

The Materialist Dialectic of History (Online Article)

Historical Note

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Content

The Materialist Dialectic of History

By transposing the Hegelian dialectic from the realm of thought to the realm of material production, Marx came to understand social reality and its history dialectically, i.e. as embodying a self-contradiction pointing beyond itself. [As we have seen](#), this understanding of social reality was already expressed in an early form in the letter to Ruge; by the time of the writing of *The German Ideology* in 1845-1846 it had acquired specificity and breadth. My focus in this article will be to articulate the basic tenets of the dialectical understanding of social reality and history as it crystallized in Marx's (and Engels') mind by 1846. I follow Lukacs in referring to this understanding by its subsequent name of dialectical materialism. I will only summarize the materialist conception of history set out in *The German Ideology* very briefly, having recourse to Marx's famous summary in his *Preface to a Contribution of the Critique of Political Economy*.

As Lukacs points out, quoting Marx, the premise of dialectical materialism is: "It is not men's consciousness that determines their existence, but on the contrary, their social existence that determines their consciousness." (Lukacs 18, Marx 4)[1] This premise is basically a response to Hegel's privileging of human consciousness over human social being; dialectical materialism stresses the primacy of social being over consciousness. As we saw above, what this premise amounts to is the recognition that human reality, i.e. human nature and the human forms of life, is the social product of collective human activity.

In *The German Ideology* Marx and Engels elaborate on their view that social being determines history and reality. They argue that the first thing human beings had to do in their history was to start producing their means of subsistence in order to survive. Human beings started living and organizing collectively with the purpose of producing their means of life; the production of the means of life is the task at the basis of all human societies. The way people organize to produce their means of life is their mode of production. Its specific form is limited by the material circumstances people find themselves in, but through their activity they in turn change these material circumstances. In other words, through their mode of production human beings produce their environment, which is therefore not natural but social, and which determines them in turn. (149-50, 164-5) This is a dialectic of social being and social practice. We do not live according to a permanent nature but rather produce our nature circumscribed by the conditions under which we live. Most importantly, Marx and Engels follow Hegel in arguing that what people do and how they live expresses and shapes who they are. A people's mode of production is a way of living, and thus, a way of expressing and shaping who they are: "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.” (150)

Marx and Engels go on to argue that the social and political structure of a society springs from and depends upon its mode of production. People first relate to each other in the way they organize production, and their social and political relations are circumscribed by this first relation. The same holds for a people’s cultural and mental life, their so-called consciousness: it is conditioned by people’s material way of life. (154) To support their view Marx and Engels argue that people’s self-conscious mental life started developing with the advent of language, which is a prerequisite of self-conscious thought, and language developed to answer the human need of communication with others. In other words, language and its corollary (self-)consciousness are social products. Initially human consciousness is the immediate consciousness of one’s surroundings, of other people and of the overwhelming power of nature. It is very clearly determined by the material circumstances people find themselves in, by their material way of life. Only later, with the division between mental and physical labor in the mode of production, does the connection between material life and consciousness become less evident. (157-9) To conclude, dialectical materialism as presented in the *German Ideology* is premised on the primacy of the practical aspect of our form of life, i.e. the primacy of our concrete needs and desires, and particularly of the ways we organize production and society to address these needs and desires. Our forms of understanding and categories of thought are understood as being determined by this practical aspect of our form of life.

The primacy of social being over consciousness is often understood as some sort of determinism of human consciousness and action by economic conditions. The discussion above demonstrates that this view is wrong. As aforementioned and as Marx and Engels stress, “circumstances make men just as much as men make circumstances” (165): men both determine and are determined by the mode and relations of production they find themselves in.[2] Furthermore, dialectical materialism stresses the human potential for conscious social transformation: this is the whole point of the *Theses on Feuerbach*. As Marx states in the 3rd Thesis: “The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-changing can be conceived and rationally understood only as *revolutionary practice*”. (144) Material circumstances indeed circumscribe the possibilities of such transformation, making political demands formulated without consideration of these circumstances utopian, but they don’t determine which possibility human actors will consciously choose and attempt to realize. They may determine our forms of understanding, but not the decisions we take on the basis of those forms. In other words, our options for social and political action are determined by our immediate practical circumstances, but not our choices. Dialectical materialism is in essence the recognition that reality is social and historical and thus subject to possible transformation from conscious human practice, and the practical demand for such transformation. Dialectical materialism thus has both theoretical and practical import. (Lukacs 18-9)

Beyond the primacy of social being over consciousness, dialectical materialism holds that social being or social reality exhibits self-contradictions that lead to its transformation. This self-contradiction develops internally in each mode of production between its productive forces and the relations of production. The productive forces of each society are the sum of its means of production, such as technology and labor. Its relations of production are the structure and division of its labor. Initially the relations of production facilitate the development of the productive forces, but the latter gradually outgrow and come in conflict with the former. This conflict necessitates a transformation in the mode of production, namely, the replacement of the existing relations of production with ones more adequate to the existing productive forces. Because said mode is the foundation of society, its internal conflict and transformation entails general social conflict and transformation which is expressed and mediated by social, political and ideological struggle. (Marx 4-5)

Marx and Engels present history as a series of modes of production giving birth to each other through the conflict or self-contradiction just described. They thus retain the dialectical structure of the

Hegelian conception of history, albeit transposing it from the realm of thought to that of material production.

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[1] All page numbers for Marx and Engels refer to: Tucker, Robert C., editor. *The Marx-Engels Reader*. Norton, 1978. All page numbers for Lukacs refer to: Lukacs, Georg. *History and Class Consciousness*. Translated by Rodney Livingstone, MIT Press, 1971.

[2] And not only by the mode and relations of production; as Engels clarified in his letters on historical materialism, there are also political, cultural and other factors shaping men.

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