

remains alive in the Marxist tradition even though the orthodox account of an inevitable sequencing of epochal stages has been broadly rejected.

Our objective in the chapters on the theory of history that follow is to contribute to the reconstruction of the Marxist theory by clarifying the structure of classical historical materialism and identifying ways in which it might be rendered more plausible. We shall begin, in Chapter 2, by examining and criticizing in some detail the most sustained defense of the classical theory extant: G.A. Cohen's *Karl Marx's Theory of History: a Defense*. Chapter 3 attempts to provide a deeper account of the explanatory agenda of historical materialism by comparing it with another prominent "theory of history", the Darwinian theory of biological evolution. We shall be interested in the sense in which each of these theories is "historical". We shall argue that historical materialism is a much more ambitious historical theory than the theory of evolution; historical materialism attempts to develop a theory of the overall trajectory of human history and not simply to account for the causal processes that explain each change within that trajectory. Chapter 4 then examines a general critique of the very enterprise of a theory of history by focusing on some claims advanced by a prominent non-Marxist social theorist, Anthony Giddens. Finally, in Chapter 5, we shall explore some ways in which the explanatory ambitions of historical materialism might be circumscribed in order to make the theory more plausible while still retaining its essential character and core insights. In the end, we cannot definitively defend the kind of historical materialism we describe. Our considered attitude towards historical materialism is therefore agnostic, though optimistic. The defense of historical materialism depends, ultimately, on the evidence of history; and it is still not sufficiently clear what would be involved in supporting or infirming historical materialist claims. We do hope, however, that what we are able to say on behalf of historical materialism will help clarify an agenda for future work on the problem.

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## Classical Historical Materialism

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Although the inauguration of a new theory of history was one of Marx's major theoretical achievements, relatively few of his writings directly address this topic. It is mainly in unpublished texts (for example, *The German Ideology*) and writings not intended for publication (the *Grundrisse*) that we find express attempts to elaborate aspects of the theory. Elsewhere there are mainly intimations.<sup>1</sup> The one explicit and general discussion of historical materialism in Marx's own work occurs in a brief but celebrated passage in the Preface to *The Critique of Political Economy* (1859). Historical materialism, then, was not a principal focus of Marx's theoretical investigations. However, it is implicit in many of his investigations and is, in any case, a fundamental component of Marxist theory.

The 1859 Preface has come to enjoy a certain notoriety among Marxists. Its schematic assertions, while hardly transparent, seem disarmingly simple. In it Marx argues that the overall course of human history can be divided into a series of distinct epochs, each characterized by a distinctive set of relations of ownership and control of productive resources, *social relations of production*. These relations of production explain critical properties of the society's political and ideological institutions, its *superstructure*, and are themselves explained by the level of development of the society's technology and overall organization of the production process, its *forces of production*. What gives history its direction is the causal structure that joins the forces of production, relations of production and the superstructure.

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1. For discussion of some relevant passages from the Marxian corpus, see G.A. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence [KMTH]* (Oxford and Princeton, NJ: Oxford University Press and Princeton University Press, 1978), pp. 142-50.

Because of the simple and deterministic character of its arguments, the 1859 Preface lent itself to easy adoption by the "orthodox" Marxisms of the Second and Third Internationals. In consequence, a brief and elliptical statement of a theory became frozen into dogma, immune from the often facile but sometimes trenchant criticisms leveled against it, and impervious to theoretical elaboration and clarification.

Sympathy for the actual positions advanced in the 1859 Preface, however, goes against the grain of much recent Marxist thought. The cutting edge of twentieth-century Western Marxism, as it has developed in more or less overt opposition to the official Marxism of the Communist parties, has tended to oppose the assertions of the Preface, though express opposition is seldom admitted. Western Marxists, including those most adamantly opposed to the substantive claims of Marx's theory of history, often profess allegiance to "historical materialism", even while they contest its fundamental positions.<sup>2</sup>

The reasons for opposition to historical materialism, or at least to its orthodox formulations, are readily apparent. There is, first of all, its determinist cast, which accords poorly with the general tendency of Western Marxist thought. Western Marxists have focused upon the role of human (individual and collective) agency in social transformation, a theme that, at best, enters at a lower level of abstraction from that at which historical materialism is pitched. There are also more immediately political grounds for opposition. Indisputably, the Preface accords causal primacy (of a sort it does not clearly explain) to the forces over the relations of production, suggesting the kind of "economistic" politics Western Marxists have opposed with virtual unanimity. Marx contended in the Preface, that "no social formation ever perishes before all the productive forces for which there is room in it have developed" and "new, higher relations of production never appear before the material conditions of their existence have matured in the womb of the old society itself". If these claims are right, it would seem that social transformation depends first on developing productive forces, and only then on revolutionizing production relations. Western Marxists, in contrast, have tended to emphasize the transformation of production relations,

2. A striking case in point is the work of Louis Althusser and his colleagues. For Althusser, "historical materialism" is expressly endorsed, but the term is used to designate Marxist social science in general. In Althusser's view, historical materialism does not even include a substantive theory of epochal historical change of the sort Marx advanced in the 1859 Preface. This radically redefined "historical materialism" is elaborated extensively by Etienne Balibar, Althusser's principal collaborator, in "The Fundamental Concepts of Historical Materialism", L. Althusser and E. Balibar, *Reading Capital* (London: New Left Books, 1970). On the Althusserians' version of historical materialism, see Andrew Levine, "Althusser's Marxism", *Economy and Society* 10, 3, 1981, pp. 243-83.

according comparatively little importance to the development of productive forces.

A straightforward reading of Marx's injunctions in the Preface would suggest the folly of attempting to build socialism in underdeveloped countries in the absence of successful socialist revolutions in the most advanced capitalist centers. This was in fact the position universally adhered to by the Marxists of the Second International—including, at first, even the Bolsheviks who, in overthrowing bourgeois rule in Europe's most backward capitalist country, sought to spark world revolution by attacking imperialism at its "weakest link". The failure of the revolution elsewhere in Europe, however, complicated efforts to develop a politics—and a political theory—based on the orthodox position. Stalin's notion of "socialism in one country", though literally opposed to what all Marxists believed before the October Revolution, could be interpreted as an attempt to develop a political response to the situation precipitated by the failure of the revolution in Germany and elsewhere. So too was Trotsky's opposing theory of Permanent Revolution. This is not the place to compare the success of these positions in translating the classical Marxist view of the primacy of productive forces into a politics appropriate for the world situation that developed after 1917. The point is just that, for both Stalin and Trotsky, what was crucially important in socialist transformation, and what must therefore have primacy in any socialist politics, are society's productive forces and their development.

The importance of developing productive forces has been emphasized by the Communist parties, as by many others. It inspired a political program wherever Soviet Communism exercised ideological influence, and varying degrees of dissent from Western Marxists outside and sometimes also inside these parties. The list of Soviet sins, committed for the sake of developing productive forces, is well known: the brutal collectivization of agricultural production, the hierarchical structure and "productivist" ideology that governs factories, the selective, technocratic and authoritarian structure of the educational system, the severe centralization of political power and, perhaps most important, the indefinite prolongation of police terror and the inexorable growth of bureaucratic domination. Needless to say, commitment to the theoretical positions of the 1859 Preface does not entail support for the political programs adopted by the leaders of the Soviet Union. In any case, the best Marxist thought in the West, with very few exceptions, has sought to distance itself from the Soviet experience; and therefore, sometimes inadvertently, sometimes deliberately, from the theoretical positions endorsed by Marxian officialdom.

For both theoretical and political reasons, therefore, most Western

Marxists have been hostile to historical materialism, rejecting it outright or abandoning its core theses while retaining a nominal commitment to the label. In this context, G.A. Cohen's seminal *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defense (KMTH)* was a remarkable achievement. In recent years, a number of writers have investigated the Marxist theory of history.<sup>3</sup> However, Cohen's book was the first to uncover and develop the causal structure of Marx's theory. There are, to be sure, differences between Cohen's position and Marx's—for instance, on the extent to which historical materialism is said to assert an order and necessity for transformations among pre-capitalist economic structures. Cohen's intent was not quite to defend Marx's express views, but to defend what he took to be defensible in Marx's view. In any case, the theory of history presented and defended in *Karl Marx's Theory of History* is nearly Marx's own. With this caution, and in view of its fidelity to orthodox understandings of historical materialism, we shall identify Cohen's with the *orthodox* view, and discuss his clearly elaborated positions, rather than Marx's own diffuse intimations of a systematic theory.

In our view, *Karl Marx's Theory of History* is at least as helpful for revealing flaws in classical historical materialism as for providing a defense of it. But to reflect on the orthodox theory's shortcomings is to begin to reconstruct the Marxist theory of history. We shall therefore launch our engagement with the Marxist theory of history by elaborating and then criticizing Cohen's arguments.

### What Historical Materialism Claims

Orthodox historical materialism advances the following two, very general claims:

- (1) that the level of development of productive forces in a society explains the set of social relations of production, the "economic structure", of that society; and
- (2) that the economic structure of a society, its "economic base", explains that society's legal and political "superstructures" and forms of consciousness.

3. See, among others, Melvin Rader, *Marx's Interpretation of History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979); William H. Shaw, *Marx's Theory of History* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1979); John McMurtry, *The Structure of Marx's World View* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978); and Allen Wood, *Karl Marx* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981).

Cohen designates (1) the *Primacy Thesis*; (2) can be called the *Base/Superstructure Thesis*. In both cases, Cohen argues, the explanations in question are *functional explanations*. This is a novel, and controversial, way of understanding the causal relations in historical materialism. Marxists in general have been quite hostile to functionalism in sociology and have formally disavowed the use of functional explanations. Nevertheless, Cohen insists that such explanations lie at the heart of Marx's own analysis and provide the only coherent basis for the Primacy Thesis and the Base/Superstructure Thesis.

Functional explanations explain the existence or form of a given phenomenon by virtue of its beneficial effects on something else.<sup>4</sup> Consider, for example, Bronislaw Malinowski's explanation of the existence of magic rituals among the Trobriand Islanders. Such rituals are explained, Malinowski argued, by the fact that they reduce the fear and anxiety elicited by dangerous forms of fishing. The rituals are thus "functional" for creating the necessary psychological states in order for people to engage in fishing under those conditions (given the low level of technology), and their existence is explained by these beneficial effects.<sup>5</sup>

There is much debate in the philosophy of science as to the legitimacy of such functional explanations. They are often viewed as teleological or, at best, as elliptical forms of more conventional causal arguments. We shall not attempt to provide any defense of functional explanations as such in this discussion. We agree with Cohen that functional forms of explanation can be legitimate in social science provided that in principle a mechanism can exist which regulates the functional adaptations. As we shall see later, we believe Cohen's functional arguments for the primacy thesis are not convincing, but we shall not challenge the very enterprise of attempting to construct a functional account.

The heart of Cohen's book, then, is a functional argument about the relationship between the forces and relations of production; he pays much less attention to the parallel problem of the functional explanation of the superstructure by the economic base. Since the dynamic process that accounts for the trajectory of human history lies mainly in the forces/relations argument, we also shall focus on this part of the theory in what follows.

The pivot of Cohen's functional explanation links the level of development of the forces of production to the (functional) effects of the relations of production on the use and subsequent development of the

4. See Chapter 7, pp. 155–60, for more detailed discussion of functional explanation.

5. The use of this example to explicate the meaning of functional explanation comes from Arthur Stinchcombe, *Constructing Social Theories* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968).

forces. Specifically, Cohen writes, "the production relations are of a kind R at time t because relations of kind R are suitable to the use and development of the productive forces at t, given the level of development of the latter at t."<sup>6</sup> And again: "When relations endure stably, they do so because they promote the development of the forces.... The property of a set of productive forces which explains the nature of the economic structure embracing them is their disposition to develop within a structure of that nature."<sup>7</sup> Cohen's task is to give an account of the interconnection of forces and relations of production that makes this functional explanation defensible.

Cohen elaborates the structure of this functional explanation in terms of what he calls "dispositional facts" about the system. Consider the example of rituals among Trobriand Islanders. Even before the invention of rituals, it was a dispositional fact of the culture that rituals would be fear-reducing. This dispositional fact about the culture, along with some unspecified selection mechanism, is said to explain the presence of ritual:

- (1) *dispositional fact*: [Ritual → reduced fear]
- (2) *functional explanation*: [Ritual → reduced fear] → Ritual

Now, while it also is a dispositional fact of the society that fear produces ritual, this second dispositional fact does not explain fear. Thus:

- (3) *dispositional fact*: [Fear → increased ritual]
- (4) *false functional explanation*: [Fear → increased ritual] → fear

The fact that (2) is true while (4) is false implies that while a functional explanation of ritual by fear is correct, a symmetrical functional explanation of fear is not.<sup>8</sup>

Cohen's functional explanation of the relations of production by the forces of production can be represented in terms of dispositional facts.<sup>9</sup>

6. Cohen, *KMTH*, 160.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 161. The second passage specifies the functional explanation differently from the first. In the first statement, the functional claim made reference to the effects of the production relations on the "use and development" of the productive forces; in the second statement, reference is only made to development. For reasons which we shall discuss presently, the first formulation is more satisfactory.

8. In Chapter 7, we shall argue that although one can *represent* a functional explanation in terms of dispositional facts and their effects, Cohen's proposal does not provide an adequate *definition* of what it is for something to have the function it does. We believe that the substance of Cohen's argument can be formulated in terms of the former claim.

9. This representation comes from Philippe Van Parijs, "Marxism's central puzzle", in T. Ball and J. Farr, eds, *After Marx* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

Let PF = productive forces, and PR = production relations. The argument then is:

- (1) *dispositional fact*: [PR → use and development of PF]
- (2) *functional explanation*: [PR → use and development of PF] → PR
- (3) *Primacy thesis*: Level PF → [PR → use and development PF] → PR

That is, the level of development of the forces of production explains which kinds of production relations would further enhance the development of the forces of production, and this (dispositional) fact explains which production relations actually pertain. This is a complex and elegant explanatory structure. Cohen's task is to provide an account of the reasoning that renders it plausible.

### The Case for the Primacy Thesis

The case for the Primacy Thesis, in Cohen's reconstruction, can be decomposed into six subsidiary theses. In outline, the argument goes as follows: A given level of development of productive forces is compatible with only a limited range of social relations of production (Thesis 1). Since forces of production tend to develop over time (Thesis 2), the forces eventually reach a level at which they are no longer compatible with existing relations of production (Thesis 3). When such incompatibilities arise, the relations are said to "fetter" the forces of production. Because human beings are somewhat rational (in the sense that they are able to adapt means to ends), and because they face a compelling, trans-historical need to develop the productive forces (as the argument for Thesis 2 maintains), when the forces are fettered by the relations, human beings have an interest in transforming the relations. If they also have the necessary capacities (Thesis 4), they will be able to do so (Thesis 5), and to substitute new relations of production that are optimal for the further development of the productive forces (Thesis 6). In the rest of this section, we elaborate these claims; in the following section, we submit them to critical scrutiny.

- (1) *The Compatibility Thesis*: "A given level of productive power is compatible only with a certain type, or certain types, of economic structure."<sup>10</sup> The idea of compatibility between relations and forces of

10. *KMTH*, p. 158.

production is introduced in order to demonstrate the existence of reciprocal limits between the forces and relations of production: for a given level of development of productive forces, only certain forms of production relations are possible; for a given form of production relations, only a certain range of development of productive forces is possible. Limits, in this context, mean two different things. First, there is the idea that within a given set of production relations the forces of production can only develop to a certain extent. Beyond that point, further development would be unattainable within those relations. Thus, it might be argued that slavery and computer technology could not coexist, for in a slave society the forces of production would stagnate at a lower stage of development. The limits in this case are limits of material possibility.

The second sense holds that certain combinations of forces and relations of production cannot *stably* coexist. It is this sense of compatibility that Cohen has in mind when he asserts the incompatibility of slavery and computer technology. "Slavery . . . could not be the general condition of producers in a society of computer technology, if only because the degree of culture needed in laborers who can work that technology would lead them to revolt successfully against slave status."<sup>11</sup> Cohen does not claim that computers could not emerge under slavery, but rather stresses the social instability of the hypothetical combination, slavery plus computers. It is this sense of reciprocal limits that is most important for historical materialism—for, in the historical materialist scheme, *incompatibilities* always emerge *within* existing production relations.<sup>12</sup>

Why, in general, would forces of production that *can* emerge within a set of relations of production be unable to coexist stably with those relations of production? Cohen does not attempt to answer this question directly. But it is relevant to note that implicitly he deploys two distinct notions of incompatibility: *use-incompatibility* and *development-incompatibility*.<sup>13</sup>

11. Ibid. This illustration is crucial for the development of Cohen's argument since he offers no general conceptual defense of the compatibility thesis, but simply affirms its truth through the use of this "obvious" example.

12. The use of the slavery plus computers example as the central illustration of "incompatibility" is somewhat infelicitous in these terms, precisely because, according to Cohen, computers could never emerge within slavery to generate the hypothesized instabilities. More to the point would have been the emergence of certain technologies within feudalism which helped to destabilize feudal property relations.

13. Despite the way Marxists sometimes talk, there is no pure dichotomy between compatible and incompatible combinations of forces and relations of production. Incompatibility is always a matter of *degree*. The greater the degree of incompatibility, the less stable is the coexistence of the forces and relations of production. The incompatibilities Cohen and Marx intend exist when the degree of incompatibility between forces and relations of production is so great that the stability of their interconnection comes into question.

*Use-incompatibility* is the simplest of these senses. It pertains whenever certain forces of production which can be generated within a set of production relations cannot be used—or effectively used—within those relations. This situation could come about for a variety of reasons. For example, the relations of production might generate obstacles that prevent direct producers from developing the necessary skills for using the forces of production (e.g. because of personal bondage to landlords). If such obstacles exist, then the necessary forms of labor power for deploying these forces of production might not be forthcoming. Eliminating these obstacles, in turn, would threaten the existing relations of production. Or, to take another example, use-incompatibility may occur when the use of particular forces of production within a given set of production relations undermines the capacity of exploiting classes to appropriate surplus from direct producers. Certain forces of production, for example, could enhance the autonomy of direct producers and increase their ability to resist exploitation, thereby rendering the combination of those forces and relations of production unstable. In such cases the use of the forces of production will tend to destabilize the relations of production.

*Development-incompatibility* is the notion stressed most by Cohen. If there is a material limit to the development of forces of production within a given set of production relations, there will eventually come a point at which those forces can develop no further. This was the first general sense of "limits", discussed above. But why should limits of material possibility for development constitute an *incompatibility* between the *level* of the forces of production attained and the relations of production? The Compatibility Thesis is about compatibilities between levels of the forces of production and forms of production relations. Development-incompatibility would occur when, for whatever reason, stagnation in the development of the forces of production destabilizes the social relations of production. We shall discuss the plausibility of this condition when we consider Thesis 3, the Contradiction Thesis, below.

These two forms of incompatibility of forces and relations of production are not independent of one another. Use-incompatibility, for example, may help explain development-incompatibility in so far as the ineffective use of existing forces of production may contribute to fettering further development of the forces. Nevertheless, since it could happen that certain forces of production are systematically underutilized and yet the forces of production could continue to develop, the two kinds of incompatibility should be considered analytically distinct.

Each of these forms of incompatibility implies a reciprocal set of limits imposed by the forces on the relations and the relations on the

forces. Productive forces impose limits on the range of possible relations of production (since only certain relations will be stably reproduced by these forces), and relations of production impose limits on productive forces (since only certain productive forces can be used effectively, developed and exploited within those relations).

According to Cohen, the correspondences between sets of production relations or economic structures and levels of development of productive forces recognized by historical materialism is summarized in Table 2.1.

This table of correspondences is admittedly rough: it fails to distinguish among the various forms of pre-capitalist class societies, and it provides no precise criteria for distinguishing the different levels of productive development. None the less, it does provide an ordered sequence of social forms within an overall historical trajectory. *If* a compelling theory of the movement from one form to another could be produced, we would indeed have a powerful, if coarse-grained, theory of history.

The rationale for the correspondences asserted in Table 2.1 is plain enough. A class, for Marx, is constituted by its relation to other classes in the social process of appropriating an economic surplus. Class relations are thus impossible without some surplus. Hence, the first correspondence in the typology. Whenever a surplus exists, then, class society becomes *possible*. Indeed, on Cohen's account, class society becomes necessary, since it is only under conditions of class domination that a small surplus can be expanded—through “investment” in technological development and in new productive facilities—into a larger surplus. Individual producers would be unwilling to make the necessary sacrifices required for further developing productive forces under such conditions. Thus an exploiting class, which appropriates the economic surplus and uses it, or at least allows it to be used, to spur development, is essential for a rise in the level of development of productive forces given that those forces have already developed sufficiently to produce a

**Table 2.1** Correspondence of Forces and Relations of Production\*

<i>Form of Economic Structure</i>	<i>Level of Productive Development</i>
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

\* This table is modified from Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History*, p. 198.

small surplus. Pre-class society (primitive communism) is therefore incompatible with any level of development of productive forces capable of generating a small surplus. This is the basis for the second correspondence.

A small surplus, in turn, is incompatible with capitalist class relations. Capitalism requires a moderately high surplus (and thus a moderately developed level of the forces of production), in order to allow for “repeated introduction of new productive forces and thus for regular capitalist investment”.<sup>14</sup> When a moderately high level of surplus is reached, pre-capitalist relations of production increasingly fetter the further development of productive forces, and therefore come to be superseded by distinctively capitalist social relations. Likewise a moderately high level of development of productive forces is incompatible with post-class society, a society of collective control of the surplus by the direct producers. Since the development of productive forces from moderate to high levels requires great deprivation and toil, the direct producers would never freely impose such sacrifices on themselves. Only a production system dominated by market imperatives, forcing a logic of accumulation on direct producers and owners of means of production, can accomplish this development. This constitutes the basis for the third correspondence.

The compatibility thesis thus maintains, albeit roughly, a systematic relation of correspondence between forces and relations of production. But it does not itself establish the primacy of productive forces. As Cohen writes:

... some Marxists who accept the primacy of the forces are content to equate it with the constraints they impose on the production relations. But that is unsatisfactory. For the constraint is symmetrical. If high technology rules out slavery, then slavery rules out high technology. Something must be added to mutual constraint to establish the primacy of the forces.<sup>15</sup>

The development thesis plays this role.

(2) *The Development Thesis: “The productive forces tend to develop throughout history”*.<sup>16</sup> The claim is that there is a *tendency* for forces of production to develop continuously, not that forces of production invariably do develop continuously. Thesis 2 is not falsified, though it is surely infirmed, by historical examples of stagnation and regression.

14. Cohen, *KMTH*, p. 198.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 158.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 134.

Likewise, it is corroborated, though not established definitively, by the many historical illustrations that can be adduced in its support.

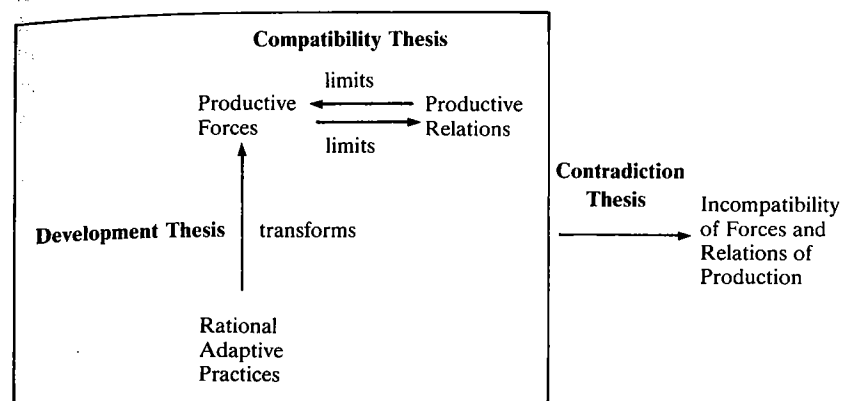
In Cohen's reconstruction, and arguably also in Marx's view, the Development Thesis is supported by appeal to characteristics of the human condition, human capacities and human nature. These characteristics are conceived transhistorically.<sup>17</sup> Human beings, the argument goes, are at least somewhat rational, and "rational human beings who know how to satisfy compelling wants ... will be disposed to seize and employ the means to satisfaction of those wants."<sup>18</sup> Under conditions of relative scarcity, where few if any wants can be satisfied immediately or without effort, the development of productive forces becomes a "compelling want". Then, in as much as human beings "possess intelligence of a kind and degree which enables them to improve their situation",<sup>19</sup> humans will in fact seize the means for the satisfaction of this compelling want by recurrently and progressively developing the productive forces (assuming, of course, that no countervailing tendencies of greater strength or outside forces—like invasions or natural calamities—intervene). Thus there is a permanent, human impulse to try to improve humanity's abilities to transform nature to realize human wants. In consequence, there is a tendency for productive forces to develop. Furthermore, the development of productive forces will tend to be cumulative. Human beings are sufficiently rational that, having once improved their situation by developing the productive forces they find at hand, they will not revert to less developed forces, except under extraordinary circumstances beyond their control. In short, in virtue of

17. Marx is sometimes thought to have opposed transhistorical characterizations of human nature, largely in consequence of some well-known disparaging allusions to the contractarian tradition in some of his early writings, especially the Introduction to the *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, and in the opening sentences of the 1857 Introduction to the *Grundrisse*, a text that also serves as the Introduction to *The Critique of Political Economy*, the text whose Preface provides the most direct formulation of historical materialism. In fact, Marx's transhistorical claims partly overlap with some tenets of traditional contractarianism. Probably the clearest account of the human condition and of human nature as conceived in the contractarian tradition is provided by David Hume in *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Book III, part 2, section 2; and *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, section III, part 1. A similar account can be gleaned from Book I, Chapter 13 of Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan*. Some pertinent features of the situation they describe are relative equality among human beings in the distribution of mental and physical endowments—including the ability to adopt means to ends—and the relative scarcity of most of what nature provides for the satisfaction of human wants. In this tradition too, human nature is deemed to be self-interested—to the extent that individuals generally seek to maximize their distributive shares and to minimize burdensome toil. Marx, on Cohen's account, also appeals to relative scarcity and self-interest, though without claiming that human beings are *always* and *only* self-interested, and to a relatively equally distributed ability to adapt means to ends.

18. Cohen, *MKTH*, p. 152.

19. *Ibid.*

**Figure 2.1** Interconnection of Compatibility Thesis, Development Thesis and Contradiction Thesis



human nature and (rational) capacities, wherever (relative) scarcity prevails, as it always has, there is a tendency for human beings to try to improve their means for transforming nature (in accordance with their wants), and therefore a tendency for productive forces to develop continuously.

The Development Thesis introduces the asymmetry lacking in the Compatibility Thesis. These two together imply a further claim:

(3) *The Contradiction Thesis: Given the reciprocal limits that exist between forces and relations of production (the Compatibility Thesis), and the tendency of the productive forces to develop (the Development Thesis), with sufficient time, the productive forces will develop to a point where they are no longer compatible with the relations of production under which they had previously developed.*<sup>20</sup> The name is apt, if we understand "contradiction" to mean an untenable structural instability. The Contradiction Thesis holds that, as development proceeds, contradictions in this sense are bound to emerge. This thesis is represented in Figure 2.1.

We have already noted that there are two senses of incompatibility implicit in the Compatibility Thesis. In principle, the development of the forces of production could generate either or both of these incompatibilities. In most of Cohen's discussion he places the greatest emphasis on

20. In Cohen's words: "Given the constraints, with sufficient development of the forces the old relations are no longer compatible with them" (*KMTH*, p. 158).

development-incompatibility, but of the two forms of incompatibility this seems less likely to generate pervasive social instability, and thus perform the explanatory task it must within historical materialism. Imagine a situation in which development-fettering occurred at a level of development of the forces of production at which the forces and relations of production were still fully use-compatible. That is, further development of the forces of production was blocked, but the existing forces of production could be fully and effectively utilized within those relations. Why should this situation lead to a pervasive instability in the coexistence of those forces and relations of production? Unless people became acutely aware of forgone opportunities for reductions in toil, it seems unlikely that the combination would be at all precarious. In contrast, when use-incompatibility occurs, existing productive resources—not capacities for *future* development—are wasted or at least underdeployed. This is likely to be much more transparent to actors, and therefore use-incompatibilities are more likely to motivate those classes that are hurt by such underutilization of forces of production to try to establish a new articulation of forces and relations of production.

Development-fettering, therefore, seems unlikely, in and of itself, to be the central incompatibility embodied in the “contradiction of forces and relations of production”. To the extent that it is implicated in such instabilities it is more likely to be as a symptom than as a driving force. Use-incompatibility between forces and relations of production is likely to contribute to a blockage of development of the forces of production; and the restoration of use-compatibility is likely to open up new possibilities for such development. But the fettering and unfettering of development as such is most plausibly a by-product of use-compatibility, rather than the pivotal incompatibility that explains transformations of the relations of production. This causal sequence is depicted in Figure 2.2.<sup>21</sup>

There is some evidence in Cohen’s discussion that in fact, in spite of his emphasis on development-fettering, it is use-incompatibility that does much of the explanatory work. Thus he cites the following passages from Marx in support of the Primacy Thesis:

21. Shifting the emphasis in the Primacy Thesis from development-incompatibility to use-incompatibility helps solve a problem Cohen confronts in his analysis of advanced capitalism. Cohen notes that there is no evidence that capitalism blocks the development of the forces of production, but that it does prevent the rational deployment of the forces of production. Thus, at current levels of capitalist development, it should be possible to reduce work-time drastically or to transform alienating labor into meaningful work, but the requirements of capitalist production relations militate against the implementation of these changes. In *KMTH*, Cohen depicts this situation as a “distinctive contradiction” of late capitalism, implying that “fettering” has taken on a new aspect in the present context. We would argue, in contrast, that in all stages of the historical materialist trajectory, it is use-fettering that destabilizes social relations; and that development-fettering, if it occurs, is only a by-product of use-fettering.

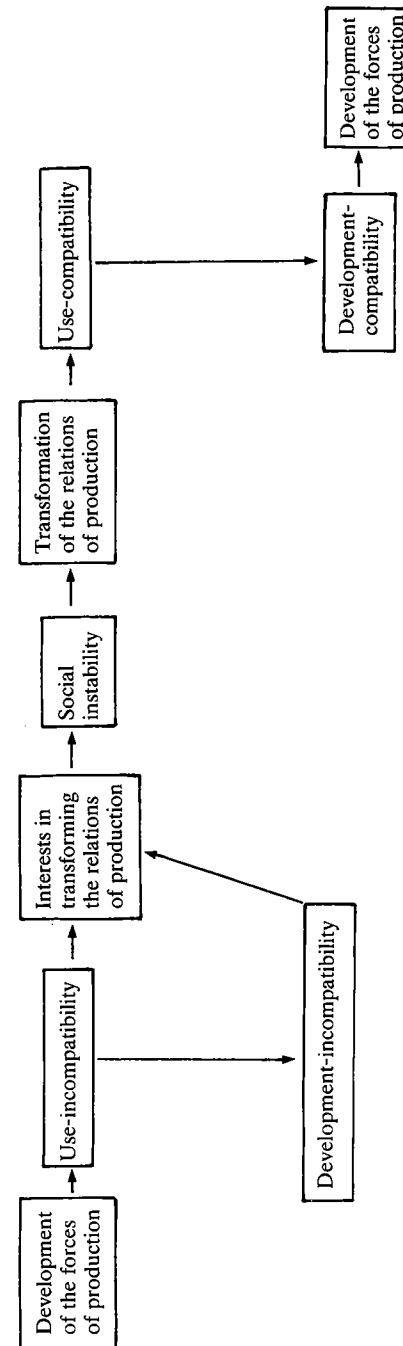


Figure 2.2 Causal Linkage between Development of Forces of Production, Use-incompatibility and Development-incompatibility



As the main thing is not to be deprived of the fruits of civilization, of the *acquired* productive forces, the traditional forms in which they were produced must be smashed... in order that they may not be deprived of the *result attained*, and forfeit the fruits of civilization, they are obliged from the moment when their mode of intercourse no longer *corresponds to the productive forces acquired*, to change their traditional social forms.<sup>22</sup>

In both passages, the emphasis is on incompatibilities between the use of existing forces of production and existing social relations, not on the future development of the productive forces.<sup>23</sup> If development-fettering occurred *without* use-incompatibility, people would not face the loss of "productive forces acquired" or be "deprived of the fruits of civilization". They would only lose future opportunities. It is hard to imagine a mechanism that could cause this loss to register as an interest compelling epochal social change. Certainly, neither Cohen nor Marx have proposed one. On the other hand, if use-incompatibility occurs, regardless of the status of development-incompatibility, then people face such a loss. If the Primacy Thesis is sound, therefore, it seems likely that it is rooted in the problems of use-compatibility and exploitation-compatibility of the forces and relations of production rather than development-compatibility.

In an essay entitled "Fettering" published a decade after *Karl Marx's Theory of History*, Cohen recognizes that use-fettering is a more plausible basis for predicting transformations of relations of production than is development-fettering.<sup>24</sup> In this essay, however, he proposes a third concept of fettering, "net fettering", which Cohen feels to be superior to both development-fettering and use-fettering. A set of relations of production are said to be "net fettering" of the forces of production when the *growth in the effective use* of forces of production would proceed more rapidly under alternative relations. Net fettering is thus a multiplicative function of the rate of growth of productive power and the degree to which a given level of productive power is effectively deployed. It thus combines aspects of both development-fettering and use-fettering.

22. Cohen, *KMTH*, p. 159. The first quotation is from *The Poverty of Philosophy*; the second from a letter of Marx to Annenkov written in 1846.

23. It is worth noting that in some of Cohen's formulations of the Primacy Thesis, use-compatibility figures equally with development-compatibility. Thus Cohen writes: "the production relations are of a kind R at time t because relations of kind R are suitable to the use and development of the productive forces at t, given the level of development of the latter at t" (*KMTH*, p. 160). In his subsequent discussion, however, use-compatibility is largely displaced by development-compatibility.

24. See G.A. Cohen, *History, Labour and Freedom: themes from Marx* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), Chapter 6, pp. 109–23.

We are skeptical of the argument that net fettering is more likely to provide solid grounds for the contradiction thesis than is use-fettering. As in the case of development-fettering, for net fettering to constitute a destabilizing force actors must have an understanding of what the future *trajectory* of development of productive forces is likely to be under alternative social systems; in this case, however, the counterfactual describing this alternative trajectory has to be melded with a second counterfactual, the degree to which the future productive forces will be effectively deployed. In contrast, use-fettering involves the cognitively simpler idea that existing productive resources are ineffectively used or wasted under existing social relations whereas they would not be so used under alternative social arrangements. This kind of fettering is much more likely to be implicated in crisis conditions and revolutionary motivations than the complex counterfactuals implied by net fettering.

The Contradiction Thesis asserts the inevitability of intensifying incompatibilities between forces and relations of production. The contradictions that result might in principle be resolved by a downward adaptation of the productive forces, a regression sufficient to restore compatibility. But this resolution is ruled out by the Development Thesis. Thus the contradictions that inevitably occur can be resolved only through a transformation of the relations of production. Such transformations will take place, however, only if there are historical agents capable of producing them. Hence:

(4) *The Capacity Thesis: Where there is an "objective" interest in transforming the relations of production to restore compatibility with the forces of production, the capacity for bringing that change about will ultimately be brought into being.* The Capacity Thesis figures implicitly in the derivation of the Primacy Thesis.<sup>25</sup> The fettering of the forces of production generates "incompatibilities" because fettering is an affront to basic human interests. If production relations are to change, then, it will likely be in consequence of the intentional struggles of actors with an interest in their transformation. But for these struggles to succeed, the actors must have the capacity to realize their interests. Hence the Capacity Thesis.

Class capacities for struggle—the organizational, ideological and material resources available to class agents—are not *identical* with class

25. Strictly speaking, the Capacity Thesis may not be required for the Primacy Thesis. It might be possible, for example, to imagine a selection-mechanism that translates interests in transformation into successful transformations in a way that does not involve the capacity of actors to struggle intentionally for their interests. The transformation of production relations could occur entirely "behind the backs" of actors. No one, however, has proposed such a mechanism.

interests in the *outcomes* of struggles. But in the orthodox historical materialist view, where interests in transforming class relations become generalized, as the Contradiction Thesis predicts, the capacities for effecting a transformation will be generated, at least in the long run.

The idea the Capacity Thesis expresses has been most directly defended by Marxists in its application to socialist revolution. For the ascendant working class under capitalism, the emergence of revolutionary, transformative interests helps generate the capacity for revolutionizing society. Workers are able to attract allies because of the universal interests their struggles embody, and the formation of coalitions strengthens the capacities for struggle of all insurgent groups. At the same time, according to the received view, the capacity of the bourgeoisie to forge alliances and mobilize support declines as their class project becomes associated with stagnation and crisis. In addition, under capitalism, development itself enhances the capacities of workers to transform production relations—by bringing workers together into factories, by educating them technically and politically, and by instilling a propensity for discipline and organization of a sort necessary for defeating capitalism definitively. Thus, in the traditional Marxist account, the capacities of the working class are enhanced by capitalist development both because the increasingly universalistic quality of their class interests fosters class alliances and because the development of the forces of production directly enhances their organizational power. If Thesis 4 were to be defended generally, a comparable story would have to be told for each of the epochal historical transformations historical materialism postulates.

(5) *The Transformation Thesis: When forces and relations of production are incompatible (as they will eventually become, so long as class society persists), the relations will change in such a way that compatibility between forces and relations of production will be restored.*

Where contradictions between forces and relations of production emerge, the resolution will always be in favor of the forces, not the relations; it is the relations of production that yield. “Why”, Cohen asks, “should the fact that the relations restrict the forces foretell their doom, if not because it is irrational to persist with them given the price in lost opportunity to further inroads against scarcity?”<sup>26</sup> Assuming that the

26. Cohen, *KMTH*, p. 152. It is worth noting that Cohen restricts his explanation of the transformation of the relations to the problem of overcoming a development-incompatibility: it is *lost opportunity* rather than *present welfare* that drives social change. But Cohen is mistaken. Since the mechanism by which development is fettered is likely to be the growing use-incompatibility of the forces and relations of production, the motivational base for overturning the relations of production is more likely found in a diminution of present welfare, not in lost opportunities.

people with an interest in transforming the relations have the capacity to do so (Thesis 4), then Thesis 5 follows from Theses 2 and 3 (which follows, in turn, from Theses 1 and 2).

The Transformation Thesis “foretells the doom” of relations of production that fetter productive forces, but by itself it does not predict what new relations will replace the old. It only implies that, whatever these relations are, they will be compatible with the level of development of the productive forces. But historical materialism, in its orthodox version, aims at a more powerful explanation: it aims to account for the actual production relations that replace the ones that have been transformed. For the forces to explain the relations in this sense, we must be able to specify the outcome of the transformations Thesis 5 predicts. Hence:

(6) *The Optimality Thesis. When the relations of production are transformed, they will be replaced by relations of production that are functionally optimal for the use and further development of the productive forces.*

In Cohen’s words, “the relations which obtain at a given time are the relations *most suitable* for the forces to develop at that time, given the level they have reached by that time.”<sup>27</sup> The rationale for this claim derives from the Development Thesis in conjunction with the Transformation Thesis and the Capacity Thesis. Assuming that the relevant actors have the capacity to transform the relations to accord with their interests, and given that their interest in transforming the relations comes from a rational desire for the effective use of the forces, it would be irrational to replace the old relations with anything short of relations of production that are optimal for the further development of the productive forces. In so far as the capacity to transform the relations implies a capacity to transform them optimally, optimal outcomes will result.

Without the Optimality Thesis, the force of the Primacy Thesis would be reduced, for it would no longer be the case that the level of development of the forces of production would explain (functionally) the actual relations of production, but only the absence of incompatible relations. This is why Cohen insists on the Optimality Thesis vehemently, even in the face of obvious counterexamples. Pre-capitalist class relations, for the most part, can hardly be said to have encouraged the development of productive forces. None the less, Cohen argues, they may have been optimal for their time. “Even a set of relations which is not the means whereby the forces within it develop,” Cohen insists, “may be optimal

27. Cohen, *KMTH*, p. 171.

for the development of the forces during the period when it obtains."<sup>28</sup> In this sense, as some commentators have remarked, historical materialism maintains that, in the long run, as compatibilities are established or restored, the world constituted by forces and relations of production, is the best of all possible worlds.<sup>29</sup>

It is a tenet of the standard view that capitalism is the optimal and, therefore, necessary form of economic structure appropriate for the rapid development of modern industry, and is therefore a prerequisite for socialism—the first stage of communism, an economic structure beyond class divisions. This claim, once believed by all Marxists, is of course opposed to the view that became standard in official Marxist circles after the October Revolution, according to which development from a relatively low base is also possible under socialism. Seventy years after the event, the old orthodoxy again seems on the mark. It is a tenet of historical materialism that a high level of development, a massive surplus, is a necessary condition for socialism—not a task to be achieved under socialism. Classical Marxism therefore opposed “premature” attempts at socialist construction, and denied the possibility of non-capitalist roads to the material conditions for communism. It is in this spirit that Cohen insisted that “premature attempts at revolution, whatever their immediate outcome, will eventuate in a restoration of capitalist society.”<sup>30</sup> It would be an exaggeration to claim that the wholesale embrace of capitalism by Eastern European state socialist societies vindicates the orthodox theory. But the orthodox theory arguably does predict this eventuality.<sup>31</sup>

With the Optimality Thesis, the case for the Primacy Thesis is complete. The productive forces functionally explain the relations of production, since only those relations will persist which optimally provide for the use and development of the forces. Since the forces of production have a tendency to develop, and since there are limits to development within all hitherto existing social relations, eventually the relations of production become incompatible with the continued use and development of the forces. When this happens, the relations will be transformed to restore optimality.

28. Ibid.

29. Cf. Joshua Cohen, “Review of *KMTH*”, *The Journal of Philosophy* lxxxv, 4 (1983).

30. Cohen, *KMTH*, p. 206.

31. In this respect, it is worth noting a contrast with “bourgeois” accounts of “totalitarianism”, in their application to the Soviet Union and other state socialist societies. On that view, the state and party apparatus was thought sufficiently powerful to prevent capitalist restoration, except of course in consequence of exogenous assaults on the “political superstructure” such as might arise through defeat in war.

## The Case for the Primacy Thesis—Criticized

### The Compatibility Thesis

The Compatibility Thesis makes two interconnected claims: (a) that for any given level of development of productive forces there are limits on compatible relations of production; and (b) that for all pre-socialist production relations there is an upper limit beyond which the further development of productive forces generates incompatibilities. We have already suggested that (a) is difficult to fault. So long as we can imagine production relations that would be incompatible with some specified level of development of the forces of production, that claim is sustainable. (b), however, is more problematic. In particular, why must there be a ceiling to the level of development of the forces of production within capitalist production relations? Or, more generally: why can't there be class-based production relations capable of developing productive forces indefinitely?

Orthodox historical materialists would support (b), in the case of capitalism, by invoking the inevitability of progressively more serious accumulation crises under capitalism. According to the view standard in Marxist political economy until recently, a rising organic composition of capital—roughly, a rising capital intensity within production—activates a general tendency for the rate of profit to fall.<sup>32</sup> The decline in the rate of profit creates tendencies towards crisis within capitalist economies for a variety of reasons: a low average rate of profit makes the economy more vulnerable to random shocks; the rate of bankruptcies of firms increases as the rate of profit declines, since more firms will have negative profits; increases in bankruptcies disrupt demand, thus causing otherwise profitable firms to lose money. The recurrence and deepening of these crisis tendencies mean that existing forces of production become chronically underutilized (thus use-incompatibility). Furthermore, since investment in new technologies is paid for out of profits in a capitalist economy, the secular decline in profits will ultimately dampen the development of the

32. In standard Marxist accounts, the organic composition of capital,  $q$ , is defined as the ratio of constant capital,  $c$ , the labor “embodied” in means of production, over the sum of constant and variable capital,  $v$ , the capital required to reproduce labor power. Thus  $q = c/(c+v)$ . In other words, the organic composition of capital is a measure of the extent to which labor is furnished with means of production in the production process. The rate of profit,  $p$ , is defined as the ratio of surplus value,  $s$ , to total capital outlay. Thus  $p = s/(c+v)$ . Finally, the rate of surplus value,  $e$  (for exploitation), is defined as the ratio of surplus value to variable capital:  $e = s/v$ . Combining these definitions, it follows that  $p = e(1-q)$ ; and accordingly, that as the value of  $q$ , the organic composition of capital, rises, the value of  $p$ , the rate of profit, declines. See Paul M. Sweezy, *The Theory of Capitalist Development: Principles of Marxian Political Economy* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1942).

forces of production (thus development-incompatibility). The declining rate of profit, the argument goes, therefore erodes the capacity for capitalism to use its existing forces of production effectively and to generate advances in the level of development of the forces of production beyond a certain point. Capitalism thereby generates its own fetters.

It is now clear, as most Marxist political economists realize, that this traditional Marxist account of the inevitability of accumulation crises under capitalism cannot be sustained. The claim is empirically unfounded and theoretically defective.<sup>33</sup> Cohen's reconstruction of Marx's theory of history, accordingly, rejects any appeal to the inevitability of capitalist breakdown (as conceived in standard, Marxist political economy).<sup>34</sup> Cohen defends (b) in a way arguably consistent with the spirit of orthodox historical materialism, though plainly at variance with its strict letter.

Cohen argues that capitalism, in promoting production for exchange rather than use, uses technological innovation to expand output, rather than to extend leisure time, where leisure is understood "as release from burdensome toil". Cohen writes:

As long as production remains subject to the capitalist principle, the output increasing option will tend to be selected and implemented in one way or another ... Now the consequence of the increasing output which capitalism necessarily favors is increasing consumption. Hence the boundless pursuit of consumption goods is a result of a production process oriented to exchange-values rather than consumption-values. It is the Rockefellers who ensure that the Smiths need to keep up with the Jones.<sup>35</sup>

The boundless pursuit of consumer goods generates an incompatibility between forces and relations of production, not because productive power as such is fettered, but because it is irrationally deployed with respect to basic human interests:

The productive technology of capitalism begets an unparalleled opportunity of lifting the curse of Adam and liberating men from toil, but the production relations of capitalist economic organization prevent the opportunity from

33. See Geoff Hodgson, "The Theory of the Falling Rate of Profit", *New Left Review* 84, (March/April 1974); and Ian Steedman, *Marx after Sraffa* (London: New Left Books, 1977), Chapter 9. A more sustained and technical account of these issues can be found in John Roemer, *Analytical Foundations of Marxian Economic Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), Chapters 3-6.

34. In *KMTH* Cohen insists that none of his arguments depends upon any "specifically labor-theoretical account of value"; and in a later essay, "The Labor Theory of Value and the Concept of Exploitation", *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 8, 2 (1979), pp. 338-60, Cohen argues for the incoherence of the labor theory of value, thereby underscoring the independence of his account of historical materialism from traditional Marxian crisis theory.

35. Cf. Cohen, *KMTH*, p. 306.

being seized.... It brings society to the threshold of abundance and locks the door. For the promise of abundance is not an endless flow of goods, but a sufficiency produced with a minimum of unpleasant exertion.<sup>36</sup>

Capitalist production relations become irrational, in Cohen's view, with respect to a general notion of improving the human condition. They therefore do not "fetter" the development of these forces. Nor are capitalist relations incompatible with the full productive utilization of those forces of production.<sup>37</sup> Rather, the fettering in question concerns the irrational deployment of the forces of production, irrational with respect to some general notion of human welfare. Before advanced capitalism, human interests were advanced straightforwardly by augmenting the level of development of the forces of production. In advanced capitalism, where the forces of production are already sufficiently developed to support socialist relations of production, human interests are furthered by the rational deployment of the forces of production that already exist. Under capitalism, therefore, "fettering" is ultimately a matter of impeding the realization of fundamental human interests through the rational use of the productive forces, not blockage *per se* of their development or their productive use.

We agree that this shift in the notion of fettering is justified. The problem, however, is that it undermines the explanatory power of the Compatibility Thesis. The key idea of the Compatibility Thesis is that certain combinations of forces and relations of production cannot stably coexist; and that a society with a sufficiently incompatible combination would be unreproducible. This was the bite of the slavery and computers example. In the case of the consumption bias of capitalism, however, in order for there to be a genuine incompatibility between forces and relations of production, claims need to be made not only about the irrationality of the consumerist preferences engendered by capitalism, but also about the long-term unsustainability of these preferences. While it is not far-fetched to imagine an eventual disenchantment with consumerism in the advanced capitalist countries, we would need a much more elaborate theory of the process of preference formation and transformation than is currently available before we could confidently predict that an erosion of consumerism would be a sufficiently powerful force to create a fundamental instability in capitalism itself. In the absence of such a claim, there is no grounding for the idea that the development of the forces of production within capitalism has an inherent tendency to lead to a system-threatening contradiction between the forces and

36. *Ibid.*, pp. 306-7.

37. By "full productive utilization" we mean that there are no underutilized productive capacities, not that capacities are used to meet human needs in a rational way.

relations of production. But without such grounding, it is not clear that the Compatibility Thesis holds for capitalism.

### The Development Thesis

We believe (1) that, in general, technical progress has a *cumulative* character, since knowledge gained through technical progress is generally not forgotten; and (2) that throughout history, even if technological progress was rare and uneven, the probability of technological advances was generally greater than the probability of technological regressions. (1) and (2) together justify the claim that there exists a tendency for the forces of production to develop continuously. Thus we think the Development Thesis is broadly plausible.

What is less clear is how *strong* this developmental tendency is. The Development Thesis accomplishes a critical task within Cohen's defense of historical materialism: given the Compatibility Thesis, the Development Thesis provides a basis for believing that eventually incompatibilities between the forces and relations of production will occur. This expectation, however, presupposes that there cannot in the long run be social forces strong enough to block the development of the forces of production permanently, before they reach the point of use- or exploitation-incompatibility with the existing relations of production. The Development Thesis could be true and yet, in certain social structural situations, the tendency for the forces of production to develop in history could still be blocked by some other, more powerful tendency. A "tendency" need not always prevail.<sup>38</sup>

What is at issue is the relative *causal potency* of the forces of production and the superstructure in shaping the relations of production.<sup>39</sup> Neither Marx nor Cohen offers any convincing general reasons why the destabilizing effects on the relations of production caused by the developmental tendency of the forces of production is necessarily more powerful than the stabilizing tendency of the superstructure. But this is, ultimately, what the Primacy Thesis claims.<sup>40</sup> Human rational capacities, intelligence and natural scarcity explain the tendency of the force of production to develop; and development eventually destabilizes the relations of production. But the superstructure stabilizes production

38. See Cohen, *KMTH*, p. 135.

39. As we argue in Chapter 7, "causal potency" is always a claim about the relative impact of two causes on the same explanandum, in this case the forces of production and superstructures on the relations of production. It is often impossible to give a precise meaning to the claim that X is a more powerful cause of Y than Y is of X when they both cause each other, since the units of "effect" for X on Y and Y on X are radically heterogeneous.

40. Cf. Chapter 7 below.

relations. In order to conclude that there will be an overall epochal trajectory of social changes of the kind historical materialism postulates, a case must be made that, in general, the tendency for the forces of production to develop is a more potent cause of the destabilization of production relations than the superstructure is of their stabilization. We think this claim is plausible. However, no argument to this effect is provided by Cohen or indeed by any other orthodox treatment of historical materialism.

### The Contradiction Thesis

If the developmental tendencies postulated in the Development Thesis are insufficiently strong, there could be class societies in which there are no endogenous tendencies for incompatibilities to develop between forces and relations of production. Or alternatively, incompatibilities might occur, but superstructures might be sufficiently powerful to neutralize them.

Consider the "Asiatic mode of production", mentioned by Marx in the *Grundrisse* and elsewhere, and much discussed by Marxists. If the Asiatic mode of production is a coherent concept with some possible applicability to concrete social formations, we have a counter-example, provided by Marx himself, to the Contradiction Thesis.<sup>41</sup> According to some Marxists, in the Asiatic mode of production the social form of production relations and the attendant form of the state generate a permanent tendency towards stagnation.<sup>42</sup> The productive forces

41. It could be the case that even though the development of the forces of production is fettered in the Asiatic mode of production, this fact would not impugn the Contradiction Thesis. The fettering could be due to causal processes distinct from the relations of production. In this case, what would be called into question is the applicability of historical materialism to this specific example, not the cogency of historical materialism's central claims. This rather different account of the implications for historical materialism of the Asiatic mode of production is noted and briefly discussed in Chapter 3. We should note that, for the present purpose, we are agnostic on the viability of the concept. Marx's characterization of Asian societies could well be false. Then these social formations would not constitute, even potentially, counter-examples to historical materialism. We mention the Asiatic mode of production here only to illustrate a gap in the theoretical argument itself, namely that it lacks a persuasive account of the inevitability of contradictions between forces and relations of production.

42. Marx's most direct remarks on the Asiatic and other precapitalist modes of production occur in the *Grundrisse*, and are conveniently collected in Karl Marx, *Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations*, ed. Eric J. Hobsbawm, (New York: International Publishers, 1964). For some discussions of the Asiatic mode of production, see Karl A. Wittfogel, *Oriental Despotism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1963), Chapter 9; Wolfram Eberhard, *Conquerors and Rulers: Social Forces in Medieval China* (Leiden: E.E. Brill, 1970); Hélène Carrère d'Encausse and Stuart Schram, *Marxism and Asia* (London: Allen Lane, 1969); Maurice Godelier, "La notion de 'mode de production asiatique'", in CERM, *Sur le "Mode de production asiatique"* (Paris: Editions Sociales, 1969); and Barry Hindess and Paul Q. Hirst, *Pre-Capitalist Modes of Production* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975).

develop to a point and then stop developing. In the Asiatic mode of production, there is definite development-fettering by the relations of production, but not use-incompatibility. While the relations fetter the further development of the forces there is no contradiction, and thus no endogenous imperative for transformation. Therefore, the Asiatic mode of production can continue indefinitely (accompanied by stagnation of productive forces, not continuous development).

In the Marxist view, imperatives for change are represented as objective class interests. Incompatibilities between forces and relations of production are destabilizing because they generate class interests in transformation. The Contradiction Thesis effectively presupposes the development, within the "womb" of the old society, of a new class, with objective interests in reorganizing the development of the forces of production under its rule. Thus if no revolutionary class is brought into being, there is no endogenous basis for change. This is apparently the situation when the Asiatic mode of production dominates social formations. For example, in classical China, according to the traditional Marxist account, there was no class capable of advancing the level of development of productive forces. For many reasons—among others, the centralization of state power, the pattern of town/countryside relations, the absorption of merchants into the ruling class, and even the technical system of agricultural production—there was no proto-capitalist class, no bourgeoisie. And the peasantry was so fragmented and dispersed into organic peasant communities, having little contact with one another, that it too was unable to function as a revolutionary class, whatever its "objective" interests might have been in eliminating the mandarin ruling class. It was only with the assault of Western capitalism upon the Chinese social structure, an *exogenous* intervention, that the power of the traditional ruling class was finally broken.

Incompatibility leads to contradiction only if there exist class actors capable of becoming bearers of a new social order, an order that would unfetter the forces of production. Whether or not such a new class exists, however, depends upon specific historical forms taken by prevailing social relations of production, and not, as the orthodox view maintains, upon a dynamic invested in the forces of production as such—a dynamic derived, ultimately, from transhistorical human interests and capacities.

It appears, in other words, that orthodox historical materialism takes the transition from feudalism to capitalism in Western Europe as paradigmatic of epochal social transformations generally. In European feudalism, a new ruling class, the bourgeoisie, did develop in the womb of the old society. And this new class was, as the Primacy Thesis requires, interested in and capable of developing productive forces.

Even though there remain considerable debates over the extent to which endogenous developments within feudalism undermined its reproducibility, nevertheless it does constitute a case within which the contradiction thesis has plausibility.<sup>43</sup> It is more problematic, however, to see this thesis as plausible across all possible pre-capitalist forms of production relations.

### The Capacity Thesis

The emergence of collective actors with interests in transforming the relations of production under conditions of fettering explains transformation of the relations only if those actors also have a capacity to pursue their interests effectively. The absence of an adequate theory of class capacity constitutes an important weakness of historical materialism, particularly in its applications to capitalist society. Even if the Compatibility Thesis, the Development Thesis and the Contradiction Thesis were correct, progressive transformations of the relations of production would follow only if the Capacity Thesis holds.

Marxists have traditionally held that the working class under capitalism can in principle organize a socialist economy. But does the working class have the capacity actually to overthrow capitalism itself? If it does not yet have this capacity, *must* it eventually develop the means for fulfilling its "historical mission"?

Marx himself was exuberantly, and naively, optimistic in this regard. Cohen, reconstructing Marx's position more than a century later, after so many failed hopes, is more cautious. Still, he does present a general argument in support of the view that class capacities for change follow from class interests in change, that is, from the intensification of

43. Many non-Marxists, and some Marxists, have suggested that the imperative to develop the forces of production was not the principal cause for the rise of the bourgeoisie and the emergence of capitalism. Far more crucial, some have argued, were such particularities of European geopolitical conditions as the pattern of town/countryside relations (a quite different pattern from the Chinese), the fragmentation and decentralization of political authority (again, in contrast to the Chinese case), the specific structure of agrarian property within the broadly feudal type of production relations, the discovery of the Americas, accidents of geographical location, and so on. But these and similar factors are either characteristics of the particular social structure of European feudalism or else exogenous factors. They are not reducible to the level of development of the forces of production. For influential Marxist discussions of the transition from feudalism to capitalism that place little stress on the contradiction of forces and relations of production as such, see Perry Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State* (London: New Left Books, 1974); and Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century* (New York and London: Academic Press, 1974). See also T. H. Ashton, ed., *The Brenner Debate: Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

contradictions between forces and relations of production. Specifically, he holds that ruling classes blocking the development of productive forces will lose support from outside their class, while ascending classes, capable in principle of liberating the forces of production from the social relations that fetter their further development, will gain allies and support. Capacities arise along with interests, because (rational) people will cast their lot with classes that promise a better future.

Another argument, specific to the development of working-class capacities, is linked to an account of economic crises under capitalism. Cohen writes:

In our view, Marx was not a breakdown theorist, but he did hold that once capitalism is fully formed, then each crisis it undergoes is worse than its predecessor. But the forces improve across periods which include crises in which they stagnate. Hence they are more powerful just before a given crisis than they were before any earlier one. . . . Therefore, socialism grows more and more feasible as crises get worse and worse (but not *because* they get worse and worse). There is no economically legislated final breakdown, but what is *de facto* the last depression occurs when there is a downturn in the cycle *and* the forces are ready to accept a socialist structure *and* the proletariat is sufficiently class conscious and organized.

This third, crucial condition, Cohen notes, “is not entirely independent. The maladies of capitalism and the development of the forces under it stimulate proletarian militancy.”<sup>44</sup>

The more general argument—that people will cast their lot with the class that promises a better future—is plausible only if we assume that people generally understand their situation and have reasonable expectations about the consequences for themselves of living under radically different social relations, and, above all, that people can translate their interests into the requisite organizational and material means for implementing them. None of these claims is self-evident.

The more specific argument for the development of working-class capacities confronts less evident difficulties. The claim that socialism becomes increasingly feasible as productive forces grow seems unproblematic. However the claim that crises become ever more intense is far from clear. In virtue of what processes do crises become ever more intense? If, like Cohen, we deny traditional Marxist accounts of capitalist breakdown, what is left to justify the claim of ever intensifying crises? At best, this claim stands in need of further argument. The related claim that the proletariat will become sufficiently class conscious

44. Cohen, *KMTH*, pp. 203–4 and p. 204, note 2.

and organized to implement new, socialist relations of production is hardly established by appeal to an “objective” interest in transforming capitalism into socialism. Disillusionment with bourgeois class rule is not sure to lead to the revolutionary formation of the proletariat. Disillusionment is, at most, a necessary condition for revolutionary class consciousness and organization; it is hardly sufficient.

Furthermore, if the inevitability of capitalist breakdown is denied, disillusionment is not even very likely to occur. Were it the case that crisis tendencies inexorably lead to permanent stagnation, the case for the inevitability of the working class becoming capitalism’s “grave-diggers” would be more plausible. Given ever increasing immiseration and a horizon of deteriorating conditions, revolutionary organization—and a revolutionary will—might be likely to develop, just as Marx, in his more optimistic moments, thought. But if we agree with Cohen that the distinctive contradiction of advanced capitalism is evident not in stagnation and immiseration, but in the irrational deployment of productive resources, then the automatic development of class consciousness seems a good deal less plausible. An increasingly irrational deployment of productive forces will not by itself lead workers to revolutionary opposition to capitalism. In a privatized consumer society of the sort characteristic of advanced capitalism, workers plainly have much more to lose than their chains.

Claims for the inevitable development of working-class capacities arising out of the “fettering” of the forces of production under capitalism are doubly inadequate: first, because class capacities are determined by a variety of factors irreducible to the development of the forces of production, and second, because technological change itself can systematically undermine the capacities for struggle of the working class.

The capacity of the working class to forge effective organizations for struggle depends upon a wide range of economic, political and ideological factors. At the economic level, for example, labor market segmentation and the development of complex job hierarchies and internal labor markets can undermine the unity of the working class, at least with respect to immediate, market-related issues. The economic fragmentation of the working class is further intensified when it coincides with—and reinforces—racial, ethnic and sexual divisions. While there are indeed tendencies favoring the homogenization and degradation of labor of the sort Marx investigated, and while these tendencies may contribute to the growth of working-class capacities, there are also important counter-tendencies promoting differentiation and segmentation that undermine these capacities.

It has been argued that the capitalist state also contributes to the

erosion of working-class capacities by disorganizing subordinate classes, undermining the class character of working-class parties and deflecting political programs from revolutionary towards reformist objectives.<sup>45</sup> Finally, on the ideological level, the class capacities of the working class are undermined by mechanisms rooted in capitalist production and distribution itself, as Marx recognized long ago (capital and commodity fetishism); and in the multitude of ideological or broadly cultural institutions that impose individualist and consumerist values—values that militate against the formation of revolutionary class consciousness and contribute to the disorganization of the working class and its integration into the prevailing order.

Needless to say, there are tendencies counteracting each of the debilitating tendencies just noted. But unless it can be shown that the development of the forces of production *necessarily* defeats each of these disorganizing processes (in the long run), there is no reason to hold that the fettering of the forces of production under capitalism—manifest, as Cohen would have it, in their increasingly irrational deployment—will inevitably lead to a growth in the revolutionary capacity of the working class; and therefore to socialism.

It might even be doubted whether the development of the forces of production under capitalism increases the class capacities of the working class at all. While it is likely, as Marx stressed, that the factory system, the distinctively capitalist form of organization of the production process, does improve communications among workers by drawing large numbers of workers together and breaking down (some) forms of craft and skill divisions within the working class, it is also evident that technical change—especially in advanced capitalism—can weaken working-class capacities. The global telecommunications revolution, combined with dramatic improvements in transportation systems, has made it easier for the bourgeoisie to organize production globally—in “world market factories”. This phenomenon, so far from bringing workers together, exacerbates national and regional divisions within the working class and isolates technical coordination from direct production. The tendency towards monopolization of technical knowledge within managerial strata closely linked to the bourgeoisie materially and ideologically has undermined the capacity of the direct producers to organize production. These and similar aspects of modern capitalism may not have the debilitating effect on working-class capacities sometimes ascribed to

45. See, for example, Nicos Poulantzas, *Political Power and Social Classes* (London: New Left Books, 1973); and Adam Przeworski, “Social Democracy as an Historical Phenomenon”, *New Left Review* 122 (1980).

them. But it is clear that there is no unequivocal and automatic connection, even of a tendential character, between technical change and development under capitalism and the growth of working-class capacities for the revolutionary transformation of capitalism into socialism.

What holds for the emergence of working-class capacities under capitalism surely pertains more generally. There is no necessary connection between the development of an objective interest in epochal social change on the part of a class and the development of class capacities for bringing about epochal transformations. An objective interest in moving from one mode of production to another is not sufficient, even in the long run, for revolutionizing modes of production. But if class capacities do not, in the end, derive from the development of productive forces—if class capacities are radically irreducible to class interests—it is unwarranted, finally, to impute to these productive forces the kind of primacy orthodox historical materialism ascribes to them.

Subordinating class capacities for action to class interests in the outcomes of actions is a consequence of the individualist style of argument Marx sometimes lapsed into, despite his many disparaging allusions to contractarians and other “individualists”. By abstracting human beings and their interests from the social and historical conditions in which these interests are formed and sustained, orthodox historical materialism (implicitly) maintains that structural conditions for the translation of interests into actions are derived from these interests themselves. However, this claim is almost certainly false. What the best Marxian social science of this century has shown repeatedly is that the major determinants of political action are irreducible, social determinations. Human beings may be generally interested in augmenting the level of development of productive forces, yet thwarted permanently from acting upon that interest. There may be insurmountable social constraints blocking epochal historical change. An abstracted, ahistorical account of human interests and rationality will not, it seems, provide a basis for explaining the historical efficacy of these constraints, nor even for acknowledging their existence.<sup>46</sup>

### The Transformation Thesis and The Optimality Thesis

Even if the Capacity Thesis were true, the Transformation and Optimality Theses would be questionable, especially as they apply to the transition to socialism in developed capitalist societies. Suppose that workers do have the capacity to overthrow capitalism and establish socialism.

46. In Chapter 6 we argue that these claims are compatible with what is defensible in individualistic stances in social science and with a proper ontology of the social world.



They still might not do so because of the costs of the struggle.<sup>47</sup> Rational actors do not act simply on the basis of the benefits associated with outcomes; they also take the expected costs of the process needed to obtain those outcomes into account. At one point, Cohen acknowledges this problem. In criticizing the view that the vote by workers for bourgeois parties demonstrates that they are captivated by bourgeois ideology, Cohen writes:

This answer no doubt gives a part of the truth, in exaggerated form. But it is important to realize that it is not the whole truth. For it neglects the costs and difficulties of carrying through a socialist transformation. Workers are not so benighted as to be helpless dupes of bourgeois ideology, nor all so uninformed as to be unaware of the size of the socialist Project. Marxist tradition expects revolution only in crisis, not because then alone will workers realize what burden capitalism puts upon them, but because when the crisis is bad enough the dangers of embarking on a socialist alternative become comparatively tolerable.<sup>48</sup>

This comment, however, is not developed in *Karl Marx's Theory of History*, nor is it integrated into Cohen's account of the "distinctive" contradiction of advanced capitalism. Capitalism might be wasteful and irrational, but still not engender such a deep crisis that the costs of a revolutionary struggle for socialism become "comparatively tolerable".

To focus on the costs borne by individuals who participate in revolutionary upheavals is to raise the ubiquitous "free-rider problem". In general, revolutionary transformations are "public goods" in the sense that their benefits necessarily spill over to (many) individuals regardless of the individuals' contribution to them. Thus, in socialist revolutions, if Marxists are right, the social changes the revolution implements do not just benefit revolutionary militants but virtually everyone not in the ruling class. Then if rationality is identified with a means-ends calculus of costs and benefits, it is hard to see why anyone would ever participate in revolutionary struggles. Everyone would want to be a free-rider. However, this problem vanishes if it is understood that people participate in revolutionary struggles not simply for individual-instrumental reasons, but for expressive reasons too. Class struggles, especially when they take on revolutionary dimensions, are not just means for enhancing one's own distributive share. They are processes that enable people to express values, solidarities, anger and ideological commitments. If people are committed to values that can only be expressed through

47. Cf. Adam Przeworski, *Capitalism and Social Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), Chapter 5.

48. Cohen, *KMTH*, p. 245.

struggle, then it is impossible to be a bystander and still receive "benefits" from the struggle.

It is incumbent on Marxists to produce a proper account of revolutionary motivation. Orthodox historical materialism holds that the fettering of productive capacities explains the inevitable emergence of revolutionary motivations, but neither Cohen nor any other orthodox historical materialist has provided a satisfactory rationale for this claim. It would seem that none can be offered within the strict purview of historical materialism. Except when workers literally have "nothing to lose but their chains", a richer theory of revolutionary motivation than historical materialism provides is needed.

In defense of the orthodox theory, it should be noted that productive forces undoubtedly do play a role in determining the costs of revolutionary struggle. One reason that revolutions have typically followed in the wake of major wars is that wars undermine the repressive capacity of defeated states, and therefore reduce the costs of revolutionary activity. Also the defeat of a state at war is, at least in some cases, linked to the stagnation of its productive forces, relative to those of other states. The problem at hand, however, is not whether the fettering of productive forces has *some* effect on the emergence of revolutionary agents, but whether a general theory of revolutionary agency can be derived directly from an account of the level of development of productive forces and their fettering. We believe that in general it cannot.

In advanced capitalism, even with fettered productive forces, it is not clear why the repressive capacity of the state should decline, why it should lose the loyalty of the police and military in the face of social conflict. It is even less clear why the irrational deployment of productive forces should generate incentives for individuals to risk their lives, or even their standards of living for a period of time, in order to be "lifted from the curse of Adam". Workers may come to believe that socialism would be in their interest, but this does not imply that they will also believe that it is in their interests to suffer the costs of destroying capitalism even when they have the organizational capacity to succeed in this endeavor. Socialist transformations may well be possible. But if they are, it is not simply a consequence of the fettering of the productive forces.

## Conclusion

If the criticisms we have raised are correct, then the Primacy Thesis in the form advanced by Cohen cannot be sustained. But this conclusion does not imply a rejection of the importance of technological development in a theory of social change. Technological development is

undoubtedly a critical factor for opening up new historical possibilities. Therefore an account of the level and type of development is almost certainly indispensable for conceptualizing possible alternatives to existing social orders.

What we would question is the contention that explanatory primacy, without any qualification whatsoever, should be accorded to the productive forces. At the very least, historical materialism, as Marx sketched it in the 1859 Preface and as Cohen reconstructed it in *Karl Marx's Theory of History*, must be supplemented by a theory of class capacities—or at least an account of the development of working-class capacities under capitalism. In all likelihood, such a theory would have to be based directly on an analysis of social relations of production, the state and ideology—and perhaps also on human interests distinct from the one in which orthodox historical materialism invests the entire dynamic of epochal historical change.<sup>49</sup>

Socialist political strategies must contend directly with the obstacles in the way of developing appropriately revolutionary class capacities: the institutional form of the capitalist state, divisions within the working class and between that class and its potential allies, and mechanisms of ideological domination and deflection. Such obstacles are irreducible to the forces of production. Thus the fettering of these forces in no way ensures the eventual erosion of the obstacles to working-class capacities. A revolutionary theory which sees the building of working-class capacities as an inevitable outcome of technological development, and which fails to grasp the specificity of the role of social structural constraints in the formation of class capacities, will, we think, be incapable of informing revolutionary practice constructively.

Our doubts about the Primacy Thesis, in its orthodox form, do not by any means imply a rejection of the core insights of historical materialism. We believe that the Transformation Thesis, and even the Optimality Thesis, can be incorporated in modified form in a more complex model of historical trajectories. What is needed is the elaboration of a range of possible outcomes, each conditional on the presence of other, relatively independent causal processes. Classical historical materialism charts one normatively salient path of epochal social change, contingent upon the coincident development and fettering of class capacities. But there almost certainly are alternative paths, contingent upon other conditions, within a more open theory of historical trajectories. While we cannot offer such a theory, we shall try to indicate something of its structure in Chapter 5.

49. Plausible candidates might include, among others, interests in freedom, community and self-realization.

## What is Historical about Historical Materialism?

It is widely held that, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, history came into its own as a proper object of scientific scrutiny, and that the writings of Darwin and Marx were decisive in this regard. To be sure, theories of nature and society had always allowed for change. But before Darwin and Marx the predominant view was that stasis, not change, was the natural state of systems. Darwin and Marx definitively reversed this conception, discovering a primary disposition to change in the nature of the objects they described. For them, stasis remained a theoretical possibility, but one requiring special explanation.

While both Darwinism and Marxism constitute revolutionary breaks with earlier conceptions of natural and human history, and while there are important conceptual affinities joining Darwin's theory of evolution and Marx's theory of history, it has not been sufficiently appreciated how these theories differ—precisely in the sense they count as *historical*. Evolutionary theory and historical materialism exemplify different strategies for making history an object of theoretical investigation. By reflecting on these differences, we can gain some purchase on the kind of theory historical materialism is, and appreciate the very special sense in which Marx did indeed construct an *historical* theory. Marx's theory of history must, of course, be judged by standards that could be applied in principle to any purported explanatory program. However, there are special features of the theory that require identification before a proper assessment can be made. The comparison with evolutionary theory is particularly useful for bringing these special features into focus.

In the next section we shall explain the sense in which the Darwinian theory of evolution constitutes a theory of the *history* of living things. This will be followed by a brief recapitulation of the core arguments of historical materialism. In the following two sections, we shall then