

Marxist Historiography

The most important place to begin with Marxist historiography is with the fact that Marxism calls itself **historical materialism**. This means that Marxists believe in the foundational importance of material life in the making of society and of history.

At the most basic level, historical materialism argues that “life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life” (Marx and Engels 47). In other words, what we think does not produce the way we live; instead, the way we live produces the way we think. It should not be a surprise – generalizations aside – if a schoolteacher believed in the importance of increased state funding for education.

But historical materialism is more specific than this vague dependence of thought upon life. In particular, Marxists point to the role played by economic life in determining social life and history. Economic life is foundational: it is a **base** upon which all the rest of our lives are constructed. Everything else – all our social institutions and beliefs, our laws, our politics, our religions – is a **superstructure** that grows out of that economic base. This is the core metaphor that illustrates historical materialism: the social superstructure built upon an economic base.

As a result, the Economic has explanatory force for Marxism. It allows Marxist historians to explain why social and cultural forms evolve in conjunction with the development of economic forces and relations. European culture and society in the Middle Ages, for instance, is built upon the base of a feudal economy. The ownership and control of productive property by a small class of aristocratic nobles helps to explain various elements of the superstructure: laws that required peasants to remain tied to their lord’s manor or that imposed the death penalty on those who poached in the lord’s deer park.

Or consider the example of capitalism, an economic system with which we’re more familiar. A capitalist economy, at its core, depends upon constant change (“disruption” in the language of Silicon Valley) in the means and relations of production – that is, in how we make things. Unlike actors in previous economic systems, individual capitalists are strongly incentivized to constantly change how they produce their goods, to find cheaper and more productive ways to do so – if they don’t, someone else will, and they’ll be out of business. The result of this constant change in the base will be the reiteration of that constant change in the superstructure. And so we get an artistic movement like Modernism that makes a virtue out of constant innovation in form. How many styles did Picasso experiment with? Similarly, a culture that convinces us to move from vinyl records to CDs to mp3s – and then back to vinyl! – is completely consistent with a capitalist economy that demands constant consumption in order to keep production constantly moving forward. More generally, or to be more philosophical and historical, it shouldn’t surprise us that a capitalist economy demands a formal legal equality (all men are created equal) and an end to feudal limitations (manorial dues and services) in order to create free markets in labor and in consumption.

But, as that last example suggests, the economy of a given society doesn’t stand still, and its development or evolution is not smooth. Instead, the economy is a constant source of conflict. For Marxism, this conflict is **class struggle**, an inevitable and ubiquitous conflict between those who do the primary work in a society and those who benefit from that work. The forces and relations of the Economic are therefore under constant stress. For historical materialism, this would explain why some political or cultural or religious forms do not always support the economic base. If a cultural movement appears that rejects the ideas connected with the dominant economic system – like the Luddites – then the historical materialist would say that that reveals the class struggle at work: the forces of opposition would seem to be speaking through this cultural movement.

For most historians influenced by Marxism, these conflicts that grow out of the economic base can be best seen in the moments of transition between different economic bases – like the transition from feudalism to capitalism. This is why so many Marxist historians focus on the English Civil War and on the French Revolution. The economic changes are so clearly connected to legal and political and religious changes. What caused the French Revolution? The orthodox Marxist might say that the French bourgeoisie, backed up by the working and lower classes, seized the superstructure of society in order to complete the economic shift to capitalism that was already in process.

This vision of the base and superstructure, however, can quickly devolve into what is called **determinism**. In this case, there is no need to take politics or law or religion seriously, because they are mere reflections of the economic base. Capitalism, in this sense, *causes* law or politics or religion. Art and philosophy merely reflect the interests of either the ruling or oppressed classes as they struggle over the economic product of society. This criticism of determinism is made, obviously, by non-Marxists – but it is also made by some Marxists themselves, who think that the base-superstructure model oversimplifies the way in which history and human societies work. Some Marxists have tried to be more subtle: they have tried to say that culture can also have some determinative power or that the Economic is only determinative “in the last instance.”

But the most significant attempt by 20th century Marxists to move beyond economic determinism involves the concept of **agency**. Agency is the ability of human actors to actually *act*, and not merely to be *acted upon* by some exterior, determining force like the economic base. A socialist revolution, these Marxists would argue, will not just *happen* because of some “logic” of history driven by economic imperatives. A revolution has to be *made*. It is not enough that there be a working class in opposition to the bourgeoisie: those actual people in the working class must think like a working class, they must see themselves in opposition to the bourgeoisie, and they must act on that belief. This sort of Marxism, when it comes to the writing of history, tends to focus on “history from below” – that is, it focuses on the members of working or oppressed classes rather than on kings and presidents.

The key to this more humanistic Marxist historiography is that the historian must take seriously the thoughts and actions and claims of those who are oppressed by the working of the economic base. The peasantry of the Middle Ages, for instance, is not simply the passive object that receives the punitive and unjust laws created by those serving the economic imperatives of feudalism. The peasantry can also *make* history, perhaps through a jacquerie. This version of Marxist historiography not only closely examines the experience of the oppressed, it also tries to place that experience within the context of the class conflict that is born out of the economic forces and relations of a given historical period. And so the small resistances (the tradition of avoiding work on St. Monday) and the large rebellions (the Luddites) of history become those moments which have special significance for this sort of Marxist historian.

The final observation to make about Marxist historiography is to recall Marxism’s origin in the Enlightenment. As a result, for most Marxists, especially those who focus on the Economic rather than on agency, history moves forward – albeit not necessarily in a straight line. History progresses towards a better future, either inevitably because of deterministic laws of class struggle or possibly because of the human struggles of the oppressed.

Examples

An example of Marxist historiography that, in this instance at least, is more closely connected to the base-superstructure model:

[In western Europe in the early 14th century, as a result of currency crises and a falling birth rate, grain prices fell and the prices for luxury goods increased.] This contradictory process affected the noble class drastically, for its mode of life had become ever more dependent on the luxury goods produced in the towns (the 14th century was to see the apogee of feudal display with Burgundian court fashions, which spread throughout Europe), while demesne cultivation [cultivation on the estates under the direct control of feudal lords] and servile dues [work and produce provided by the serfs] from its estates yielded progressively decreasing incomes. The result was a decline in seigneurial revenues, which in its turn unleashed an unprecedented wave of warfare as knights everywhere tried to recoup their fortunes with plunder. In Germany and Italy, this quest for booty in a time of dearth produced the phenomenon of unorganized and anarchic banditry by individual lords: the ruthless *Raubrittertum* of Swabia and the Rhineland and the marauding *condottieri* who spread... throughout Northern and Central Italy. (Anderson 200)

The best example of a humanistic Marxist historiography is the work of E.P. Thompson, who wrote about the early industrial revolution.

I am seeking to rescue the poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper, the “obsolete” hand-loom weaver, the utopian artisan... from the enormous condescension of posterity. Their crafts and their traditions may have been dying. Their hostility to the new industrialism may have been backwards-looking. Their communitarian ideals may have been fantasies. Their insurrectionary conspiracies may have been foolhardy. But they lived through these times of acute social disturbance, and we did not. Their aspirations were valid in terms of their own experience....

Our only criterion of judgment should not be whether or not a man's actions are justified in the light of subsequent evolution. After all, we are not at the end of social evolution ourselves. In some of the lost causes of the people of the Industrial Revolution we may discover insights into social evils which we have yet to cure. Moreover, this period now compels attention... [because] the greater part of the world today is still undergoing problems of industrialisation, and of the formation of democratic institutions, analogous in many ways to our own experience during the Industrial Revolution. Causes which were lost in England might, in Asia or Africa, yet be won. (Thompson 12-13)

Works Cited

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