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Author(s): George E. Panichas and Michael E. Hobart

Source: *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, Sep., 1990, Vol. 20, No. 3 (Sep., 1990), pp. 383-401

Published by: Cambridge University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40231703>

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Marx's Theory of Revolutionary Change

GEORGE E. PANICHAS

Lafayette College
Easton, PA 18042
U.S.A.

and

MICHAEL E. HOBART

Department of History
Bryant College
Smithfield, RI 02917
U.S.A.

I

Ever since the appearance over ten years ago of G.A. Cohen's path-breaking book, *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence*, a number of philosophers have continued the extensive reconsideration of historical materialism launched by Cohen's work.¹ These efforts have largely recast the debates about Marx's theory of history, and they have done so from the premise that historical materialism embodies a set of substantive claims as appropriately subject to analytical scrutiny as those of any other viable theory. No longer can historical materialism be viewed as embracing questionable methodological or epistemic principles that separate it from other forms of analysis and consign it to the slumbers of dogmatism or ideology.

1 G.A. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1978); hereafter cited as *KMTH*. Earlier versions of this paper were read at the Interamerican Conference on Social Philosophy and the Pacific Division Meeting of the American Philosophical Association. We appreciate especially the critical contributions of Anatole Anton and Zachary Schiffman. We also wish to acknowledge the support of the National Endowment for the Humanities and Lafayette College, whose funds made this article possible.

At the outset of his book, Cohen advances one central substantive claim that summarizes his reading of Marx's historical materialism as presented in the already pithy 'Preface' to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. 'History is,' Cohen writes, 'fundamentally, the growth of human productive power, and forms of society rise and fall according as they enable or impede that growth.' This substantive claim remains the focal point of an analytical debate wherein both defenders and critics alike have construed their arguments on a common theoretical premise.² The premise holds that the same set of factors explains both (a) changes societies undergo within any given historical epoch and (b) changes between historical epochs. Otherwise put, the theoretical account of *intraepochal*, historical development suffices equally to cover *interepochal*, revolutionary change.³ In the following pages we shall argue that this premise cannot be sustained, and that accordingly, even on the most plausible reconstruction, Marx's theory of history cannot explain social revolutions.

In developing this argument we must first review Marx's treatment of historical epochs, this to establish the criterion that defines an epoch and a typology of epochs based on the criterion. Two deficiencies permeating the commentary on epochs make this corrective necessary: a blurring between analytical and chronological stages in Marx's theory of historical evolution; a concomitant undervaluing of the logically distinct character that Marx ascribes to each individual epoch. This latter point in particular bears directly on the propriety of functional explanations of historical development within epochs, which we shall

2 Cohen, *KMTH*, x. Beyond the initial spate of reviews sparked by Cohen's book, a recent and valuable survey of the debate is provided by Allen E. Buchanan, 'Marx, Morality, and History: An Assessment of Recent Analytical Work on Marx,' *Ethics* 98 (October, 1987), 104-19. Rapidly becoming a classic of exposition, Allen Wood's *Karl Marx* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul 1981) also offers a very readable introduction; see in particular 63-81 and 101-10. David Conway unsympathetically reviews the debate in *A Farewell to Marx: An Outline and Appraisal of His Theories* (London: Penguin Books 1987), 52-81, rejecting historical materialism, along with most of Marx's theories, as notwithstanding critical scrutiny, while in Part II of *Making Sense of Marx* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1985), Jon Elster presents the most extensive philosophical discussion of both the substantive and analytical claims of historical materialism since *KMTH*. Unlike Conway, Elster sympathizes with the work begun by Cohen even while criticizing many of Cohen's specific positions and arguments.

3 Thus, for instance, the consonant remark of Allen Wood: 'Marx's thesis that the production relations of a society are determined by its productive powers admits of two related applications: First, it can explain the economic structure of a given society at a given time. Second, it can explain the changes which economic structures undergo in the course of history' (*Karl Marx*, 75).

take up in the second section, and on their inability to account for *inter-epochal* change, which we shall address in section three. The nub of our argument will be that functional explanations require appropriate boundary conditions for their application, that logically distinct, historical epochs provide those boundary conditions in Marx's theory, and that, consequently, such explanations cannot account for changes between epochs. Historical materialism, therefore, fails as a theory of revolutionary change.

II

Marx often describes the evolution of history as progress from earlier, less productive and technologically sophisticated epochs through those depicted as more advanced in productivity and technology.⁴ In this progression, revolutionary change occurs when a society passes from one kind of historical epoch to another, as from feudalism to capitalism. Many commentators believe Marx understands these passages as part of an inexorable, chronological process, one which reaches from the earliest epochs through all temporally intermediate stages, including the present, to the most advanced period of historical achievement yet to arrive with socialism.⁵ Certainly for Marx human progress requires the furthering of productive forces within and through different epochs. The ancient epoch was more productive, and progressed further, than the Asiatic; the Germanic or feudal more so than the ancient; the bourgeois epoch more so than any of the pre-capitalist epochs.⁶ Yet Marx never argues either that these epochs must follow

4 Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology*, in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 5 (New York: International Publishers 1976), 32-81, and Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. with forward by Martin Nicolaus (New York: Vintage Books 1973), 471-514

5 Note Elster's comment that for Marx 'events must necessarily evolve towards the rule first of the bourgeoisie and then of the proletariat.' Most recently Elster has characterized historical materialism as a 'secular theodicy,' claiming it 'very difficult to escape the conclusion that Marx was under the sway of a teleological conception of history.' See 'Further Thoughts on Marxism, Functionalism and Game Theory,' in *Marx en Perspective*, 'Actes du colloque organisé par l'École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, Paris, décembre, 1983,' textes réunis par Bernard Chavance (Paris: École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales 1985), 640, and 'Marxism and Individualism,' in M. Dascal and O. Gruengard, eds., *Knowledge and Politics: Case Studies on the Relationship Between Epistemology and Political Philosophy* (forthcoming from Westview Press). See also his discussion of Marx's 'teleological view of history' in *Making Sense of Marx*, 29-31, 109-18, and 241-317 *passim*.

6 Marx, *Grundrisse*, 540-1

one another in chronological succession or that one epoch provides the necessary and/or sufficient conditions for the next. The claim that he defends a linear, 'deterministic' account of chronologically successive epochs, with each epoch resulting because of a revolutionary transition from its temporal predecessor is, we believe, incorrect.

Rather, the epochs Marx delineates and discusses can best be viewed as marking analytical, not chronological stages of historical evolution.⁷ Understood as the development of productive forces, progress does not necessarily coincide with the advance of time. Thus for Marx the Asiatic, ancient, and feudal epochs represent three alternative routes out of the primitive communalism characterizing the pre-history of man.⁸ The Asiatic epoch continues in some regions up to his own day, while ancient and Germanic epochs coexist for centuries. In describing the transition in Western Europe from feudalism to capitalism, Marx never claims that only a feudal epoch can precede capitalism. And at times, as with the case of Russia, he even envisions a transition to socialism that bypasses capitalism altogether. When Marx describes historical progress by appeal to historical epochs, then, and when he describes the revolutionary transition from one epoch to another, he does not commit himself, logically or historically, to the doctrine of a series of temporally successive epochs. Instead, he is offering an account of why one epoch enjoys more potential to progress and will more likely prevail economically and politically than another.⁹

7 To be sure, as commentators sometimes note, in Marx's discussions of epochs there exists a tension between these conceptions. However, two points need mentioning here. First, Marx himself drew the distinction between *describing* chronological processes and *explaining* them. See, for example, his claim in the *Grundrisse* (100-1) that the process by which concrete reality comes into existence is not the process by which concrete reality is explained, and his letter to the editorial board of the *Otechestvenniye Zapiski* in which he states that in Part Eight, Book One of *Capital* he is describing, not explaining, the historical transition from feudalism to capitalism. *Selected Correspondence*, I. Lasker, trans.; S.W. Ryazanskaya, ed. (Moscow: Progress Publishers 1969), 293-4. Second, in reconstructing an account of the epochs we are keeping within the two constraints suggested by Cohen at the outset of the debate: what Marx wrote; the standards of clarity and rigor represented by contemporary analytic philosophy. We believe our reading of the epochs, based on an ownership criterion (developed below) accomplishes this task. An alternative, less viable approach is provided by Anthony Giddens, *A Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism: Volume I, Power, Property and the State* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1981), 69-89.

8 Eric J. Hobsbawm, 'Introduction' to Karl Marx, *Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations*, Jack Cohen, trans.; Eric J. Hobsbawm, ed. (New York: International Publishers 1965), 36-7

9 Marx's comments on Russia notwithstanding, the major qualification to this pattern is, arguably, the revolutionary transition from the epoch of capitalism to

At the core of this account there resides a criterion, which Marx relies on to identify the epochs of 'human progress' and to distinguish them from one another. That criterion is ownership, defined as the specifiable set of socially sanctioned regulations permitting various forms of control over the labor power and products of persons.¹⁰ In his most sophisticated treatment of the epochs, found in the *Grundrisse*, Marx appeals to various forms, or systems of ownership to distinguish the oriental (or Asiatic), ancient, and Germanic (or feudal) forms of society. (He also refers to the 'slavonic,' which is closely related to the Asiatic.) Bourgeois social formations are subdivided into a period of early craft production and the epoch of fully established capitalism, with an industrial proletariat and independent capital owning class. As we shall sketch in the next few paragraphs, the different forms of ownership provide in each of these cases the conceptual framework necessary for understanding why one epoch is more progressive than another.¹¹

socialism. On some readings this transition requires that the analytical and chronological characterizations coincide, for such a change is purportedly global and dependent upon the revolutionizing and universalizing features of capitalism itself. See John E. Elliott, 'Marx's *Grundrisse*: Vision of Capitalism's Creative Destruction,' *Journal of Post Keynesian Economics* 1 (Winter, 1978-79), 148-69.

- 10 This is our construction, not Marx's explicit definition. The expression 'ownership criterion' is not to be reduced to legal relationships alone. Rather, it is to be seen as a convenient way of referring to various forms of effective control over the use and situation of some thing. The language of control can be effectively 'mapped' onto legal language, provided we remember, as Marx insists, that *legal* use of the language of property functions so as to refer to 'existing relations of production.' See the 'Preface' to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Maurice Dobb, ed. (New York: International Publishers 1970), 19-23, and Cohen, *KMTH*, 34-5, 63. See also the *German Ideology*, where Marx identifies the 'division of labor' with 'property,' and its different 'forms' with the 'stages of development.' These stipulative, theory-laden identifications are possible only because of a common referent that joins them: an institutionally established and politically enforced system of ownership, specifying controls over both what producers do and what they produce. Thus Marx approvingly cites the 'modern economists' use of property as 'the power of disposing of the labour-power of others' and later in the *Grundrisse* refers to property as the 'appropriation of an alien will, that is of the instruments of production' (Marx and Engels, *German Ideology*, 38, 52; Marx, *Grundrisse*, 500-1).
- 11 Again, the epochs are not empirical approximations that merely describe different stages of history; rather they constitute the theoretical frameworks that enable one to carry out empirical investigations. Important here is Maurice Mandelbaum's distinction between sequential and explanatory structures in historical accounts. See *The Anatomy of Historical Knowledge* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 1977), chap. 2.

The emergence of property, which Marx uses as a general name for ownership – various systems of rules in virtue of which persons enjoy differing socially sanctioned powers – portends the beginning of history, that first step away from the primitive tribal state of man, his ‘natural community.’ With the Asiatic social formation communal property dominates the system of ownership. Persons realize the fruits of their individual labors while adhering to rules of ownership that establish the community as a trustee over the land and its fruits. The community, with its fundamental, essentially fiduciary control over property (here understood as the objects governed by the rules of ownership, such as land, tools and the like), mediates socially between man and nature. As such it does not belong to the objective conditions of labor, even though it does establish the parameters of production processes, requirements and results. A despot who rules an entire community and the farmer who works a specified plot of land belong to the same order and circumstances. That an individual farms a specified plot and reaps some benefits from his labor does not suffice as evidence of anything like property rights entailing exclusionary controls over what is merely possessed, used or produced. On Marx’s account, need and use of various things can function as criteria for possession of those things, but this possession presupposes the institutional fact of community trusteeship. Accordingly, it does not follow that simple possession of something or other in such a context is to be identified with proprietorship or proprietary control of or over that thing.¹² Marx thus views the form of ownership characterizing the Asiatic mode as an interaction between the entire community and what is external (or alien) to it: the community is the ‘substance of which the individuals are mere accidents.’¹³ From this point of view, because no individual enjoys exclusionary property rights all individuals remain indistinguishable members of the community.

With the ancient social formation, however, we find a different form of communal property, different for two reasons. First, while community trusteeship endures as a dominant form of ownership, circumstances are such that what the community controls is conceived as something independent of it. Second, rules of ownership emerge that permit individuals *some* measure of exclusionary control over some,

12 For an attempt to conceptualize ownership for such purposes and the construction of two general models of ownership relevant to this discussion, see George E. Panichas, ‘Prolegomenon to a Political Theory of Ownership,’ *ARSP (Archiv für Rechts – und Sozialphilosophie)* 44 (1978), 333-56.

13 Marx, *Grundrisse*, 474

albeit community designated, things. Conflicts between communities lead to the concentration of communal power in the commune itself, a concentration Marx refers to as the creation of cities (*poleis*), which command the surrounding territory. The communal form of ownership changes; it becomes 'state property, *ager publicus* – here separated from private property.' The community occupies 'alien ground' and accordingly enters into 'essentially new conditions of labor,' which develop the 'energy of the individual' more thoroughly. The individual becomes a 'private proprietor of land and soil – of a particular plot – whose particular cultivation falls to him and his family.' The community becomes an *object* with which he has a relationship. The community still mediates man and nature; but now it does so by creating new conditions for labor – by conferring rights and powers on the one hand and commanding duties on the other. Significantly, conferrals and commands attend the acquisition of property, but do not permit the exercise of proprietary rights of ownership such as those of transferral of possession from one individual to another; the system remains predominantly a form of communal ownership. Yet, the interaction is between the individual and the community, not just the individual and nature through the community.¹⁴

Furthermore, the above distinction between the Asiatic and ancient epochs rests on the separation of physical plots of land from the community. Individuals cultivate these plots as their own, and exercise over them some limited exclusionary powers, which communal rules create, govern and sanction. The peasant's plot is no longer just his immediate sphere of laboring activity; he is not merely an 'accident.' Rather, the individual, qua owner, is now distinguishable as an individual and this is so because of a new social relation, a new kind of ownership rule. Marx's use of the term 'alien ground' conveys this new, double meaning. First, the ground is specific, a physical plot of land separable from (a) other communities and under the control of one's own commune, and (b) separable from other, individual plots within one's own commune. Second, the 'ground' is the social grounding or basis of that over which one may enjoy limited exclusionary powers with respect to others in the commune. Once established, the exclusionary powers over physical plots of land extend to exclusionary powers over instruments to work the land, i.e. tools, and, eventually and most significantly, over the labor power of other people. Thus at bottom, the emergence of social relations in the form of rules of ownership permitting exclusionary control, held by some individuals

14 *Ibid.*, 474-5

over the labor power and products of others, separates the ancient from the Asiatic epoch.¹⁵

The change in the form of communal ownership carries another key implication, for the increased command over labor power and products, resulting from exclusionary control, permits the augmenting of productive forces. The change in form of communal ownership is significant for Marx's theory of history, which views the development of productive forces as necessary for progress, only because of this consequence.¹⁶ Thus the ancient epoch – which permits some exclusionary control over labor – is marked by an advance of the general level of technology and because of this is more advanced than the Asiatic social formation. Conversely, that such a possibility for commanding the labor power of others was absent in the Asiatic mode explains for Marx both the lower level of development and the longer duration of the epoch.

The importance of the form of ownership for the advancement of productive forces is further illustrated in Marx's discussion of the Germanic epoch. Briefly, in the Germanic or feudal epoch, as with both the Asiatic and ancient, communal rules of ownership were extensive, with limited exclusionary property rights permitted within the larger framework of these rules, e.g. within the estate. But whereas in the ancient epoch the community (*polis*) permitted some exclusionary rights of ownership, these rights were subordinate to the dominant, communal form of ownership. In the feudal epoch the situation was reversed. Marx describes this epoch by emphasizing the dominance of an essentially different form of ownership: 'The *commune* thus appears as a *coming-together*, not as a *being-together*; as a unification made up of independent subjects, landed proprietors, and not as a unity.'¹⁷ The significance of this reversal lies with the different form of control over labor power permitted by the now dominant, basically *proprietary* rights of ownership, and the different level of productive development made possible by this proprietary form. The possibility of increased productivity derived from control over labor exists from the outset in virtue of the fact that this increased control is the dominant, as opposed to subordinate, form of ownership.

15 This extension of exclusionary powers becomes codified in Roman law where tools are referred to as silent instruments, oxen as semi-vocal instruments, slaves as vocal instruments. For Marx, the concomitant advance of exclusionary control and productivity is, accordingly, the historical significance of Greco-Roman slavery (*ibid.*).

16 Cohen, *KMTH*, chap. 6

17 Marx, *Grundrisse*, 483

The historical manifestation of serfdom marked an advance over slavery for two reasons: (a) the greater potential for development of productive forces on the manor itself (again, confirmed historically by the technological revolution in agriculture during the middle ages); (b) the potential for interaction between independent proprietors through exchange, which provided the conditions for the development of the city as an autonomous center of production that could then exchange products with the countryside.¹⁸ Two further points bear mention here. First, the early bourgeois epoch, typified by crafts manufacture, with craftsmen organized by guilds, represents an even greater individual, exclusionary form of control over the means of production and exchange, and leads to expanding productive output. Second, even though examples of communal forms of ownership can be found in all three pre-capitalist epochs, (as well as in modern capitalist societies), the degree to which this form is dominant, vis-à-vis proprietary controls of property specifically in labor and its products, serves to distinguish historically and logically one epoch from another and to explain why some epochs have more advanced productive capacities. The rise to dominance of full-fledged proprietary ownership with the capitalist era proper correlates the individual, exclusionary ownership of labor and the means of production with the highest level of productivity in human history to date.

This reading of Marx, then, establishes the centrality of the ownership criterion and its role in generating a typology of historically and logically distinct epochs. Attention to the details of the ownership criterion helps resolve the apparently conflicting advice Marx gives in *Capital* on distinguishing epochs. In Book I he writes, 'The essential difference between the various economic forms of society ... lies only in the mode in which this surplus-labour is ... extracted from the actual producer, the labourer.'¹⁹ Here distinguishing the epochs is tied to the form in which surplus-labor is extracted. Typically this has led observers to distinguish between direct and indirect modes of exploitation: direct referring to slavery and serfdom; indirect referring to capitalism and the value form.²⁰ But in Book II Marx writes, 'Whatever the social form of production, labourers and means of production

18 The money form acquired by this exchange became one of the galvanizing agencies in the march from feudalism to capitalism (Marx, *Grundrisse*, 483-5).

19 Karl Marx, *Capital*, v. I, Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling, trans.; Frederick Engels, ed. (New York: International Publishers 1967), 217

20 See, for example, Perry Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State* (London: New Left Books 1974), 403-4.

always remain factors of it. ... The specific manner in which this union [of labourers and means of production] is accomplished distinguishes the different economic epochs of the structure of society from one another.²¹ Here the typology of epochs is derived from the production relations, and has led Cohen, among others, to emphasize a more general reconstruction of epochs, such as follows:²²

Form of economic structure:	Corresponding to	Level of productive development:
1. Pre-class society		No surplus
2. Pre-capitalist class society		Some surplus, but less than
3. Capitalist society		Moderately high surplus, but less than
4. Post-class society		Massive surplus

A difficulty with this and similar reconstructions, however, lies in the glossing of the fundamental distinctions Marx affirms (which Cohen does acknowledge) regarding the Asiatic, ancient, Germanic, and early capitalist epochs, a glossing that we believe de-emphasizes the logically distinct character of the respective epochs.

Neither the production-relations typology nor the mode-of-exploitation typology need entail nor exclude the other, yet both can

21 Karl Marx, *Capital*, v. II, Frederick Engels, ed. (New York: International Publishers 1967), 34

22 Cohen, *KMTH*, 198. Elster constructs an alternative typology tied to production relations and consisting of three main stages: 'production for use, production for exchange, and production for surplus-value.' To this tripartite schema he adds two intermediary stages, 'external trade' and 'internal trade,' the former mediating the passage from 'production for use' to 'production for exchange,' the latter from 'exchange' to 'surplus-value.' He then claims that Marx sees this five-stage sequence occurring twice in history, once culminating with commercial slavery of the ancient epoch, once culminating in capitalism. Clever though Elster's arrangement might be it overlooks the critical point that for Marx there is in every epoch a surplus product, which is a consequence of both the exercise of ownership controls and the epochal level of productivity permitted by those controls. Thus an epoch identified by 'production for use,' with no surplus product, would be a contradiction in terms. See *Making Sense of Marx*, 302-17.

be subsumed by a typology based on the ownership criterion. It is conceivable, for example, that an independent producer could be coerced into working for a wage and producing a surplus value, that a slave could be paid a wage, that a propertyless man could enter into a contract that granted him the use of means of production on the condition that he spend regularly some time producing entirely for his owner, and so on. In fact, Marx is quite aware of these possibilities. His response to such anomalies most frequently involves appeals to historical evidence indicating that a *dominant* set of ownership relations actually prevails during any given epoch, and that this dominant set of relations facilitates a dominant mode of exploitation or form of extracting surplus labor.²³ In effect these historical appeals function to instantiate his analytically constructed typology of epochs.

The ownership criterion, we thus contend, permits a more comprehensive theoretical account of the various historically and logically distinct epochs than afforded by other typologies. In designating the substantive mechanism of control over labor power and products, the ownership criterion functions in two ways: (a) to explain the manner in which production is carried out (production relations) and the concomitant development of productive forces; (b) to explain the modes of exploitation and forms of surplus labor extracted from the laboring population for the benefit of those enjoying the greatest degree of proprietary control within society. Moreover, in serving to identify and differentiate historical epochs, this more fundamental, explanatory status of ownership establishes the conceptual framework within whose boundaries explanations of both *intraepochal* development and *interepochal* revolutions must apply. As will be evident below, the latter consequence plays an indispensable role in Marx's account of historical change.

III

The premise under challenge here is, to repeat, that Marx explains revolutionary change between epochs by appeal to those same factors that account for progress or development within them. To address this we need to focus for the moment on his theory of *intraepochal* development. Marx's most succinct statement of the theory is, of course, found in the 'Preface' to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, where he reiterates the fundamental theoretical constructs of historical

23 Cohen, *KMTH*, 83, 185; Karl Marx, *Theories of Surplus Value*, Part III, Jack Cohen and S.W. Ryazanskaya, trans. (Moscow: Progress Publishers 1971), 431

materialism – forces of production, relations of production, economic foundation and superstructure, among others – and explains historical progress as growing out of the conflict between the ‘material productive forces’ and the ‘existing relations of production.’²⁴ Cohen has elicited a plausible and now highly influential account of Marx’s theory of historical explanation, one that avoids reducing the theory to mechanistic causation found all too frequently in traditional interpretations. Cohen’s reading is constructed on the twin bases of (a) the ‘primacy thesis’ – that the ‘nature of a set of production relations is explained by the level of development of the productive forces embraced by it’ – and (b) an interpretation of primacy in the language of functional explanation.²⁵ Each of these features warrants a brief examination.

The primacy thesis claims that social relations of production tend to assume the form that ensures the maximum development of the forces of production. Correlatively, superstructural institutions (political, legal, religious) that consolidate favored relations of production tend to emerge. More colloquially, we may say that the forces of production tend to select those relations that ensure their advance, and that relations of production select corresponding institutions to reinforce their positions. Included among the forces are the means of production (i.e. the instruments of production and raw materials), and human labor power, that is, the productive faculties of producing agents – strength, skill, knowledge, inventiveness, and the like. The forces or powers of production, then, refer to the direct expenditures of energy in the making of products.²⁶ The relations of production comprise the economic structure of society, those relations men enter into in the ‘social production of their existence.’

Conflicts between the forces and economic structure emerge because the forces tend to constant expansion, while the latter always at some point restrict it, and because further expansion would threaten and

24 Marx, ‘Preface,’ 20-2

25 Cohen, *KMTH*, 134, and especially chaps. 6 and 9. More recently Cohen has narrowed the range of historical phenomena explained by historical materialism, as he analyses it, but he has continued to defend his general typology of historical epochs, the primacy thesis, and functional explanations (or, more precisely, ‘consequence explanations’) as providing an adequate account of both *intraepochal* and *interepochal* change. See ‘Restricted and Inclusive Historical Materialism,’ in Chavance, ed., *Marx en Perspective*, 53-76, and for his refinements on functional explanations, ‘Functional Explanation, Consequence Explanation, and Marxism,’ *Inquiry* 25 (March, 1982), 27-56.

26 For a succinct discussion of the definitions of forces and relations of production in Marx, see William Shaw, *Marx’s Theory of History* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press 1978), chap. 1.

undermine existing ownership relations. At such a point, the latter, in Marx's words, become fetters. This relationship between forces and relations of production, to borrow a phrase from Maurice Mandelbaum, comprises a 'law-like generalization' that constitutes an 'invariant functional relationship between factors present in a variety of concrete circumstances.'²⁷ Such a law-like generalization enables us to account for why in the conflict of expanding productive forces and restrictive production relations, the latter tend to give way to the former, as modified or new relations are elicited to help further the advance of productivity.²⁸

In a similar manner Cohen accounts for the relation between base and superstructure. The base, the economic structure and the productive forces, 'needs' superstructural forms (particularly the state and legal systems) in the same way that productive forces 'need' production relations. That is, favored relations of production will require certain legal and political forms if they are to develop and maintain themselves. Ownership relations as codified in a legal system are as they are, then, because their being so is conducive to the initiation and maintenance of the production relations demanded by the productive forces. As Cohen claims: 'Bases need superstructures, and they get the superstructures they need because they need them'²⁹

How are such claims to be understood? The answer to this question leads to the second basis of Cohen's account, the contention that the correct reading of the primacy thesis depends on a particular model of functional explanation. As developed by Cohen, a functional explanation is one in which, roughly, the 'character of what is explained is determined by its effect on what explains it.'³⁰ Put another way, what

27 Mandelbaum, *Anatomy*, 156

28 Joshua Cohen argues that G.A. Cohen's defense of the primacy thesis fails, and that the model of explanation employed by G.A. Cohen is always either viciously circular or trivial (Joshua Cohen, 'Review' of *Karl Marx's Theory of History* [*The Journal of Philosophy* 79 (May, 1982), 253-73]). But see G.A. Cohen and Will Kymlicka's response to this criticism, 'Human Nature and Social Change in the Marxist Conception of History,' *The Journal of Philosophy* 85 (April, 1988), 171-91, as well as Cohen's 'Reply to Four Critics,' *Analyse & Kritik* 5 (December, 1983), 195-222, and William Shaw, 'Historical Materialism and the Development Thesis,' *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 16 (1986), 197-210. We believe the defenses proffered by Cohen, Kymlicka and Shaw of *KMTH*'s central theses succeed, but do so, for reasons advanced below, only *within* a specific historical epoch. Hence we agree that there is a successful theory of social or historical development in Marx (on G.A. Cohen's reading), but *not*, as will be argued in section IV below, a successful theory of *interepochal*, revolutionary change.

29 Cohen, *KMTH*, 233

30 *Ibid.*, 278

is to be explained actually occurs because it tends to produce some result, or is disposed to produce the result. This disposition comprises the antecedent in the logical form of a functional explanation, and is itself cast conditionally. The overall form of the functional explanation reads rhetorically as follows:

IF it is the case that if an event of type *E* were to occur at *t1*,
then it would bring about an event of type *F* at *t2*,

THEN an event of type *E* occurs at *t3*.³¹

We should note that the form of the explanation is not categorical, but hypothetical, and too that the forces of production retain their primacy by virtue of their position in the major antecedent of the overall conditional. Absent them from the explanation or remove them from their primary position, the result would be a vacuous tautology (i.e. if there are relations of production, then there are relations of production). Applied to Marx's theory of *intraepochal* explanation, given the ownership-criterion typology, a plausible articulation of the general form of the explanation would be the following:

IF it is the case that if a given set of dominant ownership relations of form *R* were to occur at *t1*, then they would bring about the advance of productive forces of type *F* at *t2*,

THEN a given set of dominant ownership relations of form *R* occurs at *t3*.³²

A similar instantiation of the schema of functional explanation will serve to relate the base and superstructure.

Cohen's achievement here is to have elicited from Marx the most plausible and sympathetic account of *intraepochal* development. His reading permits a non-mechanistic understanding of the primacy of production forces. Without functional explanations we are left with the problem of interpreting just what it means to assert that productive

31 *Ibid.*, 260

32 In instantiating the general schema of a functional explanation, we have substituted the term 'form' for 'type' in reference to ownership relations. This terminological change does not alter the logic of the schema, but does enable us to maintain a consistent terminology, which uses 'form' to refer to a dominant set of ownership relations and 'type' to refer to sub-set of the dominant form. This latter distinction is substantively critical for understanding how functional explanations work to explain *intraepochal* development.

forces 'determine' productive relations, that the base 'gives rise' to the superstructure, and similar connectives in Marx's works. If these connectives mean only that we can account for features of the social, political, and legal systems by appealing to a set of temporally successive, sufficient conditions derived from productive forces, this will be scarcely satisfying. The reverse is plainly true as well. Legal and political systems influence production relations; such relations, in turn, influence the development of productive forces. In fact it is part of the insight of the theory that they do so. Capitalist legal forms 'entrench' capitalist relations of production. But if we think, as some have, on an effect-following-cause model, then we seem forced to deny a reciprocal influence of forces and relations of production and of base and superstructure, this quite contrary to Engels' advice in his letter to Bloch of 1890. The primacy thesis, then, becomes something vague, with Marx apparently not meaning what he wrote in the 'Preface' and elsewhere.³³

IV

But with this said, the question remains of whether functional explanations of *intraepochal* development may be extended to explain *interepochal* change, historical revolutions. Here we would like to offer reasons for believing the answer to this question is negative.

Marx refers frequently to the emergence of new social relations within the womb of the old. The idea is that a variety of differing social relations may exist coevally. But remember, Marx's delineation of various, distinct epochs depends on an appeal to an ownership criterion. As earlier emphasized, one epoch is effectively distinguished from another according to whether and to what extent differing forms of control over labor and its products are the dominant forms of ownership relations. For an epoch to be the epoch it is, then, it must be the case that the form of ownership relations which dominates the epoch dominate absolutely. While there may exist within a given epoch other forms of ownership relations which would be (if in a dominant position) inconsistent with the dominant form, these forms must be subordinate to the dominant form. In the middle ages, there existed serfdom, slavery, wage-earning, and individual allodial proprietorship. Yet a specific epoch cannot be dominantly both feudal and ancient, and the middle ages was a feudal epoch. In this sense various epochs are logically as

33 Charles Taylor, 'Review' (of Cohen, *KMTH*), *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 10 (1980), 329

well as historically distinct. Marx's theory of *intraepochal* development plainly purports to explain the shift from one subaltern *type* of the dominant form of ownership relations to another *type* of that given form; it accounts for the ascendancy from subordinate to dominant positions of differing types of the particular form of ownership relations dominating and characterizing a given epoch. Thus, critically, the dominance of a specific form (as opposed to type) of ownership and the subsistence of other subordinate forms of ownership constitute the initial and boundary conditions within whose constraints functional explanations must operate when used to explain *intraepochal* development.

If this is so, then can the theory, as embodying a set of functional explanations, explain the supersession of one form of ownership by another form with which it is inconsistent? For it to do so a plausible instantiation of the general schema of functional explanations must be as follows:

IF it is the case that if a given set of dominant ownership relations of form R were to occur at $t1$, then they would fetter the advance of productive forces of type F at $t2$,

THEN a new set of dominant ownership relations of form $\sim R$ occurs at $t3$.

Only this sort of instantiation of the general schema of functional explanations will suffice as a candidate for explaining *interepochal* change. This is the case because so long as all epochs are logically distinct, any epoch is constituted by a set of dominant ownership relations of either form R or form $\sim R$. Thus if E is an epoch constituted by R , then no *other* epoch can be E , and therefore must be a $\sim R$ epoch.³⁴ It follows that if the instantiation were altered so that, for example, in the

34 A broad range of alternative forms of ownership relations occurring in, or dominating, respective epochs is logically possible. But *any* form of relation other than R (e.g. S , T , U , ... etc.) is a $\sim R$ form of relation. So no matter what alternative form of relation is chosen to instantiate the general schema of functional explanation, an epoch characterized by ownership relations other than R is dominated by a $\sim R$ set of ownership relations. If we understand him correctly, Cohen seems to admit this point in his reply to the criticisms of Milton Fisk, for he claims that during 'periods of transition from one social form to another...more than one set of relations would, with cooperation, develop the forces, and it is logically impossible for more than one set to obtain.' Further, he suggests, 'in such a period which relations prevail indeed becomes what Fisk calls a political question, and one whose answer is not settled by the state of the productive forces.' Thus it appears in these remarks that Cohen holds (a) the logical incompatibility

consequent of the overall conditional a set of ownership relations which was not new or not dominant was substituted for $\sim R$, then the instantiation would not capture interepochal change. Yet, while the above sort of instantiation might well *describe* interepochal change, it is *not*, however, a functional explanation of such change.

Recall that functional explanations account for the predominance of one form of ownership relations in virtue of its capacity to promote productive forces at a given level of development. One therefore explains why a particular form of ownership dominates an epoch only by referring to that form in the antecedent, and thereby to its dispositional effect on advancing productive forces. The critical point to recall here is that a functional explanation is a universal conditional whose antecedent is a hypothetical statement in which the consequent of the overall conditional must appear. With the above sort of instantiation, however, the character of what is explained, the explanandum ('a new set of dominant ownership relations of form $\sim R$ occurs at $t3$ '), can no longer be determined by its effect on what explains it. Since, of course, R cannot be $\sim R$, the latter is necessarily excluded from the explanans. $\sim R$ can have neither functional nor dispositional effect (promoting, fettering, or *any* sort of tendency) on productive forces of type F at $t2$, i.e. $\sim R$ cannot appear in the explanandum of a bona fide functional explanation in which R appears in the explanans.³⁵ Therefore, functional explanations cannot account for the rise to dominance of those new or extant forms of ownership inconsistent with the form already dominating a particular epoch.

Notice, this is not to say that functional explanations cannot explain *intraepochal* development or progress, for functional explanations can,

of different sets of production relations and (b) the inability of an appeal to productive forces to explain the supersession of one set by another. However, earlier in the same article he reiterates the claim here under challenge: '...the old relations go because they fail to develop the forces, from which we can infer that the new relations supervene, and persist, because and as long as they do develop the forces. And that is a functional explanation...' (see Cohen, 'Reply,' 204, 211).

35 In his highly influential work, *The Nature of Explanation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1983), Peter Achinstein defends the legitimacy of functional explanations as distinct from causal explanations in a way that corroborates our claim. For Achinstein, functional sentences of the form 'the function of x is to do y ' provide a basis for constructing an explanation of the form 'the reason that x exists is to do y ; explaining why x exists.' On this account it would be explanatory jibberish to assert 'the reason that x exists is to do y ; explaining why $\sim x$ exists.' It is equally nonsensical to assert 'the reason that dominant ownership relations of form R exist is to influence (advance or fetter) productive forces; explaining why dominant ownership relations of some *other* form ($\sim R$) exist.' Yet applying functional explanations to *interepochal* change entails just such an assertion (see 263-90).

given an initial set of conditions (here the dominance of a particular form of ownership relations) account for the continued existence of certain phenomena in succession and thus provide an account of a process *within* the context of the initial conditions.³⁶ But what functional explanations cannot do on this argument is *explain* why one epoch supersedes another. Since the boundary conditions in which functional explanations operate just are, in this case, comprised of the limits of whatever form of ownership relations dominates, functional explanations cannot explain progress to new epochs which are, *ex hypothesi*, inconsistent with the dominant ownership relations.

A further implication follows. By their nature functional explanations can neither anticipate nor predict the effects of new dominant forms of ownership relations (i.e. specifically $\sim R$) on the development of productive forces. Again, functional explanations account for the development of productive forces only given an extant set of dominant ownership relations. For example, if contemporary corporate ownership – as a type of bourgeois proprietary control, with its myriad complexities of rights, permissions, liabilities and the rest – becomes the dominant type of proprietary control in advanced capitalist societies, then, on Marx's view, this is good reason for believing that the highly sophisticated technological advances of contemporary capitalism select this complex type of proprietary control. If this sort of selection did not occur, one would expect a period of productive retardation, a period in which ownership relations fetter productive development. However, if such retardation were to occur, for example, as a consequence of the limitations of this or some other type of capitalist ownership, and if a different dominant form of ownership relations, say some form of communal, socialist ownership, were extant, then there is nothing in the theory to assure or predict that new and greater advances of productivity would select the communal, socialist form of ownership. The functional or dispositional effects contained in the antecedent of the explanation are rendered nugatory when a new set of dominant relations (i.e. $\sim R$) are substituted for the extant set of relations (i.e. R).

As explaining *intraepochal* development (or lack thereof), functional explanations can assume the form of an invariant law (or law-like generalization) operating within initial and boundary conditions, and as such, are theoretically falsifiable. But such explanations cannot yield the 'directional laws' necessary for an explanation of *interepochal* change, laws '... which define a direction of change, which are irreducible, and which

36 Maurice Mandelbaum, *History, Man and Reason, A Study in Nineteenth Century Thought* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 1971), 115-18

would apply to historical and social processes.³⁷ In short, such explanations cannot account for *interepochal*, revolutionary change.

V

Historical materialism faces a noteworthy dilemma. To be plausible, historical materialism requires functional explanations, which in turn imply a typology of historically and logically distinct epochs. Yet once such epochs are factored into functional explanations, as they must be, historical materialism cannot explain revolutionary, *interepochal* change. Therefore, either one affirms the explanatory capabilities of historical materialism, consequently abandoning explanations of revolutionary change, or one seeks to explain revolutionary change outside a plausible historical materialism. The problems for Marxist predictions and explanations of the transition from capitalism to socialism would now seem especially acute. Yet, that socialist forms of ownership lead to greater productive development than bourgeois alternatives has always been an article of faith for Marxists. So too may it equally be a matter of faith – or more to the point, politics – that socialism will supersede capitalism.

Received March, 1989

37 Ibid., 114