

MARX ON HISTORY

Introduction

Marx was born in Trier in the Rhineland province of Prussia in 1818 to middle-class Jewish parents. He went to read law at Bonn University in 1835, from where he moved to Berlin University, mixing his formal studies of law with his own studies of history, literature, art history, and philosophy, culminating in the completion of his doctoral thesis (comparing the classical philosophies of Democritus and Epicurus) in April 1841. During these Berlin years Marx became familiar with the philosophy of Hegel (whose death in 1831 had left a powerful legacy), and associated with a group known as the Young Hegelians. These were radical intellectuals who, unlike their counterparts, the Old Hegelians, did not interpret Hegel as implying a staunchly conservative defence of the status quo in Prussia and other German states. Instead, they seized upon Hegel's 'Idea of Freedom' to use as a weapon of criticism against Prussian authoritarianism. A passage from Engels (1820–1895) who associated with the Young Hegelians in 1841 (and was from 1844 to become Marx's life-long friend and co-worker) gives a flavour of their idealism. '... Such is the power of the Idea [of Freedom] that he who has recognised it cannot cease to speak of its splendour or to proclaim its all-conquering might. ... Let us not think any love, any gain, any riches too great to sacrifice gladly to the Idea ...'.¹

After leaving Berlin University Marx went to Cologne to edit a paper which became so radical in his hands that the Prussian authorities soon prohibited it, prompting Marx to resign. That same summer, in 1842, he married, and in the autumn moved to Paris to edit another German journal. There he wrote ever more radical articles which evidenced his increasing conversion to communism, until expelled in early 1845. He moved to Brussels, where he finally resolved his intellectual doubts about communism, a task which not only involved a critical examination of various socialist ideas gaining ground around Europe, but also (to use his own words) involved 'settling accounts' with Hegel's philosophy. Now intellectually confident of his own distinctive theory of history, economics, and politics, with Engels he set about working with embryonic communist movements to propagandise working-class, democratic, and socialist parties towards

international solidarity along the lines of his 'scientific socialism', popularly expounded in their *Communist Manifesto* published in 1848. Expelled from Belgium that same year, Marx returned to Cologne to participate in the revolutionary events beckoning in Germany, but was soon expelled. The French authorities refusing to have him in Paris, he emigrated to London in August 1849, where (age 31) he settled.

After these 'watershed' years of European revolutions in 1848–1849, Marx spent most days in the British Museum's Reading Room, reworking his theory of the nature of capitalist economy and society (but also writing numerous essays and articles), which evolved to become *Das Kapital*, the first volume being published in 1867. Also, he played a dominant role in the organisation of the International Working Men's Association (The First International) in 1864, until its virtual disbanding in 1872. Thereafter, in addition to continuing his work on volumes two and three of *Das Kapital* despite deteriorating health, he took a particular interest in the development of the German Social-Democratic Party from 1875 onwards, until his death in March 1883.

I have slanted the above sketch to Marx's early years because it was during them that he undertook the intellectual journey which explains the theory of history he formulated by 1846. This remained essentially unaltered as the substratum to his subsequent economic and political writings, including *Das Kapital*. This journey, as indicated, involved Marx's extricating himself from the allure of Hegel's general philosophy, as well as from Hegel's philosophy of history in particular, to the point where he formulated his own apparently diametrically opposed historical theory. The latter has variously been called 'scientific socialism', 'scientific communism', 'historical materialism', or (of course) simply 'Marxism', and the journey towards its formulation is often described as marking the transition from the 'early' to the 'mature' Marx. Partly because many of Marx's writings from 1842–1846 were not published until after his death, some not even discovered until the 1920s, and only made available in English during the 1960s, this period of his thought has generated much interest, reflected in many books re-evaluating the 'philosophical' foundations of his thinking. Thus we now have a superior understanding of the philosophical underpinning to Marx's theories than was available both to those generations who subscribed to what they took to be 'Marxism' (or, Soviet-style 'Marxism-Leninism'), and to their critics. The (especially political) ramifications of this endemic 'misunderstanding' of Marx fall outside our theme. But the material exposing it – the transition from the 'young' to the 'mature' Marx – is central to it, for in addition to permitting us better insight into Marx's mind, it also reveals an early, embryonic philosophy of history preceding the 'historical materialist' theory for which he is most famous.

Philosophical foundations: the early Marx

As indicated, at university Marx was attracted to the Young-Hegelian radicals enthused by their master's 'Idea of Freedom'. Indeed, it was only shortly after leaving university in 1841 that we find Marx idealistically writing about 'human emancipation' and calling for people to have 'real freedom'. He attacked Prussian censorship, called for greater democracy, and criticised discrimination of the Jews. Last chapter we noted room left by Hegel for at least some 'fine-tuning' of the modern state, and Marx was amongst those who used Hegelian logic as a spear of criticism, arguing that the kind of 'freedom' we saw Hegel referring to – that of freely dutiful citizens of a state respectful of individual freedom within the context of a communal will – was yet to be attained in Prussia. But it must be noted here that Marx's critical stance in no way refuted Hegel's fundamental (philosophical) *idealism*. Rather, it precisely exploited the belief that history is driven by the Idea of Freedom – i.e., that there is an underlying meaning given to history through some determining (extraneous?) logic. (In the article already quoted, Engels anticipates 'the thousand-year reign of freedom'.)² The problem was, for Marx, that in the *real* world the modern state vaunted by Hegel radically failed to fulfil that Idea of Freedom. Increasingly, this led Marx to criticise Hegel himself, as in his *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law [Right]*.

Written in early 1843, (although not published until 1927, in German), Marx's objective in this seminal but difficult work was to show that Hegel's concept of the modern state was deeply flawed. It purports to exemplify freedom, yet only does so at the level of citizenship of the state, which via its institutions claims to be the unifying factor manifesting the communality of will of freely obligated citizens. But Marx insists this universality of will and social purpose is phony because completely abstract. In the real world of work and the concrete organisation of society (i.e., 'civil society') below the state's institutions, numerous antagonistic divisions of wealth, status, class, religion, property, and power abound. This is where individuals live their real lives, and yet as (political) citizens they are all treated as 'equal', afforded the rights to private property, religious expression, equality before the law, and potentially (via universal suffrage) the right to political representation. For Marx, such 'citizenship,' is a purely abstract expression of man's communal nature – in fact, a contradiction to it, since

in order to behave as an *actual citizen of the state*, and to attain political significance and effectiveness, he must step out of his civil reality, disregard it, and withdraw from this whole organisation into his individuality; for the sole existence which he finds for his citizenship of the state is his sheer, blank, *individuality* . . .'.³

Thus, far from experiencing his citizenship as his social participation in a genuine universality of will, his political existence 'as a citizen of the state is an existence outside his *communal* existences and is therefore purely *individual*'.

But what of the great advances towards 'freedom' which the French and American Revolutions apparently achieved in their institution of 'the universal rights of man and the citizen', whereby ordinary people were politically 'emancipated' from exploitation, inequality, and discrimination on grounds of religion, social standing, and property? Marx's reply (even clearer in his article, *On the Jewish Question*, written later in 1843) is splendidly ironic. These much-vaunted 'rights of man' characterising the modern state do *not* free people from the divisive inequalities in actual society. On the contrary, their very *function* is to copper-bottom in law the bases of social division by giving all citizens the right, for example, to freedom of religion and freedom to own private property. Thus, for Marx, although the modern state does offer *political* emancipation from religious and property discrimination (by permitting freedom of religion and removing property qualifications from citizenship), it does not free people from such discriminations in real society. On the contrary, it maintains and even exacerbates it. For example, if by abolishing property qualifications for the vote, 'the masses have won a victory over the property owners and financial wealth', this might mean the state has freed itself from property restrictions – however, this 'not only fails to abolish private property but even presupposes it'.⁴ Likewise with other 'universal rights', e.g., 'man was not freed from religion, he received religious freedom . . . He was not freed from the egoism of business, he received freedom to engage in business'.⁵

Thus the problem with the modern state, for Marx, is that in *political* terms it establishes a coherently equal society in which the essential communality of man is no longer divided by wealth, rank, religion, birth, and other divisive distinctions. Yet it only does so by 'freeing' individuals to pursue their own merely individualistic aims without hindrance from social accountability (i.e., from 'political' control). In passages concerning previous *feudal* society Marx suggests there was at least something authentically *social* about it, now swept away by the modern state. It is true there were gross inequalities of rank, wealth, and power in feudal society. And yet at least these differences were given directly political expression in their hierarchical constitutions, such that the overall social organisation in which each individual lived was transparent to him. In *that* sense, there was an authentic society, governing itself as a society, rather than what Marx saw as the situation under the modern state, where *any* sense of social solidarity and communal consciousness was stripped from man in a 'civil society' left to the pursuit of self-interestedness. As Marx put it, '*egoistic* man . . . , the member of civil society, is thus the basis . . . of the *political* state. He is recognised as such by this state in the rights of man'.⁶

The solution, for the early Marx, is a society and 'state' where Hegel's ideal of 'universality' *truly* pertains. He refers to this variously as 'democracy', 'the genuine state', or the condition of 'human emancipation'. Quite what this means for the *form* of state under his ideal of 'democracy' is not spelt out. Yet this may be precisely the point, for Marx insists that 'in democracy the constitution, the law, the state itself, insofar as it is a political constitution, is only the self-determination of the

people'.⁷ In other words, in the 'genuine' state it is up to the people to decide what 'political' functions should exist and what form they should take – but crucially this is premised on people not being divided amongst themselves.⁸

This returns us to Marx's view of the phony claims of the modern state to exemplify 'universality' via its 'rights of man'. For example, regarding liberty, Marx complains: '[b]ut the right of man to liberty is based not on the association of man with man, but on the separation of man from man. It is the *right* of this separation, the right of the restricted individual, withdrawn into himself'. Similarly, the right to private property is 'the right to enjoy one's property and to dispose of it at one's discretion, without regard to other men, independently of society, the right of self-interest'.⁹

Like Robert Owen, the French 'utopians', and other socialists preceding him, Marx thus identifies individualism, egoism, and exploitation as endemic to modern society. But he goes much further than them by relating the modern *state* to this non-communal society, as being simply reflective and supportive of it. Marx's idealistic alternative is 'democracy', and we can see how he equates it with 'human emancipation' in the following passage: '. . . only when man has recognised and organised his own powers as *social* forces, and consequently no longer separates social power from himself in the shape of *political* power, only then will human emancipation have been accomplished'.¹⁰

Towards private property and the proletariat

So far we have seen Marx severely critical of Hegel's estimation of 'the modern state', yet not because he doubts Hegel's underlying philosophy centred on 'the Idea of Freedom'. But his thinking developed, resulting in an article published early in 1844 as an introduction to his earlier *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law*. Here, he turns from 'the state', and instead focuses on the reasons why *civil society* is so fractious. To do this, he turns to primarily *economic* factors, claiming that 'the relation of industry, of the world of wealth generally, to the political world is one of the major problems of modern times'.¹¹ In one of the earliest indications of his subsequent 'class' theory of history, he focuses on the connection between private property and classes or 'estates', claiming that periodically in history a certain class emerges which, in order to emancipate itself from subjection to higher classes, presents itself as the saviour of the whole of society, and is indeed 'perceived and acknowledged as its general representative'. He claims the bourgeoisie played exactly that role in the French Revolution, in its struggle against the classes which represented 'all the defects of society', namely, the French nobility and clergy. He even anticipates the time in French history when, as 'the role of *emancipator* therefore passes in dramatic motion to the various classes of the French nation', it finally passes to a class which will 'organise[s] all conditions of human existence on the presupposition of social freedom'¹² – a vague formulation which nevertheless suggests that changes in the fundamental *economic* organisation of civil society, involving the displacement of previously dominant classes, may produce a civil

society no longer riven by egoism and divisions, but instead provide the conditions necessary for that 'democracy' he had described earlier. Indeed, referring to 'modern nations' other than Germany (which he regarded as laughably backward), he looks forward 'to the *height of humanity* which will be the near future of those nations'.¹³

Tantalisingly, however, he then leaves France aside, and asks what the possibilities of such a movement are in *Germany*. Scathingly, he says that in Germany there is neither one particular class which marks it as 'the negative representative of society', nor one which has 'the breadth of soul that identifies itself, even for a moment, with the soul of the nation', such that the political progress apparently possible in France and elsewhere seems impossible. This prompts Marx to ask, '[w]hat, then, is the *positive* possibility of a German emancipation?', and he answers that in Germany's case the only solution is 'the formation of . . . a class of civil society which is not a class of civil society', a class which 'claims no *particular right* because no particular wrong but *wrong generally* is perpetrated against it', a class which has a genuinely 'universal character by its universal suffering', and which therefore 'cannot emancipate itself without emancipating all other spheres of society'. This class is the proletariat. It is unique because premised on *not* resting on *any* share of private property (i.e., ownership of national wealth and resources) – and it is a definite *class* because it is not 'the *naturally arising* poor' which feature as flotsam in any society, but rather is the specific product 'of the rising *industrial* development',¹⁴ i.e., an integral part of the functioning of society. Marx claims 'the proletariat is coming into being in Germany', and that its demand will be 'the negation of private property'. Although he does not elaborate on this here, he makes it clear that the logic of the proletarian demand – a civil society no longer based on the previous class divisions symptomatic of differing degrees of ownership of private property – equates with those necessary conditions of 'democracy', 'freedom', or 'human emancipation' he earlier derived from his (critical) interpretation of Hegel.

The other theme emerging in this piece reflects Marx's increasingly uneasy relation with idealist philosophy, both of Hegel himself and its radical interpretation by the Young-Hegelians. Marx begins to display impatience with philosophical criticism which does not recognise and incorporate the need for *practical* change – i.e., a transformation of the nature of civil society. For example, after famously referring to religion as 'the opium of the people', he argues that '[t]o abolish religion as the *illusory* happiness of the people is to demand their *real* happiness. The demand to give up illusions about the existing state of affairs is the *demand to give up a state of affairs which needs illusions*'. Thus, speaking of political theory in general, it follows that 'the criticism of speculative philosophy of law turns, not towards itself, but towards *problems* which can only be solved by one means – *practice*'.¹⁵

In this article Marx wrote about Germany specifically, and yet in the course of his analysis he stumbled upon the principal ingredients of the version of communism for which he became famous – for within a few months, in his *1844 Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, he generalised these thoughts on class, private property, the

proletariat, and 'human emancipation', to *all* modern societies. No longer concerned with Hegel's theory of the state, he concentrates on criticising the capitalist basis of modern civil society. Capitalist society is deeply divided, contradictory, and fundamentally inhumane, as evidenced most sharply by the situation of the proletariat (the industrial wage-labourer). Marx observed that 'the worker becomes all the poorer the more wealth he produces', that 'with the *increasing value* of the world of things proceeds in direct proportion the *devaluation* of the world of men'. This is because 'labour produces not only commodities: it produces itself and the worker as a *commodity*'.¹⁶ From here, Marx elaborated his now famous theory of 'alienation', deriving from that Hegelian notion of 'self-objectification' explored in the previous chapter.

Marx first adapts the notion to man's *labour* generally, saying that 'the product of labour is labour which has been embodied in an object, which has become material: it is the *objectification* of labour. Labour's realisation is its objectification'. Yet in the actual world of capitalist economic relations, 'this realisation of labour appears as *loss of realisation* for the workers; objectification as *loss of the object*: . . . as *alienation*'. This, however, is not merely a *subjective feeling* on behalf of the worker. Rather, in the actual world, 'the more objects the worker produces the less he can possess and the more he falls under the sway of his product, capital'.¹⁷

Marx then extends this notion to the *activity* of work itself, for he claims that because the worker confronts the objects of his labour as 'alien' to him, then the very activity of producing the object is also 'alien' to him. 'If then the product of labour is alienation, production itself must be active alienation, the alienation of activity . . .'. This is demonstrated by the fact that in his work, the worker 'does not affirm himself but denies himself, . . . does not develop freely his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind.' He 'therefore only feels himself outside his work, and in his work feels outside himself. The key to this is that labour is *forced* upon him by someone else (the capitalist), and thus, not being 'his spontaneous activity, . . . it is the loss of his self'. Indeed, Marx observes that 'man (the worker) only feels himself freely active in his animal functions – eating, drinking, procreating . . . and in his human functions he no longer feels himself to be anything but an animal. What is animal becomes human and what is human becomes animal'.¹⁸

This takes us back to Hegel's distinction between humans and animals, and Marx elaborates upon this in order to bring his moral objection to capitalism to its dramatic culmination. For Hegel, (self-)consciousness differentiates man from animals. Just so for the early Marx. He asserts that the character of the human species is 'free, conscious activity'. According to Marx, 'the animal is immediately one with its life activity. It does not distinguish itself from it', whereas 'Man makes his life activity itself the object of his will and of his consciousness; . . . his own life is an object for him', and because of this, his activity is *essentially* (i.e., in principle) 'free activity'.¹⁹

In other words, the essence of being human is *freedom*, the necessary condition of which is *self-consciousness*, by which man can make his own life an *object* of his

will. The italicised words are precisely the terms in which Hegel explained 'freedom'. But what Marx has done is unequivocally to transfer this Hegelian logic from 'Spirit' to *man*, and his complaint is that under an economic system in which capital employs labour, 'man' is alienated from his essential human nature, because that nature is freely productive work. Under capitalism, work is imposed by others (for selfish ends) upon men who are thereby deprived of the capacity to make their lives the object of their will. Instead, in a cruel reverse, men are forced to sell what should be their human-affirming activity simply to keep alive.

Marx's 'immature' philosophy of history

If such ideas might appear over-dramatised, we should recall that Marx was referring specifically to the plight of the industrial wage-labourer (the 'proletarian') of the early decades of the nineteenth century, during which it has been claimed, for example, that one generation of northern English mill-owners would run through three generations of mill-workers. However, in these 1844 *Manuscripts* he generalised his analysis to imply that 'man as such' has become radically alienated from his human essence. This is because Marx conceives of man's *history* as a process whereby, through his productive activity ('work'), man has progressively 'objectified' or 'realised' himself in the actual world, altering it in accordance with his *human* needs. The combination of modern industrial production and the natural sciences, however, has enormously accelerated this process of mankind's self-expression, whereby 'the nature which develops in human history . . . is man's *real* nature'. Marx claims that 'we have before us the *objectified essential powers* of man in the form of *sensuous . . . useful objects . . . displayed in ordinary material industry*'. Nature has become increasingly 'humanised', such that 'history itself is a *real* part of *natural history* – of nature developing into man'.²⁰ And yet the huge irony, for Marx, is that as man 'duplicates himself not only, as in consciousness, intellectually, but also actively, in reality, and therefore . . . contemplates himself in a world that he has created', he does not recognise himself in that world. Why? Because 'in tearing away from man the object of his production, . . . estranged [alienated] labour tears from him his *species life*, his real objectivity as a member of the species'.²¹

The *private* ownership of the means of production thus exemplifies this giant irony of 'alienation' in human history. For Marx it seems that just as, via modern industry and science, humanity is approaching conditions which promise its full self-objectification, it has never been more cut off from experiencing its self-fulfilment. This is because of the modern system whereby capitalists (the property owners) pay others (the property-less proletariat) a wage to work the means of production so that they (the capitalists) can make a profit by the sale of the proletarians' work. Thus the almost mystical significance of 'the proletariat' for Marx. As claimed in his earlier article, on the one hand it is a distinctive class because integral to the functioning of modern industrial society, but also there is a sense in which it is *not* a class because, unlike other classes, it occupies no rank whatsoever in property-holding, but is merely a commodity to be variously

exploited by them. By a plausible, even elegant, logic it follows for Marx that the only 'class-interest' of the proletariat is to abolish private ownership of economic resources altogether. But in removing the very basis for its existence as a class, it would also be removing the basis of *any* classes in society, since their existence derives from a civil society organised around private property.

The logical result, then, of the proletarians' interest is a classless civil society characterised by the *social* ownership of the means of production. These would no longer be worked to make a profit (for capitalists), but be worked to meet the agreed needs of society. In short, we arrive at the practical basis for that 'universality' of will underlying Hegel's notion of freedom – and this is why Marx refers to the proletariat as providing 'the key to the riddle of history'. Its unique destiny is to emancipate not only itself but, in so doing, the whole of society by realising the universal will of man. Marx refers to this new society as 'communism', and describes its significance in thoroughly Hegelian terms. It is 'the *positive* transcendence of . . . *human self-estrangement*, and therefore . . . the real appropriation of the *human* essence by and for man'. It is 'the *genuine* resolution of the conflict between man and nature and between man and man – the true resolution of the strife between existence and essence, between objectification and self-confirmation, . . . between the individual and the species'. Moreover, still thinking in Hegelian terms, Marx suggests that the movement towards 'communism' is in fact nothing less than the meaning of world-history displaying itself.

Communism [is] the complete return of man to himself as a *social* (i.e., human) being – a return accomplished consciously and embracing the entire wealth of previous development . . . Communism is the riddle of history solved, and it knows itself to be this solution. The entire movement of history [is communism's] *actual* act of genesis . . . [and] also . . . the *comprehended* and *known* process of its *becoming*.²²

Here, then, in these abstract formulations, is nothing less than an (undeveloped) 'philosophy of history' from an early Marx clearly indebted to Hegel, despite being centred on the self-realisation of 'man' rather than on that of Hegel's ambiguous 'World-spirit'. However, another revealing feature of the 1844 *Manuscripts* is Marx's increasingly ambivalent attitude towards Hegel's *fundamental* philosophy. Although captive to Hegel's logic regarding 'freedom', 'universality', 'self-objectification', and 'alienation', we have already seen Marx's growing impatience with abstract philosophising which ignores practical reality. This reappears immediately after the above 'philosophical' passages on the movement of history as 'the return of man to himself', for Marx adds: 'It is easy to see that the entire revolutionary movement necessarily finds both its empirical and its theoretical basis in the movement of *private property* – more precisely, in that of the economy'.²³ This suggestion – that *economic* factors underlie the movement of history – is of course thoroughly un-Hegelian, since for Hegel it is Spirit's impulse towards self-consciousness of its essence, Freedom, which underlies world-history. Marx's

thinking, it seems, may be losing its coherence just at the point where he attempts to formulate his own philosophy of history. Why was this so?

Feuerbach and 'materialism'

A key factor in explaining Marx's philosophical difficulties in these 1844 texts is Feuerbach's strong impact on his thinking. Ludwig Feuerbach (1804–1872) was until 1839 a follower of Hegel's philosophical idealism, believing that reality is infused with Reason. But he then radically altered his ideas, and propounded a *materialist* philosophy based on sense-perception. Now, for Feuerbach, reality consists solely of the material world, whose nature is apprehended through the senses. The reality of the material world of objects is irreducible and unsurpassable – there is no 'logic' behind it. Existence is not the Hegelian fusion of Being and Thought, of the 'real' and the 'rational'. 'The real in its reality . . . is the real as an object of the senses; it is the sensuous. Truth, reality, and sensation are identical'.²⁴

What, then, becomes of 'God', (or of Hegel's 'Mind')? Feuerbach's answer is that God is simply man's idealised image of man himself. 'God is nothing other than the original and the model of man; corresponding to how God is and what he is, man must be and wants to be or at least hopes to be in the future'. . . .²⁵ This is because 'the essence of a being is recognised . . . only through its object. . . . Thus, the object of the eye is neither tone nor smell, but light. In the object of the eye, however, its essence is revealed to us. . . . He who cultivates the soil is a farmer, he who catches fish is a fisherman'. He observes that 'God is an object . . . only of man', and thus 'what is expressed in the being of this object [God] is merely the peculiar essence of man'.²⁶ Thus, God 'is man's own essence and goal conceived as a real being'. This explains the attributes of God in theology – e.g., omnipotence, omnipresence, and omniscience. They are simply man's own consciousness of the capacities of *mankind's* nature.

And yet because man's actual possibilities have historically been limited, man idealises his nature into a transcendent, unapproachable being – 'God' – and bows down in self-abnegation before his own fetish. 'Where else than in the pains and needs of man does this being who is without pain and without needs have its ground and origin? . . . Only in man's wretchedness does God have his birthplace'.²⁷ In short, man alienates himself in religion.

From this standpoint Feuerbach launches his fundamental criticism of Hegel's idealism. He tells us that 'the culmination of modern philosophy is the Hegelian philosophy', and yet 'it is . . . nothing other than theology . . . transformed into philosophy'.²⁸ But he, Feuerbach, has rumbled Hegel, and instead proposes a new philosophy which will at last emancipate man from the debilitating influence of (religious) alienation and Hegelian 'speculative' philosophy. This new philosophy rests not on 'God' or (philosophically) on some disembodied Reason. Rather, 'it rests not on a beingless, colourless, and nameless reason, but on reason saturated with the blood of man'. Repeatedly, Feuerbach stresses that man is a sensuous being of flesh and blood, and therefore the new philosophy 'corresponding

to the needs of mankind and of the future'²⁹ 'declares that only the human is the rational; man is the measure of reason',³⁰ – man, that is, as the species, for 'the single man for himself possesses the essence of man neither in himself as a moral being nor in himself as a thinking being. The essence of man is contained only in the community and unity of man with man'.³¹

Feuerbach, Marx, and Hegel

Marx was impressed by Feuerbach's ideas, and in the 1844 *Manuscripts* he furthered the task of criticising Hegel's philosophy at its very heart – i.e., idealism. Marx's essential complaint is that instead of viewing self-consciousness as a property of human nature, Hegel regards human nature as 'a quality of *self-consciousness*'. Because of this mystification, in Hegel man is essentially 'regarded as a *non-objective, spiritual being*'.³² It follows, for Hegel, that if in his actual material life man does not feel fully objectified (i.e., is alienated), then the solution lies in re-arranging his consciousness, i.e., in 're-thinking' himself, rather than re-arranging his material conditions – akin, arguably, to psychotherapeutic theories which purport to solve psychological problems on the couch, through altering one's consciousness via a revised self-knowledge, rather than addressing the actual circumstances causing the psychological problem.

But for Marx, (as Feuerbach had argued), 'Man is directly a natural being . . . a corporeal, sensuous, objective being', and this means that 'he has *real, sensuous objects* as the object of his being or of his life, or that he can only *express* his life in real, sensuous objects'. Thus, because Hegel's philosophy depends on the notion that material reality (including human history) is the expression of disembodied Mind, it is fundamentally flawed. According to Marx this entraps Hegel into the notion that *all* materiality, whatever form it takes, is an alienation of Spirit and thus ultimately something to be spurned by 'self-consciousness' – akin to the mystic's rejection of the actual, material world and his retreat into his self. As we have seen, Marx's view is different. If one is alienated by one's actual circumstances, then it is those circumstances which need to be changed.

The importance Marx attaches to man as an *objective* being, a part of Nature, is thus clear enough. However, this does not mean man is like any other animal, for we have already seen Marx stress his uniqueness in being self-conscious. He returns to the point. 'But man is not merely a natural being: he is a *human* natural being. That is to say, he is a being for himself. Therefore he is a *species being*, and has to . . . manifest himself as such both in his being and in his knowing'. What does this imply? Again, Marx reverts to that embryonic theory of *history* expressed earlier:

[t]herefore, *human* objects are not natural objects as they immediately present themselves, and neither is *human sense* . . . immediately . . . *human* sensibility . . . Neither nature objectively nor nature subjectively is directly given in a form adequate to the *human* being. And as everything natural has to *come into being*, *man* too has his act of origin – history –

which, however, is for him a known history, and hence as an act of origin it is a conscious self-transcending act of origin. History is the true natural history of man.³³

These are difficult passages, but taken in conjunction with his previous references to labour as man's objectification, and to 'communism' as the solution to the riddle of history, we can reconstruct Marx's thought. Having dismissed both Hegel's 'Spirit' and Hegel's man as fantastical non-beings because non-objective, Marx is arguing that man is nevertheless unique in being self-conscious. This permits man to produce his own conditions, by changing the world given him in nature. In his activity of changing the world, man is thus 'producing' himself, and is conscious of that 'self' as imprinted on, or expressed in, the world he produces. In this sense, then, history is the process of human self-realisation – the process of man's 'coming-to-be'. Yet although this giant process of world-history has made huge strides particularly since the Scientific Revolution and the increasingly cooperative nature of productive activity, man fails to *experience* his increasing self-fulfilment and 'species nature' because of the alienating impact of private possession of the economic resources which underly class-divisions. The industrial proletarian, whose working life is merely a commodity, is the supreme exemplar of this alienation. And this is why 'communism, as the supersession of private property, is the vindication of real human life as man's possession'³⁴ – that is, 'communism' provides the objective circumstances, through social control of the productive process, for the realisation of man's potential to experience the world as his own, thus 'solving the riddle of history'.

This, then, is the embryonic philosophy of history amongst these disorganised 1844 *Manuscripts*. For Marx, history is nothing less than the process whereby a species whose essence is self-consciousness undertakes the long journey of fulfilling its self (its nature) via the mediation of 'objectifying' itself in the real world. Both the concepts and the logic of this theory derive directly from Hegel, revolving as they do around the interplay between a subjective consciousness and the external, objective world it engenders, and how in experiencing this 'self-objectification' as alien to itself, it progresses (dialectically) to overcome this defect. And yet the influence also of Feuerbach is dramatic, for whereas in Hegel this being is Mind or 'Spirit', for Marx this being is 'man' – and 'man', moreover, who although indeed self-conscious, is an objective, natural, sensual being of flesh and blood. Man's project (the meaning of history) is to 'realise' his nature via a process of mediation between his consciousness and the external world – and he does this by 'objectifying' himself in productive activity. But whereas for Hegel (at least, according to Marx) the external world manifested by 'Spirit' is *always* alien from that of pure Self-consciousness, such that the latter must always transcend it and return to its self as 'Mind', this is not the case with 'man'. Because 'man' is an objective, natural being, the objective 'external' world is *not* alien to him. It is true that as raw nature it is alien – it does not reflect human nature. But in his work

in/upon the external world, man constantly alters it to accommodate it to his bodily and mental needs. Thus, 'objectification' is not ultimately alienating (as in Hegel), but is in principle direct 'self-realisation'.

However, that the world man creates is not *experienced* as self-realising, or 'human', but as alienating, is because of the divisive factors of power and property relations which reduce most of mankind's productive activity to the status of a commodity. This perverts the living experience of the affected class not only 'subjectively' in terms of how they feel but objectively insofar as they are poverty-stricken, insecure, and powerless amidst a land of plenty – and (it is fair to assume from Marx's comments) it is equally alienating for the rich and powerful who, although materially comfortable, have an equally perverted consciousness of what it is to be 'human' in their exploitative, egoistic lives.

The resonance of Marx's 'immature' philosophy of history

Although much interest in this early, neo-Hegelian, philosophy of history by Marx centres on its relation to his later theory of 'historical materialism' (treated below), its scope and audacity merit considering it in its own right despite its sketchy nature. Noticeable first is the obvious moral dimension the concept of 'alienation' introduces into it, reminiscent of Rousseau's strictures on 'civilised' society. Second, the theory continues that 'politicisation' of philosophy of history we noted as a feature developing in the Enlightenment. In Marx's case this clearly revolves around the reconstructing of a civil society no longer based on private-property-based economic and social relations – ie 'communism', ('practical humanism', or 'true democracy'). Today this belief in 'communism' can seem outdated, although what Marx meant by it in the 1844 *Manuscripts* is extremely general – but even as such, seems far removed from its controversial twentieth-century versions. (Neither is it clear that in this early theory Marx saw 'communism' as historically inevitable.)

Rather, it is another feature of Marx's theory which resonates in today's world – namely, his notion of the overall meaning of human history as the process of altering the external, natural world to accommodate it to our human nature – i.e., that history is man 'humanising' the world. We now know Marx was merely on the threshold of the advances since made in 'man's conquest of nature'. And even now, these advances promise to accelerate at a pace and encompass a scope unheralded in history, such that increasing numbers of people question the wisdom of the process. Ecological concerns abound as human activity deliberately or otherwise alters the planet's systems. Medical possibilities raise increasingly fundamental dilemmas regarding our notions of how, and how long, we live our lives. And perhaps above all, genetic engineering, not only of plants and animals, but of human beings, raises into the starkest relief the issue of what it is to 'be human'.³⁵ In short, if in Marx's day, questions regarding what it actually *means* to 'humanise' the world could be judged rather speculative, in today's world it beckons to have literal import. In this light it is worth revisiting the efforts Marx made to directly address this question as central to his early philosophy of history.

His thinking on this begins with his notion that ‘in his *work upon* inorganic nature, man proves himself a conscious species being, i.e., as a being that treats the species as its own essential being. . . . [a]n animal only produces what it immediately needs for itself or its young, . . . whilst man produces universally’. What Marx means is that man’s productive activity is not limited to his individual physical needs, but reflects the multifarious attributes of his species, sensual and intellectual. Thus, ‘the universality of man appears in practice precisely in the universality which makes all nature his *inorganic* body’, but a body ‘which he must first prepare to make [it] palatable and digestible’.³⁶

Further on, Marx tries to explain what the truly *human* experience of the objective world should be. Ideally,

[m]an appropriates his comprehensive essence in a comprehensive manner, that is to say, as a whole man. Each of his *human* relations to the world – seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling, thinking, observing, experiencing, wanting, acting, loving – . . . are in . . . their *orientation to the object*, the appropriation of that object; . . . their orientation to the object is the *manifestation of the human reality*.

Ideally, then, ‘all *objects* become for him the *objectification of himself*, become objects which confirm and realise his individuality. . . . The manner in which they become *his* depends on the *nature of the objects* and on the nature of the essential power corresponding to it’.

What does this mean? Marx explains that any *individual’s* experience of the world depends upon what ‘essential’ powers he has. For example, ‘the most beautiful music has *no* sense for the unmusical ear’, and this is (presumably) simply a ‘natural’ misfortune. However, any such block to the possibility of *human* experience pales into insignificance compared to the damage caused by the alienating effects of a private-property based society and culture. ‘Private property has made us so stupid and one-sided that an object is only *ours* when we have it – when it exists for us as capital, or when it is directly possessed, eaten, drunk, worn, inhabited, etc. – in short, when it is *used* by us’. Referring to man’s ‘essential’ powers, Marx complains that because of this utilitarian attitude to the world, ‘In place of *all* these physical and mental senses there has therefore come the sheer estrangement of *all* these senses – the sense of *having*’. (We might today gloss this as the ‘commodification’ of experience in our ‘consumer’ societies).

Instead, he looks forward to a time when, via ‘the transcendence of private property’ ‘all human senses and attributes’ will be ‘emancipated’. This emancipation is based upon a new society where ‘need or enjoyment has . . . lost its *egotistical* nature, and nature has lost its mere *utility* by use becoming *human* use’. In this new situation, man’s senses will ‘relate themselves to the *thing* for the sake of the thing’, by which Marx means that one will be able to find in the thing or object that which stimulates our *human* sensibilities. For example, ‘For the starving man it is not the human form of food that exists, but only its abstract existence as food. It could just

as well be there in its crudest form' – or, '[t]he dealer in minerals sees only the commercial value but not the beauty and the specific character of the mineral'.³⁷

Finally, however, we return to Marx's theme of the 'universality' of man, for he claims the most pervasive block to *human* experiencing of the world has been because individuals live in circumstances which alienate them from their species-consciousness. We have already noted Marx's rejection of egoism and individualism, and he seems to suggest that such a 'non-social' consciousness blunts the capacity for *human* sensitivity because individuals are unable to benefit from an openness to the multifarious 'essential' capacities of mankind. For this reason, 'the senses of the social man *differ* from those of the non-social man', and it is in elaborating on this apparently bizarre claim that his assorted ideas on human experience and the meaning of history reach their summation.

Only through the objectively unfolded richness of man's essential being is the richness of subjective *human* sensibility . . . either cultivated or brought into being' – that is, 'a musical ear, an eye for beauty of form – in short, senses capable of human gratifications, senses affirming themselves as essential powers of man.

He continues: 'For not only the five senses but also the so-called mental senses, the practical senses (will, love, etc.), – in a word, *human* sense – comes to be by virtue of its object, by virtue of *humanised* nature. The *forming*³⁸ of the five senses is a labour of the entire history of the world down to the present'.³⁹

Sufficient has been said to justify our claim that in the *1844 Manuscripts* Marx sets out the principles of a 'philosophy of history'. Indeed, given his interest in Hegel it is difficult to see how he could have avoided doing so. However, his ideas only amount to a framework of key concepts. The reader cannot fail to notice that Marx has not offered any actual *history* as yet! However, we can see the direction his mind was taking. Shortly after the above passages on history as the 'objectification' of man and the 'humanisation' of nature, he says that if we wish to trace this formative process we must look at man's work or industry, since then 'we see how the history of *industry* . . . [is] the *open* book of *man's essential powers*, the perceptibly existing human *psychology*'.⁴⁰ Clearly, then, although the framework of his (1844) philosophy of history was infused with aspects of Hegelian philosophy, its *empirical* content would have been markedly different because it would have focused on man's productive activity – 'the history of industry' – rather than on (Hegelian) changing phases of Self-consciousness. And this is precisely what his 'mature' theory of history is to focus on. However, having argued that 'history is the true natural history of man', Marx added, 'on which more later'.⁴¹ But he does not fulfil this intention. Instead, in the few remaining pages of the *1844 Manuscripts* Marx returns, like a dog worrying a bone, to criticising Hegel's concept of Mind and the alienation of Self-consciousness, at which point he abandoned the *Manuscripts*,

unfinished. When, more than a year later, he returned to flesh out his theory of history, that theory appears to have undergone a transformation.

Marx's revised theory of history – 'Historical Materialism'

From 'philosophy' to 'practice': Marx's epistemology

The reason Marx abandoned the 1844 *Manuscripts* (only written for self-clarification in any event) was partly that he had argued himself into a blind alley. In talking of history as man's self-objectification, throughout the *Manuscripts* he employs the concept 'man', meaning the abstraction 'mankind'. But when he posed the question, 'how . . . does man come to alienate his labour?', suddenly this abstraction 'creates the domination of the person who does not produce'⁴² – a confused answer because somehow real, class-divided men have emerged as if produced by 'mankind'. As he explored this further, he realised the need to abandon such 'philosophical' abstractions as 'man', and talk only of actual *men* (i.e., real men and women). But this was no mere technical point for Marx. On the contrary, it persuaded him there was something fundamentally wrong with 'philosophy' itself insofar as, at least in its idealist tradition (exemplified by Hegelianism), it sets up abstractions and treats them as real things. Hence the blind alley he had encountered when asking how 'man' came to alienate 'himself'. In short, it may be reasonable to talk abstractly of 'mankind' as comprising both masters and workers, but it is as difficult to see how a 'mankind' *solely* comprised of workers can somehow become a real *agent* and *produce* masters as, presumably, also part of 'mankind' – and an 'alien' one at that!

By 1845 Marx's doubts about the efficacy of (idealist) philosophy to talk sensibly about reality crystallised into his *Theses on Feuerbach*, where he laid the basis of 'historical materialism' as an alternative approach to understanding the world. Now, Marx not only dismissed Hegelian idealism, but also criticised Feuerbach on the grounds that his materialism was in fact just another species of idealism. This issue gets to the heart of the 'mature' Marx. He complains that all previous materialist philosophies (including Feuerbach) are incorrect because they believe in the self-sufficient reality of 'objective' things in nature – i.e., they assume there 'really' *are* 'trees', 'rocks', 'horses' existing as such, and which the human senses straightforwardly perceive as if the mind were like a mirror, reflecting a given reality. Marx calls this 'contemplative materialism', and says it is erroneous. Rather, our ideas of things in the external world are not simple 'reflections' but are mediated by how those things impinge upon our *practical* experience as beings in that world. As beings of flesh and blood (rather than pure intellects) we notice things and their properties insofar as they are relevant to us 'in practice'

This can be explained by some simple examples. Imagine the proverbial cave-man bumping into something hard, which hurts him. He will therefore notice 'it', and let us suppose he calls 'it' a rock. He has become aware of 'rocks', but all he means by 'a rock' as yet is something hard which hurts if one bumps into it. 'There

are such things as rocks' – this idea about the world, albeit crude, is at least some help to him. Now suppose he bumps into another thing which is hard, but it drops fruit he can eat. He will thus notice this object, and rather than call it a rock, distinguish it by calling it, e.g., a tree. There are now such things as 'rocks' and 'trees', but their meaning is established through man's experience of them *in practice*. By the word 'rock' our cave-man now means something which is not only hard and can hurt, but something which does not bear fruit. This is how we can conceive the development of human consciousness of the external world, whereby through 'practice' (i.e., the *manner* in which we respond to 'objects') we extend our 'understanding' of that world's nature. Whether there are 'really' such things as 'rocks' or 'trees' is a meaningless question. The point is, are they useful ideas in practice? (Let us note it was not until the 1960s that people became aware of 'teenagers', and not until people flew airplanes that they became aware of 'air-pockets'. Does this mean that teenagers, or air-pockets, did not exist in previous history? Alternatively, does this mean that teenagers and air-pockets will always exist?)

Thus we see the force of Marx's assertion that 'the question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a *practical* question. Man must prove the truth, i.e., the reality and power, the this-worldliness of his thinking in practice. The dispute over the reality [validity] or non-reality of thinking which isolates itself from practice is a purely *scholastic question*', (e.g., such futile 'philosophical' questions as 'how many angels can stand on the head of a pin'). All such erroneous thinking stems from the fallacy whereby 'things, reality, sensuousness are conceived only in the form of the *object*, or of *contemplation*, but not as *sensuous human activity*, *practice* . . .'.⁴³

The trouble with Feuerbach, according to Marx, is that despite talking of 'real, living' men, he is still wedded to the abstract concept, 'man'. Hence, although he gets as far as to see 'man' alienating himself in religion, he attributes this to the 'essence of man' as an abstract category, and thus fails to explain why this 'man' alienates himself. But now, for Marx, just as there is no such reality as 'the essential' rock or tree, so there is no such thing as 'the essence of man'. There are only real, actual men and women, and their nature or 'essence' is no more than how, in practice, they relate to each other. 'The essence of man is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of social relations'. Thus, if 'man' is alienated in religion, we should recognise that this is a property, not of 'the human essence', but of actual men who 'belong in reality to a particular form of society' – i.e., religion 'is itself a social product'.⁴⁴

Just so, then, with 'man's self-alienation' in the *productive* process. It is not a property of 'man'. Rather, it is a feature of actual, real men who live in the particular social relations which produce alienation.

A crucial implication of this new approach was that Marx abandoned belief in 'truth' as some kind of philosophical absolute, and instead judged the validity of ideas in terms of their efficacy in practice. Two things followed regarding socio-

political thought and its role in historical change. First, people can imagine or philosophically ‘deduce’ whatever ideas they like about society, justice, freedom, and the like – but unless these are grounded in the actual nature of material reality they are barren. If new, they are likely to be utopian because merely wishful thinking disassociated from the realities of the actual world. But, second, it also follows that where new ideas derive from a practical awareness of how reality is *actually* impinging upon people in a new way, then these new ideas will have a genuine currency whereby they can indeed ‘prove the truth. i.e., the reality and power, the this-sidedness’ of their thinking ‘in practice’.

This latter thought finally released Marx from the last restraint he felt Hegel imposed, for Hegel had famously said of his book of political philosophy, that ‘as a work of philosophy, it must be poles apart from an attempt to construct a state as it ought to be’. Rather, what philosophy achieves is ‘to recognise reason as the rose in the cross of the present’.⁴⁵ This gigantically conservative judgement on the point of political and social ‘philosophising’ – that it cannot lead to bringing about a better world – had impressed and perhaps restrained the young, radically-minded Marx, despite the preparedness of his less intellectually conscientious radical colleagues simply to ignore it. Indeed, we have just seen that a part of Hegel’s stricture was to remain integral to ‘historical materialism’ – namely, Marx’s lifelong battle against ‘utopianism’, begun back in 1842 when he voiced scepticism over French socialist and communist ideas.⁴⁶

Historical materialism: The German Ideology

The *Theses on Feuerbach* thus represent a distinct shift in Marx’s thinking. Rather than continue ‘philosophising’ about the ‘essence of man’ and alienation, Marx turned to seeking explanations of problems by looking at people’s actual circumstances, especially their social organisations at any particular time. Indeed, so marked is this shift in approach, and so certain was Marx of its validity and significance, that he set about writing *The German Ideology* with Engels in late 1845. The intention was to publish his new outlook and to roundly criticise those ‘radicals’ who continued to base their thinking on Hegelian premises. Amongst them he now included Feuerbach, because he ‘never arrives at the actually existing, active men, but stops at the abstraction, “man”’. This is a ‘relapse into idealism’.⁴⁷ Marx calls his new theory, ‘the materialist conception of history’, and in a head-on clash with Hegel and his philosophical legacy, contrasts it to ‘the idealist conception of history’. But as already hinted, there is now a sense in which for Marx *all* ‘philosophy’ is ‘idealist’ to the extent it relies on the efficacy of pure thought, dissociated from the concrete social mediation in which it arises, to ‘objectively’ understand reality.

For this reason, in expounding his basic theory of society and history, Marx’s tone is scathing about the claims of ‘philosophy’ to speak sense. His first point is that there would *be* no human history without the existence of actual human beings in their real historical circumstances – and these human beings have first and foremost

to survive, which involves 'eating and drinking, housing, clothing . . .'. Human beings, unlike animals, do this by *producing* the means to satisfy these basic needs, and thus this production is the first properly *historical* act.⁴⁸ Already we see how Marx's views have changed, for whereas a crucial notion in the 1844 *Manuscripts* was that 'man' is distinguished from animals by self-consciousness, now Marx says: '[m]en can be distinguished from animals by consciousness, by religion or anything else you like. They themselves begin to distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to *produce* their means of subsistence'.⁴⁹

His next point is that in producing to meet their needs, new needs are generated, and he reminds us that the productive process 'today, as thousands of years ago, must daily and hourly be fulfilled merely in order to sustain human life', a fact he deplores historians and philosophers for neglecting.⁵⁰ This is because, 'by producing their means of subsistence men are indirectly producing their material life' – and at any one time, how men produce (i.e., the 'mode of production') not only keeps them alive: 'Rather it is a definite form of activity . . . , a definite form of expressing their life, a definite *mode of life* on their part'. Having dismissed all philosophising about the nature of 'man' as so much verbiage, Marx completes the point by saying: 'As individuals express their life, so they are. What they are, therefore, coincides with their production, both with *what* they produce and with *how* they produce. Hence what individuals are depends upon the material conditions of their production'.⁵¹

His next point is 'that men, who daily re-create their own life, begin to make other men, to propagate their kind'. In short, some kind of *family* structure pertains, and this is a cooperative context involving a division of tasks. Alongside this, other forms of cooperation emerge to facilitate the activity of production, such that,

it follows from this that a certain mode of production, or industrial stage, is always combined with a certain mode of cooperation, or social stage, and this mode of cooperation is itself a 'productive force' . . . hence, the 'history of humanity' must always be studied and treated in relation to the history of industry and exchange.

Within these basic 'premises' underlying history, Marx has so far ignored consciousness, or the role of ideas. This is because he argues that consciousness is from the beginning a product of those material conditions of human life already outlined. He links it to the origins of language, which itself emerges 'from the need . . . of intercourse with other men' in the productive process. Thus from its origins, 'language is practical, real consciousness that exists for other men as well', and thus 'consciousness is . . . a social product, and remains so as long as men exist at all'. Marx claims that initially men's consciousness was thus only a limited awareness of each other (and hence of themselves) because of the restricted social relations in primitive modes of production – 'mere herd-consciousness'. Also, 'because nature is as yet hardly altered by history' and thus 'confronts man as a completely alien, all-powerful . . . force', men's first religion is that mere 'natural religion' in which nature itself is animated.⁵²

However, because population growth generated an increase in needs and greater productivity, cooperation extended – and these conditions promoted a development of men’s consciousness to the seminal point when ‘a division of material and mental labour appears’. Indeed, Marx claims it is only then that division of labour truly becomes established, when ‘ideologists’ separate themselves from material labour and become ‘priests’. In scathing terms Marx claims that from this point, ‘consciousness is in a position to emancipate itself from the world and to proceed to the formation of “pure” theory, theology, philosophy, morality, etc.’, and that it can now ‘flatter itself that it is something other than consciousness of existing practice, that it *really* represents something without representing something real’. But, for Marx, ‘it is quite immaterial what consciousness starts to do on its own’. This is because it is only possible for it to propose ideas at odds with the world around it – ‘all this trash’ – insofar as that real world itself exhibits contradictions. The latter arise because ‘intellectual and material activity, . . . enjoyment and labour, production and consumption, devolve on different individuals’,⁵³ and this is due to the division of labour.

Division of labour

‘The division of labour’ is a key concept in Marx’s theory of society and historical change. Although practised in varying degrees for millennia, the concept was famously brought to prominence by Adam Smith, who opened his *Wealth of Nations* (1776) by showing how the productive process – (he used the example of pin-making) – is enormously enhanced by dividing the separate actions involved in production between different individuals, thus allowing specialisation and saving time (and also facilitating the use of machinery). This extends from the operations involved in manufacturing a single article to the division between different occupations, and as Smith pointed out, it is primarily due to the division of labour that, relieved from having to produce everything for themselves, individuals enjoy vastly increased wealth. As such, ‘the division of labour’ seems a solely technical matter of the efficient deployment of work-activity.

For Marx, however, although ‘the division of labour’ indeed means the above, it also means much more. This is because of the economic and social implications inseparable from it in actual history. Marx claims the first division of labour was in the family, ‘where wife and children are the slaves of the husband’. This was ‘the first form of property’, for although crude, ‘even at this stage it corresponds perfectly to the definition of modern economists, who call it the power of disposing of the labour-power of others’ – (i.e., by ‘property’ Marx, like economists, is not referring to mere personal possessions). Even at its inception, then, the division of labour implies ‘the *unequal* distribution, both quantitative and qualitative, of labour and its products’.⁵⁴

The division of labour extended beyond single families to a division of labour between different families, and then into the tribe. Later, as nations emerged, it led ‘at first to the separation of industrial and commercial from agricultural labour,

and hence to the separation of town and country . . . Its further development leads to the separation of commercial from industrial labour'. Subsequent divisions of labour within these different branches result in different relative positions of groups depending on 'the way work is organised in agriculture, industry, and commerce'.⁵⁵ At each stage, however, these further divisions of labour are not merely technical improvements in the organisation of productive capacity. Rather, because 'division of labour and private property are, after all, identical expressions',⁵⁶ then 'the various stages of development in the division of labour are just so many different forms of property', which 'determines . . . the relations of individuals to one another with reference to the material, instrument and product of labour'.⁵⁷ In short, historically any mode of production functions through a particular division of labour, and thus generates a certain set of social relations based on the 'labour-disposing' powers of private property. In this sense, all societies have been 'class' societies, where different classes occupy different positions of relative inequality and privilege.

The state

Marx then extends this analysis to the *political* aspect of societies. Overall, the division of labour helps generate a society's total production by which its members are sustained. But the society is divided into unequal parts, and therefore there is a 'contradiction between the interest of the separate individual . . . and the common interest of all individuals who have intercourse with one another'. This 'common interest' exists 'as the mutual interdependence of the individuals among whom the labour is divided', yet individuals are unable to relate to this genuine common interest because restricted, in their unequal societies, to seeking 'only their particular interests'.⁵⁸ Because of the threat of continual discord, the 'common' interest has to be asserted, and this is exactly the function of 'the state'. Yet Marx distinguishes between the *genuine* and the *illusory* 'common' interest, claiming that in reality the state only asserts the latter. Why? Because 'the state is the form in which individuals of a ruling class assert their common interests',⁵⁹ and thus it functions to maintain the property-relations which correspond to the division of labour. Being therefore always the agent of the dominant class (apart from tumultuous revolutionary times), it is not surprising that numerous individuals should experience the so-called common interest asserted by the state as 'alien' to them.

In a rare contribution to this part of *The German Ideology*, Engels puts it clearly: 'Out of this very contradiction between the particular and the common interests, the common interest assumes an independent form as the *state*, which is divorced from the real individual and collective interests'. It is only 'an illusory community', and 'it follows from this that all struggles within the state . . . are merely the illusory forms . . . in which the real struggles of the different classes are fought out'. As such, the state is always the creature of 'civil society', reflective of the power and property-relations within the latter – just as the latter has in its turn been shaped

by the productive forces which underlie the whole edifice of 'state' and 'society'. Engels' complaint, that 'of this the German theoreticians have not the faintest inkling'⁶⁰ is generalised in Marx's conclusion that 'we see that this civil society is the true focus and theatre of history, and how absurd is the conception of history held hitherto, which neglects the real relations and confines itself to spectacular historical events'. Marx is not only criticising 'mere' empiricist history, but also the Hegelian approach to history. For Marx, 'alienation' is now clearly the effect of private property and the division of labour, which with its further development through history ensures that individuals 'become more and more enslaved under a power alien to them'. This power is in fact 'the world market', but for the Hegelians is 'a pressure which they have conceived of as a dirty trick on the part of the so-called world-spirit'⁶¹

Superstructure and ideology

So far, Marx has argued that at the basis of any society is its mode of production and the attendant property-relations which its division of labour generates. He has also argued that, because the *state's* function is to fix and defend the existing privileges of the dominant propertied class, then the *political* dimension to societies is merely a superstructure emerging from the 'true theatre of history', namely, civil society. According to Marx, this realisation should amend much of the way history is understood, for it means that political struggles have not *caused* historical change, but are rather the *effects* of changes ultimately traceable to *economic* factors.

But Marx is not only concerned to downplay the role of politics and state-activity in historical change. He also wants to downplay the role of *ideas* – i.e., widely construed as all the products of consciousness. Although particularly concerned to attack Hegelianism as the most extreme version of the illusion, he generalises this to all approaches which elevate 'consciousness' into a determining factor in historical change. Instead, he insists that his conception of history – 'historical materialism' – which starts 'from the material production of life itself' and explains the nature of 'civil society', also shows how the latter in its turn explains 'how all the different theoretical products and forms of consciousness, religion, philosophy, morality, etc. arise from it'.

To justify this huge claim (as influential as it has been controversial) Marx reminds us of his fundamental proposition that 'life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life', and that therefore the correct approach to history 'does not explain practice from the idea but explains the formation of ideas from material practice'.⁶² Elsewhere using the term 'ideology' to encompass all modes of thought, Marx is therefore insisting that the ideological dimension to any society is, like its politics, merely superstructural – i.e., that it is explicable via the nature of 'civil society', itself made up of social relations dependent upon the mode of production. Thus, for Marx, philosophy, legal ideas, morality, and even art, do not even generate their *own* self-contained history, let alone determine history's course, but should be explained in terms of their origins in practical life.

For example, regarding philosophy, he claims that when ‘the reality’ of ‘the practical process of the development of men’ is described, then ‘a self-sufficient philosophy loses its medium of existence’.⁶³ This completes that growing disillusion over the nature and function of ‘philosophy’ we noted as a feature of Marx’s intellectual development. It implies that one may philosophise as much as one likes about e.g., the nature of justice, love, or God, and construct a ‘history’ of how these ideas have been differently construed over the ages by philosophers – but the only worthwhile questions are, not ‘what is justice?’, ‘what is love?’, ‘what is God?’, but first, what was *meant* by these terms in ancient Athens, or in Renaissance Florence, or in the writings of Plato or Hegel? – and second, *why* did they construe these meanings? This latter question resolves into an enquiry into the social relations pertaining at the time in order to explain why these ideas made sense, or ‘worked’ for them, (or alternatively, was being challenged by alternative notions by those for whom the present understandings did *not* help make sense of *their* actual experience).

In short, to understand Marx’s theory of ideology it is worth reminding ourselves of his epistemological dictum, ‘The question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a *practical* question’. On this basis, then, Marx attacks the tendency ‘common to all historians, particularly since the eighteenth century’, to attribute historical change to changes in ideas and values – i.e., ‘ideology’. For Marx, they have got matters upside down, and he exposes their error as follows:

If . . . in considering the course of history we detach the ideas of the ruling class from the ruling class itself and attribute to them an independent existence, . . . without bothering ourselves about the . . . producers of these ideas . . . and world conditions which are the source of these ideas, then we can say, for instance, that during the time the aristocracy was dominant, the concepts of honour, loyalty, etc. were dominant, during the dominance of the bourgeoisie, the concepts of freedom, equality, etc., [were dominant].⁶⁴

And in repeated sections of the *German Ideology* Marx reserves special scorn for the extreme version of this error – the Hegelian philosophy of history – for it is precisely this ‘trick’ which the Hegelians exploit, for

once the ruling ideas have been separated from the ruling individuals and, above all, from the relations which result from a given stage of the mode of production, and in this way the conclusion has been reached that history is always under the sway of ideas, it is very easy to abstract from these various ideas “the Idea” . . . as the dominant force in history, and thus to consider all these separate ideas and concepts as “forms of self-determination” of the Concept developing in history

thus leading to the ludicrous conclusion that 'the philosophers, the thinkers, have at all times been dominant in history'.⁶⁵

The course of history: historical change

For Marx, on the contrary, the history of states and of ideas has always been merely reflective of what *really* determines historical epochs, namely, the economic basis to actual material life. The final component which completes his overall theory of history is his theory of *historical change*.

In *The German Ideology* Marx claims that the motor behind major historical changes is the repeated emergence of a *contradiction* between 'the productive forces' (i.e., the mode of production) and 'the form of intercourse' they generate, (i.e., 'the relations of production', or property-relations). For Marx, 'the conditions under which individuals have intercourse with each other' are 'the conditions under which alone these definite individuals . . . can produce their material life and what is connected with it'.⁶⁶ These conditions, because generated by the mode of production, are appropriate whilst it prevails as the dominant form of a society's productive forces. There is thus a period of comparative stability where the social relations, political system and legal code, and the ideological superstructure, efficiently correspond to the fundamental mode of production. However, there comes a point where the existing productive forces become held back from further expansion because they begin to outstrip the 'social relations' appropriate to them up until now. A huge contradiction develops, and is only resolved by a period of revolutionary turmoil during which the social/property relations are transformed into new 'forms of intercourse' which correspond to the new mode of production harbingered by the further development of the productive forces.

In short, there comes a point where the relations of production and corresponding superstructure become a straightjacket, rather than a cosy glove, for economic development. They become 'fetters', and it is their transformation into a new set of social/property relations necessary for the expanding mode of production which is the very stuff of history. 'Thus', Marx writes, 'all collisions in history have their origin, according to our view, in the contradiction between the productive forces and the form of intercourse'.⁶⁷ The motor of history is driven forward as 'an earlier form of intercourse, which has become a fetter, is replaced by a new one corresponding to the more developed productive forces . . . – a form which in its turn becomes a fetter and is then replaced by another'.⁶⁸ This, then, is a process 'which . . . has occurred several times in past history', and 'necessarily on each occasion burst out in a revolution, taking on at the same time various subsidiary forms, such as all-embracing collisions, collisions of various classes, contradictions of consciousness, battle of ideas, political struggle, etc.'. ⁶⁹

Historical sketch

Having set out this overall theory, Marx devoted considerable space in *The German Ideology* to therefore sketching out the principal periods of history in terms of how the productive forces generated their specific property and class relations via the division of labour. He begins with 'tribal property', which 'corresponds to the undeveloped stage of production' revolving around hunting, fishing, cattle-raising, and primitive agriculture. The division of labour is 'still very elementary', being merely an extension of that in the family, such that 'patriarchal chieftains' exercise power over the tribe and its slaves. The next stage of society was classical antiquity (i.e., exemplified by Greece and Rome) based on what Marx calls 'ancient communal and state property'. This emerged 'from the union of several tribes into a city', which is the communal property of its citizens, via which they 'hold power over their labouring slaves'. But gradually these societies based on 'communal private property' were undermined by the development of 'immovable private property', whereby patrician families began to own parts of what had been common land farmed by 'the plebeian small peasantry'. Marx claims this process of the decay of communal private property 'began very early in Rome . . . and proceeded very rapidly from the time of the civil wars' (amongst the patrician class of Rome) 'and especially under the emperors' (i.e., beginning with the fall of the Republic in AD 30). He suggests that one of the effects of 'the concentration of private property' was 'the transformation of the plebeian small peasantry into a proletariat' – in other words, as with (later) *industrial* private property, a property-less, wage-labouring class – but that 'owing to its intermediate position between propertied citizens and slaves', this class 'never achieved an independent development'.⁷⁰ In this important respect, then, the 'proletariat' of the classical world was unlike the modern proletariat because there existed a class below it – the slaves.

Feudalism and the Middle Ages

If classical antiquity was based on the city (and its surrounding agriculture), the succeeding form of society was based on the country, and here Marx is referring to the Middle Ages following the decline of the Roman Empire. This decline, coupled with 'conquest by the barbarians, destroyed a considerable part of the productive forces'. Industry 'had decayed for want of a market', trade had been violently disrupted, and coupled with 'the influence of the Germanic military constitution' of the invaders, these conditions led to the development of 'feudal or estate property'. This form of society was based primarily on the rural agricultural economy and, according to Marx, was, 'like tribal and communal property . . . also based on a community'. But in this case 'the community' was that of the landowning nobility, which held power over 'the directly producing class', namely, 'the enserved small peasantry' – still, then, 'an association against a subjected producing class', but different to antiquity 'because of the different conditions of production'. This feudal landed hierarchy 'had its counterpart' in the 'feudal

organisation of trades' in the towns of the Middle Ages – again, a kind of communal private property in which 'the gradually accumulated small capital of individual craftsmen' was organised into guilds which controlled the employment and training of journeymen and apprentices, and protected the merchant/industrialists against 'the robber-nobility' and from 'the growing competition of the escaped serfs swarming into the rising towns'. Marx summarised medieval rural and town organisation by saying it 'was determined by the restricted conditions of production – the scanty and primitive cultivation of the land', (the strip-system), 'and the craft type of industry'. Although the overall social/property division into hierarchical estates was 'strongly marked' – 'princes, nobility, clergy and peasants in the country, and masters, journeymen, apprentices and soon also the rabble of casual labourers in the towns', the actual modes of production involved 'little division of labour in the heyday of feudalism'.⁷¹

Pre-industrial capitalism

For Marx, what began the break-up of medieval, feudal society was precisely a development of the division of labour. Whereas in medieval towns those who manufactured also promoted and sold their goods, in the Renaissance era there 'was a separation of production and intercourse, the formation of a special class of merchants'. The effects of this crucial development in 'commercial communications' were that the merchants extended trade 'beyond the immediate surroundings of the town'; 'new tools are brought from one town to another', which now enter into reciprocal relations, generating a further division of labour whereby each individual town 'is soon exploiting a predominant branch of industry'. This greatly expanded the forces of manufacturing production, indeed to the point where the guild-system and its accompanying property-relations were 'outgrown'. Whilst this economic expansion was initially limited to the home market in England and France, in Italy and Flanders it took off because of 'intercourse with foreign nations', and it is this latter eventuality which Marx calls 'the historical premise for the first flourishing of manufactures'. He observes that this depended upon an increase in the concentration of capital both in the private hands of the merchants and, 'in spite of the guild regulations', in the guilds themselves, (symptomatic of their decline). He points to a symbiosis between the growth of trade, the merchant class with its capital, and the development of manufacture as a mode of production, because 'the kind of labour which from the first presupposed machines, even of the crudest sort, soon showed itself the most capable of development'. Weaving became the principal manufacture because of factors which gave it 'a quantitative and qualitative stimulus, which wrenched it out of the form of production hitherto existing'. In addition to country peasants who began to make weaving their primary rather than merely secondary occupation, 'there emerged a new class of weavers in the towns', serving domestic and foreign markets with increasingly luxurious goods.

All this depended upon the gradual transformation of fixed, immovable capital (i.e., 'natural capital' as ownership of land in the country and guild-property in the

towns) into *movable* capital (i.e., the fluid mobility of investment *money*). The capital of the merchants was of the latter kind from the beginning, and the second impulse for its growth was manufacture itself, 'which again mobilised a mass of natural capital, and altogether increased the mass of movable capital as against that of natural capital'. (The enclosure of land for pastoral farming, resulting in a leap in vagabondage, is a well-known example of this process, and was complained about by Thomas More in his *Utopia* in 1513). Technical as this may be, for Marx it was a crucial economic, even historic, development, for it transformed property and hence class relations. Above all, increasingly 'the relations between worker and employer changed' from the patriarchal relation between journeyman and master in the guilds into the purely 'monetary relations between worker and capitalist'. Although feudal relations persisted in the countryside, increasing numbers of peasants fled from their landlords to the towns, which were already becoming more important than the countryside as powerhouses of production.

One of the chief features of this period spanning the fifteenth to the seventeenth century was that 'manufacture and the movement of production in general received an enormous impetus through the extension of intercourse which came with the discovery of America and the sea-routes to the East Indies'. Countries 'entered into competitive relations . . . fought out in wars, protective duties and prohibitions', and 'the masses of gold and silver which came into circulation' stimulated the growth of a world-market dependent upon an expansion of commerce, manufacture, and movable capital.⁷² Nevertheless, Marx claims that compared to later periods, 'the movement of capital . . . still remained . . . relatively slow' because of the protectionist policies of the manufacturing and trading nations. Correspondingly, merchants rather than manufacturers were the dominant new class. Nonetheless, this 'mercantilist' attitude did not prevent 'the beginning of money-trade, banks, national debts, paper money, speculation in stocks and shares . . . and the development of finance in general',⁷³ thus preparing the conditions for an ever greater transformation of capital from its 'natural' form in physical resources into infinitely mobile capital, i.e., pure money.

Industrial capitalism

Sometimes the above is described as the era of 'pre-industrial capitalism', and this captures Marx's approach, for he claims it was succeeded by what became a qualitatively different period, 'the third period of private property since the Middle Ages', namely, the era of large-scale industry characterised by 'the application of elemental forces to industrial ends, machinery, and the most extensive division of labour'. Because of the special 'concentration of trade and manufacture in one country, England', which thus developed a 'relative world-market' for its goods, a point was reached when the demand for its manufactures 'could no longer be met by the industrial productive forces hitherto existing'.⁷⁴ This circumstance provided 'the motive power' for the emergence of large-scale industry, the chief mode of production of Marx's own times, and in addition to the scientific and technological

advances involved, it also depended on the development of freedom of competition within nations (i.e., a market economy) – something that ‘had everywhere to be won by a revolution – 1640 and 1688 in England, 1789 in France’.

For Marx, the emergence of large-scale industry as the dominant force of production had dramatic effects upon the nature of societies. Increasingly, it ‘universalised competition’ within and between countries, which ‘forced all individuals to strain their energy to the utmost’. It ‘established means of communication and the modern world market’, which ‘produced world history for the first time, insofar as it made all civilised nations and every individual member of them dependent for the satisfaction of their wants on the whole world’. It ‘subordinated trade to itself, transformed all capital into industrial capital, and thus produced the rapid circulation . . . and centralisation of capital’ – in other words, it created the big bourgeoisie and the modern industrial proletariat, removing from the division of labour, and from labour itself, ‘the last semblance of its natural character . . . as far as this is possible’, by destroying ‘the crafts and all earlier stages of industry where it gained mastery’. In creating ‘the modern, large industrial cities which have sprung up overnight’, it ‘completed the victory of the town over the country’. In creating ‘everywhere the same relations between the classes of society’, it ‘thus destroyed the peculiar features of the various nationalities’, creating ‘a class [the proletariat] which in all nations has the same interest and for which nationality is already dead’.

Although elsewhere Marx was to lavish praise upon pre-industrial and then industrial capitalism for opening up the world and gigantically expanding the productive forces of society, in the above passages he has stressed the negative effects in an almost wistful way. As noted earlier, Marx thought that in previous eras there was at least something ‘natural’ in people’s relation to their work-activity, however restricted (e.g., the medieval craftsman) – and something authentic about their social relations, however unequal, because based on more ‘natural’ communal distinctions (e.g., feudal relations of reciprocal obligation between lord and serf). We have even seen him distinguishing between ‘natural’ (immovable) capital based on physical property, and money capital. The latter is completely indifferent to its use so long as profit is made, and it is this feature of the era of industrial manufacture and its attendant social relations and ideological superstructure that prompts Marx to summarise the effects of industrial capitalism as follows: it ‘resolved all natural relations into money relations’, thereby producing an ethos which ‘destroyed as far as possible ideology, religion, morality, etc. and, where it could not do this, made them into a palpable lie’.⁷⁵

The moral dimension

Without such passages involving *moral* evaluation, the tenets of ‘historical materialism’ could be regarded as a purely ‘scientific’ approach to human history – i.e., as an objective theory not dependent upon ‘philosophical’ assumptions or any

particular moral values. And so it has often been viewed, and indeed also utilised in academic areas ranging from political history to economics, from cultural history to the history of thought, and to sociology (which partly originated from Marx's insights). However, it is not only the hyperbole of the above passages which shows that 'historical materialism' was not conceived as 'value-free' by Marx. On the contrary, a moral position runs throughout the whole text, and directs it to a dramatic consummation of his theory of history – namely, the call for and prediction of a communist revolution.

Not surprisingly, this moral dimension harks back to those earlier 'humanistic' writings associated with Marx's *first* attempt at philosophy of history. There, he emphasised 'alienation' as a grim feature of human history, and proposed the moral ideal of escaping from it in order to achieve the realisation of the human species, construed in the neo-Hegelian terms as 'freedom' – i.e., man's experience of full 'self-objectification' in his being-in-the-world. Then, in *The German Ideology*, we saw him spurn such 'speculative' philosophising, not least because of the (to him) risible philosophy of history underpinning it. But Marx's *volte-face* did not involve ditching his moral ideals – rather, they were recast into a different conceptual framework and language. In the 1844 *Manuscripts* he had posed the question as to 'why man alienated himself' through his work, but had aborted the attempt to answer it because it was a purely 'philosophical' question resting on a-historical notions of 'the essence of man'. In *The German Ideology* the problem is redefined. Now it is the situation of real individuals, as they function in their productive context and relate to others in their community, which is the focus of Marx's moral attention – and he singles out *the division of labour* as the prime culprit.

Ideally, then, the division of labour needs to be abolished, for it has transformed all 'personal powers . . . into material powers' over which individuals have no control, such that they cannot feel fulfilled in their lives. This dire situation 'can only be abolished by the individuals again subjecting these material powers to themselves and abolishing the division of labour'. But, Marx insists, this is not possible without the formation of a genuine community. He tells us that 'in the previous substitutes for the community, in the state, etc., personal freedom has existed only for the individuals . . . of the ruling class'. It was an 'illusory community' made up of 'one class over against another', which bore down particularly on the lower classes, since it was 'for the oppressed class not only a completely illusory community, but a new fetter as well'. What is needed is a 'real community', for it is only *within* such that 'each individual [has] the means of cultivating his gifts in all directions; hence personal freedom becomes possible only within the community'.⁷⁶

The prediction of 'communism'

Put like this, this 'real community' (Marx's 'communism') might be no more than an abstract ideal following from Marx's *moral* preferences. As such, his vision of communism would have little to do with our theme, philosophy of history. Rather,

we could rest content with 'historical materialism' solely as a theory of the past historical development of societies. However, Marx is emphatic that 'communism' is, for him, not merely a *moral preference* – rather, its actual coming-to-be follows directly from his philosophy of history. 'Communism is for us not a *state of affairs* which is to be established, an *ideal* to which reality will have to adjust itself. We call communism the *real* movement which abolishes the present state of things. The conditions of this movement result from the now existing premises'.⁷⁷

In other words, Marx is claiming that history has *once again* developed to a point where the conditions for another new era are in place, thus presaging an overall 'revolution' in the political, social, and ideological nature of societies. As such, this coming upheaval will again come about through the same determinants of previous epochal change – namely, the releasing of the accumulating productive forces from the property/class relations which have become 'fetters' on the development of the mode of production. In this case, the contradiction is between the wealth of productive forces harbingered by modern industrial manufacturing and the extension of a world-market, and the capital-labour, property/class relations presently pertaining. As in previous revolutionary transformations, this will involve ousting the ruling, propertied class from its control of the means of production, and thus be driven by class-struggle.

However, for Marx there is a crucial respect in which the forthcoming upheaval will be different in its outcome, and of the utmost significance in world-history. This is because, whereas all previous transformations have replaced one form of class-rule with another, the coming revolution will abolish class-divided societies altogether, and instead usher in societies where the means of production will be owned and controlled, not as some form of private property, but at last by the 'real community', no longer divided into separate classes. This will be truly 'world-historical' because 'in history up to the present . . . individuals have . . . become more and more enslaved under a power alien to them, . . . a power which has become more and more enormous'. The coming (communist) revolution will at last put a stop to the paradoxical dialectic whereby, as men increasingly master and 'humanise' the world through their productive activity, they are increasingly dominated by the very world they are creating, and consequently feel increasingly 'dehumanised'. Instead, the communist revolution will, from the logic of the premises which have made it imminent, transform this powerless dependency 'into the control and conscious mastery of these powers, which, born of the action of men on one another, have till now overawed and ruled men as powers completely alien to them'.⁷⁸ Years later, in referring to the significance of the new era beckoning, Marx expressed the idea as follows: 'The prehistory of human society accordingly closes with this [new] social formation'⁷⁹, paving the way for history proper, i.e., a new world-order in which human-beings consciously (freely) make their own history as their own deliberate creation.

As noted, Marx is emphatic that the above is not simply a wished-for ideal, but follows from the 'laws' of historical change he has set out, such that his prediction of the new era is an integral part of his theory of history. Why is this so? The answer

reverts to those first intimations he expressed in 1843 about the proletariat's uniqueness. His view then was that, specifically in relation to Germany, the only class which could 'emancipate' German society into 'true democracy' was its developing proletariat, because it was not suffering a particular wrong done to it by a higher class, but was suffering 'wrong generally' in that its total lack of property, power, and status epitomised the negative aspects of private-property based society. Its class demand could only be the abolition altogether of private ownership of the means of production, thereby abolishing the very basis of class-divided society. We saw Marx generalise this idea in the 1844 *Manuscripts* to apply to *all* modern countries. Yet he was still under the allure of the Hegelian concept of 'the universality of will'. His theory about the proletariat derived directly from deducing what the achievement of that 'philosophical' ideal would imply.

When, however, in *The German Ideology* he came to abandon Hegelianism (and, arguably, 'philosophy') altogether, he did not abandon this theory of the proletariat. On the contrary, he incorporated it into 'historical materialism'. In the latter work he advances the notion that the 'subsuming of individuals under definite classes cannot be abolished until a class has evolved which has no longer any particular class interest to assert against a ruling class'.⁸⁰ Now, historical development has generated precisely such a class – the proletariat. Unlike the serfs, who when they broke from their feudal servitude, 'did not free themselves as a class' and 'did not break loose from the system of estates, but only formed a new estate, retaining their previous mode of labour even in their new situation, and develop[ed] it further by freeing it from its earlier fetters', Marx claims that,

for the proletarians, on the other hand, the condition of their life, labour, and with it all the conditions of existence of modern society, have become something extraneous, something over which they, as separate individuals, have no control, and over which no social organisation can give them control, [i.e., as a class].⁸¹

Indeed, whereas 'all earlier revolutionary appropriations were restricted', the proletariat's plight is such that 'things have now come to such a pass that the individuals must appropriate the existing totality of productive forces, not only to achieve self-activity, but, also, merely to safeguard their very existence'.⁸² Likewise, Marx claims, 'in all previous revolutions the mode of activity always remained unchanged and it was only a question of a different distribution of this activity, a new distribution of labour to other persons'. Here again the logic of historical development dictates the uniqueness of the proletarian situation, because,

the communist revolution is directed against the hitherto existing *mode* of activity, does away with *labour*, and abolishes the rule of all classes with the classes themselves, because it is carried through by the class which no longer counts as a class in society . . . and is in itself the expression of the dissolution of all classes . . .⁸³

In short, then, the laws of historical development have generated the situation where modern industrial-capitalist societies are on the cusp of epochal change to 'communism', construed as, amongst other things, classless societies, 'stateless' societies (i.e., in the sense of being 'true democracies'), and societies where the forced division of labour is abolished, along with 'labour' itself, (i.e., productive activity as a commodity to be bought and sold).

Later developments

The historical imminence of 'communism', then, is the dramatic consummation of Marx's 'mature' theory of history first worked out in 1845 in *The German Ideology*. Not published until 1932, aspects of it were instead exploited by Marx in subsequent works published at the time of writing – for example, in *The Communist Manifesto* in 1848, and in *Das Kapital* in 1867 as well as in his unpublished extensive preparatory notes to *Das Kapital* since published as *Economic Manuscripts of 1857–58*⁸⁴ (in both of which latter works Marx includes sections analysing in greater detail the origins of capitalism itself) and in politico-historical works analysing key episodes of recent and contemporary French history in class terms.

But as a theory of history he did not change it. Rather, it is the bedrock on which he developed his further political, historical, and economic ideas, (for as he tells us himself, it had achieved its 'main purpose – self-clarification' after his earlier wrestlings with Hegelianism). For example, because of its obvious *political* message he frequently simplified the role of class in history – e.g., 'The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles',⁸⁵ this despite the fact that in the *German Ideology* we saw him saying that when epochal revolutions occur because of contradictions 'between the productive forces and the form of intercourse', then these collisions take on 'at the same time various subsidiary forms, such as . . . collisions of various classes, contradictions of consciousness, battle of ideas, political struggle, etc.'⁸⁶ In other words, class-struggle is but a *part* of these huge movements. Likewise, for good propagandist purposes Marx was wont to declare that the victory of the proletarian revolution was inevitable, whereas nowhere in *The German Ideology* did he claim such a cast-iron necessity. Rather, although the economic determinants of a society are crucial, so is the more subjective factor of the degree of class-consciousness and initiative. 'Both for the production on a mass scale of this communist consciousness, and for the success of the cause itself, the alteration of men on a mass scale is necessary, an alteration which can only take place in a practical movement, a *revolution*'.⁸⁷ It is true Marx did see capitalist society as on the threshold of epochal change towards 'communism', and thus in that sense as historically determined or inevitable. However, there is a certain tension between his saying, in the *German Ideology*, that the abolition of private property is *necessary* because 'only in a revolution' can the proletariat 'succeed in ridding itself of all the muck of ages and become fitted to found society anew',⁸⁸ and the notion that such a revolution is *inevitable*, and will *inevitably* succeed. The term, 'necessary', could be read as referring to the *logical* necessity of the abolition of private property as the

'only' way of overcoming class division, given the logic of 'historical materialism'. This is different from claiming an empirical or 'scientific' necessity, whereby an event is indeed construed as *inevitable*.

Although Marx was to use the latter language on later occasions, it was far more a feature of Engels' formulations. Engels developed his own version of Marx (called 'dialectical materialism') in which historical development is presented in unambiguously mechanistic terms, as if social change followed autonomous 'laws' akin to the scientific laws governing the natural world. As noted by the best commentators,⁸⁹ this was not Marx's position, since in his more subtle approach human beings play an active, constitutive role in historical development, albeit often deluded in their consciousness about the world. Thus (rather as with Vico) for Marx, human beings make history (albeit under definite conditions), not some autonomous 'laws' of social development. A certain latitude is therefore justifiable where Marx in later writings seems to present the transition to communism as *inevitable*. Whilst it is true that his theory in *The German Ideology* indeed looks to the collapse of the capitalist society he was familiar with, quite how and when this would happen is not predicted in historical terms. And quite sensibly so, we might judge, considering that (like Hegel before him) Marx was working out a theory of history that analysed huge changes which often took centuries to work out all their manifestations.

In this light it is instructive to note Marx's relative openness over the actual manner in which capitalism would be replaced, and the time-span involved. For example, when he first formulated his (mature) philosophy of history in 1845, many European countries were deeply embroiled in their particular nationality problems, in facing strident calls for 'democracy' from large radical movements, and in confronting the ubiquitous problems of poverty, unemployment, and urbanisation known then as 'the social problem'. This heady mixture was to lead to 1848, that 'watershed' year of European revolutions, and later in his life Marx admitted that he and fellow radicals thought they were 'witnessing the death-throes of capitalism', only to find that what they were actually witnessing was its 'birth-pangs'. Indeed, it was partly this shock (along with his own assessment of 'the new stage of development which this society seems to have entered with the discovery of gold in California and Australia')⁹⁰ that encouraged Marx to engage on a close 'scientific' study of capitalism (leading to *Das Kapital*) from the 1850s onwards. Similarly, in his *political* thinking, it was not until the Paris Commune of 1871 that he construed the notion of a transitional phase from capitalism to communism via 'the dictatorship of the proletariat'. In addition he came to speculate that a *peaceful* transition might, unusually, be possible in Britain and the USA. Such observations, then, should encourage us better to understand the epochal perspective from which Marx was viewing history than has many an impatient, dogmatic Marxist since, as well as many a scornful critic alleging that history has shown Marx wrong. Feudalism, after all, lasted centuries, and took centuries to be discarded – and even now, not globally.

Comments

'Progress', 'determinism', and inevitability

Having already remarked on his early, 'immature' philosophy of history, I will mainly restrict comment to 'historical materialism' – firstly as an example of 'philosophy of history' in general, and secondly to its status as either 'philosophy' or 'science'.

Regarding general observations, first it is clear that in both his earlier and 'mature' theories, Marx did not see history as cyclical. This is not to say, however, that distinct forms of society do not collapse, particularly in his mature ('historical materialist') theory. On the contrary, history moves through epochal changes. (Perhaps confusingly, these changes are called 'revolutions', a term suggestive of history 'going round in circles').

Second, is history driven *forward*? i.e., is it *progressive*? Marx's answer (apparent in both his theories) is in the affirmative, yet the matter is not straightforward. This is because history is not *unilinear* for Marx. Rather than a relatively uncomplicated march of progress, integral to Marx's theorising was the notion that as some things get better others necessarily get worse, precisely leading to fundamental upheaval ushering in a new era. This is reminiscent of Hegel's notion of *dialectical* change (through thesis, antithesis, and synthesis). In Marx, however, the dialectical nature of change stems from practical, not logical, contradictions – and even here, was later presented too mechanistically by Engels and 'orthodox' Marxists. Rather, it was a general framework of explanatory and predictive value – for example, his graphic notion that capitalism produces its own gravediggers by generating the proletariat. Third, it is clear that for the atheist Marx there is no 'God' or immaterial 'Mind' behind the course of history. However, this does not exclude its course being '*determined*' by factors (outside of human design) which shape a discernible pattern to the major outlines of historical development. But just how far this lends an *inevitability* to historical change and its direction has often been overstated by Marxists and critics alike.

Perhaps a clear way to address this much-debated theme is, first, to ask: could the course of history have been different as far as Marx was concerned? The answer must surely be 'yes'. For example, there is nothing in his theorising to suggest the Scientific Revolution was 'inevitable', nor that it should have made the particular discoveries it did. (Likewise with the new discoveries of gold whose significance we saw Marx noting in the 1850s). Without it, however, we can assume the large-scale industrial manufacturing mode of production would not have emerged. More to the point for Marx is that, once it *did* emerge, many changes in class-structure, property relations, political systems, and ideology/culture did indeed come about *necessarily*, 'inevitably', or were 'determined' (i.e., to use these terms interchangeably). But their exact nature and timing is not something Marx's theory ever purported as 'inevitable'.

Second, then, we may ask; could the *future* course of history Marx predicted be different as far as he was concerned? The answer to this hot potato is surely to

be found in the remarks just made. Marx did regard the collapse of capitalism as historically inevitable. In one sense, given the scope of speculative 'philosophy of history' this eventuality should occasion no surprise to anyone, whether of a Marxist persuasion or not, since the alternative is to suggest that the remainder of the world's history will permanently be restricted to 'capitalism'. One hardly needs a 'theory' of history to express astonishment at such a lack of imagination.⁹¹ But Marx did not base his prediction on such obvious historical instincts. Rather, he claimed to find present reasons (further researched in *Das Kapital*) in the make-up of capitalist societies which not only spelt their demise but also 'determined' what, in broad terms, would replace them – i.e., 'communism'. However, 'capitalism' is a term used by Marx to denote the *social relations* of modern society, not its *mode of production* – and according to 'historical materialism' it is because of changes in the *latter* that capitalism will be discarded by the course of history.

This puts a different complexion on whether, for Marx, that course could be different from what he predicted, for it depends not so much on the nature of capitalism as on movements in the nature of modern productive forces. In his own times, Marx was witnessing the rapid development of large-scale industrial manufacturing as the predominant 'mode of production' in modern societies. His predictions about capitalism were not based on the *demise* of industrialism, but on its future expansion and development, potentially, he believed, to where poverty could be eradicated (eventually world-wide). Modern production was becoming ever more highly 'socialised' in its exploitation of resources world wide, including the work-activity of human-beings. Yet the means of production were still owned as private property, and worked by wage-labour to make a profit for the capitalists. It was this contradiction which prompted Marx's prediction that, as in all earlier epochs, the relations of production were becoming fetters on future development, and would inevitably be broken by the sheer needs of those suffering most from their disadvantages. This was what Marx saw as 'inevitable', or 'determined' by the course of history.

But since his death in 1883, it could be argued that a second 'industrial revolution' began towards the end of the nineteenth century, incorporating electricity and petrochemicals, dramatically altering numerous aspects of society, albeit still under capitalist relations. (Lenin was not alone in suggesting the latter were significantly altered through the growing internationalisation of capital and the new wave of 'imperialism'.)

Again, it could be argued that in the third quarter of the twentieth century a third major development in the 'mode of production' of advanced countries was the growing automation of industrial processes, changing working lives beyond recognition compared to Marx's day. Finally, it is now suggested we have entered the '*post-industrial*' era, dominated by 'service industries', electronic technology, pharmaceuticals, and the new economies based on the 'information technology revolution'. (And bio-engineering beckons!) Yet it is true that capitalism, understood as competitive commodity production by privately controlled interests employing the labour force, survives as the predominant socio-economic system

under which these contemporary forces of production operate. In that fundamental sense it could be argued nothing has changed since Marx's times, despite economic 'globalisation'.

For some this suggests not only that Marx's *predictions* have been proved wrong but that the persistence of 'capitalism' through vastly expanding and altering 'modes of production' disproves the entire principles of 'historical materialism'. Others, however, have argued that the course of history since Marx's death has exemplified these principles in ways obvious to any thinking person. It is true that 'capitalism' has not yet succumbed to pressure from the disadvantaged 'classes' it produces, but this is because it has *still* yet to reach as far as Marx himself saw as a necessary precondition of its demise. When he first formulated his theory in 1845 he made clear that amongst the material, practical premises of the coming of communism was the necessity for capitalism to have 'rendered the great mass of humanity "propertyless", and moreover in contradiction to an existing world of wealth and culture'. This necessitates the 'universal development of productive forces' such that 'a *universal* intercourse between men' would be established, which 'produces in *all* nations simultaneously the phenomenon of the "propertyless" mass (universal competition), making each nation dependent on the revolutions of the others, and finally puts world-historical, empirically universal individuals in place of local ones'. He concluded from this that communism (and hence the collapse of capitalism) 'is only possible as the act of the dominant peoples "all at once" and simultaneously, which presupposes the universal development of productive forces and the world intercourse bound up with them'.⁹² It is because, in 1845, he saw capitalism already (and necessarily) developing on these lines that he said the premises for communism were already present.

Whether this universalisation of capitalism he stipulated is nearing completion after its fearsome battles of the twentieth century is conjectural, although one cannot fail to reflect on our present terms, 'global capitalism' and 'the world economy'. But what is beyond doubt is that Marx could not have been expected, and never claimed, to predict the actual events and time-scale it would entail. Also, from the perspective of the 'philosophies' of history we have been examining, the course of history moves far more slowly than its prophets like to think – which might prompt us to suggest (Marx notwithstanding) that the attempt to use 'philosophy of history' for *political* purposes has been, and will continue to be, ludicrous. Along these lines, then, it is not that with hindsight Marx would have predicted some alternative course of history, as if its principles of development had suddenly changed. Rather, he might have congratulated himself on the accuracy of his prediction of the world-reach of capitalism, but have been as fascinated as anyone by the actual historical events involved. And as for his prediction of 'communism', there would seem no reason to suggest he would jettison it in principle, although many reasons to suggest he would amend what little he predicted about its concrete nature and manner of coming about.

'Science' versus 'philosophy'

It is perhaps appropriate that now our final comments on Marx's theorising about history should coincide with ending the first Part of this guide, devoted to 'speculative philosophy of history'. This is because, ironically, Marx understood himself to have dealt this branch of philosophy a death-blow. Arguably he was right, insofar as it could be claimed that since his writings no new, great speculative philosophy of history has been conceived. But however much this is attributable to his impact, it is also the case that towards the end of the nineteenth century 'science' increasingly replaced 'philosophy' in the explanation of numerous aspects of social reality.

In this light it is worth commenting upon whether 'historical materialism' is indeed part of 'speculative philosophy of history' or, instead, 'science'. As far as Marx was concerned, from 1845 he stopped writing 'philosophy'. Instead, he is always translated as claiming 'scientific' status for what he called 'the materialist conception of history', even though the term 'science' in translation rarely appears in *The German Ideology*, and is in any event ambiguous in the German: 'Where speculation ends, where real life starts, there consequently begins real, positive science, the expounding of the practical activity, of the practical process of development of men'.⁹³ Indeed, when famously distinguishing his version of socialism from others in *The Communist Manifesto*, the term is not used at all. Rather, the language is as follows:

The theoretical conclusions of the Communists are in no way based on ideas or principles that have been invented, or discovered by this or that would-be universal reformer. They merely express, in general terms, actual relations springing from an existing class struggle, from a historical movement going on under our very eyes.⁹⁴

The emphasis upon 'historical materialism' as a *science*, meaning the model of *natural science* whereby things happen through the iron necessity of 'laws' independent of human control, came later from Engels, particularly in his dabblings with the natural sciences in his *Anti-Dühring* of 1875, (where Marx never dabbled) and later, more famously, in the very title of his work, *Socialism – Utopian or Scientific?*, which was the most influential popular exposition of 'Marxism', running through numerous editions and translations. It was perhaps from this work most of all, especially in its English title,⁹⁵ that readers derived the view that the march of history was viewed by Marx as 'scientifically inevitable', the exact impression Engels wished to make.

Thus questions arise as to how far Marx meant to afford his 'theory' or 'conception' of history the status of 'science' in that strong sense defined above, or meant something nearer to what we would call a 'philosophy', despite his rejection of the term. The answer lies partly in semantics. For centuries, in different languages,

what we translate as 'science' and 'philosophy' were used as interchangeable terms for 'knowledge'.⁹⁶ Even when the specifically factual, empirical knowledge we call 'scientific' began in the seventeenth century to be detached from a priori conceptual thinking, it was often called 'natural philosophy'. There are also the related terms, 'a theory' and 'to theorise', with their own contradictory meanings. Such ambiguities demonstrate that we are far from having a uniform, clear, vocabulary to denote the status of 'knowledge', and that particularly as we go back into history caution is needed in ascribing what writers mean when they employ such terms, their contextual use often being a surer guide than dictionary definitions.

In Marx's case it seems clear that when *attacking* 'philosophy' he is attacking thinking which proceeds purely through deduction from logical categories. This is not to say he dismissed the power of logic – rather, he rejected the validity of treating universal terms such as 'man' as if they denote real phenomena. In this he was following earlier 'nominalist' thinkers (such as Hobbes) as distinct from the 'realists' who thought otherwise. By his day, this traditional dispute was couched in terms of 'materialist' versus 'idealist' philosophy, and thus when attacking 'philosophy' it could be argued Marx was only attacking *idealist* philosophy (i.e., particularly Hegel). However, we also saw him attacking *materialist* philosophers (including Feuerbach) on somewhat similar grounds – namely, their belief that in talking of *material* things (rather than logical categories) they were talking of things whose reality, meaning, or nature was objectively fixed through sensual perception as by some external *diktat*. For Marx such thinking was equally flawed, for it still believed in things having fixed essences, despite being apparently grounded in empirical, material reality rather than abstract concepts. It is in this larger sense that Marx attacked both idealist and materialist 'philosophy' as a mode of apprehending and understanding the world.

Instead, Marx's proposed new method, 'historical materialism', was 'scientific' in the sense that, for him, it was derived from the facts of practical reality rather than fixed or a priori concepts. It was also 'scientific' in the sense that, from this 'real actuality', it proposed a general 'conception' or framework of central tenets which explained the connections between things – akin to the role 'scientific laws' play in explaining nature. However, unlike the latter, the subject-matter of 'historical materialism' was not nature, but the *human* world – and this distinguishes it from the model of the 'hard' physical sciences, since the 'laws' governing the development of societies are not some extraneous 'principles' directing how things function, but are what he calls 'premises' derived from straightforward practical reality, (e.g., the production of means of subsistence). In understanding the human world, then, we must be 'scientific' in the sense that we should begin from its strictly *material* 'premises'. History must be understood *materialistically*. So, we might say, must natural science. However, it is equally important that this materialist basis to human life must be understood *historically* – i.e., as subject to continuing alteration over time, partly (but significantly) because of the impact of human activity itself – and this is not a feature of natural science. Put simply, then, in 'historical materialism' it is as important that human life be approached *historically*

as that it be approached materialistically. 'History' thus becomes integral to the understanding of social reality, as *method*, rather than being merely something whose facts might interest one.

It is just this restricting of the scope of 'historical materialism' both to *human* affairs and to their *historicity* which prevents Marx's theory from being 'scientific' in our contemporary sense of the term.

But how far is his theory of history 'scientific' in what he meant by the term? Some have argued that, whatever he meant by claiming he was not 'philosophising' but was instead being 'scientific', he failed because of the inclusion of *moral* judgements in his historical theory. Similar doubts are raised about the 'objectivity' of his specific theory about economics in *Das Kapital*, a work so clearly fired by the same moral impulses present twenty years earlier in *The German Ideology*. The argument is that, whatever we mean by 'scientific' knowledge, it must at the minimum eschew the intrusion of moral evaluations about its subject-matter. If not, it is being 'philosophical' rather than 'scientific' because introducing ideas unamenable to empirical verification. On these grounds, Marx's theory of history is 'philosophy'. Moreover, it could be claimed that it is 'philosophy' in *bad faith* because it purports not to be philosophy. This is because Marx himself appears to dismiss 'moral' ideas as simply reflections of different material (class) interests. An important achievement of 'historical materialism' is, after all, to explain where moral ideas come from, thus stripping them of any claim to universal 'truth'. But by these same criteria, then, the moral impulse underlying Marx's *own* theory relegates it to 'mere ideology' – certainly not 'science', and arguably not even 'philosophy' because the latter, where value-orientated, is supposed to *argue* its values rather than assume them as given.

The demise of 'philosophy of history'?

Such arguments raise considerable questions about 'historical materialism' as a method of understanding the course of history. However, a case exists for suggesting they arise from false expectations derived from the belief that Marx understood himself to be proposing a rigidly determinist 'science' of history. I have tried to indicate that this is a false reading. No 'science' or 'philosophy' of history can ignore the role human needs, desires, illusions, and ambitions play in human history. That is, after all, what makes it *human* – or put the other way round, is what makes it *history*. Marx was acutely aware of this, as demonstrated firstly by his turn away from Hegel's 'Spirit' as the central figure in historical development, replacing it with 'man' – and then his turn away from (Feuerbach's) 'man', replacing it with actual men embroiled in and responding to their material circumstances. He undertook this intellectual journey – away from 'philosophy' towards 'real' knowledge – better to understand the grand scope of history. But making that journey did not involve his abandoning his previous thinking *in toto*. His earlier, merely general, notion of history as the process of human self-objectification through productive activity is

strongly present in his (mature) historical materialist theory, albeit stripped of its abstract connotations. Likewise his earlier notion of 'alienation' continues to resonate in his mature theory, except that the abstract ideal of 'freedom' is transposed into the more prosaic ideal of individual fulfilment within the context of a fully enabling mode of social and productive organisation. Also, the centrality of private property, class division, and the proletariat in his earlier 'philosophising' about history persists into his mature theory, but now as real operative factors in explaining actual historical epochs and their changes. It is true that a moral standpoint underlay this overall conception, from his earliest 'philosophising' to the 'scientific' claims of historical materialism. But Marx never made any secret about it, nor felt the need to apologise for it on the grounds that it might invalidate his theory.

Perhaps one reason for his lack of concern was that the moral views he expressed were not, as far as he was concerned, intrinsic to any particular class-interest, and thus not narrowly 'ideological'. Rather, it is a morality which reviles any limitation upon individuals' ability to explore and fulfil their capacities because their activity is treated simply as a means to be commandeered and exploited for others' selfish ends. As such, it is a 'general' moral value which may be expressed differently, and involve surmounting different problems, throughout the history of societies – but one that, for Marx, has doggedly shown itself throughout the practice of human beings' history. And it is this latter observation which perhaps provides a more satisfactory explanation for why Marx never flinched from incorporating his moral perspective into his thinking and writing. By doing so he was hoping to insert his ideas, including their moral imperative, as a factor in people's understanding of the world – because it is *human beings* who, in their thoughts and actions, are the stuff of world-history. But the corollary to this (which Marx's own logic dictates) is that it is up to *them*, through their continuing activity in history, to 'prove' whether the meaning he claims to find in that history is valid. 'The question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a *practical* question'.⁹⁷ Have better historical understanding, or subsequent events, consigned Marx's theory of history to the proverbial dustbin, or is the jury still out?