

Taking Historical Materialism Seriously?

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What I wish to show is that
Marx's "materialist conception of history",
valuable as it may be, must not be taken too seriously;
that we must regard it as nothing more than
a most valuable suggestion to us to consider things
in their relation to their economic background.

Karl R. Popper

It happens to be about a century ago that Friedrich Engels praised his close friend Karl Marx for having discovered what he considered to be "the laws of history". Before then philosophers or scientists have never conceived of history to be a course of events which could be explained and understood in a scientific manner by a law or law-like principle. The only exception might be Hegel, but his teleological conception of the development of the Spirit within the history of mankind is hardly to be understood correctly when interpreted as a scientific discovery. Ever since however there has been a long tradition of interpretations of Marx' conception of history for which to take historical materialism seriously means exactly what it meant to Engels: the discovery of a specific law of history or a law-like principle about historical development.

In this essay I examine the question whether or not historical materialism can be taken seriously in the sense that he really discovered a general law of history or a law-like principle about the historical development of human societies including their political structures and cultural affairs.

After separating historical materialism in a narrower sense from Marx's so-called materialist conception of history, SECTION ONE formulates an apparently inevitable dilemma of historical materialism, thus conceived, has to face. It is argued that there seems to be a choice between a modest interpretation that makes historical materialism truistic and an ambitious one which is by far too strong to be promising.

SECTION TWO presents Sweezy's original and largely convincing alternative interpretation of the *Preface*, which is generally considered to be the *locus classicus* of historical materialism. This interpretation is then shown to deserve additional support from what I take to be Marx's broader philosophical and methodological outlook on history and the study of historical developments. Moreover, recent more standard interpretations of Marx's so-called "theory of history" by Cohen, McMurtry and Shaw are argued against because they fail to understand Marx philosophical and methodological outlook, but also because they give a largely insufficient account of

historical materialism. Finally, the consequences of Sweezy's alternative interpretation are examined with respect to the apparent dilemma any interpretation or reconstruction of historical materialism has to face if it to be taken seriously in the sense mentioned above.

Finally, SECTION THREE examines whether is a way out of the dilemma by formulating a reconstruction the central hypothesis of historical materialism as a modest, but non-truistic empirical hypothesis about the historical development of human societies. Such a hypothesis is formulated by way of generalizing Marx's findings on the 19th century development of the capitalist system of economy in Europe although we have to admit that such a reconstruction goes against his own intentions and his insightful sceptical attitude against any such hasty generalizations. Finally, what we take to be the main problems of such a reconstruction are outlined and Marx's very own doubts about such attempts by various marxist philosophers are agreed upon.

1 - The inevitable dilemma of historical materialism

In *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, Friedrich Engels claims that there supposedly are "two great discoveries" which we owe to Karl Marx: "the materialist conception of history and the revelation of the secret of capitalist production through surplus value" (p. 700).¹ Although some, mostly orthodox Marxists may disagree, what Engels calls "the discovery of surplus value" still seems to remain a secret unrevealed even to such modern economists who are favorable to Marxian ideas within economic theorizing.² The situation seems to be different with Marx's alleged "discovery of the laws of history". Recently, Anglo-Saxon scholars studying Marx seem to have rediscovered his alleged theory of history as presented for the most part in the *Preface*. It is in the *Preface* where we find what is one of the best known quotations of Marx's writings:

"It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness." (p. 182)³

This very statement expresses what is generally considered to be the core principle of historical materialism (HM) or "the materialist conception of history (MCH), as Marx occasionally used to call his own position on historical development.

I take it for granted that after the linguistic turn in both philosophical conceptions of the human mind by Wittgenstein, Ryle, Quine and others and in psychological studies of the genealogy of human thought capacities by Piaget, Kohlberg and others most of us tend to agree with this statement rather than with its idealist counterpart that it is the individual consciousness of men which determines their (social) being. Hence, I assume that most of us admit that there is at least some kernel of truth in Marx's view about the relationship between individual consciousness and the social being of man.

Nevertheless, it is by no means clear what the alleged kernel of truth historical materialism really is. Therefore, the main problem with historical materialism is that hardly anyone has ever spelled out precisely what the the central hypothesis of historical materialism really is telling us.

To prevent unnecessary misunderstanding let us distinguish at first between historical materialism (HM) and the materialist conception of history (MCH). HM basically is the

scientific hypothesis that the superstructure of any society is somehow determined by its so-called material base. For Marx the terms 'material base' and 'superstructure' are to be defined by other economic terms such as, e.g. 'economic structure', 'forces of production', 'means of production', 'labor power', etc. It is crucial to our understanding of HM that it is a relatively independent part of Marx's or Engels' materialist conception of history (MCH). The MCH includes much more than just HM, such as at least (1.) Marx's conception of the four pre-socialist modes of production (Asiatic, ancient, feudal and modern bourgeois or capitalist), (2.) his view of history as an evolutionary process, being based on the growth of human production power, (3.) his eschatological view of history as a goal-directed evolutionary process that inevitably progresses towards "the liberation of mankind at the end of history", (4.) his dialectical view of pre-socialist history as motivated by constant "class-struggle", (5.) his view that major historical changes (such as the changes of the mode of production) are brought about by revolutions rather than by evolutionary developments, (6.) his "crisis theory", as it applies to modern monopolistic capitalism, as well as finally (7.) his more specific economic and political analysis of 19th century capitalism, of its economic conditions of production as well as of its typical superstructural conditions, etc.

It seems to me that one can find his "crisis theory" and his analysis of 19th century capitalism more plausible than other components of MCH, and hold on to them without being committed to anything involved in the other elements of what is generally taken to be Marx's MCH. Similarly, one can discuss HM in the narrower sense defined above without actually being committed to any of these other elements of the MCH (although perhaps with the exception of his view of history as an evolutionary process being based on the evolution of production power depending on how one is going to interpret HM). Thus, although HM originally appears to be a central and constituent element of the MCH, HM could turn out to be a valuable discovery even if the other elements of the MCH (as listed above) proved to be highly problematic or even simply false.

The possibility to separate HM in order to evaluate it in isolation will become important for my argument since we I agree with *Sweezy, 1981* that the *Preface* and Marx's more reasoned and less sketchy other remarks on historical matters should not be interpreted as outlining a general "theory of history". It is exactly this standard interpretation which emphasizes the oversimplifying, baseless and inadequate claims involved in the first until the fifth element of what is generally considered to be Marx's MCH. Once and for all most of the MCH is discredited in the light of Sweezy's alternative interpretation, it is going to be necessary to see how this affects HM.

In his *Speech at the Graveside of Karl Marx*, Friedrich Engels starts to summarize Marx's "discovery" of HM, as follows:

"Just as Darwin discovered the law of development of organic nature, so Marx discovered the law of development of human history: the simple fact, hitherto concealed by an overgrowth of ideology, that mankind must first of all eat, drink, have shelter and clothing, before it can pursue politics, science, art, religion, etc." (p. 681)

There certainly is nothing wrong with the claim that basic human needs such as the needs for food, shelter, clothing, etc. have to be satisfied before men can pursue higher

religious, artistic, scientific and political goals. Nevertheless, this is not exactly the kind of observation which deserves to be called a "scientific discovery". For it simply sounds too truistic to take this to be a scientific discovery, especially when compared to Darwin's principle of evolution through "natural selection".⁴ Hence, we might have to think of it rather as a claim representing a certain outlook on the social life of men being opposed to the idealistic or Hegelian *Weltanschauung* which is based on the idea that the unfolding of the Absolute Spirit through the historical development of human societies, cultures and traditions is the moving force of historical development. However, Engels is adding something which should sound less truistic and even familiar to most of us today: "therefore the production of the immediate material means of subsistence and consequently the degree of economic development attained by a given people or during a given epoch form the foundation upon which the state institutions, the legal conceptions, art and even the ideas of religion, of the people concerned have been evolved, and in the light of which they must, therefore, be explained, instead of vice versa, as had hitherto been the case" (p. 681).

Although this conclusion does not logically follow from the truistic observation mentioned above, we can read it as an inductive argument heading to give some plausibility to the conclusion. Furthermore, I would like to argue now *at first* that it is rather this latter passage which contains the main message of HM, and *secondly* that it contains the kernel of an insight which is worth to be called a "scientific discovery" or at least a methodological principle of empirical scientific studies in sociology. The insight is contained in the idea that it is the economic conditions of production which are foundational to everything belonging to the superstructure of a society, as e.g. religion, art, science, law and politics. In my opinion comparative social and ethnic studies of religion, art, science, law and politics tend to strongly support such a view.

However, anyone who is willing to defend such a view has *at first* to explain as clearly as possible in which non-truistic sense the material base of a society is foundational, and *secondly* he or she has to show how one can reach a so-called "law of the development of human history" as a valuable scientific hypothesis starting with this very basic observation of the foundational character of the material base. Although it is by no means evident what this very "law" is telling us, we should be aware of the following in advance: even if it is true that the material base of a society is in some sense foundational then this is rather a static fact, i.e. something obtaining without change through a given period of time, hence no dynamic principle of evolution. By contrast, the term "law of development of human history" suggests a law of motion, i.e. a dynamic principle of how something evolves through a given period of time. Thus the insight into the foundational character of the material base cannot be the total story about HM.

In the light of all of this, I want to argue now that anyone who is willing to take historical materialism seriously as a scientific discovery about the historical development of human societies, whether in Marx's original formulation or in a sympathetic reconstruction of it, has to face the following apparent dilemma: *Either* one takes HM essentially to be the doctrine about the foundational character of the material base in the description and explanation of social and cultural phenomena, admitting that this is all there is to HM, *or* one argues that this doctrine, though it is fundamental to HM is not the main point about HM, but rather a dynamic law-like principle about historical development.

However, taking *the first stance*, one has to face the fact that the doctrine of the foundational character of the material base is, at least in its original formulation, in danger of being truistic. Moreover, it is hard to imagine how one could present a non-truistic reformulation of this doctrine. If so, then HM would have to be considered to be truistic in itself, and therefore could no longer be taken seriously as a scientific discovery.

Taking *the second stance*, one has to face the severe difficulties surrounding any attempt to formulate or reformulate anything worth of the title "universal law of historical development". However, since there hardly is anything like such a universal law of history (as I will argue later) HM again cannot be taken seriously as a scientific discovery again. It follows that whichever way one prefers, HM is in a very weak position indeed.

2 - Considering Sweezy's alternative interpretation of HM

In his remarkable *Four lectures on Marxism*, P.M.Sweezy presents a very convincing interpretation of the *Preface* which is generally considered to be the *locus classicus* of HM (and sometimes also of MCH). In the course of his interpretation Sweezy is making several points which I find largely convincing. According to Sweezy, the *Preface* is widely misinterpreted as presumably expounding a so-called "scientific theory" of the historical development of human societies in general.

Such a "theory of history" is often interpreted as involving certain "laws of history" which in some sense are supposed to determine the course of historical development of human societies. This, Sweezy argues, means to overrate the *Preface* because its purpose was merely to help the reader in understanding "political economy", the subject matter of *A Contribution to the Critique of political Economy*. Marx obviously thought that he owed to explain to the reader how he came "to focus his research on political economy" (p. 21). This he must have found to be necessary in order to illustrate the point of view from which his research was carried out, or in Marx's own words "the general conclusion" which "once reached...served as the guiding thread in my studies" (p. 182).

Only if we examine the *Preface* as a whole and in its context "rather than simply lifting out a few statements that are formulated in general terms" (p. 21) we shall, according to Sweezy, understand the real purpose and its autobiographical tone of voice. Moreover, only then we shall realize that for the most part Marx had been theorizing about 19th century capitalist economy and not about history in general" (p. 21). In general, when Marx is theorizing about political economy he is referring to the political economy of capitalism as such. Therefore, Sweezy is finally drawing the conclusion that "it was therefore the study of capitalism and not of any other forms of society that had led to his 'general conclusion'; the forces of production/relations of production and base/superstructure schema was evidently derived from his study of capitalism, including its origins, its development, and its presumed future" (pp. 21-22).

If one agrees with Sweezy so far then it seems that one has to deal with the following

objection: There is one, even if *only* one sentence in the *Preface* where Marx is referring to what he calls "the Asiatic, ancient, feudal and modern bourgeois modes of production" as "progressive epochs in the economic system of society" (p. 182). Obviously, Sweezy owes us an explanation making this apparent obstacle compatible with his interpretation. As Sweezy argues, this statement was simply meant to emphasize the status of capitalism as the hitherto last progressive epoch in a long line of antagonistic forms of society.

However, whether or not we find Sweezy's considerations convincing or not, the plausibility of his general line of interpretation of the *Preface* does not depend on this particular point. It seems to me that one can accept Sweezy's interpretation and still admit that Marx sometimes extrapolated somewhat carelessly from his study of the political economy of capitalism and its development to former "stages of history" just as much as he sometimes attempted to predict its future development. Such an *ad-hoc*-hypothesis is still more favourable to Marx's work as a whole than the kind of interpretation Sweezy is arguing against.

The reason is that Sweezy's interpretation of the *Preface* is not only plausible in its own right but also deserves support from the anti-Hegelian methodological and philosophical position Marx has arrived at in the *German Ideology* in 1845.⁵ We should not forget that Marx has hold on to his scientifically-minded and anti-historico-philosophical position for the rest of his life-time. Evidence for this we find in his later remarks on the correct understanding of his so-called "materialist conception of history". These remarks partially deviate from his former less careful extrapolations on history in general and oppose the doctrines of HM which had been put forward by his first Marxist followers.

We can certainly admit that even the later anti-Hegelian Marx is sometimes more freely theorizing about history and its inherent necessities and laws in general. However, it is a well-known fact, that he later has critically commented on such earlier formulations of his own. Therefore, such generalizing statements are rather to be interpreted as somewhat crude and sometimes even bold extrapolations from his empirical findings on 19th century capitalism in Europe. On the background of his general methodological position which was scientifically minded empiricism we should definitely not take them too seriously.

Additional support for Sweezy's line of interpretation is coming from the fact that Marx has made it quite clear that he does not *just* want to turn the Hegelian metaphysical "interpretation of history" on its feet, as it is often misinterpreted. It rather seems that Marx had a definite philosophical and methodological position being opposed to Hegel in two ways:

At first, he is definitely rejecting Hegelian dialectics as a mystification of historical development. Hegelian dialectics is primarily rejected for its misleading metaphorical descriptions of historical events and processes in terms of actions and series of actions performed by a presumed subject called "History". Next it is equally rejected for describing History as a kind of super-natural conscious agent who is following some kind of inherent plan. Marx refusal of this metaphysical view of history finds its paradigmatic expression in the following Passage of "*the Holy Family*".⁶

"History does nothing; it does not possess immense riches, it does not fight battles. It is men, real, living men, who do all this, who possess things and fight battles. It is not "history" which uses men as a means of achieving - as it were an individual person - its own ends. History is nothing but the activity of men in pursuit of their ends."

Secondly, there is Marx's repeated commitment to anti-speculative and empiricist scientific methodology in historical research. For this reason any kind of generalizations on historical development, whether they are more idealist or more materialist, have to be sufficiently supported by careful empirical investigations. Or as Marx put it in a very characteristic manner: "Empirical observation must in each instance bring out empirically, and without any mystification and speculation, the connection of the social and political structure with production." (p. 24)

Due to both aspects of Marx's position after 1845 his anti-Hegelian reflections on historical development and its proper study are of profound methodological character. Marx's essentially methodological position is basically a rejection of metaphysical speculation on history as such or on historical development in general. Therefore, the very kernel of his criticism of Hegel (which is in fact also a disguised self-criticism of the young Hegelian Karl Marx) is a straightforward rejection of any philosophy of history and at the same time a suggestion of rigorous historical research based on empirical investigation and critical evaluation of historical data.

Hence, Marx criticism is *ad hominem* the attempt of the matured economist to get rid of the Hegelian jargon and metaphysical style of theorizing which still influenced his earlier Feuerbachian critique of Hegel.⁷ It is motivated by his realization that he himself once had been blinded and misguided by the very language of *the German Ideology* which prevented the German intellectuals both from understanding the real world they live in which had been the political economy of 19th century capitalism and prevented them from helping to change it which became more and more imperative in Marx eyes.

As a consequence Marx's position is much more a view on the method of scientific theorizing about historical development than it is a theory of history as such. Furthermore, Marx did not really aim at anything like a "conception of history" or an "interpretation of history" which describes and explains any law-like tendencies of historical development of human societies in general. To the opposite, once historical research is carried out the way Marx is calling for - a way in which it definitely was not commonly carried out at his time - so-called philosophical or speculative conceptions of history turn into superfluous and void relicts of ideology which are more of a hindrance to serious historical research. As Marx himself hoped for, such conceptions of history disappear for the sake of a scientifically minded studies of concrete historical developments which at best aim at hypothetical retrospective explanation of past and present tendencies as well as an attempted prediction of future tendencies.

As *McLellan, 1971* points out Marx is consequentially emphasizing that the so-called historical materialist doctrines resulted primarily from his study of the development of Western Europe therefore should "not be extrapolated beyond without further thought".⁸ Accordingly, Marx is opposing Marxist ideology because of their uncritical application by of his schema of the main "stages in history" in the Western world to the historical development in Russia. More generally, Marx is warning his followers not to turn his

"historical sketch of the genesis of capitalism in Western Europe into a historical-philosophical theory of the general path every people is fated to tread, whatever the historical circumstances in which it finds itself" (p. 294).

Against such unscientific extrapolations Marx argues that one will never understand history "by using as one's master key a general historico-philosophical theory, the supreme virtue of which consists in being supra-historical" (p. 294). This is the consequence of the application of Marx's argumentation *against* philosophies of history on historical materialism as put forward by those who called themselves "Marxists". Hence, it is not surprising at all that Marx refused to be identified with those who used to call themselves Marxists towards the end of his life. Others who like Sweezy seriously attempt to preserve a scientifically minded methodological attitude towards historical studies are entitled to be sceptic about such interpretations or reconstructions of HM which take it to be a "theory" or general "conception of history".

Marx's twofold methodological position however is completely neglected by recent scholarly interpretations of his MCH. *G.A.Cohen, 1978, J.McMurtry, 1978* and *W.H.Shaw, 1978*, unlike *A.Wood, 1981* uncritically assume that Marx has put forward a "theory of history" in the *Preface* and a few further pages of his works. Given the extremely metaphorical, aphoristic and vague language of Marx's mostly very sketchy remarks on historical developments it is no surprise that their efforts to reconstruct his "theory of history" differ quite a bit. Consequently, HM has received such fundamentally different interpretations as of "economic determinism" (ED) on the one hand and of "technological determinism" (TD) on the other hand.

As *G.Hellman, 1979* argues, HM certainly was not intended to be equivalent to TD:

"However important technology may be, it is evident that widely different patterns of real power relations in the work process can coexist with a given technology, and moreover that the direction in the development of technology is itself in a large measure governed by relations of power and social class interest in the work process." (p. 146)

In my opinion, while the former should be evident, the second claim is *prima facie* a reasonable empirical hypothesis, although its truth value cannot be decided purely by arm-chair-sociology. Although TD is not a good candidate for a reconstruction of HM, ED is not a better one. Rather neither one of the predominant lines of interpreting HM presents a high-level empirical hypothesis which is formulated precisely enough in order to constitute a reasonable historical research-program. Even if this was not intended by these authors, their failure to turn HM into such a reasonable empirical hypothesis rather raises doubts about taking HM seriously.

From a philosophical point of view the deepest and most far reaching weakness of all these interpretations appears to be that none of these authors explain us in some detail what a theory of history is supposed to accomplish over and above what historians do all along as they are involved in historical research: writing and rewriting over and over again the political, economic and cultural history of various societies which once populated or still populate the surface of this planet; gathering, comparing, organizing, selecting and evaluating stored informations; giving various accounts of eras, epochs,

and periods from different perspectives (religion, art, science, politics, economics, etc.); synthesizing their previous work into sometimes unpalatable and boring and at other times plausible and exciting stories which attempt to make intelligible to their contemporaries and their descendants what in a given period of time lead to or brought about historical change in form of a new tendency, an evolutionary process, a revolution or a singular event.

It is for this reason that it is generally left open whether anything worth of the title "theory of history" is possible at all; whether it had to involve "laws of historical development"; whether they could be interpreted as "genuine laws" as we find them paradigmatically in modern physics; what the range of their validity is; whether they can be interpreted in any plausible sense as being deterministic; what kind of interpretations are allowed for by Marx's historical materialist vocabulary; etc. The importance of these critical questions can hardly be underestimated unless one gives up once and for all the determinist and mistakenly generalizing interpretations or reconstructions of HM as a part of Marx's alleged "theory of history".

If Sweezy's interpretation of the *Preface* is plausible and if our account of Marx's methodological position on historical research in political economy is adequate, then the following conclusion seems to be unavoidable: It is not only questionable that Marx in the *Preface* never intended to outline a general theory of historical development of human societies, but it is also highly problematic that he could have consistently intended such a "theory", given his methodological point of view after 1845. Moreover, if Marx's late self-criticism is taken into account the way it should be, then most of his earlier formulations of historical materialist doctrines have to be reconsidered in the light of his corrective remarks. Consequently, any attempt to properly reconstruct Marx's historical and methodological remarks as a conception, theory or interpretation of history in general seems to be based on a fundamental misinterpretation of Marx's economic writings and likewise of his scientific intentions and attitude after 1845.

Before we finally come to examine the consequences for facing the apparent dilemma of HM, let us first look at the final conclusion Sweezy is drawing from his reasoning:

"The schema of the Preface is thus by no means arbitrary or artificial as applied to the case of capitalism, from which, after all, it was originally derived. But it seems to me a great mistake to treat this schema as embodying laws of historical materialism that are universally valid. The essence of historical materialism is simply that every society has to produce what it consumes, and it has to consume in order to reproduce itself, to survive, and to carry on the myriad activities that together define it as a recognizable historical entity. Production is therefore fundamental in a universal and unique sense, and a scientific approach to the understanding of history has to take this as its starting point. Furthermore, it is obvious that the possibilities of production at any given time and place establish narrow, though certainly not rigidly defined, limits and constraints on what a particular society can actually accomplish."

Apparently, Sweezy favors the first stance of the dilemma about HM because he holds (1.) that HM essentially consists in the doctrine of the foundational character of the material base, but denies (2.) that HM has to be interpreted as a general view of history

that embodies universal laws of historical development. Agreeing with Sweezy on both points it is now necessary to find out whether the doctrine of the foundational character of the material base can be reconstructed in a non-truistic way. According to Sweezy however this doctrine consist simply in the claim that for human beings coverage of the biological needs for subsistence, survival and reproduction is a precondition for carrying out all those other typically human activities which constitute the superstructural conditions of human coexistence in any society.

However, if this is all there is to this doctrine, then HM is once again in danger of being truistic. Nobody in his or her right mind will doubt such a thing. Nevertheless, we find religious thinkers in many, especially Eastern religious traditions, such as Hinduism and Buddhism, but also in Christianity who favor ascetic tendencies in order to strengthen one's self-identification with one's mind rather than with one's body. Such tendencies are rare only in the islamic and jewish religions. Therefore, such a doctrine is only less than truistic when contrasted with such religious denial of the real and material world or with the anti-materialist idealism of Hegel and Fichte. For Marx this doctrine meant a rejection of the Hegelian idealism of his youth as well as the rediscovery of his jewish background.⁹

Even if this doctrine might not deserve to be called a scientific discovery, HM thus conceived certainly has its value. Therefore I agree with *Popper, 1966* who comments on it in the following way:

"the claim that the economic organization of society, the organization of our exchange of matter with nature, is fundamental for all social institutions and especially for their historical development. This claim ... is perfectly sound, so long as we take the term "fundamental" in an ordinary vague sense, not laying too much stress upon it. In other words, there can be no doubt that practically all social studies, whether institutional or historical, may profit if they are carried out with the eye to the "economic conditions" of society ... In this sense, Marx's economism can be said to represent an extremely valuable advance in the methods of social science." (pp. 106-107)

It finally appears that both horns of the dilemma indeed lead to a dead end. The first line of interpretation seems to leave us with atruism, although also with a useful reminder on method in the social and historical studies. The second ambitious interpretation seems to be in accordance with Marx's intentions and views. The remaining is to be examined now: the question whether there is a way out of these two apparent blind alleys.

3. Historical materialism as an empirical hypothesis

If there is anything to be learned from the vast and constantly growing literature on HM, then it is the following:

On the one hand it is easy to interpret HM in such a way that it is by far too strong a claim to be taken seriously at all, namely like *A.W.Wood, 1981* as the thesis of strong economic determinism (SED):

"On this interpretation, Marx's thesis is that people's thoughts and actions, their political behavior as well as their moral, religious and philosophical convictions, are all causally determined by economic facts, while these actions and convictions themselves exercise no influence whatever on the economic situation."¹⁰

The thesis of SED is a version of a crude misinterpretation of Marx's views as to be found very often in Marxist ideology. It is very simplistic, openly reductionist and even absurd. It reduces the very complex influences which economic-political conditions of a society have on superstructural conditions to a magical process in which the so-called material base conditions become forces which are supposed to uniquely determine epiphenomenal conditions of the super-structure without taken any interaction into account and especially without regarding the undetermined creative forces of human consciousness of most human individuals.

On the other hand, it is just as easy to turn HM into a truistic statement. Obviously neither way is able to make sense out of HM. Instead a middle course has to be taken between the Skylla of absurdity and the Charybdis of truism. Most likely, there is no other way out of the dilemma.

At this point we have to find out whether or not Sweezy's conclusion is adequate. After all there might still be a way to reconstruct HM in a non-truistic way. In other words the question is whether or not HM can be understood as an meaningful empirical hypothesis of social science about historical development which is neither truistic nor by far too strong.

Such a historical-materialist hypothesis (HMH) about historical development of all human societies is certainly not to be considered as a strictly law-like principle, but rather as an inductive generalization about the past. Thus, even if societies hitherto developed in the way described by it, there is no guarantee that they still develop in similar ways in the future. Therefore, future developments might be different and render such a empirical hypothesis wrong. Furthermore, although this HM-hypothesis might be used in a predictive way, it is an independent question whether or not future developments will be such that this hypothesis about historical developments in the past turns out to be falsified.

To put forward such an HM-hypothesis means to generalize on Marx's findings about the historical developments within 19th century capitalism against his own intentions taking the full risk of formulating a hypothesis which is easily refuted by historical research. Such an attempt is based on the observation that Marx economic-political vocabulary seems to be "applicable to a wide range of societies" as *J.Hellman, 1979* has pointed out.¹¹

The inductive generalization of the HM-hypothesis then is this:

For any human society S, (1.) considered as a complex, but culturally unitary organic system evolving through a period of time $t - t'$ and (2.) sufficiently divisible into *material-base-conditions* (MBC) on the one hand and *super-structural conditions* (SSC) on the other hand, despite of the observed mutual interdependences and interactions among and between both spheres of conditions, there is a *stronger tendency* for *major*

historical changes in super-structural conditions to be brought about by material-base-conditions than vice-versa.

Although this is a somewhat vague hypothesis indeed, it seems to me that this is the best we can reconstruct on the base of Marx's anti-Hegelian scientific method. First of all, it is weak enough not to be easily refuted by historical research. Secondly, it is certainly not truistic. Thirdly, it is a generalization on historical development. And finally, it deserves to be called "historical-materialist".

Although it is up to historians and social scientists to decide whether or not this is a valuable hypothesis on the historical development of human societies, I would like to add a few critical remarks from a philosophical point of view.

(1.) It is not obvious how we can identify any social entity as a *unitary society* through a period of time. The notion of a *society* has to be applicable to any form of human social life starting with tribal communities, as we still find them in Africa, Australia and South-America, up to such very complex social systems of human coexistence, as we find them in modern industrialized nations, like the U.S.A., France, Germany, Japan, etc. There is a certain vagueness in our ordinary concept of a society. Vagueness of empirical concepts is not always a problem, as we can learn from the later Wittgenstein. However, we have to be aware of the problem of applying empirical concepts which are usually dependent on a certain context of phenomena onto another sphere of phenomena.

(2.) The very *distinction between material-base and super-structure* seems to be more useful when applied to modern industrialized societies as they evolved in the 19th century. It seems to be questionable whether or not this distinction can be applied to pre-modern societies as we still find them in other pre-industrial cultures. As Sweezy has pointed out:

"...under capitalism, unlike other forms of society, separating base from superstructure and locating the prime source of change in the base correspond to a deep-seated and palpable reality, namely, the unplanned and uncontrolled character of a predominantly commodity-producing economy. Furthermore, the distinction between forces of production...and relations of production is there for any one to see. And it does not take a profound knowledge of economic history to understand that underlying the great changes that have characterized the capitalist epoch has been a series of technological revolutions. Nor would anyone want to deny these changes originating in the economy have more or less rapidly spread to other areas, including government and laws, philosophy and religion, culture and the arts, in short everything that is usually thought of as constituting the superstructure."¹²

(3.) Another vague notion involved in our reconstruction of the HM-hypothesis is the concept of a "*major historical change*". Certainly this is a evaluative concept allowing for various degrees and therefore being relative to some instances of comparison. Disagreement in applying this very notion to any historical event is almost to be expected. Nevertheless, certain changes as, e.g. the breakdown of the totalitarian political system of the former Soviet Union and its allied countries which had been

based on the Marxist-Leninist ideology, are to be characterized as a major change beyond any doubt.

(4.) Finally, the fourth problem might arise from the notion of a "*stronger tendency*". What is needed here is an agreement about a majority of changes are changes in the SS-conditions brought about by MB-conditions.

Although it is very hard to estimate *a priori* the degree to which this very general hypothesis is correct, it seems to me that even this weaker version of a HM-hypothesis is still problematic when it comes to the historical facts. To present an example, let us admit that the process of the secularization in Western Europe starting in the 18th century and still going on towards the end of this century was a major change in the SS-conditions of all the relevant nations involved in this process. It seems to me that it will be hard to give a largely convincing historical analysis of the process of secularization in Western Europe showing that this major change of SS-condition was predominantly brought about by MB-conditions. Even if such changes in the MB-conditions have to be taken into account, it will be very hard to explain the changes in the SS-conditions completely or at least mainly by changes in the MB-conditions.

However, if the thesis of HM fails to be true in such a paradigmatic testing case, then it seems that there is not much to be said in favor of the HM-hypothesis. And if the HM-hypothesis is going to fail, then we are allowed to wonder whether there are any law-like statements about historical development which could help us to explain history by laws. Historical change simply is not the kind of entity where it is reasonable to expect scientific explanations by law-like generalizations. Maybe this is simply so because historical developments, like Popper's clouds, involve rather chaotic causal changes and to many unknown or at least unpredictable starting conditions are involved in order to expect law-like generalizations and deductive explanations of particular events or processes to be possible at all.

For these reasons, we have to remain sceptical about historical explanations. We may allow for reasonable speculation and prognostic hypotheses about tendencies, processes and even single events to be expected. However, this amounts to be guess-work after all, even if it is reasoned and intelligent guess-work on future tendencies based on systematically collected evidence on the past.

Consequently, we should also be sceptical when *any* philosopher with very honorable intentions, like e.g. Kant, Lessing, Schelling, Hegel, Marx or Teilhard de Chardin present their favorite conception of history in general and claim to have found *the* law of history or *the* key to understanding the historical development of the history of humanity. We have to admit that history is an open affair and that we don't have a single key to understand it completely. Why is this so? Well, we are only human beings after all. And as human beings our perspective on history as such is always essentially narrow and limited. For us mortal creatures God's outer perspective on the whole of history is necessarily out of reach, even though some of us venture to strive for it.

¹ For convenience I quote Marx and Engels from *Tucker, 1978*.

² I am referring here to the fundamental disagreement between *Sweezy, 1981* and those who, like *Robinson, 1973* and *Steedman, 1978* argue that "value theory is in no way essential to the Marxian analysis of capitalism, and that the central concept of his analysis should be not the rate of surplus value, but the rate of profit." (p. 31).

³ Quoted from the standard translation of the *Preface* as found in *McLellan, 1971*.

⁴ Concerning Engels' attribution of a discovery of a "law of development of organic nature" to Charles Darwin one might have justified doubts whether there are any genuine law-like principles in the biological sciences at all. Even if one merely allows for generalizing scientific hypotheses based on certain observation such as on archeological evidence, the discovery of the natural evolution of man stays with us as a scientific discovery introducing a new epoch in the self-understanding of man within the universe. Unlike Marx's alleged discovery, Darwin's principle of the evolution of biological species through natural selection did not only successfully guide research for a longer period of time, but even gave rise to new fields of research and a new branch in the life-sciences. Although comparison proves to be fruitful in order to see what it might take to speak of HM as a proper discovery, we should not deny that Marx's emphasis on the economic conditions of a society is a valuable methodological rule of thumb when we are trying to understand its historical development through decades or even centuries. However, Marx shares this outlook with the classical tradition of political economy starting with Adam Smith. Cf. *A. Walker, 1978*, Chs. 3 and 4.

⁵ For a very instructive presentation of the development of the early Marx, see *M. Wolfson, 1982*.

⁶ Cf. *McLellan, 1971*, p. 125.

⁷ For an excellent account of Marx's breaking away from Feuerbachian humanism and materialism, see *M. Wolfson, 1982*, chs. 8-10.

⁸ Cf. *D. McLellan, 1971*, p. 126.

⁹ Cf. *M. Wolfson, 1982*, chs. 8-10.

¹⁰ Cf. *A.M. Wood, 1981*, p. 63. This seems to be a somewhat stronger claim than what G.A.Cohen, 1979 and J.McMurtry, 1979 mean by economic determinism. Nevertheless, they did not really clarify what the thesis of ED is supposed to say.

¹¹ Cf. *J. Hellman, 1979*, p. 145.

¹² Cf. *P.M. Sweezy, 1981*, pp. 22-23.

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