

# Dialectical Materialism and Economic Determinism

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## Freedom of the Will and the Interpretation of Behavior

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The concepts of economic determinism and dialectical materialism are equally fundamental components of the Marxist perspective of historical materialism. This historiographical perspective focuses attention not on the "Great Men of history," nor on the ideas that seem to drive it along, but rather on the material, that is to say, economic substructure of human society from which the majority of the human social-cultural-political enterprise arises and flourishes. This view of history is a marked change from the traditional method of historical interpretation, and presents us with the assertion that "history makes man" just as much as "man makes history." In order to understand how dialectical materialism and economic determinism both support, and reinforce, each other as key aspects of the Marxist methodological approach to history and society, we will first uncover what each concept means and what its implications are; secondly, we shall look at how they relate to the idea of the freedom of the will; and lastly, we shall explore the hermeneutic aspects of each.

Dialectical materialism may be understood as Karl Marx's metaphysical perspective, a framework for history and, to a larger extent, reality. Having studied Hegel's thought extensively, Marx found his use of dialectics as a model for stages of development powerfully pertinent to the unfolding of history. However, where Hegel emphasized the Ideal (what he dubbed Geist) as the ultimate reality unfolding dialectically and manifesting itself phenomenally as gross material and historical change, Marx sought to reverse this metaphysics, identifying material change and processes as the heart of historical development and the seed from which the "Ideal" world germinates. History develops dialectically, that is to say, by a succession of opposing theses and antitheses followed by their synthesis, which contains part of each original thesis. For Marx, this dialectical process would necessarily be a material one; developments in the substructure of economic life, such as those in production, the division of labor, and technology, all have enormous impact on the superstructure of the political, legal, social, cultural, psychological, and religious dimensions of human society. Marx illustrates this assertion in *The Poverty of Philosophy*, observing that, "The hand-mill gives you society with the feudal lord; the steam-mill society with the industrial capitalist."<sup>1</sup>

Marx's and Engels' stages of economic development, or modes of production, build on one another in succession, each brought about by a development in technology and social arrangement: primitive communism with communal ownership of resources; slavery with private ownership of labor; feudalism as a further development with private ownership of land; followed by capitalism with the private ownership of the machinery of production accompanied by the further simultaneous expansion and segmentation of private property; and lastly socialism and communism, as a return to communal ownership of the means of production. But what does this mean for human subjects, who find themselves in the midst of such a materially determined arrangement?

By positing that history progresses by way of material change rather than ideal development, this seems to indicate that we are indeed products of the general economic conditions which quite literally form the basis of our livelihood and environment, both materially and psychologically. The economic substructure has far-reaching implications for those who create it, dictating how, when, why, and under what conditions we produce and consume.

Marx's conception of economic determinism has a number of implications for what is generally understood as "freedom of the will"; the range of possible courses of action and belief are always already suggested by the environment from which they arise and flourish, and yet the choices we make among them are always, in one way or another, influenced and directed by our values, attitudes, and beliefs. But these, in turn, are determined and directed by the contingent environment in which we find ourselves, and for Marx, that environment itself arises from general economic conditions. Generally speaking, Marx does indeed reject the traditional idealistic assertion of libertarian free will that the human agent is capable of making choices and taking action independently of any external influence.

We have already established that Marx holds the range of possibilities we may choose from as already determined not only externally, but also internally, in the sense that material conditions already influence what we are most likely to choose. But this perspective still allows for choice, however limited it may be. Someone growing up in a lower-working class environment will experience the difficulties of being from such a social strata, and may feel compelled to change his or her lot; the fact that they may choose to embark on a career as an attorney and subsequently escape their class environment does not indicate that they made a completely free choice to be successful. It indicates rather that their environment influenced them to better themselves economically, and therein lies the crux of the argument. No matter what we choose, the determined range of possibilities that we experience already suggests our choices.

It is important to remember, however, that Marx's own articulation of economic determinism should not be understood as being a unilateral "one-way street" of sorts. Marx does not attempt to separate the economic substructure from its resultant superstructure. He acknowledges that elements of the superstructure necessarily influence the substructure; for example, a legal system in place in a given society may enact sweeping economic legislation that could result in effective changes in said economic substructure.

But what does this view of human freedom present for the idea of freedom of the will? What should be understood as freedom of the will? By this, we generally mean the prevalent notion that human agents can freely make choices and take courses free from constraints, including appointment, conditions, and predispositions. Needless to say, this belief is quite at odds with the human agent of economic determinism. Marx does not dispute the fact that we both have and can make choices; rather, he emphasizes that the range of possible choices are already determined by the material conditions of our environment history, and that whatever our ultimate choice from these may be, it too was determined in some way by our predisposition to it engendered by our values, attitudes, and beliefs, which are also informed by material conditions. Thus, economic determinism is not so much a purely mechanistic perspective on human existence so much as a methodological approach to understanding the underlying preconditions to possibilities and choices, which arguably form the basis of history itself.

The hermeneutic aspect of Marx's thought, that is, the exegesis that quite literally is dialectical materialism and economic determinism for the "text" of history, reveals itself in terms of what it seeks to uncover. Marx's economic work is largely a search for value and process. His social and political thought is an attempt to analyze human experience within the context of the economic forces that ultimately have enormous influence upon it. He attempts to discover, via the methodology of dialectical materialism, the true underpinnings of human society and the as-yet unseen forces at work within it. With the dialectic of the material, Marx attempts to interpret history in terms of material conditions; the whole of human history is effectively powered and influenced by the material substructure of society. Whereas the dominant interpretation of history up to Marx was that of ideas and "will" directing the course of history in a rational manner (Hegel being the culmination of such idealism), Marx and Engels view "the ideal" as being directed by material history itself. Human society and history is not dictated by either human or divine reason and will; it is created and furthered by the economic processes underlying the reality we create by our own labor, which subsequently create our experience.

## References

- <sup>1</sup> Marx, Karl, *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, edited by David McLellan (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).