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HISTORICAL MATERIALISM:

SOME CONCEPTUAL AND METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

BY

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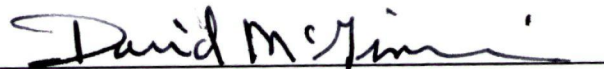
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## ABSTRACT

This thesis attempts to defend and modify G.A. Cohen's formulation of historical materialism in the light of some criticisms of that formulation. The aim is to show that the hope for socialist revolution in developed capitalist countries is not unscientifically utopian.

The thesis begins with remarks on current events in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, and tries to show how those events are compatible with historical materialism. The two main theses of historical materialism, what Cohen calls the Primacy and Development theses, are explained and reconciled with the idea that history is the history of class struggle. This is followed by an extended discussion of Allen Buchanan's arguments against the idea that historical materialism can account for the possibility of collective struggle against capitalism. Then, in a discussion of methodology, it is argued that historical materialism does not need to stand the test of rational choice theory, since the latter is based on an incoherent contrast between 'micro' and 'macro' levels of social analysis.

The thesis ends by endorsing a rather non-traditional (for a Marxist) formulation of historical materialism.

According to this formulation, there is 'ethical causation' in history which is irreducible to Cohen's primacy and development theses. This is based on Debra Satz's "Marxism, Materialism, and Historical Progress", in which Satz argues that part of the reason that history is moving towards communism is that communism is good. That strange-sounding claim is defended.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to thank a few people for helping me in various ways over the last two years.

First of all, my thesis advisor, Dr. Kai Nielsen. More than anyone, he kept me interested in philosophy and in intellectual work generally. Without his influence and example, I may well have lost my enthusiasm. He has opened my eyes to the pointlessness and triviality of much current philosophical discussion, and at the same time shown me interesting alternative paths. He has also helped me to think more clearly and honestly about my political and moral beliefs. This thesis obviously owes a lot to him. I wish there were more like him.

Of the graduate students, the kindness and helpfulness of Damon Gitelman will be remembered. Damon typed the bibliography (with lightning speed) and in so doing enabled me to meet an important deadline. He also guided me (along with Debbie Teale) through the nightmarish morass of the university's Multics computer system. But I have come to value Damon's friendship even more than his computer wisdom. He helped me through some difficult times.

I hope I see my office-mate, Karen Elstein, again. She's been a good friend and tried to help me once, in

vain, with my wardrobe. Also deserving mention are John Sarnecki, whose acumen demystified me on the question of margins, and Phil Hoffman, who was often around the department and kept me company by beating me at chess. I want also to express gratitude to Maggie Kohl, who showed concern for me and encouraged me throughout the last year. I shall miss her.

I must, at this point, acknowledge the support of my relatives in Calgary, especially my cousin Neelu, who often invited me to her house and made great meals. And last but not least, I thank my friend and roommate Daniel Maher. We've been through a lot together and almost as long as I've known him he's been a source of inspiration, sometimes despite his intentions.

Lest I forget, the songs of Warren Zevon helped carry me through the last stages of the thesis. Without them I might have become an 'excitable boy' indeed.

## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my mother, Shail, and my father, Satinder.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTERPRETING CHANGES IN THE SOCIALIST WORLD

In these uncertain times, it is not clear whether socialism has a future. We often hear, with the current crises in state socialist societies, that Marxism and Leninism are dead. It is not just that the socialist and communist ideals are viewed as immoral -- that, in any case, is a firmly entrenched belief in capitalist societies -- but that they are viewed as inherently unworkable, as if the very attempt to implement those ideals will guarantee a regime of economic inefficiency and political despotism. The history of existing socialist countries has been unimpressive on many counts. So the anti-socialist sentiment, which emanates from various forms of media and our educational institutions, cannot simply be dismissed as 'bourgeois ideology'. Yet for those who, like myself, believe that the capitalist socioeconomic order has created more problems and more misery than it is capable of solving and alleviating, and that democratic socialism is the only desirable and feasible alternative, these declarations of the death of Marxism are too quick.

Many critics of Soviet-style socialism have argued that the centrally planned economy and the one-party system are

unstable; but no one, as far as I know, predicted the recent mass movements in the so-called communist world. Now, in view of these changes -- and it is not yet clear how far-reaching they will be -- it is easy for defenders of capitalism smugly to say 'We told you so'; and for Marxists to say, 'Well, those countries weren't socialist in the first place.' Neither response seems to me appropriate.

Although I am sympathetic to the latter response, any claim to the effect that those countries are not 'really' socialist is, I think, as weak as the claim, sometimes voiced by right-wing libertarians, that Western industrialized societies with welfare states are not 'really' capitalist. Where an economic system is marked by large-scale private ownership and control of productive property and wage labour, that is capitalism; and where such private ownership and control is banned in favour of public ownership and control, that is socialism. What the libertarian wants is an ideal capitalism with minimal state involvement. What the democratic socialist wants is an ideal socialism with minimal state control of productive property and maximal workers' control. Both systems can be more or less democratic. It is disingenuous, on the socialist side, to adopt a position such as, 'Whatever is

most democratic, that is by definition socialism'. That is a lot like saying, 'Whatever is most good, that is by definition Christian'; or, 'Whatever is good for freedom, that, by definition, is endorsed by liberalism'. Such moralized definitions tend to beg questions and encourage lack of communication. Abolition of private ownership and control of the means of production (in favour of some form of public ownership) is enough to make a socioeconomic system socialist, but not enough to make it a democratic socialism.

On the other side, the 'We told you so' defenders of capitalism speak with more certitude than they ought. It is too early to tell whether the communist world will 'go capitalist' or turn to more democratic forms of socialism.(1) Whatever the case may be, we should keep a few things in mind.

First, 'market socialism' is not a contradiction in terms. Democratic socialists want democracy in the workplace and the political arena (and even in the family). Whether and to what extent that is practicable remains to be seen, but there is nothing in this socialist idea that

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(1) At present, East Germany seems most likely to move towards the effective adoption of capitalist structures.

conceptually precludes the possibility of some degree of genuine market competition. Socialists tend to treat markets as anathema because, historically, market economies have congealed into the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of a minority, property owning class. But in a socialist society, in which productive property is owned and controlled by the producers, policies could be formulated and implemented (as democratically as possible) to set limits on the free play of the market (or so it is hoped). We shouldn't, when observing an increasing readiness for introducing a relatively small amount of market competition, draw the conclusion that state socialist societies are converting to capitalism. Markets have been around a lot longer than capitalism. It is a mistake to treat 'markets' and 'capitalist production relations' as inseparable or identical concepts.(2)

Where there is no large scale private ownership of the means of production, and the economy is centrally planned, but there is little or no democratic control, as in modern

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- (2) For elaboration and defence of the idea of market socialism, see Alec Nove's The Economics of Feasible Socialism (London, George Allen & Unwin, 1983), Part Five; and Jon Elster and Karl Ove Moene, eds., Alternatives to Capitalism (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989), the 'Introduction' and the article by Nove.

state socialist societies, there is still room for state regulated market competition. But it is by no means clear that these societies see the kind of large scale private control of productive property, multinationals and all, and the attendant inequalities and social irrationalities, which characterize capitalism, as desiderata. Even if the rhetoric seems to indicate a desire to adopt capitalist structures -- and I am not sure that it does -- we should wait and see whether, in practice, this amounts to a reduction in central planning compatible with the idea of market socialism, or to a more drastic upheaval of socialist institutions.

Second, 'democratic socialism' is not a contradiction in terms either. Naturally, the capitalist media tend to interpret democratic reforms in socialist countries as presaging a global victory for capitalism. For if the state socialist countries become more democratic while retaining socialist economic institutions, defenders of capitalism will have a harder time defending capitalism in contradistinction to socialism. We would be subjected to increasing litanies on the inefficiency, rather than the injustice, of socialist systems; and insofar as the latter contributes to the former, there might even be less talk of inefficiency. It is better for defenders of capitalism to

say that democratization shows that Marxism and Leninism are dead.

Aside from wishful thinking, that would betray, I think, a confused view of what socialist theory is about. Most socialist theory in the Western tradition, including Marx and Engels, is of the democratic socialist variety. Socialists claim that their vision of a better society demands a more extensive democracy with more autonomy for more people than is possible under capitalism. A socioeconomic system based on socialist principles will, on their view, be more conducive to realizing our cherished Enlightenment values on a broad scale, than any form of capitalism could be.(3) Critics of socialism are inclined to say the authoritarianism and inefficiencies of many state socialist societies are endemic to state socialist systems. Defenders of socialism say these things are mainly a product of such historically contingent factors as low level of economic development, war, hostile capitalist encirclement, and lack of democratic traditions. It would be unfair to dismiss the latter claim in an a priori

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- (3) See Andrew Levine, Arguing for Socialism (Boston, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), esp. chapter Two, and Kai Nielsen, "Capitalism, State Bureaucratic Socialism and Freedom", Studies in Soviet Thought, 38, 1989, pp. 291-97.

fashion. The Soviet Union may be moving toward a more democratic, less authoritarian form of socialism.

Third (and most relevant to this thesis), in terms of socialist theory, the kind of socialism Marx and Engels had in mind could only be attained if the productive forces at a society's disposal had developed to a level at which there was enough wealth to both meet everyone's basic needs and sustain productivity levels.(4) A genuinely democratic socialism is, on this view, the historical successor to an advanced, developed capitalism. If this is right, it will be the Western capitalist countries (and Japan) which are best suited to socialist transformation. So even if some of the East European countries experiment with capitalism, that is not a disconfirmation of Marx's theory of history. Perhaps that is the only way enough wealth can be created, in this world of capitalist power, to make a genuinely democratic socialism feasible in those countries. While it is unclear, then, what the future of socialism will be, it

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- (4) In Philippe Van Parijs' characterization of a feasible conception of abundance under socialism, it is not necessary that production be as efficient under socialism as in capitalism; just that the difference not be so great that people's needs cannot be met in socialist society. See "In Defence of Abundance", in Analyzing Marxism, Kai Nielsen and Robert Ware, eds., (Calgary, University of Calgary Press, 1989), pp. 467-95.

is premature, if not obviously ideological, to relegate the socialist ideal to the dustbin of history.

But there is another concern, voiced even by contemporary Marxists, about the possibility of socialism. It might be said that democratic socialism is all very well and good, a morally pleasing ideal; and it might even be accepted that current events in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union do not necessarily signify the end of socialism (although they do signify a political crisis). But many people think that the prospects for collective socialist struggle in advanced capitalist societies are bleak, or at least unlikely. And if, as one might plausibly believe, capitalism must be overthrown in these societies before democratic socialism (as opposed to state bureaucratic socialism) can truly have a chance of succeeding in the rest of the world, then Marxists must give reasons for thinking that history is moving toward communism, or at least socialism; and this means showing why it is reasonable to believe that there will be collective socialist struggle in the capitalist countries of North America and Western Europe (and elsewhere).

But in these times it is hard to be optimistic. Earlier Marxist thinkers and activists, such as Lenin, Trotsky,



Gramsci, and Marx himself, wrote about the future of socialism in an authoritative, confident, sometimes dogmatic style and with a real sense of urgency. Liberals, conservatives, and some Marxian scholars tend (uncharitably) to attribute to Marx the view that the coming of communism is inevitable, history's telos, a view which expresses a secularized nostalgia for the Second Coming.

This ignores Marx's claim to being scientific rather than metaphysical. Sometimes it is said -- especially by those who call themselves 'postmodernists' -- that the secular-scientific culture of the Enlightenment, by replacing traditional, religious modes of thought, simply substituted one metaphysically mythical world-view for another. Knowledge claims made in the name of science, it is true, were, and often are, proffered no less dogmatically and absolutistically than the claims of religion. But I do not see anything preventing us from thinking of that as inessential to the scientific enterprise; as the trace of a metaphysical and theological conceptual apparatus which we have not entirely outgrown. What can be said is that in Marx's time the fallibilistic and probabilistic nature of scientific theories were much less emphasised than they are today, that Marx was

influenced by the vocabulary of Hegelian metaphysics, and that Marx's writing was always guided by political commitment and inherently praxis oriented.

These factors led Marx to make some grandiose, hyperbolic statements, and no doubt this has to some extent encouraged some metaphysically inclined Marxists to make similarly grandiose claims. In one sense, critics of Marx's historical materialism (like Jon Elster) are right. If the only ground we can muster for the belief in a future socialist revolution is an Hegelian view about the necessary unfolding of history, then, really, we have no ground at all and socialist hopes remain utopian ( in a pejorative sense of 'utopian' ).(5) It is unfortunate that some Marxists still defend the idea that communism is inevitable, both because the idea is very implausible, maybe even incoherent, and because by now we should have become jaded with transcendentalist pretensions in philosophy and politics; pretensions which, it seems, cause more harm than good.(6)

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(5) Jon Elster, Making Sense of Marx (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 1-49.

(6) See End Note 1.

In this thesis I shall defend historical materialism, a theory which purports to give empirical grounding for the idea of a socialist revolution occurring in developed capitalist societies. In my view, historical materialism is a social scientific theory that stands without Hegelian underpinnings. This is opposed to the view of an important Marxist thinker, Jon Elster, who regards Marx's theory of history as essentially Hegelian and, consequently, essentially flawed.

Elster, I believe, does not give historical materialism a fair hearing, largely as a result of what he takes to be the proper method of explanation in social theories, namely, methodological individualism. I want, in the course of this thesis, critically to discuss what I think is a plausible version of historical materialism, focusing on the work of G.A. Cohen and some other 'analytical Marxists'. This will include some discussion of social scientific methodology, since, within analytical Marxism (and from non-Marxist perspectives) those who cast aspersions on the status of historical materialism often do so on methodological grounds. I am referring to analytical Marxists such as Elster, John Roemer, and Daniel Little, as well as non-Marxist political philosophers such as Allen Buchanan; all of whom contend that historical materialism

fails to confront, on a theoretical level, the problem of collective action. Roemer, unlike Elster, does not abandon historical materialism, but, like Elster, maintains that if it is to be at all plausible, it must be 'solidified' with the 'tools' of rational choice theory and an analysis of 'microfoundations'.(7)

I shall defend a version of historical materialism, drawing from the work of G.A. Cohen and Debra Satz(8) against these basically methodological objections. There are, I think, certain myths underlying 'rational choice Marxism' which cause needless problems; myths inherited from the neoclassical economists whose methods are being emulated. If the hope for socialist revolution is to be more than a groundless hope, we should see how historical materialism, a theory which says history is moving toward communism, can be defended against criticisms which question its very status as a theory. That is what I shall attempt to do.

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- (7) John Roemer, "'Rational Choice Marxism': Some Issues of Method and Substance", Analytical Marxism, Roemer, ed., (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 191-201.
- (8) G.A. Cohen, Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence (Oxford, Clarendon Press Press, 1978), and History, Labour and Freedom (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1988); and Debra Satz, "Marxism, Materialism and Historical Progress", Nielsen & Ware, eds., pp. 393-424.

Chapter Two gives a brief account of Cohen's version of historical materialism. Chapter Three responds to so-called 'collective action' problems for the theory, as articulated by Allen Buchanan. Chapter Four presents a critique of rational choice theory, and attempts to relate that critique to historical materialism. Chapter Five introduces and defends Debra Satz's notion of an "intentional mechanism" as a necessary addition to Cohen's version of historical materialism. Chapter Six defends Cohen's claim that the development of the productive forces is autonomous, but suggests a broader characterization of what counts as autonomous. I conclude with some general remarks on the project of revising and refining Marx's theories, and some comments on Jon Elster's scepticism in regard to the future of democratic socialism and communism.

END NOTES

1. By 'transcendentalist pretensions' I mean, roughly, the attempt to arrive at a culture-independent, history-independent point of view on such 'things' as Truth, the Good, Human Nature, and History. Such attempts are criticized in Jurgen Habermas, The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity (Cambridge, Mass., The MIT Press, 1987); Richard Rorty, Consequences of Pragmatism (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1982), and Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989).

## CHAPTER TWO

### THE BASIC THESES OF HISTORICAL MATERIALISM

G.A. Cohen begins his classic defence of historical materialism by citing the following passages from Marx's 'Preface' to A Critique of Political Economy:

In the social production of their lives, men enter definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces.... At a certain stage of their development, the material productive forces of society come in conflict with the existing relations of production, or -- what is but a legal expression for the same thing -- with the property relations within which they have been at work hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an epoch of social revolution. With the change of the economic foundations the entire immense superstructure is more or less rapidly transformed....(9)

In Cohen's depiction and reconstruction of these ideas about epochal historical change, there are two main hypotheses or theses: the development thesis and the primacy thesis.

The development thesis states that the productive forces tend to develop throughout history, so that human productivity, as a whole, tends to increase. The

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(9) Marxism: Essential Writings, David McLellan, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 19-20.

'productive forces' include whatever machines, tools, land, knowledge and skills a society has at its disposal to produce food, clothing, shelter, machines, tools, and other objects which people consume and use. The forces or means of production provide human beings with their means of subsistence, and also the means by which they can satisfy needs and wants beyond the need to survive.

Plainly there is more wealth in our age of technologically developed capitalism than at any other time in human history. The fact that there are many more starving and malnourished people than in previous epochs is no disconfirmation of the development thesis. The claim is simply that, from the first primitive human societies through to the present age, there has been a more or less steady development of the means by which people can satisfy their needs and wants; needs and wants which themselves change and grow as a result of productive development. Human beings are, among other things, technological animals, learning about, adapting to, and manipulating their changing environments to suit their changing purposes. Slowly but surely, new tools, machines, methods, and inventions have increased human productive capacity. In our time, massive starvation and malnourishment could be avoided by redistributing the world's resources (which is



highly unlikely, given the structural imperatives of world capitalism and the power politics of nation states); these things are not due to an insufficiency of productive development. The development thesis does not say increasing productive capacity is necessarily put to good use; it just says it increases.

In John Roemer's words, the development thesis states that the productive forces "tend to develop independently of the will of people, but surely somehow because of actions people perform in striving to improve their situation." (10) This conception of productive development carries with it no Hegelian notion of historical necessity, there is no universal Mind or Spirit to be uncovered at the bottom of all this; there is just a simple fact which is explicable by attributing to people a minimal instrumental or problem-solving rationality (as Cohen does). (11) Because of this minimal rationality (and other propitious fortuities, like opposable thumbs and big brains) human beings tend, over time, to come up with better, more efficient ways of manipulating the environment to produce more of what they want and make their lives more

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(10) In Free to Lose (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 111.

(11) Karl Marx's Theory of History, pp. 152-53.

comfortable. The development thesis is neutral in regard to philosophical debates concerning the nature of rationality. Those who claim that there is more to rationality than what is involved in explaining productive development may be right (and I think they are) but they do not deny that people generally do exhibit a minimal, problem-solving rationality. The attribution of this minimal rationality, according to Cohen, is the only explanatory mechanism the development thesis requires (other than biological factors like thumbs and brains).

The development thesis, so stated, is hardly controversial (though even if it is obviously true, it would be strange to say it is trivially true). It is something most reasonable people would accept, and does not distinguish historical materialism from many other approaches to history; although the unique explanatory significance of the fact of productive development in Marx's theory of history does distinguish historical materialism from other approaches to history.

The primacy thesis, on the other hand, is distinctively Marxian. This thesis states that the property relations within which production is organized can either 'fetter' or enhance the development of the forces of production, and

that when they fetter such development, an "epoch of social revolution" begins; until, finally, the existing relations of production are transformed into a mode of production more conducive to continued development. Epochal historical change is, on this view, explained by the interaction between the relations of production and the level of development of the productive forces.

This kind of explanation is functional, and is regarded with suspicion by methodological individualists like Elster and Roemer. Let us see if we can make sense of it.

In a society advanced in science and technology, one does not expect ever to come across a group of overworked serfs. Serfdom is part of a feudal mode of production, highly unsuited the use of modern science and technology in the process of production. Cohen says, "If high technology rules out slavery, then slavery rules out high technology." (12) What does 'rules out' mean? High technology rules out slavery, as a system of production, because that mode of production is not conducive to or functional for the attainment of the high levels of productivity that modern science and technology make possible. The existence and decline of modes of production

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(12) Ibid., p. 158.

are explained by their effectiveness or ineffectiveness in developing the productive forces.

The productive forces develop as a result of the practical rationality that, in conditions of scarcity, human beings tend to apply, over time, to improve their lot -- which is not to say this development is the willed result of any particular person or group of persons. So the causal relationship is not symmetrical. That is, the relations of production, although having an affect on the rate of productive development, do not account for the very fact of productive development. However, the very fact of productive development accounts for shifts in modes of production. The development of the productive forces is not 'functional' for relations of production. Saying that slavery 'rules out' high technology is like saying that coming across a serf rules out the possibility of spotting a video store nearby: there is no natural association of ideas, the two things don't go together. The reason slavery and high technology don't go together, again, is that there are other relations of production (i.e. capitalist relations) that would make far better use of high technology in terms of productive development. Cohen succinctly states the primacy thesis as follows:

The forces [of production] would not develop as they do were the relations different, but that is

why they are not different -- because relations of the given kind suit the development of the productive forces.(13)

For an example of how historical materialism has been used to explain historical change, consider the "commercialization argument" for the transition from feudalism to capitalism.(14) The advent of steam made it possible to operate machinery capable of facilitating production on a much larger scale than, for instance, water mills on feudal manors. This, in combination with another development in the productive forces, the improvements in transportation technology, "made available distant markets that could be supplied by an enterprise producing goods for exchange rather than for its own use [the latter being characteristic of feudal production]."(15) Increasingly, the opportunities for economic advantage created by developments in productive technology were seized by the emerging capitalist class. While the feudal manor began to fetter productive development, the capitalist factory began to promote it.

This kind of explanation seems to be consistent with

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(13) Ibid., p. 161.

(14) Roemer, Free to Lose, pp. 112-13.

(15) Ibid., pp. 113.

Marx's view that class struggle is the facilitator of historical transformations. As Roemer puts it (in agreement with Cohen):

A capitalist class will eventually succeed in defeating a feudal class for control if it has knowledge of [and access to] a technology sufficiently superior to feudal technology to act as a magnet, in the long run, for serfs and peasants. Such a change in control is effected through class struggle, but it is made possible by the level of development of the productive forces.(16)

Developments in productive technology made it advantageous for merchants to increase their stock of fixed capital; this required a labour force, a proletariat, for its maintenance and operation; and with the increase in output facilitated by the improved productive technology, the argument goes, the capitalists were able to offer higher standards of living to the direct producers, and "this higher standard of living [acted] as a magnet to draw the producers into its mode of production."(17)

But surely there is something wrong with this account. While it is true that, in the long run, capitalists, at least in Western Europe, could offer workers a higher standard of living than feudal lords could offer serfs,

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(16) Ibid., pp. 115-16.

(17) Ibid., p. 115.

this does not explain why, during the incipient stages of capitalism, when life for factory workers was often more miserable than manorial life for serfs, capitalist enterprises acted as a "magnet".

An important question, which I will consider in the fifth chapter, is whether it is sufficient to explain epochal historical change in economic terms alone. There is an empirical question about how much coercion was involved in the transformation of serfs and peasants into proletarians. Coercion, population pressure, and propaganda about better opportunities in the towns may all have contributed to the making of the urban proletariat, the precursor of the working class of the industrial revolution.(18) But part of the attractiveness of capitalism might also have been the fact that it increased freedom (as Satz contends). Serfs, being legally unfree, were forced to work for a particular lord; proletarians, on the other hand, were at least legally free to enter into contractual relations with different capitalist employers. Marxists stress, rightly, that this proletarian 'freedom' has really become a kind of gloss over substantial

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(18) John Hicks, A Theory of Economic History (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1969), chapter Eight.

proletarian 'unfreedom'(19) ; but, for many serfs, the idea of being legally free to enter or not enter into contracts, as opposed to being tied to the land, might have been seen as emancipatory. This is not strictly an economic motivation; it is a moral motivation, the kind of motivation Marxists rarely appeal to in their social and historical explanations.

Historical materialism is a theory about the future as well as the past. But it is hard to see how developments in productive technology alone, under capitalism, will eventually induce the proletariat to struggle for socialism. It is not even clear that the productive forces will continue to 'develop' indefinitely, given the finitude of the world's resources. In my view, Cohen's functional account can only be part of the story, if historical materialism is to be viable. Again, I provide a fuller discussion of this in the fifth chapter.

Some Marxians have thought that the assignment of fundamental causal efficacy to the development of the productive forces is incompatible with the view that history is the history of class struggle. According to

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(19) G.A. Cohen, "The Strucure of Proletarian Unfreedom", in Roemer, ed., pp.237-59.



Robert Brenner, class struggle, rather than productive development, plays the fundamental causal role. He explains the transition from feudal to capitalist relations of production directly by reference to the relative power of the exploiting and exploited classes.(20) Brenner argues that, after the Black Plague, there was not much difference in the economic situation of the peasantry in England and Spain, on the one hand, and Eastern Europe, on the other. Yet the end of serfdom came so much later in Eastern Europe than in the West. There was, according to Brenner, no real difference in the level of development of the productive forces in the two regions; but, the peasantry in Eastern Europe was not sufficiently well organized. As a result, the "second serfdom" caused stagnation rather than development of the productive forces. In the West, the peasantry was better organized and more rebellious; which brought serfdom to an end more quickly and, as peasants were drawn into the rising commercial economy, developed the productive forces.

Similar points can be made about the relative stagnation of productive development in dynastic China. Perhaps the

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(20) Robert Brenner, "The Social Basis of Economic Development", Roemer, ed., pp. 23-53.

relative passivity of the Chinese peasantry (if that is true) contributed to this stagnation.

I think, however, that Brenner's insights are compatible with the development thesis and the primacy thesis. It is hard to deny the significance of class power and class struggle for the kind of differentiation in levels of productive development that Brenner observes in European history. Not only class struggle, but political culture, geography, religion, war, and so on, will have an impact on the rate of productive development. Yet if we presume, plausibly, that the development thesis refers to productive development in the world as a whole (and not specifically Eastern Europe or China) and that the primacy thesis attempts to explain the transformation of one mode of production into another (rather than trying to account for all the factors that might bring about such transformation more or less quickly) then Brenner's points are supplementary, not alternative, to Cohen's historical materialism.(21)

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(21) Kai Nielsen, "On Taking Historical Materialism Seriously", Dialogue 22.2, 1983; G.A. Cohen, History, Labour, and Freedom, pp. 25-9; and Roemer, Free to Lose, pp. 123-24.

There are good reasons for viewing history in this broad way. Given that it is human emancipation that democratic socialists are, or ought to be, interested in, and not just the emancipation of people in this or that region or country, it is appropriate to try to formulate hypotheses about the general course of human history; hypotheses which might be relevant to seeing how that emancipation might come about. Moreover, it is often the case that social scientists draw factitious boundaries; for example, between the 'local' and the 'global', or between the 'domestic' and the 'international'. Sometimes these boundaries are useful. But sometimes they deceive us into assuming a greater degree of community isolation and separation than is actually the case. Historical materialism, as a theory of human history, takes a broader view of human affairs than most (if not all) social theories. The idea is not to gloss over the differences of circumstance and culture within which people act; but to see in what sorts of socially malleable ways the lives of people are connected. We should think of historical materialism as a theory of the history of humankind.

That the life-chances (to borrow a phrase from Rolf Dahrendorf) of people from distinct cultures, with distinct ways of life, are intertwined, and that it is appropriate

to theorize about how they are intertwined, should be obvious in the age of capitalism. Part of the explanation for the poverty of Bolivian peasants, for example, would be to locate their position and role in the complex hierarchy of the international economic system.

Looking at the history of human society, then, there has been a more or less constant development of the forces of production; even though, in Eastern Europe and China, there may have been long periods of stagnation. Surely Brenner is right in saying class structure and class politics is a large part of the explanation for differential levels of productive development in different regions. Roemer responds to Brenner in the following way:

... a few centuries' difference in the development of capitalism in different parts of Europe -- the result of differing balances of class forces in regions -- is not a significant period of time in human history and [Brenner's] evidence therefore does not contradict Cohen's traditional reading of historical materialism. Sooner or later, and perhaps from a properly long-range historical point of view, more or less simultaneously all of Europe was transformed into a capitalist economic structure at the historical instant when the productive forces reached a certain level.(22)

The claim that "a few centuries' difference in the development of capitalism" is not "a significant period of

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(22) Free to Lose, p. 124.

time in human history" seems to me just bad wording; reinforcing the idea that Marxists, dwelling on their utopian dreams, viewing the present as an insignificant, transient stage, are not interested in confronting human suffering here and now. Of course it is a significant period of time. But 'significance' is relative to purposes. If our purpose is to come to grips with broad trends in human history, a few centuries might not be so significant.

Roemer's bad wording aside, his point is that Europe (and, for that matter, the rest of the world) did eventually emerge from feudalism, and that the primacy thesis accounts for this. The particular balance of class forces may have delayed this process in some areas, and hastened it in others. But this does not detract from the claim that, looking at human society as a whole, the tendency of the productive forces to develop -- whatever continent or country happens to be the geographical hub of this development in a given epoch -- causes, in the long run, the replacement of economic structures which fetter this development with economic structures which enhance it.

Therefore I think it is a mistake to see the primacy thesis as contradictory to Marx's claim that history is the

history of class struggle. An historical materialist explanation of epochal change must give a central role to class power and class struggle; and it must place this in the context of Cohen's functional explanation of the existence and decline of modes of production. The important thing, for Cohen, is that the functional explanation occurs at a more basic level in the sense that it attempts to specify the conditions under which class struggle will succeed or fail; whereas the class relations themselves are not appealed to in the explanation of productive development. This would give both a fuller, more comprehensive picture of historical change -- fuller than an explanation which emphasizes only one factor -- and one that seems to capture Marx's own thinking more accurately. As long as historical materialism is seen as a theory about human society and epochal change, there will be no conflict between the primacy and development theses, on the one hand, and the role of class struggle as the facilitator of historical transformations, on the other hand.

Nevertheless, while Cohen's reading of historical materialism can incorporate Brenner's insights concerning the central explanatory role of class power and class struggle, I do not think the theory, as it stands, is

sufficient to explain why history is moving toward communism. It is not clear that production under socialism or communism would be more efficient than capitalist production; indeed, there are historical indications pointing the other way. But even if there were to be a gain in efficiency, Cohen does not provide sufficient grounds for the belief that the proletariat in advanced capitalist countries will rise up in collective socialist struggle.

I think Debra Satz, in "Marxism, Materialism, and Historical Progress", has supplemented historical materialism in a way that makes it much more plausible than Cohen's version taken on its own. She does so in a way that not only makes more sense of past epochal change, but also gives more rational grounding to Marx's predictions regarding the supersession of capitalism by socialism.

Before I discuss Satz, however, I want to consider what is currently a very fashionable criticism of historical materialism. This is usually called the 'collective action' problem. That is the subject of the next chapter.

## CHAPTER THREE

### HISTORICAL MATERIALISM AND THE COLLECTIVE ACTION PROBLEM

The collective action problem is sometimes put in terms of a 'free rider' problem. People with common interests often must cooperate in order to fulfill those interests. But often the rational actions of each member of a group will prevent cooperation, and thereby prevent their common interest from being realized. Allen Buchanan, in "Revolutionary Motivation and Rationality", states the problem this way:

...(p)rovision of the public good in question is threatened by the free rider problem. Each member of the group, if rational, will reason as follows. Regardless of whether I contribute or not, either enough others will contribute to provide good G or they will not. If the former, then the good will be available to me free of charge and my contribution would be wasted. If the latter, then my contribution would again be a loss to me. So rational self-interest requires that I not contribute and go for a 'free ride' on the efforts of others.(23)

If everyone thinks like this, then the 'public good' will not be forthcoming, unless people can be coerced into cooperating or they begin to view the benefits of cooperating as outweighing the costs.

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(23) In Philosophy and Public Affairs 9, no.1, 1979, p. 64. See also Buchanan's "Marx, Morality, and History: An Assessment of Recent Analytical Work on Marx", Ethics 98, (Oct. 1987), pp. 112-119.



Buchanan is quick to add that the free rider problem arises for "group utility maximizers" as well as rational egoists. Even if people are interested in bringing about what is good for the group with which they identify, Buchanan argues, the same pattern of reasoning will apply:

Regardless of whether I contribute or not, either enough others will contribute or they won't. If the former, then my costs of contribution would do no good, while constituting a subtraction from the utility the group gains from G. If the latter, then my costs of contribution are again a subtraction from the group's utility. So maximizing group utility requires that I be a free rider. And again, since every other maximizer of group utility reasons in the same way, the good G will not be secured.(24)

Buchanan then uses this 'rational choice' analysis of collective action to throw doubt on Marx's claim that there will be socialist revolution in advanced capitalist countries. The historical materialist account of revolutionary transformation, Buchanan argues, "is not a substitute for a theory relating the proletarian's needs and interests to his actions." Historical materialism may explain "how those interests and needs come to be and how the proletarian comes to see them for what they are", but it offers no account of how the individual members of the working class will acquire and act upon their revolutionary

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(24) Ibid., p. 65.

motivation to struggle against capitalist relations of production.(25)

I cannot give due consideration to all of Buchanan's controversial claims about Marx, or to the sundry applications of rational choice methods to the problem of revolutionary motivation; but I do wish to argue that the so-called collective action problem is not as intractable as Buchanan thinks, that collective goods analysis, in itself, adds nothing substantive to historical materialism or to Marx's reasons for thinking capitalism sows the seeds of its own destruction, and that, contrary to Buchanan, Roemer, et.al., it is collective goods analysis which requires the concepts of historical materialism and not vice versa.

To start then, let us consider the collective action problem as it arises for rational egoists. If people are fundamentally self-interested animals by nature, there is no hope for socialism. Some subtle philosopher might be able to invent logically possible worlds in which rational egoists cooperate to make a successful revolution. But in fact revolutions require sacrifices and revolutionaries must to some extent genuinely care about improving the

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(25) Ibid., p. 77.

situation of human beings (though they may be mistaken about what that comes to and about the means to achieving it). They do not have to be saints either, but I think it is reasonable to assume that without something like 'conditional altruism', even the amount of cooperation needed to coerce people into supporting a revolution would be extremely hard to muster. Buchanan's supposition, that 'genuine' Marxists believe that revolution is motivated by self-interest alone, seems to this Marxist amazing.

But are we rational egoists by nature? Or do we project this trait on all of humanity, across cultural space and through historical time, because our own socioeconomic order encourages us to think in terms of narrow economic rationality? I think we should take the latter possibility seriously.

The historical evolution of capitalism was accompanied by the formal -- merely formal -- separation of the political and economic spheres. We tend to assume this separation is natural, but it wasn't always like that. In Behind the Veil of Economics, Robert Heilbroner argues that in pre-capitalist socioeconomic formations, "the acts of production and distribution appear as intrinsic elements in the sociopolitical life of these communities. What we call

the economy is, in Polanyi's words, 'embedded in non-economic institutions'." (26) I think Heilbroner is saying that, in precapitalist societies, it was much more obvious -- than in capitalist societies -- that people were motivated by both economic and non-economic considerations in their economic activity. (27) My point is that it would be hard to see people in these societies as tokens of the type "rational egoist". Producers were motivated by considerations other than the need to survive (although there is no reason to say this was not an important motivating force). Their daily economic activity was also motivated by a sense of moral and political obligation: they accepted the authority of tradition and the naturalness of hierarchy. Insofar as this was the case, human beings cannot be said to be rational egoists by nature. (I am aware of certain Hobbesian attempts in moral philosophy to derive morality from rational self-interest, but even if some such story of the origin of morality could

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(26) Robert Heilbroner, Behind the Veil of Economics (New York, W.W. Norton & Co., 1988), p. 17.

(27) Note that the truth of that claim (if it is true) does not gainsay the historical materialist claim that the political-legal-ideological superstructure is functionally explained in terms of its stabilizing influence on the economic structure, for the descriptions of structures, in Marxist theory, are not primarily put in terms of people's motivations.

be told, that would not show that, once a social morality was in place, people would continue to adhere to it only out of self-interest).

At any rate, such a psychological thesis, if it is to be viable, needs more defending. And this means establishing something stronger than the trivially true claim that people try to satisfy their wants. They might 'want' to be moral, and this might, sometimes, conflict with other wants whose satisfaction requires immoral or morally neutral behavior. If we take the view, broadly shared among modern moral philosophers, that morality and self-interest are not the same thing, sometimes mutually supportive but sometimes conflicting, and that people sometimes act morally even when it is possible to follow their self-interest instead, then the claim that people are fundamentally egoists -- whether this is presented as part of a philosophical anthropology or as a scientific, psychological thesis -- loses much of its force.

Heilbroner emphasizes (I think rightly) that economic activity under capitalism is itself guided by considerations which are not purely self-interested. For example, in capitalist societies there must be general acceptance of the idea that people have the right to buy

and sell productive property, and even to buy and sell labour. Without general acceptance of these moral beliefs (ideological as they are) capitalist market relations would scarcely be possible. So even though capitalist market relations may breed or reinforce a 'rational' egoistic mentality, those relations presuppose that people are also motivated to some extent by things other than self-interest. It might be said that it is in each worker's self-interest to put up with the system to make ends meet; but if self-interest alone motivated them, then the general acceptance of the aforementioned moral beliefs would be utterly mysterious and inexplicable. Why wouldn't our constitutions simply appeal to people's self-interest, without any reference to certain general moral principles and inalienable property rights?

Thus far, then, we have no compelling reason to believe that the free rider problem, as it arises for rational egoists, creates theoretical difficulties for historical materialism, and in particular, for the claim that, eventually, workers in capitalist societies will engage in collective socialist struggle. Furthermore, even if people are predominantly motivated by self interest, the fact that revolutionary class struggle has occurred in the past gives us reason to think egoism was not the whole story; and, by

extension, that it need not be the whole story in the future either.

As aforementioned, however, the collective action problem does not necessarily presuppose rational egoism.(28) Buchanan thinks the problem persists even if workers know their class interests and want to fulfill those interests. His claim is that each worker, in all likelihood, will view her own possible contribution to the collective good as a cost which detracts from overall group utility, irrespective of whether or not others contribute. As a result, no one will contribute, even if everyone wants to, because contributing, in any case, will not do anything to bring about the collective good of the workers.

To begin an objection, consider the following remark by Arthur Ripstein:

Rational choice theory, with its emphasis on how ideally rational individuals would allocate resources, ignores Marx's view that the process through which concrete individuals manage their affairs is at least as important as its consequences.(29)

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(28) The discussion will, in the end, return to rational egoism, for I have not yet presented Buchanan's argument in its most favorable light.

(29) Arthur Ripstein, "Rationality and Alienation", Nielsen & Ware, eds., p. 463.

Ripstein is here questioning the notion that instrumental rationality is the only or most important rationality we have. Workers' contribution to collective action might not only be motivated by calculations of 'expected value' for themselves or their class. They might also be motivated by the satisfaction and sense of solidarity they develop in the very process of acting to promote the fulfilment of their class interests. Being a 'rational' person, to them, might mean being a certain kind of person; a person who makes sacrifices for and builds links of solidarity with those who share common life experiences, especially a common experience of oppression.

I think Ripstein is right to stress these possibilities (but I do not wish to suggest that people who are not motivated by the kinds of things Ripstein refers to are irrational; I just want to say that those who are so motivated are not irrational). Buchanan calls this the "in-process benefits" solution to the problem of collective action. He thinks terrorists, Red Cross volunteers, and peace demonstrators, are groups whose members "may set great store by the community, fraternity, and solidarity which they experience as participants in a common



struggle."(30) However, this way of dissolving the collective action problem for the proletariat, Buchanan argues, is dubious. He thinks there are basic flaws in such an approach.

In the first place, says Buchanan, the in-process benefits solution is not in line with Marx's own views. Marx "nowhere suggests that such derivative goods of association, rather than the proletariat's interest in the overthrow of the system, are a major factor in the revolutionary motivation of the proletariat."(31) Ripstein would firmly disagree with this reading of Marx. Probably both he and Buchanan could evince textual support for their own views on what Marx said or intended. Not being sure of Marx's views on this point, I simply wish to make the obvious point that the two views about revolutionary motivation are not mutually exclusive. Workers might be motivated by in-process benefits and their interest in the overthrow of the system. Buchanan and Ripstein recognize this, but Buchanan, in my view, understates the significance of the former and Ripstein, perhaps, makes too much of it. If historical materialism had to assign a

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(30) "Revolutionary Motivation and Rationality", p. 71.

(31) Ibid., p. 72.

central role to in-process benefits to explain revolutionary motivation, it would run into further problems, as Buchanan makes clear.

For instance, one would have to specify under what conditions these intrinsic benefits of association are sufficient for revolutionary motivation. Buchanan shows that this is indeed a problem.

For it is clear that these intrinsic benefits of association are not always forthcoming nor, even if forthcoming, always effective. History provides numerous examples of peoples who failed to achieve effective resistance to their oppressors, even though they shared a common form of life and a common experience of persecution. A Marxian who relies on the in-process benefits solution must explain, for instance, how the case of the proletariat differs from that of Ghetto Jews in Nazi Europe. On the face of it, one would have thought that the resources of community, fraternity, and solidarity would have been richest in such closeknit ethnic groups.(32)

This passage is instructive, though not quite in the way Buchanan intends. His example (and one could think of others) shows that the prospect of in-process benefits is very likely not going to be sufficient for revolutionary motivation. If an oppressed or exploited group is to engage in liberative collective action, it must have sufficient resources, communication channels, leadership, organization, and political will. But although Ripstein

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(32) Ibid., p. 72.

does not give these things much attention, there is little reason to think that he (or any Marxist) doubts the importance of at least some of them. Fellow feeling and solidarity among workers is surely necessary (though insufficient) for a socialist revolution. Buchanan seems to suggest that in-process benefits are not very important, just in virtue of the fact that they are insufficient. Perhaps I am reading Buchanan uncharitably on this score. It is worth noting, however, that Buchanan is himself prone to uncharitable interpretation. For instance, I know of no Marxian who " relies on the in-process benefits solution." They generally think that, while workers must (to some extent) be motivated by fellow feeling and a sense of class solidarity, successful revolutionary action presupposes that certain objective conditions hold.

Of course there is some disagreement concerning what these conditions are, but it is by appealing to them that a Marxian can explain "how the case of the proletariat differs from that of Ghetto Jews in Nazi Europe." Marx's class analysis, his hypotheses concerning the proletariat's role in the development and fall of capitalism, and his materialist conception of history, perhaps combined with Lenin's views regarding necessary conditions for revolutionary motivation and action, together comprise a

cluster of interrelated, essentially empirical beliefs. By appealing to some or all of these beliefs, a Marxian can say that the prospect of in-process benefits might be an effective (though insufficient) motivating force in the case of the proletariat, when certain conditions obtain; and that these conditions did not obtain for Ghetto Jews in Nazi Europe, rendering their feeling of community, fraternity, and solidarity ineffective as a motivating force for collective action. There is no inherent problem with treating in-process benefits as an essential part of revolutionary motivation: the fact that this kind of motivation is ineffective for one group does not mean it cannot be effective for another, or that an empirically-based explanation cannot account for the difference.

Still, there is, according to Buchanan, an even more serious difficulty.

Where an ongoing process of common struggle already exists, it is plausible to appeal to in-process benefits to explain the continual existence of cooperation. But the mere possibility of in-process benefits in the future, if the process gets underway, is of dubious merit as an explanation of how the process gets started. This process is greatly exacerbated by Marx's insistence that the capitalist system fosters competition and egoism in all its members

and thoroughly undermines all genuine forms of community.(33)

We have already maintained that collective socialist struggle cannot be motivated merely by the prospect of in-process benefits. Socialist revolution is also motivated by workers' collective interest in transforming capitalist relations of production.(34) This will not be possible if everyone cares only for their own well-being. The essence of the above objection is that, even if people are not egoists or possessive individualists by nature, the capitalist system fosters these traits, and historical materialism is empty without an account of how they will be overcome.

Using Buchanan's terminology, then, the claim is that even if workers want to maximize group utility (realize their class interests) they will end up acting like egoists, due to the nature of the capitalist system. I am not certain whether to construe that as a collective action problem for 'rational' egoists, or as a collective action

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(33) Ibid., p. 72.

(34) And, according to historical materialism, that goal can only be successfully realized when capitalism has developed to a certain level, i.e., when certain objective conditions obtain.

problem as Buchanan construes it for group utility maximizers.(see above)

The latter problem, it seems, misses the mark. Buchanan's characterization assumes that workers will view their own contribution as a cost which subtracts from the collective good of their class. But if we keep in mind that the collective good in question is the abolition of capitalist relations of production, in favor of a socialist system premised on meeting peoples' needs rather than the private accumulation of capital (and eventually creating conditions for classless society) it is hard to see how an individual worker could see her contribution as anything but a contribution. Why wouldn't each worker regard her efforts as setting an example for other workers? If workers were truly group utility maximizers, their actions might diminish the likelihood of favorable reform in the short term. But if the way to maximize utility, in the long term, is to abolish capitalism altogether (and this should be what Buchanan means by "group utility maximization", otherwise he is not discussing socialist revolution) then the onus is on Buchanan to show why workers would see their efforts and sacrifices as detracting from the provision of the long term goal. How else could that goal become a live possibility?

Furthermore, Buchanan should consider the following argument, put forth by Cohen in History, Labour and Freedom.<sup>(35)</sup> Cohen presents a fairly plausible reconciliation of two elements which, left unreconciled, might combine to create a free-rider problem. On the one hand, let us suppose, workers want to realize their class interests. On the other hand, let us suppose, the contribution of an individual worker will not make a difference to whether or not the goal is realized, and each worker, recognizing this, is not motivated to contribute. Cohen denies the latter supposition by re-characterizing the 'goal' in a way that incorporates something like what Buchanan calls in-process benefits. The goal is not just to overthrow capitalism and replace it with socialism, but to do so in the easiest possible way. Part of what makes the process easier, for those who are engaged in revolutionary struggle, is that others are contributing. An individual worker or revolutionary can relieve some of the burden of other workers or revolutionaries who are struggling for socialism. In this way, Cohen argues, although the contribution of a worker may not make a difference to whether socialism is achieved, it may well make a tangible difference to the burden shouldered by

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(35) See pp. 57-64.

other revolutionaries or workers engaged in socialist struggle. Again, it seems to me that the onus is on Buchanan to show why this 'solution' is implausible, particularly if workers are characterized as group-utility maximizers.

As I understand it, the key to the collective action problem, for Buchanan, is really the problem of getting from 'rational egoism' to 'group utility maximization'. I argued that this problem is not intractable because a) people are motivated by a sense of moral and political obligation (and not just by self-interest) in their daily activity, and b) successful revolutions and other forms of collective action have occurred that would not have occurred if people were only motivated by self-interest. We need not assume that workers must renounce self-interest to engage in revolutionary struggle; better to say they will be motivated by some combination of class interest, in-process benefits, and self-interest (and, as I will later contend, by certain moral conceptions).

However, one is left with the nagging thought that this is all too easy. Showing that the collective action problem is not intractable is not the same as showing that its solution is more than a logical possibility. In



capitalist societies, there are certain structural constraints that continue to block the road to revolution; it seems there are not many auspicious signs for socialists. Joshua Cohen and Joel Rogers, in On Democracy, refer to "demand constraints" and "resource constraints".(36)

Demand constraints are those aspects of the capitalist system which induce workers to limit their demands to demands for "short-term material gain". Private control of investment decisions creates conditions of material uncertainty for workers (beyond the uncertainties of nature) and thus reduces their political demand to "the defense or promotion of [short-term] material interests."(37) In contrast to revolutionary struggle, the goals of short-term struggles are easier to clarify, easier to coordinate, and more likely to achieve official recognition. Moreover, workers in developed capitalist societies have more to lose than their chains; some of their interests are in fact satisfied within the system. And finally, "the achievement of short-run material satisfaction often makes it irrational to engage in more

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(36) On Democracy (New York, Penguin Books, 1985), chapter Three.

(37) Ibid., p. 55.

radical struggle, since that struggle is by definition directed against those institutions which provide one's current gain."(38) Resource constraints are constraints on collective action arising from structural inequality. Successful collective action requires access to resources, information, and communication channels; all of which are directly or indirectly controlled by the capitalist class.

These constraints point to a definite collective action problem for the proletariat in the near future. But these are practical problems which call for practical solutions; they do not signify a theoretical inadequacy of historical materialism. In an essay on Elster and methodological individualism, Robert P. Wolff makes a similar point.(39) In the "real world" of collective action, he argues, there are always practical obstacles in getting people to participate, but these problems are usually not intractable. In the world of rational choice theory, on the other hand (the world Buchanan and Elster sometimes inhabit), the problems are on the level of explanation: 'What motivates individuals to participate?'. Wolff

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(38) Ibid., p. 57.

(39) "Methodological Individualism and Marx: Some Remarks on Jon Elster, Game Theory, and Other Things", (unpublished).

criticizes Elster for his tendency to characterize the preferences and motivations of individuals in such a narrow, rigid manner, that collective action becomes a mystery. Yet, in the 'real world', collective action is the norm. Perhaps we should avoid drawing such a hard and fast line between theory and practice (as Wolff seems to); what we should say is that standards of conceptual clarity, rigour, and plausibility in social theory construction do not necessarily warrant the assumption that current practical problems will forever be practical problems. Putting it yet another way, we shouldn't assume that the current obstacles to revolutionary struggle, entrenched as they are, will always be overwhelming and practically insurmountable.

The present state of things is not eternal, not ordained by God, not derived from Nature's laws, and not metaphysically necessary (whatever that means). A virtue of historical materialism is that it combats the ahistorical 'presentism' which underscores much of the literature on collective action, by hypothesizing about the mechanisms of epochal social transformations, such as the supersession of feudalism by capitalism. No doubt there were many people who, during feudal times, were unable to conceive of things being in any fundamental sense different

than they then were. But things are fundamentally different. We have, since the Enlightenment, developed a much deeper historical consciousness than that which is manifest in pre-Enlightenment thinkers, and we should be able to grasp that institutions and practices which are deeply entrenched at this historical stage are contingent and malleable right to the core.

Needless to say, this kind of talk will be considered 'soft' and 'tender-hearted' by those who believe rational choice analysis is 'hard' and 'tough-minded' (there is, inter alia, sexism underlying this theoretically useless dichotomy). What they want is a detailed 'microfoundational' account of the process by which workers will overcome the possessive individualism which the system encourages.

Assuming (till the next chapter) there is something to the micro-macro distinction, we cannot give a reasonable and useful micro-story without incorporating macro-concepts and hypotheses. There is not much point in constructing rational choice scenarios or 'games' as mere logical possibilities. To be at all relevant (and non-utopian) they must be placed in an historical context. John Roemer shows that one way of doing this, if we want to give a

micro-account of revolutionary motivation, is to construct rational choice scenarios within an historical materialist framework.(40)

If we trace the development of capitalism from its early, laissez-faire stage to its present, welfarist form, we see that the system has, through all the booms and busts, through periods of turmoil and stability, more or less continually made concessions to exploited classes and groups whose expectations have increased as productivity and state involvement in the economy have increased. Sooner or later, Marx predicted, the expectations are bound to exceed what the system can offer, and a legitimacy crisis in capitalism, which cannot be resolved by mere readjustment within the system, will ensue. It is worth noting that Marx bases this prediction, not on an a priori argument, but on an empirically-oriented analysis of the dynamics of capitalist growth. Various theorists have developed this 'crisis theory' in the light of the last century of international monopoly capitalist development.(41) If historical materialism adequately

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(40) "Some Issues of Method and Substance", in Roemer, ed..

(41) Some examples: Jurgen Habermas, Legitimation Crisis (Boston, Beacon Press, 1975); James O'Connor, The Fiscal Crisis of the State (New York, St. Martin's Press, 1973); and John Roemer, Analytical Foundations

accounts for the dynamics of historical transformations in the past, and, in conjunction with crisis theory, the historical development of capitalism from its incipient stages to the present, then what it predicts in regard to the supersession of capitalism by socialism in the future, can be regarded as having some inductive plausibility. Admittedly, these are huge 'ifs'; but what Buchanan and others do not seem to realize, I think, is that the central questions are empirical and not resolvable through philosophical analysis. I am merely trying to show, against some of Buchanan's contentions, that historical materialism is not a conceptually muddled theory. Roemer, among others, argues that Marxists need to employ rational choice models to show how individuals come to acquire those preferences which will lead them to engage in revolutionary struggle. He thinks historical materialism and Marx's crisis theory are not, methodologically speaking, sufficient without rational choice theory. This is strange, since historical materialism and crisis theory offer empirically testable hypotheses (which is not to say they are easily testable) with or without rational choice theory. What, then, does a micro-explanation come to?

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of Marxian Economic Theory (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1981), chapter Five.

Recall that, according to Buchanan, Marxists need "a theory relating the proletarian's needs and interests to his actions." How, exactly, will demand and resource constraints be overcome? I think the kind of story that Buchanan, Elster, Roemer, Daniel Little, et.al., want is given in Part One of the Communist Manifesto, in Marx's diachronic account of how "the bourgeoisie ... produces ... its own gravediggers".(42) In Analyzing Marx, Richard Miller produces a powerful reconstruction of that account. And he intends this reconstruction as a response to Buchanan; a way of showing the collective action problem is not intractable. The passage is very long, but I think it is important enough to be quoted in full.

... (i)ndustrial development is said [by Marx] to create new forms of interaction ('association') among workers leading to broader and more determined forms of cooperation in resistance, ultimately 'revolutionary combination'. The psychological mechanisms seem to be the following. From the first, workers resist capitalist efforts to cut wages, speed up work, and the like, but they first do so through individual protests, and the defense of special privileges, and the withholding of special skills. As those special skills and privileges become largely obsolete through industrialization, cooperation becomes a much more effective resource. Some workers ask others to help them in resistance, at least by not accepting strikebreaking work. They expect and often receive a positive response from those who can expect to benefit from reciprocal help later. As different factories become more

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(42) McLellan, ed., pp. 26-31.

interdependent, as control becomes concentrated in larger firms and as communication improves, the opportunities for such reciprocity spread. Meanwhile, cooperation in resistance makes an increasingly powerful impact, on account of its growing scope and the economy-wide effects of industrial conflict in crucial industries. The growing cooperation and a growing awareness of the similar situation of other proletarians contribute to a heightened willingness to take risks for others in order to advance common interests. Ultimately, they lead to 'revolutionary combination'.(43)

Miller notes that this account relies on three assumptions. First, cooperation in resistance becomes a necessary means to reduce subordination and suffering for individual workers, and some people, hoping for reciprocation, will initiate that resistance. Second, workers who have benefited from the resistance of other workers, and are then urged to cooperate, will, generally, according to Miller, "find their self-esteem reduced, if they stood aside as free riders."(44) Therefore some will reciprocate, if there is a reasonable chance that their cooperative efforts will be successful. Third, "The broader past cooperation has been within the group, the more important its benefits for the group have been and the more likely are gains from expanded cooperation, the

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(43) Richard Miller, Analyzing Marx (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 69.

(44) Ibid., p. 72.



greater the subsequent increase in cooperation will be."(45)

Miller's account of how workers have come to cooperate in resistance, and will (increasingly) cooperate in the future, ultimately to engage in revolutionary struggle, seems to be what Buchanan is asking for when he asks for a "theory relating the proletarian's needs and interests to his actions". If he is asking for more than this, then I do not know what he wants. Miller's 'micro-account' is not a proof; it doesn't demonstrate the inevitability of socialist revolution. But it is not presented as a merely possible scenario either. Miller is saying that there are certain salient tendencies in the development of capitalism (concentration of industry, improved communications, interdependence of firms, increase of unskilled labour, etc.) which make growing cooperation not only possible but necessary, for workers to meet their needs and interests (needs and interests which change and grow as a result of productive development).

The passage from Miller is an appropriate response to Buchanan in that it attempts to explain why collective action has been and will be rational for the proletariat.

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(45) Ibid.

But Buchanan would argue that the tendencies toward working class solidarity, outlined by Miller, do not indicate a move toward "revolutionary combination". Demand and resource constraints will keep forcing workers into fighting for short-term material gain. Why should we suppose that workers will cooperate in a way that goes beyond 'trade-union consciousness'?

But couldn't the question be put the other way: Why should we suppose that workers will never get beyond trade-union consciousness? If the productive development and socialization of production that capitalism has brought into being has made it increasingly rational for workers cooperatively to defend their interests, why should the process of growing cooperation not foster an increasing hostility to the system itself? Does time stop with our glorious socioeconomic order? Keeping a broad historical perspective, taking historical materialism and Marx's crisis arguments into account, Marxists think we have some good empirical (non-teleological) reasons for thinking there will be collective socialist struggle. Capitalism does make it economically rational to be concerned with short-term material gain, and it does foster egoism and possessive individualism. But it is not so monolithic: it also socializes production, creating, among other things,

greater interdependence and more effective cooperation and solidarity among workers. Perhaps this is not convincing if we look at capitalism over the last twenty or thirty years; but looking at the last two centuries, Miller's contention becomes less objectionable. If the claim about growing solidarity is still doubtful, we can at the least postulate it as a reasonable empirical possibility, adopting something like Gramsci's posture of pessimism of the intellect and optimism of the will.(46)

The question is whether capitalism will continue to maintain working class consent. Will it continue to satisfy workers' material interests? What if workers' expectations in the Third World rise? Will workers in developed capitalist countries continue to accept a system that has to meet the rising expectations of Third World workers? We know the capitalist system is flexible, but there is no intractable collective action problem which makes its abolishment an impossibility or a mere logical possibility. That Buchanan seems to think of it in that way is a result of his a) viewing the present state of things ahistorically, and b) seeing capitalism monolithically as a system engendering only obstacles to

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(46) Kai Nielsen suggested this to me in his comments on a draft of this thesis.

its transformation, rather than a system which creates opportunities as well (of the sort Miller stresses).

To this point I have not said much about ideology and coercion. Joshua Cohen and Joel Rogers think that ideology and coercion are of minimal explanatory relevance. But I have argued that the maintenance of the capitalist system requires, not just the motive power of self-interest, but also general acceptance of certain moral beliefs (such as the belief that individuals have the right to buy and sell productive property). We can infer two things from this: one, that people are not just motivated by self-interest, and therefore the egoist collective action problem is misguided if it pretends to be more than a partial explanation of the absence of revolutionary struggle; and two, that if workers begin to see the dominant ideology for what it is, with the help of socialist leadership, the collective action problem will become less and less of a problem. It will not go away, but if workers see the system as fundamentally unjust, they will be more reluctant to be free riders. The dominant ideological beliefs with which they have been socialized will no longer form part of the motivation for their actions.

Insofar as the police and army serve to maintain the status quo, coercion is also an important part of the collective action problem. The possibility of punishment or death is a 'cost' of participating in revolutionary struggle. For that struggle to be successful, workers must gain substantial military support. This sort of thing should not be so hard to imagine, given that it has happened in the past. And it could happen again if capitalism fails to deliver the goods. On Buchanan's view, such a suggestion is far-fetched because it is easier for capitalists to solve their collective action problems than it is for workers. Capitalists can pay for armies; workers cannot.(47) But I wonder, then, how Buchanan would account for actual historical cases of ruling class 'submission'. It seems to me that, when there is dissension toward an existing regime or social order, the chances of gaining military support increase as the number of dissenters increases. If a substantial segment of the population opposes an extant social order, then the ease with which the ruling class may have solved its collective action problems in the past might slowly be turned into a very difficult and dangerous task. How would Buchanan explain the overthrow of the Tsarist autocracy in Russia, the

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(47) Buchanan, "Marx, Morality, and History ...", p. 116.

substantial military support obtained by the Bolsheviks, or even the French Revolution?

To summarize. Buchanan (and others) claim that historical materialism is conceptually and methodologically flawed, because it fails to give a 'micro-account' of how proletarians would acquire revolutionary motivation and overcome their free-rider problems. I have argued, in response, that Richard Miller, in Analyzing Marx, provides a plausible historical materialist account of growing proletarian cooperation and solidarity, phrased in terms familiar to rational choice theorists. Whether proletarians eventually unite in "revolutionary combination" depends, in large part, on whether Marx's substantive claims about the mechanisms of epochal change and the dynamics of capitalism are true. I tried to make some of those claims sound like more than logical possibilities, at least to the extent that regarding them as such is often a result of viewing the present ahistorically and capitalism monolithically and statically. Against Buchanan, then, I conclude that there is no intractable collective action problem for historical materialism, and that, therefore, his criticism fails as an attempt to vitiate that theory's claim to methodological legitimacy.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### RATIONAL CHOICE THEORY AND THE MICRO-MACRO DISTINCTION

In the last chapter I tried to respond to a 'rational choice' objection to historical materialism by assuming the validity of some of the assumptions of the rational choice conceptual scheme. I assumed that rational choice theory gives us a legitimate, distinct method, for describing, explaining, and predicting social phenomena. The aim in this chapter is to challenge that assumption, or at least to cast doubt upon it. I will suggest an alternative way of conceptualizing social theory, and in particular historical materialism. With this re-conceptualization, historical materialism, I think, will be more cogent and plausible.

Jon Elster asserts that accounting for the possibility of collective action is the most important task of the social sciences.(48) He endorses rational choice analysis and shows little sympathy for Marx's theory of history. Methodological individualism, according to Elster, is the proper explanatory approach in the social sciences, and this is incompatible with the functionalism and Hegelian

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(48) "Rationality, Morality, and Collective Action", Ethics 96 (Oct., 1985), p. 141.

metaphysics which characterize historical materialism. Others, like John Roemer, Daniel Little, and Andrew Levine, take a more moderate stance (towards historical materialism). While renouncing methodological individualism, they endorse "microfoundational analysis", with a view to giving historical materialism more credibility. As Little puts it:

Providing microfoundations for a Marxist theory of politics ... promises to enrich and strengthen the latter.... Analytical Marxism represents a striking new development in Marxist thought: the marriage of some of the foundational ideas of classical Marxism with the methods and tools of rational choice theory.(49)

I shall argue that, if methodological individualism is untenable, then microfoundational analysis is not a distinct method, not a contrast to something called "macrofoundational analysis". If analytical Marxism "represents a striking new development in Marxist thought", it is not in virtue of demystifying and supplementing classical, 'macro-Marxism' with a new 'micro-Marxism'. This micro-macro picture springs from a fictional dichotomy, and historical materialism suffers no loss of cogency or plausibility without it. To be more specific, my claim is that the micro-macro contrast, being in certain

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(49) Daniel Little, "Marxism and Popular Politics: the Microfoundations of Class Conflict", Nielsen & Ware, eds., p. 164.



ways incoherent, is unnecessary for the scientific assessment of historical materialism's hypotheses.

The plausibility of Miller's account of how the 'rational choices' of workers lead to increasing cooperation and solidarity, and ultimately to 'revolutionary combination', depends on the adequacy of historical materialism and Marx's analysis of capitalism. It is not, as Buchanan, Elster, and others assume, the other way around. Individuals do not acquire their preferences, beliefs, and desires, and interact with each other in an historical vacuum. Throughout Miller's passage we find references to certain 'macro-level' concepts like "industrial conflict", concentration of capital, interdependence of factories, "economy-wide effects", improved communications, and so on. What Miller does is provide a reasonably clear outline of how these 'macro-phenomena' affect the preferences and actions of the individuals ('micro-phenomena'?) comprising the working class.

My objection to some rational-choice Marxists is not that there is anything wrong with doing what Miller is doing; rather, I think that they misrepresent what is being done. In the first place, it is not as if Marxist thinkers

outside the analytical tradition did not try to relate broadly historical categories to the 'concrete' level of individuals' preferences, beliefs, desires, and actions. Marx wrote, at great length, about the socialization of production and its affect on members of the working class.(50) He may not have been as careful and rigorous as he should have been (though this itself is debatable) but he was not doing anything substantively different. This leads one to suspect that rational-choice analysis is not methodologically special and distinct; it does not give us insight to a 'deeper' reality or to phenomena that could not be examined just as well without the use of game-theoretic or rational choice formal models. It looks as if analytical Marxists have achieved nothing more, in this respect, than to borrow some jargon from neoclassical economics in order to talk about the same kinds of things that Marxists have always talked about.

If that is the extent of the change, it should be acknowledged, as Ripstein says, that "The principles of rational choice function more or less as principles of logic do in theoretical argument: they preserve content

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(50) Karl Marx, Capital 1 (New York, International Publishers, 1967), chaps. 14-15.

without introducing any content of their own."(51) Various games and scenarios may be applied to show the probability or improbability of a particular case of collective action. Which game is most plausible is a matter of whether the individuals in question actually do adhere to the conception of rationality implied in the game, and whether they actually do order their preferences in the way posited by the observer. A formal model in rational choice theory, to be useful, requires prior answers to these empirical questions. That is not a criticism of rational choice theory as such; it is to highlight what is sometimes forgotten, namely, the parasitic nature of its formalism.

Roemer criticizes traditional forms of rational choice theory for their "hegemonic individualism". That view, implicit or explicit in "welfarist" social choice theory, involves "the postulate that interpersonal utility comparison is impossible or not meaningful"; and "its philosophical foundation appears to be the belief in the inscrutability of individuals."(52) Elster, in addition,

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(51) "Rationality and Alienation", p. 452. Note that the fact that the principles of rational choice are merely content-preserving (if it is a fact) is not my reason for saying the micro-macro contrast is incoherent. This will be seen later on.

(52) John Roemer, "An Historical Materialist Alternative to Welfarism", in Foundations of Social Choice Theory,

says rational choice theory tends to presuppose, unwarrantedly, that individuals confront a given set of alternatives, "so that for instance the issue of agenda manipulation does not arise"; and that they are endowed with given preferences which "are not subject to change in the course of the political process." (53) Amartya Sen thinks that these are not very profound criticisms, since the viability of rational choice theory does not (and never did) depend on these admittedly unwarranted assumptions. Rational choice theory retains its status "as a field of study". (54) In the formulation of rational choice problems, there is no need to confine analysis within the narrow domain of self-interested, utility maximizing, atomized individuals.

The formulation of a collective action problem, then, should take various things into account. Among them are the following: a) individuals' preferences, beliefs, and desires, are affected by the resources at their disposal; b) their preferences, beliefs, and desires, are affected by their social and natural environments; c) preferences, beliefs, and desires change, they are not static; and d) agents need not be construed narrowly as self-interested

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Jon Elster & Aanund Hylland, eds., (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 133.

utility maximizers. Sen, as I said, does not think these things create fundamental problems for rational choice theory as a field of study. He argues (here referring to social choice theory) that,

It is part of the generality of social choice theory to permit parametric variations of inputs as well as of outputs....(234) In examining the foundations of social choice theory, note must be taken both of the heterogeneity of the types of problems dealt with and the variations that the format permits in the nature of inputs, outputs and processes of aggregation. It is a mistake to think of social choice theory as a given set of complete ideas that are unleashed every time any problem is taken up for 'social choice theoretic' treatment.(238)(55)

Let us take these claims as unexceptionable. If Sen is right, we can say that there is nothing internally incoherent in the use of rational choice models in the social sciences. But I shall argue, in the rest of this chapter (in an unfortunately roundabout manner), that there is nothing to justify the idea that rational choice theory gives us a special methodology which is necessary to legitimate social scientific inquiry; and that the temptation to think otherwise is based on a tacit acceptance of unsustainable metaphysical notions. Moreover, I shall contend, contrary to its proponents, that not only is rational choice theory unnecessary, it is a pointless impediment to the assessment of broad social

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(55) Ibid.

theories such as historical materialism. (Some things can be strictly unnecessary but still useful; I think rational choice theory is not one of them.)

Nothing in Sen's remarks distinguishes rational choice theory from other ways of theorizing about social phenomena. Marx theorized about how people's preferences, beliefs, and desires, were shaped in certain ways by the resources at their disposal, by their social and natural environments; about how people's preferences, beliefs, and desires change with the changing environment; and about the kind of environment that gives rise to predominantly self-interested, 'utility maximizers' (and the processes by which the transformation of that environment becomes feasible). Yet Marx was not, by any means, doing rational choice or social choice theory. We are left in the dark as to what is special about rational choice analysis.

According to Sen, "Social choice problems arise in aggregating the interests, or preferences, or judgments, or views, of different persons (or groups) in a particular society, and the exercise of aggregation can arise in very many different contexts." (56) The 'context', however, is all-important. Aggregating the interests and preferences

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(56) Ibid., p. 214.

of proletarians in a formulation of a collective action problem, for instance, seems useful if, for example, it is embedded in a diachronic, 'macro-account' of the sort given by Miller. The influence of ideology and coercion are also relevant to attributing beliefs, preferences, and desires to workers. Since the preferences we are aggregating are not 'given', the exercise of aggregating them is inseparable from an empirical understanding of the context in which they arise (indeed, that is what saying they are not 'given' amounts to). But unless we cherish formalism for its own sake, such an exercise does not distinguish rational choice from any other social scientific theory which relates institutions and practices constituting an historical context, to peoples' needs, interests, preferences, beliefs, desires, and actions.

What makes rational choice theory attractive, aside from the apparent exactitude of formal models, is its implicit appeal to a subject-object dualism; a dualism which is very pervasively accepted in our culture.(57) This dualism persists despite criticism of "hegemonic individualism", and of the notion of 'given' preferences and 'given' sets

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(57) See Charles Taylor, "Philosophy and its History", Philosophy in History, R.Rorty, J.B. Schneewind, & Q. Skinner, eds., (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 17-22.

of alternatives. While the idea that the individual is in some sense socially formed is gaining acceptance, rational choice theory still sees social phenomena as the interaction between two worlds: on the one hand, the social and natural environment, and on the other hand, the world of the individual. This is evident in Sen's talk of 'inputs' and 'outputs'. The individual is like an empty screen, sometimes displaying its mental states, between the inputs from and outputs to the social and natural environment. It is not just that individuals are physically separate from each other and from other physical objects; in addition, they are the essential link in the causal chain from one set of social circumstances to another, an opaque medium through which social change comes about. They are to that extent distinct and separable from social phenomena, even though their mental states are largely shaped by and in turn shape that phenomena. Philosophers may have bid farewell to 'substance philosophy' long ago, but it is hard to see in all this anything less than a commitment to a view of the individual as a 'Mind-substance' which somehow causally interacts with the 'object world'. The resultant conceptual problem of explaining the interaction between the two worlds -- the social world and the world of the individual -- seems to me



as unsolvable as the Cartesian problem of explaining mind-body interaction. Once an ontological gap, always an ontological gap.

Few rational choice theorists would accept such an unflattering characterization of what they are doing. Atomism and even methodological individualism have come under severe attack, not least from those who endorse rational choice theory. Yet, unless I am missing something very important, it seems that rational choice analysis tends to smuggle these same notions in through the back door. Consider Roemer's supposedly de-atomized proposal for 'rational choice Marxism'.

He starts by schematically representing an historically specific situation as follows. Let  $R(t)$  represent "the full description of technology, institutions, and ownership relations at time  $t$ , the conglomeration of the classical Marxian productive forces and economic structure." (58) Let  $P(t)$  list "all the people and their preferences at time  $t$ ." (59) Historical progress is then characterized as resulting from two processes, the "solution process" and

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(58) "Some Issues of Method and Substance", Roemer, ed., pp. 195-6.

(59) Ibid., p. 196.

the "preference formation process". Through a specific solution process, the interaction of peoples' preferences with their economic and material environment will produce a changed environment. Roemer represents this as follows:

$$\{R(t), P(t)\} \gg R(t+1).$$

Rational choice Marxism differs from neoclassical economics in that the latter focuses (generally) on the competitive equilibrium solution process; whereas, according to Roemer, "there are other rational responses people might have to their environment, given their preferences  $P(t)$ , than to act as price takers and environment takers." (60) Class struggle, Roemer thinks, comes to be a more rational response from the worker's point of view, than a response which accepts the terms of trade as given. Roemer calls this solution process "bargaining". He adds that rational choice analysis can also show, "at the level of individual preferences, what causes a person to cast his lot with a class despite the possible penalties and costs, when his standing on the sidelines would not weaken the class struggle." (61) In the last chapter, I tried to show why it is wrong to say the

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(60) Ibid., p. 198.

(61) Ibid.

answer to the free-rider problem lies in rational choice analysis, rather than in the empirical adequacy of Marx's substantive claims about the course of history and the development of capitalism.

The preference formation process is presented as follows:  $\{P(t), R(t)\} \gg P(t+1)$ . This schema explicitly acknowledges that "individuals are formed by society, and [that] these individuals react rationally to their environments to produce tomorrow's environment, which in turn produces individuals who think somewhat differently from before, and react in their environment to bring about yet a new environment." (62)

Roemer's general outline leaves one wondering what work is being done by rational choice methods. Peoples' preferences are shaped, in important ways, by their social and natural environments; and their actions, taken together, change that environment in important ways. But then why not just tell the story, in a reasonable and perspicuous manner, of how different aspects of the social fabric causally relate to each other -- the way Miller does, for example? Why do we need a formalistic representation which conceptually separates individuals and

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(62) Ibid., p. 197.

their preferences from their social and material environments, particularly once we have admitted there is no ontological gap separating the two? It can only be because we have not fully accepted the consequences of the absence of such an ontological gap. The idea that social theory should seek explanatory mechanisms relating peoples' preferences to social phenomena that are not best described in terms of peoples' preferences seems to me very sensible -- and obvious. Nevertheless, I think it is plainly false to say (as Roemer does) that rational choice models are appropriate or necessary to that kind of explanatory practice. I shall now attempt to explain more clearly why I think that is false.

It is true enough that historical materialism (or any social theory) would not be very interesting if it made no reference to individuals' beliefs, preferences, and actions. But referring to these things is not the same as explaining historical change exclusively or primarily in terms of them. In "Marxism and Methodological Individualism", Andrew Levine, Elliot Sober, and Erik Olin Wright present a fourfold typology of social explanation.(63) The four types are atomism,

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(63) Andrew Levine, Elliot Sober, & Erik Olin Wright, "Marxism and Methodological Individualism", New Left

methodological individualism (MI), anti-reductionism or methodological holism (MH), and radical holism. They argue that the first and the last are untenable (and have very few proponents), and they make a case for MH over MI.

According to the atomist view of social explanation, only the non-relational psychological states (beliefs, preferences, and desires) of individuals are explanatory of social phenomena. In an explanation, we may refer to certain interactions among individuals, but "the causal processes which govern the outcomes of such interactions are entirely intra-individual."(64) Levine et.al. dismiss atomism on the grounds that "the world outside the mind helps explain why agents think and want what they do."(65) Beliefs and desires may cause actions, but socially explanatory beliefs and desires are themselves explained by objective relations among individuals. If agent A believes agent B has power over her, and acts accordingly, it can only be because she makes a prior reference to objective relations of power and subordination. These relations, therefore, are irreducibly explanatory of agents' actions.

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Review 162 (1987), pp. 67-84.

(64) Ibid., p. 70.

(65) Ibid., p. 71.

There is another, perhaps more telling criticism of atomism (and, I shall maintain, against MI also). This criticism stems from Donald Davidson's work on the methodology of interpretation, although I use it for a slightly different purpose than Davidson. In "Judging Interpersonal Interests", Davidson argues that "there is something fundamentally wrong with the idea that interpersonal comparisons can be isolated from simple attributions of desires or interests, since comparisons are implicit in such attributions." (66) Davidson is criticizing the notion that we can first decide what people's beliefs, desires, and preferences are, and then aggregate them and compare them in strength. The attribution of certain mental states to an individual presupposes a public language and seems to render the idea of atomistic individuals unintelligible (the debt owed to Wittgenstein, with his private language argument, is clear). If I am to attribute beliefs, preferences, and desires, to an agent, X, then I must use my own beliefs, desires, and preferences, in a way that provides a basis for comparison. Words acquire their meanings by their use in sentences or propositions. When I attribute a belief to

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(66) Donald Davidson, "Judging Interpersonal Interests", in Elster & Hylland, eds., p. 210.

someone, I must be able to verbalize this belief in a sentence or proposition. Suppose I attribute to agent X a belief that she is underpaid by her employer. For this belief to make sense to me, the interpreter, I must automatically attribute a host of further beliefs to X: that there are employers and employees, that there is an employer-employee relationship, that employees are paid by their employers, that there are standards of payment such that one can be underpaid, and so on. If I attribute another belief to X which contradicts the first attributed belief, then, according to Davidson, I must either re-interpret the meanings of the words with which I am phrasing her beliefs (in order to make the beliefs non-contradictory) or I must explain the contradiction. There will be fewer cases of false belief and logical error than true belief and logical propriety. This will be so, Davidson argues, because if there were too many cases of false belief and errors in reasoning, X's beliefs, desires, and preferences would be unintelligible to me. The attribution of false belief and logical error presupposes a large area of mutually shared beliefs (which the interpreter cannot help but think true) and mutually shared standards of reasoning. Davidson argues:

...(t)he strength of each belief is a function of the strengths of further beliefs. Such dependencies reflect the fact that we take some

propositions to be evidence for the truth of others. The moral for interpreters is that an acceptable interpretation must by and large reproduce the interpreter's pattern of conditional probabilities.(67)

It seems to me that these are all very reasonable (and true) remarks on what is involved in interpreting people's utterances. I also think that these claims, if true, are rather devastating for atomism (and MI). Atomism posits "inscrutable individuals", with private, inaccessible mental states. But insofar as their beliefs, desires, and preferences, are essentially private and non-relational, they will be beyond the realm of the interpreter's comprehension, and appealing to them in social explanation will be like explaining social phenomena in terms of the workings of invisible ghosts. What Davidson shows is that, in the very process of attributing particular beliefs, desires, and preferences (say, in a preference-ordering for a rational choice scenario) to individuals, we ipso facto tie them to a common, public world with a common public language. Attributing mental states to individuals de-atomizes them (if it even makes sense to say they were atomized in the first place). To say of an individual, that she has certain beliefs, already is to presuppose that

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(67) Ibid., p. 204.



she is related to other individuals by a common language. It is to presuppose that, whatever the 'individual' is, it is not something more fundamental than society, or characterizable in a way that does not presuppose society.

Levine et.al. also argue that the explanatory terms in social theories do not refer to collective entities. They reject radical holism. Putative radical holist approaches in the Marxist tradition include the idea that 'History' is an entity unto itself, an intentional agent with an ultimate goal; that individuals are, ontologically, epiphenomenal manifestations of self- subsisting social structures; and that groups or classes literally think and have interests.(68) These notions, like their atomist alter-egos, have been criticized for their unintelligibility, but few Marxists, particularly in the analytical tradition, still subscribe to them.

But while there are not many supporters of atomism and radical holism anymore, there is still debate over whether MI or MH has pride of place in social explanation. MI, according to Levine, claims that relations among

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(68) An example of a radical holist approach is Richard Schmitt, "Methodological Individualism, Psychological Individualism, and the Defense of Reason", Nielsen & Ware, eds., pp. 231-56.

individuals are explanatory of social phenomena, and that social properties, if they are explanatory, are reducible to relations among individuals. MH, on the other hand, claims that social properties are often irreducibly explanatory, and that it is essentially an empirical question whether this will be so in a given case. Levine favours MH, on the grounds that 'social' properties (like the profit-making and survival of capitalist firms) tend to be "supervenient" on 'individual-level' properties and relations ( like the particular patterns of interaction and relations among the individuals in a particular firm).(69) This means that, while usually there are many (perhaps indefinitely many) and various 'micro-pathways' through which a particular social phenomenon or property may be realized, the only thing these pathways have in common is that they are instances of the realization of that social (or 'macro') property. There is no one explanation at the level of relations among individuals to which the social property in question may be reduced. In that case, the social property, insofar as it is explanatory, is irreducibly so.

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(69) "Marxism and Methodological Individualism", pp. 75-8.

With this defense of MH and criticism of MI, Levine, surprisingly, concludes the essay by defending microfoundational analysis as a way of bringing ballast to macro-theory.

It seems to me that Levine does not see the full implications of the rejection of atomism and radical holism. If social phenomena is not made up of isolated, atomistic individuals, or collective entities with the characteristics of an individual, then what is there but individuals in their relations to each other and the physical things of the world that help constitute those relations and are relevant to explaining them (eg. army weaponry)? Why should there be a choice left between MI and MH?

Eliminating atomism and radical holism eliminates any ontological gaps. What Levine calls social properties are just, in the end, relations among individuals, and relations among individuals are nothing but social properties. 'Macro-level' concepts, like state, kinship relations, and market competition, are not explanatorily reducible to individuals' beliefs, desires, and preferences (and thus atomism is unsustainable); but surely those terms are simply shorthand, that is, abbreviations for longer,

more cumbersome descriptions of certain regularities in the ways that individuals relate to and interact with each other in certain historical and cultural contexts (including the beliefs and attitudes they have about and toward each other). And 'micro-level' phenomena, like the beliefs, attitudes, and preferences of proletarians, and the ways in which they interact in specific historical and cultural settings, are surely social phenomena. As soon as we move from atomism to relations among individuals, we are dealing with social phenomena; and as soon as we move from radical holism to social phenomena that does not consist of collective entities, we are dealing with relations among individuals, that is, social phenomena.

The claim that what we think of as 'macro-terms' are merely shorthand for descriptions of relations among individuals might be misleading. I do not mean to say that, on one hand, there is one kind of thing (say, a state), and on the other hand, another kind of thing (relations among individuals) to which the first can be ontologically reduced. I mean, rather, that there is only one kind of thing (relations among individuals) and that we use words like 'state' mainly for their convenience; it would take too long to spell out all the ways that individuals stand in relation to each other in a way that

constitutes what we call a 'state'. It is easier just to say 'state'.

Furthermore, I want emphatically to deny that I am now committed to MI. For I do not accept Levine's contrast between relations among individuals and 'social phenomena'. I think that relations among individuals are social phenomena. There is no metaphysical difference between what Levine considers a 'social' property and what he refers to as relations among individuals. The fact that there may be more individuals involved in what Levine considers social phenomena than in what he considers individual-level phenomena, does not show that, metaphysically speaking, they are not on a par. Levine et.al. do not explain, given their rejection of atomism and radical holism, why they continue to contrast relations among individuals with social phenomena. Without some such explanation, I do not see the point of treating MI and MH as different kinds of explanatory practices.(70)

However, Levine is referring, not to an ontological gap, but to an explanatory irreducibility. I think he is right,

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(70) Robert P. Wolff, in "Methodological Individualism and Marx", argues similarly, that there are no collective entities and that relations among individuals are explanatory. What I don't understand is his clinging to MI. MI as opposed to what? See pp. 2-3.

insofar as he means that, for explanatory purposes, some things that traditionally have been regarded as macro-level, cannot be reduced to things that traditionally have been regarded as micro-level. But if MI is not atomism and MH is not radical holism, this would mean the following: some explanatory terms which are abbreviations for certain kinds of relations among individuals in certain contexts, are typically not rephrasable, for explanatory purposes, in terms of descriptions of other kinds of relations among individuals. Putting it another way to make it sound less like MI and more like MH (but actually saying the same thing), we can say that some explanatory terms which are abbreviations for certain kinds of social phenomena in certain contexts, are typically not rephrasable, for explanatory purposes, in terms of descriptions of other kinds of social phenomena.

Levine's own example is illustrative.(71) Economic growth in capitalist societies can be explained in terms of the "macro-processes of competitive market relations." But this does not mean that the relations among the workers, and between the workers and capitalists, must be the same in every growing firm (though, of course, in some important

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(71) "Marxism and Methodological Individualism", p. 78.

ways, they will be the same). The macro-processes of competitive market relations are not explanatorily reducible to the particular configurations of interaction among individuals in each firm. Yet the so-called macro-processes of competitive market relations are themselves relations among individuals in a particular setting. The macro-processes, it might be said, are relations among individuals at a higher level of generality than what we call micro-processes; but, without the metaphysical presuppositions of atomism and radical holism, there is not much point to making a fetish of the micro-macro distinction. We should just say there are different levels of generality; that, when we explain social phenomena, we always refer (whether we are using 'macro-words' or less general descriptions), to relations among individuals; and that sometimes a causal relation at one level cannot be described in terms of a causal relation at another level.

Elster, Roemer, Levine, et.al., think that filling in the details at the micro-level can add credibility to functional explanations of the sort historical materialism postulates. Micro-level accounts can help guard against spurious correlations. I think we are now in a position to see what this comes to. It amounts to saying that, when we

make broad generalizations about how individuals relate to and interact with one another, we should always be looking for less general accounts of how individuals relate to and interact with one another, accounts which are compatible with and perhaps supportive of the initial, broad generalizations. But if Levine is right, we should not normally expect these broad-level generalizations to be explanatorily reducible to any particular less general description. The less general descriptions are important, but only in the sense that filling in the details is important, not in the sense of providing a more basic explanatory framework. The less general descriptions would be providing a more basic explanatory framework if they ushered in an ontologically more basic unit of analysis than so-called 'macro-explanations.' But they do not.

The problem, in some of the rational-choice Marxists' discussions of historical materialism, is that sometimes atomism creeps in. In Elster's case, MH explanations must be reduced to MI explanations. He claims that "nothing but individual opportunities, beliefs, and motivations can enter into an explanation of their behavior." (72) Elsewhere he says that "To go from social institutions and

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(72) Jon Elster, "Rationality, Morality, and Collective Action", Ethics 96, (Oct. 1985), p. 137.



aggregate patterns of behavior to individuals is the same kind of operation as going from cells to molecules."(73)

If (to be uncharitable) this means the basic causal power in human society is the individual and her unique, inexplicable mental states, then we have atomism all over again. Such a view ignores the fact that an individual's opportunities are shaped by her social and natural environment (or doesn't see the import of this fact); and ignores, further, the fact that an individual's beliefs and motivations are formed in and affected by an historical and cultural context. It ignores, in other words, the fact that individuals are essentially social beings -- a view which is powerfully reinforced if Davidson's claims are taken seriously. Just as it is senseless to think one can take a transcendental step outside one's skin to observe one's empirical self, it is equally unintelligible to say that one can step outside one's social existence, form beliefs and motivations, and see opportunities, re-enter society, and interact with other, similarly atomized individuals in a way that causes interesting social phenomena. If that is what Elster's MI comes to, it is

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(73) Making Sense of Marx, p. 5.

based on an incoherent notion of the individual or 'the self' that has been (at least officially) discarded.

Insofar as Elster's MI is not atomist, it is not opposed to or distinct from MH. It just aims to explain social phenomena at a lower level of generality or 'aggregation' than an historical materialist explanation of epochal transformations. We can now say that Miller, by relating 'macro-processes' to individuals' preferences and actions, was not providing anything like a 'micro-basis' for historical materialism. Rather, he was, within the context of the definite causal relations posited in Marx's theory of history, filling in some details, relating as many things as possible to each other, seeing how things hang together -- to use a Sellarsian phrase -- in order to give a more complete, compelling picture of the growth of solidarity among the proletariat as capitalism develops. Just as Miller's account of growing solidarity can be a supplementary part of, rather than an alternative to, Cohen's historical materialism, Elster's notion of 'micro-explanation' can be seen as embedded in 'macro-explanations'; keeping in mind that these are merely convenient labels for analyzing relations among individuals at different levels of generality, and not names for competing methods, or keys to observing distinct

ontological realms, one of which needs to be reduced to the other for successful explanation to be possible.

This is not meant to be a criticism of analytical Marxism. On the contrary, that 'school' has made significant advances in clarifying, refining, and criticizing traditional Marxist categories. However, we should distinguish these successes from some analytical Marxists' use of rational choice models. What is being criticized is a claim about the methodological status of those models as a form of microfoundational analysis. It may be true, as Levine and Wright say, that there is no distinct Marxist methodology, but it is also the case, in my view, that 'good social science' does not need to split things up into micro and macro levels of analysis. There are two particular assumptions being criticized.

The first is the assumption that microfoundational analysis relates and connects two things that, without microfoundational analysis, would remain unrelated and disconnected. Wright assumes this, in "What is Analytical Marxism?", when he suggests that rational-actor models give us an understanding of "the relationship between individual choice and social processes." (74) If we refrain from

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(74) Erik Olin Wright, "What is Analytical Marxism?",

separating these two things in the first place, refrain from separating individuals' choices from social processes, indeed refuse to grant that that dichotomy is intelligible since no individual is "an island unto himself", then rational choice theory loses its rationale as being the glue which holds disparate worlds together. There is no homogenization going on, because there were no heterogenous elements to begin with.

The second assumption is revealed in the following passage, again from Wright:

If you believe (a) that at least in some important social contexts actors make conscious choices, and (b) that when they make choices they take into consideration the expected consequences of their actions, and finally, (c) that in assessing such consequences they take into consideration the choices of other actors -- that is, that they act strategically, not just rationally -- then something like game theory and rational-choice theory would be an appropriate part of one's repertoire of analytical techniques.(75)

The three things which Wright lists, I think, are all very important for any social theory to take into account (in fact, how could one not take them into account?). Whether game theory or rational choice models are necessary or appropriate for taking them into account is another

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Socialist Review, (April, 1989), p. 47.

(75) Ibid., p. 48.

question. My criticism is this: the use of rational choice models becomes superfluous once we recognize that individuals are not inscrutable, and that their preferences and sets of alternatives are not 'given'. Recognizing these things, rational choice theorists have contextualized their 'micro-explanations' in 'macro-level' processes (the way Roemer does, for example). If individuals' preferences and sets of alternatives were in some sense given, and individuals were in some sense inscrutable (in other words, if something like atomism were true) then rational choice theory might be doing some work that empirically-based theory construction and empirical research couldn't do. For then it could represent social outcomes (or the absence of certain social outcomes) as resulting from aggregations of the pre-given intentional states of the individuals concerned. It wouldn't have to take the trouble of contextualizing those intentional states, for the social environment, the context, would be the result of them.

Without atomism, on the other hand, the usefulness of a rational choice scenario depends on the empirical adequacy of the account of the social context upon which it is imposed (or in which it is embedded); and on whether the assumptions about human psychology and rationality in the model will be borne out by the actual behavior of

individuals in that context. I think the work done by rational choice models, in that case, is virtually nil. The important things are a) that the concepts used for describing and explaining are coherent and related in a coherent, consistent way, and b) that the substantive claims being made are true or warrantably assertible.

Note that Miller's account of growing proletarian solidarity does not employ rational choice models. Its adequacy is completely independent of their use. Rather, its adequacy depends on whether the assumptions about human psychology and rationality underlying it, and the claims about how in fact capitalism develops and how this affects the struggles, concerns, and opportunities of workers, are true or warrantably assertible. And on that question, clarifying concepts, making sure they are coherently related, and empirical research are the only kinds of activities that can help us come to a fully rational answer.

It is true, as Wright and others say, that rational choice models can make the assumptions and constraints of a situation explicit; but so can sentences. I do not think there is anything left implicit in Miller's account that rational choice theory is best suited to make explicit.

Wright defends rational choice Marxism, against the charge of some Marxists, according to which it simplifies social reality; this, Wright contends, is one of its virtues, it is to be commended as good science on that account.(76) My criticism is just the opposite: namely, that rational choice theory unnecessarily complicates matters, creating a smokescreen of redundancy over issues of substance.(77)

There is perhaps a certain tactical advantage ushered in by rational choice Marxism. It is an accomplishment to show that methods used in neoclassical economics can also be used for Marxist purposes. But gaining a tactical advantage (if that is even true) should not be confused with getting things right. That those methods have long been a generally accepted form for social analysis does not attest to their indispensability to 'good science'. Insofar as analytical Marxists argue otherwise, I think they are given to illusion.

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(76) Ibid., p. 44.

(77) I am trying to avoid the kind of a priori argument against rational choice techniques that Kai Nielsen refers to as "stupidly Luddite". I'm all for progress, but I agree with Nielsen's opinion expressed later in the same paragraph: "By now we should have lost our innocence concerning the prospect of some new methodological tools taking us to the promised land. We are not going to get such a fix." Marxism and the Moral Point of View (London, Westview Press, 1989), p.22.

To summarize. I argued that the distinction between microfoundations and macrofoundations in the theoretical analysis of social phenomena is, for all intents and purposes, superfluous and even obfuscatory in certain ways, once we abandon the metaphysical presuppositions of atomism and radical holism. I proposed, albeit sketchily, a way of conceptualizing historical materialism, and social theory generally, which sees all explanatory terms in social theory as inescapably referring, directly or indirectly, to relations among individuals (or social phenomena). I suspect that viewing things in this way would put to rest many 'second-order', methodological disputes, and focus our attention on 'first-order' questions about the truth or falsity of empirical claims. Macro and micro-explanations would not be seen as distinct and competing methods, but as more or less generalized attempts to achieve a coherent grasp of interesting and important causal relations operating in society, the knowledge of which may provide a basis for prediction and retrodiction (and action). Seen in this light, historical materialism would (or should) be assessed in terms of whether its claims are true or false, and less in terms of whether it uses the 'proper' methodology. It seems to me that the uncritical acceptance of the micro-macro distinction reflects a gratuitous



reification of some pragmatic, common sense categories, in a way which creates unnecessary methodological quagmires.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### THE PRIMACY THESIS AND THE ROLE OF VALUES

Debra Satz, in "Marxism, Materialism, and Historical Progress", argues that Cohen's standard reading of historical materialism, though compatible with Marx's view of history as the history of class struggle, provides insufficient grounds, a) for regarding classes (rather than some other group) as the agent of epochal change, b) for the view that there is moral progress in history, and c) for the idea that democratic socialism or communism, rather than some other social form, will replace capitalism.(78) According to Satz, 'material' causes, in Marx's theory of history, need to be supplemented by an 'intentional' mechanism whose operation is irreducible to those material causes.

Recall that on Cohen's reading, the primary cause of social revolutions is the development of the forces of production. In each epoch, there will be a stage at which the prevailing property relations, and the legal-political-ideological forms which help to sustain them, are no longer able to accommodate the development of

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(78) In Nielsen & Ware, eds., pp. 393-424.

human productive powers. This will result in ever-increasing social instability, culminating in the establishment of a new set of property relations, with suitably altered legal-political-ideological forms.

In capitalism, this process is supposed, by some Marxists, to be (partly) facilitated by a fall in the general rate of profit. In comparison to feudalism, capitalist property relations are much more efficient in facilitating the development of human productive powers. Capitalists need to make profits to survive and compete with each other. In order to do this, they must extract 'surplus value' from labour. It becomes necessary, for capitalists to compete and survive, to minimize production costs and increase the efficiency of the labor process. This need drives them to seek improvements in productive technology and to mechanize the production process as far as is politically and technically feasible. Hence there is a global trend toward capital intensive industries, the result of which is an overall increase in labour productivity relative to labour costs. But this must be set against the increase in the costs of acquisition, maintenance, and operation of improving productive technology. The ability to secure profits depends on whether the beneficial effects (from the point of view of

the capitalist class) of mechanization on productivity relative to labour costs, is enough to counterbalance the increasing cost of fixed capital.

According to Anwar Shaikh, this global process leads to the following situation:

Under given technical conditions, as the limits of existing knowledge and technology are reached, subsequent increases in investment per unit output will call forth ever smaller reductions in unit production costs. This ... implies lower transitional rates of profit for the lowest cost methods, and hence ... a falling general rate of profit.(79)

Capitalism begins to be less and less conducive to developments in productive technology, as the more efficient methods tend to bring in their train diminishing marginal utility. Competition, Shaikh claims, "forces capitalists to adopt these methods, because the capitalist with the lower unit costs can lower his prices and expand at the expense of his competitors -- thus offsetting his lower rate of profit by means of a larger

share of the market."(80) Some Marxists think that the falling rate of profit is a dominant tendency in international capitalist development, which can be slowed

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(79) From Shaikh's contribution to A Dictionary of Marxist Thought, Tom Bottomore, ed., (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1983), p. 159.

(80) Ibid.

or temporarily reversed, but which cannot be permanently avoided within the structure of capitalist property relations.(81) The accumulation of capital, which initially brought an increase in the general rate of profit, comes to be more costly relative to output, gradually undermining the incentive for further accumulation (because it becomes relatively more costly). Marx thought that this would go on "until at some point the total mass of profit begins to stagnate"(82) , precipitating a crisis in capitalism.

Reforms and readjustments to confront these crises, Marxists maintain, are constrained by the dynamics of capitalist accumulation; and thus, in regard to certain salient trends in the evolution of capitalism, the readjustments (like state intervention in the economy, the rooting out of weaker capitalist firms, increased suppression of labour demands, expansion to areas with cheap labour, war, colonial expansion, etc.) cannot be more than band-aids, the system is inherently unstable.

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(81) For criticism of falling rate of profit theories, see Jon Elster, Making Sense of Marx, pp. 155-61. For a non-traditional reading and defence of the theory, see John Roemer, Analytical Foundations of Marxian Economic Theory, chaps. 5-6.

(82) Shaikh, Ibid., p. 160.

Each period of readjustment results in "more concentration and centralization, and generally lower long-term rates of profit and growth." (83) Cohen argues that the process of growth, decline, crisis, and readjustment, finally ends when workers become sufficiently organized and class conscious to transform the existing property relations. (84) (I have argued that there is nothing like an intractable collective action problem in regard to this last issue).

This sort of account is often put forth as a part of a traditional reading of historical materialism. It meshes nicely with Cohen's primacy and development theses, or so it seems. Productive development is first enhanced, then fettered, by capitalist property relations; leading, eventually, as the crises become more pronounced, to class struggle against those relations, toward the establishment of a system of property relations which again enhances the development of the productive forces. This explanation is sometimes said to be technologically or economically determinist (85) , since it gives the primary causal role in

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(83) Ibid.

(84) Karl Marx's Theory of History, pp. 201-204.

(85) For a criticism of Cohen's so-called technological determinism, see Richard Miller, Analyzing Marx, chap. 5. Note that Cohen himself does not think he is a technological determinist.

human history to forces which are not the intended results of human agency (though they are, of course, unintended results of human agency). Rather than intentions, it is the unintended interplay between the development of technology and systems of property relations, that determines the general course of history.

It is wrong to infer, from this "technological determinist" reading, according to which moral values and political ideals play a subordinate causal role, that values and ideals therefore have (or should have) no genuine importance for people struggling for socialism.(86) It is, to put it minimally, highly unlikely that a collective struggle against an extant social order can occur in the absence of a widespread assumption that the struggle is morally justified. An oppressed class must see themselves as an oppressed and exploited class, where the idea of 'oppression' or 'exploitation' is not a purely descriptive notion. If sociologists such as Weber and

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(86) Not long ago I thought otherwise, because I thought that if the justification of some moral beliefs was not relative to a mode of production, then the explanation of why those beliefs are influential in social revolution cannot be put in terms of the primacy thesis. Fallacious reasoning on my part, as Cohen, History, Labour and Freedom, chap. 4, and some comments from Kai Nielsen have shown me -- although I'm still not sure whether there is any truth in it or not.

Habermas are right in asserting, of modern societies, that in everyday life we have institutionalized (and perhaps artificially divided) certain 'value spheres' -- namely, the aesthetic or subjective, the scientific or cognitive, and the moral or practical -- with their own modes of reasoning or forms of discourse, then it would be very strange indeed if, when participating in political and social struggles, we could suddenly drop the moral point of view from our conceptual scheme. Moreover, nothing Cohen says seems to conflict with this. He would simply add that, for moral values and political ideals to be historically efficacious (in transforming a society) they must either be compatible with or serve the development of human productive power, and they must be crystallized in class struggle. Whether these claims are true or not, they do not make historical materialism an amoralist or anti-moralist theory.

That being said, there are still problems. I remarked (in chapter two) that Marx's theory of history was not only meant to give a plausible explanation of past epochal change, but also to give us plausible grounds for believing history is moving toward communism, or at least democratic socialism. If it succeeded in doing that, the hope for a better collective future than capitalism allows, would not



be groundlessly utopian. I think historical materialism gives us some reason for believing that capitalism will run into legitimacy crises, and perhaps even that it will, through collective struggle, be transformed into something else.

But we have seen that Cohen's 'materialist' explanation of historical change says only that one mode of production will replace another because it is more conducive to the continued development of the productive forces. Satz argues, compellingly, that this does not capture Marx's idea that history is progressing. It is not just that history is marked by increasingly efficient modes of production. In addition, socioeconomic orders, as history goes, become better from a moral point of view. Feudalism created more freedom than was possible in slave systems, and capitalism created more freedom than feudalism. And if democratic socialism or communism (not the less than ideal socialist regimes that exist today) came upon the historical stage, such that the major social, political, and economic institutions were run democratically and not in more or less authoritarian ways, then peoples' freedom would be enhanced to an extent unmatched in human history.

We could, as Kai Nielsen suggests, replace Satz's talk of 'freedom' with a more specific notion of 'autonomy'.<sup>(87)</sup> As a preliminary to continuing with Satz's argument, I will briefly characterize what I mean by autonomy, and specify some ways in which, according to Marxists, there will be more autonomy for more people in democratic socialism or communism than in capitalism.

According to Joshua Cohen and Joel Rogers, "Autonomy consists in the exercise of self-governing capacities, such as the capacities of understanding, imagining, reasoning, valuing, and desiring."<sup>(88)</sup> Rodger Beehler adds 'choosing' to the list, saying that "the capacity to choose for oneself is a defining feature of autonomy."<sup>(89)</sup> More specifically, Andrew Levine, in Arguing for Socialism, characterizes autonomy as the ability "to set achievable ends for oneself; to be self-determining."<sup>(90)</sup> Autonomy, characterized in this way, is clearly something more than what is thought of as negative liberty (roughly, freedom

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(87) Kai Nielsen, "Afterword: Remarks on the Roots of Progress", Nielsen & Ware, eds., p. 517.

(88) On Democracy, p. 151.

(89) Rodger Beehler, "Autonomy and the Democratic Principle", (unpublished copy), p. 1.

(90) Andrew Levine, Arguing for Socialism, p. 21.

from interference) in the liberal tradition. Rather, a person is autonomous if, accounting for unavoidable natural, physical, and social constraints, she can effectively pursue ends from among alternatives which she has chosen herself. Any society will have norms, restrictions, and structures. The question of autonomy arises when the parameters of choice are shaped and limited by norms, restrictions, and/or structures without which there would be more autonomy for more people in the society. Then there is a prima facie case for removing those obstacles to autonomy, although they might turn out to be justified in virtue of preserving another value which takes precedence over autonomy in the particular case. And there is also the possibility (in fact, the necessity) of restricting autonomy in certain areas, to secure a more widespread realization of autonomy.(91) In Satz's view, autonomy is the overriding value in a comparative evaluation of social systems; the system which promotes

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(91) Note that for socialists, the liberal tendency to treat equality and autonomy as conflicting goods is misguided. For socialists, there is no way of creating extensive liberty (when productive development is relatively advanced) without first ensuring real (not just formal) equality. See Kai Nielsen's Equality and Liberty (New Jersey, Rowman & Allanheld Publishers, 1985).

more autonomy for more people is the morally superior system.

On most Marxian accounts, there are restrictions to autonomy in capitalist societies that could be avoided in democratic socialism. In three important, interrelated institutional contexts -- the family, the workplace, and the political arena -- impediments to effective participation in decision making have the effect of unnecessarily restricting autonomy.

Politically, it is commonly accepted that 'representative democracy' is all we may reasonably expect. Equal effective participation is not possible when it comes to national policy-making. So we are left with 'one person, one vote', and the hope that our leaders will represent and serve the interests of at least the majority of citizens. Admittedly it is unreasonable to demand participatory democracy where it is logistically almost impossible to have it. But we have good reason to doubt that citizens' interests are even being 'represented' democratically; that, even within the limits of representative democracy, the majority of the public are actually represented in public policy. There are various factors which mitigate against this, ranging from

non-proportional representation to unelected legislative chambers to insufficient voter turnout, but I wish to draw attention to a fundamental systemic factor; namely, the fact that the state in any capitalist country, so long as it is a capitalist country, will tend to create stable conditions for capitalist accumulation (which, to speak perhaps loosely, might go hand in hand with making life a chaos for most people). You won't hear leaders such as Bush, Thatcher, Kohl, and Mulroney (or even Trudeau or Ed Broadbent), questioning the moral status of the capitalist economic system, although they might question the operations of this or that capitalist (which is itself rare). Of course the publics of capitalist democracies do not usually clamour for socialism, but this does not negate the effects of the systemic state-economy relation on political ill-democracy, as can be seen in the following, typical example of a conflict between a multinational corporation and a local constituency. This is an example of an oil company, in England, wanting to build a refinery on Canvey Island in Essex.

...(t)he proposal was strongly opposed by many residents of the area, [and the] Minister of Housing had some sympathy with them. But when the issue came before the Cabinet it decided in

favour of the oil company... The risks involved in displeasing the company were deemed to be too great. Against that local opposition counted for very little.(92)

There are countless examples of corporations getting their way, even when the constituencies 'represented' by politicians protest. No wonder voters feel politically impotent: to a large extent we are politically impotent. Political life seves the purposes of a powerful, minority capitalist community. There is no conspiracy here (I think); it is part of the structure of societies based on capitalist property relations.

In the workplace, workers generally have no say in the production process: what to produce, how to produce it, how much, when, where, and what to do with the product, and so on. These decisions are, of course, the repository of capitalists and their delegates (but ultimately of the capitalists).

We also live in sexist societies. Women are still paid less than men for doing the same jobs, they generally work in lower paying and lower status jobs, and there are still many more unpaid housewives than househusbands. Modern families still look like little patriarchies. The familiar

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(92) Anthony Arblaster, Democracy (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p. 101.

Marxist line is that women are in their subordinate position at least partly due to a structural need of capitalism to maintain and reproduce the labour force requisite for continued profitable accumulation.(93) If this is so, then the undemocratic nature of the family -- with women in the subordinate role of child-rearer and homemaker, tending to have a lower income base (if any) than the 'head' of the household -- is tied (in some ways) to the capitalist mode of production.

If these Marxian claims are close to the mark, and given Levine's reasonable contention that "when our choices and activities have tangible effects, we are more inclined to take responsibility for what we do than when what we do is

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- (93) See Linda Nicholson, "Feminism and Marx: Integrating Kinship with the Economic", in Seyla Benhabib & Drucilla Cornell, eds., Feminism as Critique (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1987); and Michele Barrett, Women's Oppression Today: Problems of Marxist Feminist Analysis (London, New Left Books, 1980). Both these authors show that all aspects of women's oppression are not explicable in terms of a simple Marxian production paradigm. But they also show that a lot of important aspects of women's oppression, including oppression within the family, are linked in important ways to the overall demands of capitalist production. What they want is to give a more prominent place to gender as a category of social analysis and critique than Marxists usually do. This is reasonable, and not inconsistent with the claim that democratic socialism would be far more conducive to women's autonomy than capitalism.

without tangible consequences"(94) , then it is clear that the arrangement of current social institutions -- be they political, economic, or familial -- does not encourage an 'inclination to take responsibility'. People as citizens, workers, and wives, cannot truly take charge of their lives when their spheres of choice are limited by a state mainly responsive to the capitalist community, corporate bosses mainly concerned to compete with other corporate bosses, and husbands worried about job security and competing with other husbands. If we value autonomy or self-determination, we should want to eliminate the undemocratic nature of politics, family life, and work in capitalist societies.

There may be and have been improvements within the capitalist system (extended franchise, right to strike and form unions, day care, welfare, etc.), but every Marxist claims that as long as private individuals effectively control the major means of production, these three things will not change: (a) politicians will tend to subordinate the interests of citizens to the interests of corporations (and this includes environmental issues); (b) workers (i.e. the majority of citizens) will be forced to sell their

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(94) Arguing for Socialism, p. 41.



labour power in order to subsist, to devote a major portion of their lives to mechanical, uncreative, stultifying, thankless tasks, for the sake of the owners' profit; and (c) the nuclear family will tend to be a patriarchal institution as a functional requirement of the capitalist system of production (though I am not as sure of this as I am of the first two).

This is why Marxists think that autonomy will be best served by establishing a democratic socialism which abolishes the private ownership of productive property; at any rate, this is seen as a necessary though perhaps insufficient condition, insofar as it eliminates any structural basis for the limits to autonomy that I have mentioned. Capitalism, with its class divisions, necessarily concentrates wealth and power in the hands of a minority, property owning class. Equal autonomy in a society with those property relations is impossible. Democratic socialism eliminates class divisions based on unequal effective control of productive property, and thus necessarily puts into place conditions for a more widespread realization of autonomy. (There is a reasonable assumption underlying that statement: namely, that there is a close connection between autonomy, wealth, and power).

On Satz's view, however, Cohen's version of historical materialism gives us very little reason to think capitalism will in fact be transformed into democratic socialism. For Cohen's account demands only that capitalism will be replaced by a mode of production which is more conducive to developing the productive forces. Leaving aside the question of whether democratic socialism would in fact be more efficient in this way, Nielsen points out, in concurrence with Satz, that "With Cohen's account and like accounts we have no reason to believe that history would yield communism (or democratic socialism) rather than some form of state socialism or technocratically authoritarian but efficient form of statism replacing the welfare state." (95) Taking the primacy thesis on its own, these possibilities cannot be precluded or even deemed less likely than the democratic socialist alternative.

Cohen's account cannot be defended (as being sufficient) with an appeal to the greater efficiency of the more democratic system. For, even if that is true, the explanation of why it is more efficient must be independent of the primacy thesis: the greater efficiency of the more democratic system is not explained by the fact that it is

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(95) "Remarks on the Roots of Progress", p. 522.

more efficient. The democratic system might be more efficient because people are more autonomous and less alienated than they would be in an authoritarian system, and as a result they will be more productive and creative. However, this vitiates the primacy thesis in the following way.

Cohen wants the primacy thesis to explain why capitalism will be replaced by a system which is both more efficient in developing the productive forces and more democratic, allowing for greater freedom. But, as I said, the reason the democratic system is more efficient than both capitalism and other possible, less democratic systems, cannot be the fact that it is more efficient; that is circular. Consequently, whatever it is that makes the democratic system more efficient must, if the primacy thesis is true, be part of the explanation of why it comes about. The primacy thesis, therefore, if it is true and if democratic socialist property relations are more efficient than authoritarian alternatives, cannot be a sufficient explanation. Cohen's explanation needs to be supplemented by an account of what makes one historically possible social form more efficient than another, for developing the productive forces. And, to avoid circular explanation, this account cannot simply restate or be reduced to the

primacy thesis. The only reason, as far as I can see, for saying that democratic socialist property relations are more efficient than authoritarian relations, is that the former create conditions for greater autonomy and less alienation, which, as I said, might encourage people to be more productive, innovative, and creative. So, even if democratic socialism will succeed capitalism in virtue of its greater efficiency in developing the productive forces, its greater efficiency is explained by the fact that people want more autonomy. The fact that people want more autonomy is part of the explanation for why capitalism will be replaced by a more efficient mode of production (assuming the more democratic system is the more efficient). That people want more autonomy is not explanatorily reducible to the primacy thesis: saying that one mode of production replaces another to enhance the development of the productive forces, says nothing about why that particular mode of production, rather than another, is specially suited to enhance that development. And therefore, the supersession of capitalism by democratic socialism (and eventually, communism) cannot be accounted for with Cohen's version of historical materialism, taken on its own. There must be another, 'non-material' mechanism at work.

This is Satz's conclusion, though I have given a somewhat different argument for it. In my argument, I assumed (perhaps implausibly) that democratic socialism would be more efficient than the more authoritarian alternatives mentioned by Nielsen. My argument was intended to reinforce Satz's, in case that assumption is true. If it is not true, then Satz's conclusion holds a fortiori.

On Satz's view, we can only view history as moving towards communism, on the assumption that people tend to learn, over time, about their interests in freedom (or autonomy). She argues that freedom is an objective good, and the fact that oppressed classes become increasingly aware of it throughout history explains why communism, rather than an equally efficient, but more authoritarian regime, will be the endpoint of historical evolution. She also argues that Marx himself would have been amenable to such a view, despite his many derogatory remarks about morality as expressing ruling class ideology. Marx, in the 'Preface' to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy, conceives the Asiatic, Ancient, and Germanic modes of production as a sequence of progressive stages. Satz remarks,

These three social forms coexist historically,  
and Marx nowhere indicates that these three forms

can be ranked according to the levels of surplus they produce. Nonetheless, he presents these three modes as if they were successive stages of development. Marx's presentation suggests that he is ordering these social forms according to a distinct developmental logic, not of expanding production but of increasing social freedom.... In the Asiatic mode, none are free; in the Ancient mode only the non-slave citizens are free; in the Germanic mode all are (somewhat) free, circumscribed by their narrow localistic relations based on tradition.(96)

What this shows, Satz claims, is that historical progress, for Marx, cannot be explained by the development of the productive forces alone; that is, there must be another causal mechanism if we are to explain the "increasing social freedom". Satz's account goes, roughly, as follows.

In every (pre-communist) epoch there will be a dominant social class which appropriates the surplus product. They will do so in a way that is propitious for the development of the forces of production and maintains the extant property relations. Then, as Cohen's formulation indicates, those property relations will become less and less able to accommodate productive development. Eventually, their inability to do so leads to crisis. The dominated class or classes, exercising no control over the social surplus, has been learning (however slowly) through

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(96) "Marxism, Materialism, and Historical Progress", p. 405.

class struggle, that in order to realize their interests -- both material interests and their interests in freedom -- they must transform the existing property relations. This finally leads to revolution. "Every class divided society", asserts Satz, "thus contains the agent of its own destruction".(97)

The upshot of this is that, if historical materialism is to be viable, it must rely, not only on Cohen's 'materialist' account, but also on an account which posits an (irreducibly) explanatory role for certain objective values -- in particular, the value of freedom. In this way, Satz believes, the idea that history is progressing, is accounted for and not, in the manner of some liberals, seen simply as a fortunate state of affairs.(98) This is required of a Marxist theory of history, which seeks to explain not only the material changes, but also the moral changes, which create the conditions for the replacement of capitalism by communism. The changes that need to be explained, according to Satz, are the following: the

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(97) Ibid., p. 411.

(98) Satz cites John Rawls' "The Idea of an Overlapping Consensus", Oxford Journal of Legal Studies, 7, 1(1987), as an example of the liberal view. I would add Richard Rorty, Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity, pp. 44-73.

increasing equality of basic social conditions, increasing respect for, and recognition of human beings as moral agents or ends in themselves, increasing integration of people into public political life, and "The location of the source of moral authority in men and women themselves, as opposed to natural law and divine sanctions".(99)

Satz's strategy is to explain the fact of expanding freedom by combining the primacy and development theses with an "intentional mechanism". She contends that a certain metaethical doctrine, value realism, supplies this mechanism.(100) According to that doctrine, there are certain things that are morally good, whether we think so or not. Satz thinks freedom or autonomy is one of these things; it is something which everybody, across cultures and throughout history, has an objective interest in attaining as far as is possible. The fact that autonomy is objectively valuable explains why people get more of it throughout history; the assumption being that humans gradually come to better, more accurate understandings of the 'objective' world, including the world of objective values. Part of that understanding includes learning about

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(99) "Marxism, Materialism, and Historical Progress", p. 398.

(100) Ibid., p. 414-17.



the conditions which impede the realization of what is objectively valuable, in this case freedom, and how to overcome those conditions.

Note, however, that Satz does not abandon the primacy and development theses. The development of the productive forces, she thinks, is necessary for the expansion of freedom in social life. But it is certainly not sufficient, and historical materialism cannot plausibly claim that capitalism will be superseded a more democratic social form without something like Satz's intentional mechanism.

Historical progress, then, results both from a causal mechanism which expands the productive forces, and from an intentional mechanism through which agents act on what they recognize as objectively valuable. And it is through class struggle that the oppressed social classes learn more about the conditions which limit their freedom and the possible ways of overcoming these conditions.(101)

I now want to defend Satz's proposal, by anticipating three possible criticisms. The first is a non-Marxist criticism, the second could be advanced by either Marxist or non-Marxist, and the third is a Marxist criticism.

The first objection questions the idea that history is progressing. As a counterbalance to Marxist (and liberal)

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(101) Ibid., p. 415.

talk of moral progress, we could construct a fairly long list of the twentieth century's grim accomplishments. No other century has seen as many wars and as much of people killing other people. In our 'progressive' age, we have seen massive genocide, the accumulation (and use) of planet-threatening nuclear weapons, the continued wasteful, useless destruction of the natural environment, the persistence of avoidable starvation, malnourishment, and disease among a large part of the world's population, murderous religious and political fanaticism, imperialism and its death squads, apartheid, totalitarianism, the persistence of vast (again, avoidable) inequality and exploitation within and between countries, widespread ignorance and illiteracy, and so on. It may be true that most, if not all, of these things could be rectified if we made revolutionary changes in our basic institutions and practices. But, it might be said, the very persistence of these things, when they are avoidable, attests to the basic ugliness of human beings and the basic lack of progress in human history. The idea of moral progress, seen in this light, comes off as naive. Perhaps Milan Kundera is right when he says, in The Unbearable Lightness of Being, that leftists are suffering from what he calls "kitsch", seeing history as a beautiful "grand march", a rosy parade,

selectively ignoring or trivializing whatever is disturbing.(102)

I think there are two kinds of legitimate response to these pronouncements. The first stresses, again, that despite all those negative aspects of our age, modern societies still have improved on pre-modern societies in regard to the very basic moral changes referred to by Satz. To accept that is not to trivialize or ignore all the suffering that is going on. It is merely to avoid romanticizing our pre-modern past and to acknowledge some very fundamental changes that we take for granted. Nielsen argues in this way:

There are indeed horrors now as there have always been throughout history, and they are nothing to be complacent about. Something like Noam Chomsky's disciplined outrage seems to me exactly the right response. But that notwithstanding, there is now more equality in the world, more respect for liberty and more deeply entrenched ideas of democracy, equal citizenship and equal moral sovereignty than ever before. Even the hypocritical lip service paid to it is the compliment that vice pays to virtue.(103)

....

(102) Milan Kundera, The Unbearable Lightness of Being (New York, Harper & Row Publishers, 1984), Part Six. This is a wonderful novel, whose only negative side is that there is too much philosophy in it.

(103) "Remarks on the Roots of Progress", p. 512 (fn).

That might not be very comforting to someone who is not convinced that these moral improvements compensate for the horrors of our century. One might view history as a combination of, on the one hand, a slow expansion of freedom, and on the other, a slow magnification of the disastrous effects of folly, blunder, and our baser instincts. Any theory of history which places the moral improvements at centre stage is unduly 'rosy' and misrepresents what has actually transpired by being too narrow. Perhaps the best thing is to not have an overarching theory of history at all.

My response to that is to invoke Marx's saying that the purpose of theory is not just to interpret the world but to change it. I do not know how to argue against the idea that the moral improvements do not, on the whole, outweigh the horrors. But we might come at this indirectly by noting that social theory is inherently normative. The phenomena we are studying is normative: people with wants, desires, hopes, frustrations, etc.. Since the people theorizing about society are also part of that society, actors and not a mere audience, the theorists cannot avoid having at least partly normative theories, whether this is concealed or explicit. We pick certain aspects or trends in society and theorize about them, not out of the

blue or because they capture the whole stream of life, but because they are relevant to certain purposes. If the purpose is, partly, to see how we can feasibly change our institutions to make human lives more fulfilling, there is no point in paralyzing ourselves with remarks about how bad human beings are and how the moral improvements don't match up to the horrors. Even if that were true (which I doubt) those improvements could be emphasized in a way that does not deny the existence of the negative things; emphasizing the improvements might give us clues as to how to eliminate the latter. Where is the "kitsch" in that? Being misanthropic is not exactly helpful in understanding and changing the things that made one misanthropic in the first place. If one is beyond hoping to change those things, then there is not much to argue about.

That being said (perhaps dogmatically) there is another criticism which might be levelled at Satz, in regard to her espousal of value realism. She claims, not only that freedom is an objective interest of human beings, but that the truth of that claim is independent of human preferences. She opposes that to the anti-realist view according to which freedom is something we just happen to value, and not something whose value we can raise to the status of objective truth. I do not wish to defend either

position, but I want to show how irrelevant are those meta-ethical doctrines to the viability of Satz's 'intentional mechanism'.

Satz (and Nielsen) think it is important, for Marxist theory, to show that the historical expansion of freedom is not just a "fluke of history", but the result of peoples' learning, mainly through class struggle, about their objective interest in freedom (i.e. autonomy). I wish to separate the notion of 'objectivity' from value realism (in this sense, Nielsen would agree). It seems to me that, in the sphere of values as elsewhere, we can (and do) distinguish objective from merely subjective interests without postulating an order of values beyond the pale of human desires, beliefs, and preferences.

Often we contrast 'short-term' interests with 'long-term' interests. Sometimes we don't see what our interests are until we reflect upon our predicament and possible ways of improving it. We seem to do this without invoking or assuming an order of values independent of what human beings think and want (at any rate, we needn't assume anything like that) but just by contrasting what, after calm consideration, we really want (our real interests) with what we want now (our immediate or apparent

interests). Further, human beings might have enough in common so that we can, in this way, say things about the true interests of the individuals comprising certain groups, classes, or even society as a whole. There may be some things, like democracy and autonomy, which the vast majority of people, if not everyone, would find upon reflection to be in their true interests. But the notion of 'objectivity' here is not a value realist's notion of objectivity. It is better thought of as what would be intersubjectively consented to in an ideally rational argumentative discussion. In this Habermasian vein, a claim approaches objectivity if it would be agreed to in a rational consensus, where the standards of rationality are themselves intersubjective standards.(104) Defending this kind of methodology would take a lot of arguing; I simply want to make a prima facie case for the idea that we can save Satz's notion of freedom's objective value without value realism, a doctrine which seems to me more shaky than Habermas' theory. If Habermas is right, we could specify and argue for the objective value of autonomy in modern societies; and then we could defend Satz's intentional mechanism by showing how people have continually and

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(104) See Habermas' Philosophical Discourse of Modernity, pp. 294-368.

progressively struggled to achieve more of it (even though they didn't use the word 'autonomy' or the jargon of modern moral and political philosophy).

However, I think that this implies, contrary to Satz and Nielsen, that the expansion of freedom in social life is in a sense just a fluke of history. But it is a fluke in the same sense that the development of the productive forces is a fluke. The fact that freedom has expanded may be explained by saying that people learn, over time, how to attain more of what is objectively valuable. The fact that freedom is objectively valuable is part of the explanation for why it is increasingly realized, and in that sense makes it something less than an accident. But that freedom is objectively valuable is tied to what human beings would prefer, believe, and desire upon reflection, and in that sense the expansion of freedom is a result of what human beings just happen to value (just as the development of the productive forces is largely a result of the fortunate fact that we have big brains, opposable thumbs, and practical rationality). This is probably splitting hairs, but it serves (I hope) to clarify where the disputes should be. Marxists can agree with liberals like Rawls and Rorty that moral progress is in a certain sense a fluke (i.e. it is, of course, a fluke in the 'whole realm of things'). But



the expansion of freedom is not a fluke in the sense that the objectivity of the value of freedom plays an irreducibly explanatory role in the study of historical change.

Finally, I want, briefly, to say something about a criticism which will inevitably come from some Marxists. This is the view that Satz is being historically 'idealist'.

According to some Marxists, ideas, or what might generally be called 'intentional states', can be explained in terms of 'material' technological and economic causes. Satz, of course, denies this in the case of some ideas, such as the idea that freedom is good. But Satz does not, in Hegelian fashion, explain historical change merely or even primarily in terms of intentional states. She is supplementing historical 'materialism', not replacing it. The debate between historical idealism and historical materialism, insofar as Marxists see that as a matter of great philosophical import, no longer has a rationale. People and their preferences and values are just as 'truly' or 'really' part of the world as anything else. Their very existence is not secondary or epiphenomenal to the 'material' world. We could only see that debate as having

a rationale if we thought there was something non-trivially significant about the subject-object dichotomy. I have criticized that notion in the previous chapter. Without that metaphysical dichotomy, there is no longer any difficulty in regarding values as having an independent causal force; that they do is just as intelligible as the idea that the development of the productive forces is an independent causal force. The two things are ontologically homogenous, as it were, part of one and the same world. Historical 'materialism' is somewhat of a misnomer; what matters are the substantive empirical claims of the theory.

What, I think, Satz has shown is that historical materialism needs the hypothesis that values play a fundamental role in historical change, in a sense that is compatible with, requires, but is not required by the primacy thesis. In that sense Satz's 'intentional mechanism' is not explanatorily reducible to that thesis.(105)

....

- (105) If Satz is right, she has given yet another reason to be suspicious of the egoist free-rider problem discussed in Chapter Three. For Satz points to the fact that there has been moral progress, and claims that this could only have occurred if people, through class struggle, have acted from moral considerations (such as the belief that greater freedom or autonomy is good for human beings).

## CHAPTER SIX

### THE DEVELOPMENT THESIS AND THE ROLE OF VALUES

In the previous chapter I endorsed Satz's criticism of the primacy thesis. I argued, with Satz, that epochal social change cannot be sufficiently explained in terms of the adaptation of economic structures to developments in the forces of production. In this brief chapter, I want to suggest a way in which moral values can play a role in productive development, without undercutting the thesis that there is an autonomous tendency of the productive forces to develop.

Cohen calls the thesis that there is such an autonomous tendency the Full Development Thesis.(106) Sometimes he says (meaning the same thing) that there is an "asocial" tendency of the productive forces to develop. It is necessary for us to be clear on what Cohen means by 'asocial' or 'autonomous', and on why this is such an important issue for historical materialism.

By 'social', Cohen means something narrower than my broad conceptualization of social phenomena as anything involving relations among individuals (see Chapter Four).

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(106) G.A. Cohen, History, Labour and Freedom, p. 84.

Cohen simply means, by 'social', anything which implies or essentially involves a specific economic structure or superstructure (in the Marxian sense of these terms).(107) The autonomy or asociality of the tendency to productive development is, Cohen says, "just its independence of social structure, its rootedness in fundamental material facts of human nature and the human situation"; and he adds that " nothing more, or less, will be meant by the autonomy of the tendency of the forces to develop".(108)

For Cohen's version of historical materialism to be viable, it is necessary for the tendency to productive development to be rooted, not in facts about specific social structures, but in socially unspecific facts about human beings and their material situation. This is necessary if the primacy thesis is to be derived from the development thesis; since, if productive progress could only be accounted for by referring to specific social structural arrangements, then those social structural arrangements could not be explained by their being propitious for productive development. Without the full development thesis, then, the main project of Karl Marx's

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(107) Ibid., p. 83.

(108) Ibid., p. 84.

Theory of History, to revive historical materialism as a coherent, plausible, social scientific theory, would be seriously weakened, for its most basic theses would then be conceptually and/or empirically flawed.

Joshua Cohen challenges the development thesis on the grounds that a) it doesn't square with the facts, and b) it cannot be asocially explained even it did square with the facts.(109) The empirical objection was more or less rejected earlier, in Chapter Two (in the discussion of Brenner). G.A. Cohen adds, in attempting to deflate the empirical objection, that a) we should distinguish between cases of productive stagnation and actual regression (only if the latter are frequent is the development thesis in trouble), b) we should distinguish between actual and potential output per person (only if the latter tends not to increase is the development thesis in trouble), and c) we should distinguish between technical progress and productive progress in a wider sense (only if the latter tends not to occur is the development thesis in trouble).(110)

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(109) Joshua Cohen, review of Cohen, Karl Marx's Theory of History, Journal of Philosophy 79, 5 (1982).

(110) See End Note 1.

Joshua Cohen's other objection, the conceptual one, is the one that G.A. Cohen is most worried about. The objection is that G.A. Cohen's asocial premises are insufficient to ensure that people will solve their collective action problems in a way that promotes productive growth. Assuming there actually has been a tendency to productive development (a good assumption) this would only show "that [social] structures have been such that individual pursuit of material advantage has issued in productive growth." (111) In other words, if there is a tendency for productive growth, this can only be because there have been social and institutional arrangements which have been favorable to individuals (or groups) who make productive innovations. Without those institutions and structures, there would be no guarantee that people would solve their "coordination problems". The fact that productive development is in everyone's interest does not guarantee that it will be in any individual's interest to initiate that development. (112)

G.A. Cohen's response to this objection seems to me very good. The tendency to productive development, recall,

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(111) review of Karl Marx's Theory of History, p.265.

(112) Allen Buchanan, in "Marx, Morality, and History ...", argues in a similar way. PP. 107-110.

is rooted in the practical rationality of human beings and the conditions of material scarcity in which humanity generally finds itself. As Cohen puts it,

...(g)iven their rationality, and their naturally inclement situation, people will not endlessly forgo the opportunity to expand productive power recurrently presented to them, and productive power will, consequently, tend, if not always continuously, then at least sporadically, to expand.(113)

According to G.A. Cohen, there are at least two reasons, as against Joshua Cohen, to think that the asocial premises are enough to account for the tendency to productive development.

The first is that material scarcity might well create enough interdependencies among people such that multi-person Prisoner's Dilemmas could occur in "indefinitely long series, and it is by now well known that such seriality facilitates their solution."(114) In other words, it might well become, in conditions of scarcity, rational for individuals to coordinate their efforts in a way that makes productive growth possible. Moreover, there could be 'entrepreneurial' people who would initiate those

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(113) History, Labour and Freedom, p. 86.

(114) Ibid., p. 102.

efforts. Joshua Cohen has not shown why this cannot happen.

The second reason is probably the more telling one. It is an inference to the best explanation. If social structural arrangements tend to be propitious for productive development (an assumption which Joshua Cohen concedes in his presentation of the coordination problem), then what better explanation of that fact than that there is an autonomous tendency for the forces of production to develop, and that as a result social forms come into existence in the service of that tendency?(115) The fact that productive development can only be realized through specific social structures, far from explaining productive development in terms of social structures, shows, on G.A. Cohen's view, that the nature of the social structures themselves is explained in terms of the need to accommodate productive development. How else would Joshua Cohen explain why, as he concedes, social structures tend to be propitious for productive development?

I think G.A. Cohen, in this way, preserves the full development thesis. However, if the arguments of the previous chapter are correct, Joshua Cohen might well

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(115) Ibid., p. 102.



respond that social structures are as they are at least partly because they accommodate peoples' moral conceptions. People will support those social structures that give them (and members of their class) greater autonomy. But this, Joshua Cohen could argue, is not an autonomous or asocial cause of epochal social change, since values such as autonomy are part of what Marxists call the superstructure. If the fact that they allow for greater freedom is part of the reason for the emergence of social forms which enhance productive development, then the emergence of those social forms are partly explained by the fact that people want more freedom, in addition to the facts referred to in Cohen's asocial premises. Cohen's inference to the best explanation to save the full development thesis (i.e. What else accounts for the propitiousness of social structures?), therefore, must at least partly rely on social factors, such as the human striving for autonomy.

My response to that would be to deny that the human valuing of freedom is a social fact (in Cohen's sense of social, not the sense of social put forth in Chapter Four). I would treat the preference for greater freedom as virtually on a par with the asocial fact that human beings, with their practical rationality, strive to meet their needs in conditions of material scarcity. Indeed, I find

it hard to separate these things in the first place. For it seems to me that the motivations that Cohen ascribes to people in order to explain productive development (i.e. they want to meet their growing needs and wants in conditions of scarcity) are fairly closely linked to the desire people have to increase their autonomy. To put it another way, making life materially more comfortable is almost always instrumental to making people 'non-materially' more free. One can imagine, of course, cases where materially comfortable people are not very autonomous, but it seems to me that we can safely say that generally people are more autonomous when their material (and other) needs are met than when they are not met, or not as extensively met as they could be.

The point is this. G.A. Cohen tried to save the full development thesis by claiming that the only way to explain the fact that social forms tend to be propitious for productive development is by appealing to asocial facts about human beings and their material situation. But we have already claimed, in the preceding chapter, that we need also to appeal to an 'intentional mechanism' (one which expresses a moral striving for social forms allowing for greater freedom) to explain why certain social forms (rather than others which might be equally propitious for

productive development) come into being. If that is the case, however, aren't we appealing to a superstructural fact to explain what Cohen wants to explain with asocial premises alone? My answer is no; on the grounds that the human striving for autonomy is not a superstructural fact, merely serving the purposes of this or that mode of production. It is in fact something that cannot easily be separated from the asocial fact that human beings tend to exercise their practical rationality in order to meet their needs and wants in conditions of scarcity. Just as people who make productive innovations tend to make them with a view to making life more comfortable (for themselves or others or both), they tend, I think, to make them with a view to making people (themselves or others or both) a little more free. (I am not suggesting that they possess the vocabulary of the Enlightenment; just that they behave in ways which indicate that they care about, or are somewhat constrained by the fact that people generally prefer more autonomy to less).

I am not sure, for all that, of the truth of the claim that moral conceptions play a role in productive development. But if they do, it becomes important, if historical materialism is not to be weakened, to characterize those moral conceptions in such a way that

they are not deemed superstructural phenomena. I think that can be done, although I have not myself given a detailed argument for it.

END NOTES

1. See History, Labour and Freedom, p. 105. In the light of the last distinction, G.A. Cohen argues that, during the Ming and Ch'ing dynasties in China, though there may not have been much in the way of technical innovation, the fact that there was an extension of cultivation and exploitation of new resources counts as an expansion of productive power.

## CONCLUSION

The film Twelve Angry Men, is about a jury (composed of twelve men) considering the case of an eighteen year old Hispanic boy, charged with the murder of his father. The jury proceedings commence with a vote, in which eleven men vote 'guilty', and one, played by Henry Fonda, votes 'not guilty'. The eleven men voting guilty react in various ways to the 'black sheep'. Some are outraged, some think it's funny or that Davis (Fonda's character) is some sort of quack who didn't pay attention to the prosecution's case; some express impatience, and some show a willingness to listen to Davis' reasons for his apparently groundless decision.

Forced to explain himself, Davis appeals to some moral sentiments. He says that even though the prosecution's case seems irrefutable, the jury owes it to the accused at least to engage in some discussion before sending him to the electric chair. Although Davis has no real arguments for believing the accused is innocent, he feels sympathy toward the boy, who has constantly been beaten by his father and has lived in a ghetto all his life. Davis wants the accused to be innocent, but he has no substantial reasons for saying even that there is room for 'reasonable

doubt'. The prosecution has brought two witnesses to testify against the defendant, and there is no good reason, or so it seems, to doubt their testimony. It seems like an open and shut case, and some of the jurors begin to deride Davis for his 'bleeding heart' attitude. What emerges, of course, is an extended, very exciting discussion in which, slowly but surely, the jurors come to a more plausible and coherent interpretation of the facts than that with which they started. This results in a unanimous 'not guilty' vote, on the grounds that there is room for reasonable doubt. The prosecution's case, it turns out, gained most of its force from the fact that the defendant's attorney overlooked many important details and inconsistencies.

I want to use this as a somewhat strained analogy for responding to a criticism that is sometimes levelled at the kind of thing I am doing in this thesis, and which various Marxist theorists do. To many, the status of Marxist theory, both as an account of social reality and as a basis for political commitment, is an open and shut case. By the time most of us come to higher education (if we do) we are already assuming that Marx has been proved wrong by the facts, that he was some sort of ethical monster who wanted to subsume peoples' individuality in a mysterious collectivity, that these empirical and ethical faults stem

from a flawed methodology, and that this in turn is rooted in a repressed megalomania (or some other psychopathological condition). I base that assertion on my own experience of secondary and postsecondary education and not on some study, but it seems to me it is not an exaggeration. The 'intelligentsia' is no exception to this general negative view of Marx. The jury has already accepted a given interpretation of the facts, and according to this interpretation Marx is guilty of the above-mentioned sins. My aim is to show at least that Marx's theory of history is not guilty of the third one (i.e. a flawed methodology) and also to suggest that we can reasonably doubt the validity of the other accusations. Given the disrepute in which Marxism is generally held, this is a defensive plea, a claim that there are reasonable grounds for doubting some of the easy dismissals of historical materialism (some of which are echoed by analytical Marxists).

A critic might say that Marxists are forever making conceptual and methodological revisions, not out of a concern for truth, but because they have a certain political agenda and moral outlook which they want to preserve in the face of contrary evidence; just as Davis is accused of letting his bleeding heart get the better of his



sober judgment. This assumes, however, that one cannot simultaneously be guided by a moral and political outlook and a concern for truth in the study of social and historical phenomena. It is not hard to detect moral and political predilections in non-Marxist social theory either. But that is not an objection to those theories unless there is something objectionable in the implicit moral and political stances. Moreover, sometimes the moral and political stances are informed by a false understanding of the way things are. In that case, to object to Marxist theory because of its moral and political outlook puts the cart before the horse; for Marxists might not have the moral and political outlook that they do if they saw social reality differently. But then Marxist theory should be given a fair hearing, and not criticized for making methodological and conceptual revisions. Yet even if those revisions are initially motivated by moral sentiments, there is nothing inherently wrong with that. Those moral sentiments might well be commendable and, as with Davis, provide enough reason for at least looking further into the matter. Like Davis, I, (and Marxists generally) want to arrive at a certain conclusion, and want a more coherent and plausible interpretation of the facts (than that which is generally accepted) which would lend credence to that

conclusion. That conclusion is the idea that the transition from capitalism to socialism is not just a sweet dream, but something that can be feasibly realized. For many Marxists, the exercise of refining and revising Marx's theories may well be motivated by moral sentiments, by the desire to come up with an explanation of how an exploitative and unjust system might be replaced by (at the least) a less exploitative and less unjust system. But wanting these things, while that may be a legitimate impetus for trying to revise and refine Marx's theories, is of course no justification for doing so by ignoring contrary evidence. My hope is that the analogy with Twelve Angry Men goes all the way, so that the ways in which I have tried to make historical materialism sound plausible and methodologically defensible are as reasonable (without running contrary to the evidence) as Davis' case for the accused. If the theory is seen to be unsustainable on empirical grounds, then it is time to go on to something else. The arguments presented in this thesis assume that once we stop vilifying historical materialism for its so-called conceptual and methodological sins we can take a more clear-headed look at its so-called empirical sins.

I want to end with some comments on Jon Elster, who, in my view, is the most profound critic of Marx's prediction

of the coming of communism. Despite his rejection of historical materialism, Elster is still committed to the ideals of socialism. In Making Sense of Marx, he endorses those ideals in a nuanced and cautious way, and ends the book asserting, "A better society [than capitalist societies] would be one that allowed all human beings to do what only human beings can do -- to create, to invent, to imagine other worlds."(116)

But again, Elster is very sceptical of Marx's predictions. He says, for example, that the theory of the falling rate of profit has "conclusively been shown to be invalid."(117) If that is true (I have my doubts about 'conclusively') then that does not mean historical materialism has been shown to be invalid. What it does mean, however, is that the theory of the falling rate of profit, insofar as it is intended to support the primacy and development theses, fails to give any support whatever. Still, combining those theses with Miller's account of growing proletarian solidarity and Satz's intentional mechanism, I think, makes Marx's prediction more than wishful thinking. Even if there is no dominant tendency of

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(116) Making Sense of Marx, p. 531.

(117) Ibid., p. 119.

the general rate of profit to fall, there is still poverty, unemployment, periods of inflation and/or stagnation, recessions, depressions, waste, inefficiency, and exploitation. There is no reason to think capitalism can satisfy everybody's (or even most peoples') needs and interests; and if people strive, historically, to realize their interests in freedom, as Satz maintains, then it is an open question how long they will put up with the freedom crushing system we live under.

Speculating about the necessary conditions for the advent of communism, Elster agrees with Marx that capitalism develops the productive forces to a level at which communism becomes possible. But, says Elster, "The possibility of a superior arrangement is not in itself sufficient: it will not lead to the demoralization of the ruling class nor... to the rise of revolutionary motivations among the workers."(118)

In his discussion of revolutionary motivation, Elster considers the motivational force of alienation and justice. To struggle against capitalism in favor of communism or democratic socialism, workers must be motivated by these

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(118) Ibid., p. 528.

normative conceptions and see communism as more fully capable of satisfying them than the current system.

But Elster finds this problematic. The idea that workers will be motivated by the prospect of an unalienated or less alienated life (which means, for Elster, a life in which one can be creative) doesn't come to terms with the following difficulty.

To appreciate the joys of active creation one must already have experienced them, which is something few have had a chance to do under capitalism. To feel the attraction of communism one must be there already. Or again: to make a rational choice one must know both sides of the question, but workers living in capitalist society know only one side. True, if they accept the promise of communism to be technically more efficient, they might desire it as a means to increased consumption -- but why should they believe this when the technical efficiency is supposed to follow from the shift away from consumption and towards active creation?(119)

In a more optimistic discussion of the motivational force of considerations of justice, Elster seems to foreshadow Satz.

In my view, the political, social, and economic history of the last few centuries makes good sense when understood in this perspective. This history has been a somewhat uneven, but basically continuous process of increased democracy, pointing towards, but not reaching, communism as understood by Marx. The driving force has been the almost irresistible legitimacy of the notion of self-government. Once formulated and

....

(119) Ibid., p. 529.

advocated, it acquires a compelling force that makes all attempts to resist it appear as retrograde and hopeless, even in the eyes of the resisters. Tactics and strategy then concern the timing and form of the changes, not their ultimate necessity. Hence justice could provide not only a motivation for the workers, but also a cause of demoralization among the rulers.(120)

It seems to me that Satz's reformulation of historical materialism does two things in regard to these remarks by Elster. Satz argued that freedom or autonomy is an objective good for human beings, and that through the course of history people learn (mainly through class struggle) about the conditions which impede its realization and how to overcome those conditions. If that is right, then Elster's 'alienation dilemma' is resolvable. For one does not have to have already enjoyed something which is objectively valuable to recognize that it is objectively valuable. Workers need not be considered so unreflective that they could not come to considered judgments in favour of the more autonomous and hence less alienated way of life that might be possible with communist relations of production (note again that the notion of objectivity needn't be construed as value realist). In addition, Elster's claims about justice as motivational fit very well with Satz's formulation, particularly in the light of the

....

(120) Ibid.

connection I tried to make between democracy or self-government and freedom or autonomy. The difference is that Satz incorporates that as an explanatory mechanism alongside Cohen's primacy and development theses, whereas Elster, by dissociating justice as motivational from a broader theory of historical change, remains, in my view, needlessly utopian. On Satz's view, the 'justice motivation' is not simply a weak necessary condition; it is something that we may reasonably expect to come about as people engage in class struggle and begin to understand their class interests.

Nevertheless, Elster's scepticism is well-taken. This is certainly not meant to be a demonstration of the inevitability of socialist revolution. It is meant to show that historical materialism, the theory which predicts this, is coherent, methodologically sound, plausible, and worth considering. (Whether a socialist revolution is called 'socialist' or something else, doesn't matter; probably in North America it would be referred to by some other name -- like 'democratic liberalism' -- since people tend to react the same way to the word 'socialism' as they do to the word 'satanism'. Neither of these are as bad as their antitheses). One of the problems is that, even if historical materialism does make a convincing case for the

claim that capitalism will be transformed into democratic socialism (and I am not pretending to certainty on that score) it says nothing about when this will happen. How far into the future should one look? There is no solid ground for Marxists on this question. That makes things uncomfortable. But though there is no certainty in regard to the question of when and if capitalism will be superseded, historical materialism is a reasonable social scientific theory which makes socialist hope something more than a groundless faith. And even if it is, as some critics of Marxism say, a kind of faith, it is a humanist faith, informed by the belief that capitalism is an unjust, exploitative system that causes disgraceful levels of human suffering and degradation; and that it is possible, at this stage in history, to replace that system with a system that is more humane.



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