

indirectly.⁴² Perhaps this is why the impulse to develop authoritative resources appears less universal than the impulse to develop productive forces directly. In any case, in so far as the motive for expanding authoritative resources derives from the motive for improving material welfare, the development of authoritative resources is subordinate to motivations structured by allocative resources.⁴³ This is precisely what a Marxist analysis entails.

It is one thing to argue for the relative plausibility of a materialist theory of historical trajectories over Giddens's dualist theory. It is quite another to produce a substantive and compelling reconstruction of historical materialism. While we cannot elaborate such a theory, in the next chapter we will outline some of the directions in which this reconstruction might proceed.

42. It is interesting in this regard that many of the earliest historical advances in surveillance that Giddens identifies were concerned with the tallying of tribute. See for example his discussion of the early forms of writing in Sumer, *A Contemporary Critique*, p. 95.

43. It is, of course, conceivable that people want power for power's sake, not because it increases their material well-being. A desire for power could then provide the motivational basis for an autonomous development of authoritative resources. We are skeptical of this motivation, however; and, in any case, would caution against multiplying transhistorical human interests beyond necessity.

Towards a Reconstructed Historical Materialism

In the face of orthodox historical materialism's evident implausibility, many Marxists have abandoned the Marxist theory of history altogether. Both the Primacy Thesis and the Base/Superstructure Thesis are now almost universally rejected. Yet, as we have noted, Marxists continue to endorse the underlying intuition that historical materialism articulates—that history has a determinate structure—and continue to use concepts that derive their theoretical status from historical materialism. In our view, these intuitions are sound. What they suggest is that, at this point in the history of Marxian theory, historical materialism should not be abandoned, but reconstructed.

Orthodox historical materialism attempts to provide an explanation for the overall trajectory of historical development by linking together two pairs of concepts: forces and relations of production, and economic bases and superstructures. The interactions and contradictions between forces and relations of production explain the trajectory of economic structures; the interactions and contradictions between economic structures and superstructures explain the trajectory of superstructures. Accordingly, reconstructions of historical materialism involve rethinking each of these pairs of connections.

The Primacy Thesis

Orthodox historical materialism provides an account of:

- (a) the necessary (material) conditions for change;
- (b) the direction of change;

- (c) the means through which change is achieved;
- (d) sufficient conditions for change.

We have already argued that the least plausible of these claims is (d).¹ The orthodox theory claims that wherever there is an interest in epochal historical change, eventually the change will occur—subject only to the obvious proviso that conditions for sustaining human life remain in effect and that the initial conditions under which the theory applies continue to pertain. Where an interest in change exists, the capacities for change eventually follow. There is, however, no good reason to hold that an interest in change suffices to bring about the requisite material, organizational and intellectual capacities for change; and no reason, therefore, to propose an inevitable sequence of epochal historical stages. What we call *weak* historical materialism, claiming (a), (b) and (c), but not (d), thus suggests itself. Epochal transformation does not follow simply from an interest in bringing it about; the capacity for change is a non-redundant second ingredient, which must also be present. Epochal historical change is still rooted in material conditions (a); it still has a directionality (b), making changes “sticky downward”, as described in Chapter 4; and changes are still actualized through class struggles (c); but there is no longer any claim to the inevitability of specific transitions.

Dropping (d) helps transform historical materialism from an “organism development” model of history into a theory of historical trajectories.² If agents capable of transforming relations of production are not *always* forthcoming when productive forces stagnate, it is obvious that production relations may not always develop *optimally*. The roadmap of historical development can thus have forks and detours, junctures in which more than one option is historically possible and in which suboptimal outcomes (with respect to the “unfettering” of the forces of production) can occur. The cumulative quality of the development of the forces of production still makes retreats on the map less likely than stasis or progression (thus the “sticky downward” directionality to historical trajectories), but eliminating the thesis of optimal selection of economic structures opens the possibility of multiple routes into the future.

Still, not everything is possible at every juncture, and throughout most stretches of history societies are not at junctures at all. Usually, there is sufficient compatibility between forces and relations of pro-

1. See Chapter 2.

2. See Chapter 4.

duction. Weak historical materialism is therefore not a trivial position. It provides an account of what is and is not on the historical agenda for different levels of development of productive forces. It depicts an historical map—an account of the patterns of correspondence or “contradiction” between forces and relations of production that open up and close off possibilities—and accounts as well for the direction of movement along the map. In addition, weak historical materialism makes claims about the means by which historical change (and stasis) is achieved. It is class struggle that, in the end, determines whether and how we move along the map the theory provides.

Weak historical materialism is thus the orthodox theory without the unlikely and unwarranted claim that what is necessary for epochal historical change is ultimately also sufficient. Yet, in spite of this difference, both orthodox and weak historical materialism hold that there is a lawlike tendency for relations of production to correspond to forces of production in ways that facilitate the continuous development of productive forces. Orthodox and weak historical materialism are therefore historical theories in the same way.³

The elaboration of weak historical materialism as a theory of historical trajectories is bound to provoke a reconstruction of the typology of economic structures Marxists have traditionally acknowledged. In Cohen’s version of the traditional argument, there are only four kinds of economic structures: pre-class society, pre-capitalist class society, capitalism and post-class society (socialism/communism). If this list were exhaustive there would be little possibility of developing a nuanced theory of historical trajectories. One can hardly construct a “roadmap” with multiple routes when there are only four points on the map. Dropping the Optimality Thesis creates a theoretical opening that requires the development of a more differentiated typology of social forms.⁴

To this end, we think it is desirable to elaborate concepts of economic

3. The distinction drawn here between orthodox and weak historical materialism is different from the distinction sometimes drawn by evolutionary biologists between “strong” and “weak” selectionism. The latter distinction describes a disagreement over the power that natural selection exerts on evolution; it therefore concerns the relative causal importance of natural selection in the evolutionary trajectories of populations, not the cogency of natural selection itself.

4. If only four types of economic structure are possible, the Optimality Thesis would lose its bite. Even if it were true, it would not be informative to say that capitalism is the optimal economic structure at the point when feudalism is no longer viable (because feudal social relations fetter further development of the productive forces), if capitalism, post-capitalism and pre-class society (“primitive communism”) are the only options. The thesis becomes interesting only after we identify a wider range of (possible) post-feudal economic structures.

structure at lower levels of abstraction than Marxists generally have. For example, capitalism is usually defined as a system within which the means of production are privately owned by one class (capitalists) which then hires (propertyless) direct producers (workers) in a labor market to set those means of production to work. Capitalists own the means of production; workers own their labor power. The property rights embodied in these forms of ownership, however, have many aspects; ownership is a bundle of rights. According to the received understanding, owners of means of production can use them as they please—sell them, destroy them, appropriate profits from their use, and hire and fire others to use them. However, in actually existing “capitalist” societies, some of these rights are effectively vested in other agents. Occupational safety requirements, pollution controls, capital export controls, job rights of workers and profit taxes all compromise capitalist property rights. The theoretical question, then, is whether transformations of capitalist property rights constitute the basis for qualitatively different relations of production. Philippe Van Parijs has argued that developed forms of “welfare state capitalism” constitute a distinct mode of production. If workers enjoy considerable property rights in jobs, and capitalists lose many of their rights over means of production and even over control over most of the social surplus, societies would no longer be capitalist in their “laws of motion”, even if private property in means of production is still officially retained.⁵ Many other differentiations among relations of production are conceivable—among pre-capitalist class societies and also among societies that orthodox historical materialists would regard as post-capitalist or socialist. If historical materialism is to be reconstructed into a useful and sustainable theory of historical trajectories, a richer elaboration of economic structures than those Marxists have traditionally acknowledged is an important priority.

Other kinds of reconstructions of historical materialism based on modifications of the Primacy Thesis are possible. An historical theory that advances only (a) and (b), which we might call quasi-historical materialism, is also conceivable. The resulting theory, in order to deny (c) plausibly, would have to propose an alternative—non-Marxian—account of the means through which the pattern and direction it shares with weak and orthodox historical materialism are achieved. One might argue, as does Richard Lachmann, that epochal transformations of systems of production are consequences of intra-ruling class conflicts rather than class struggles.⁶ Lachmann argues that, in the transition from

5. Philippe Van Parijs, “A Revolution in Class Theory” 15, 4 (1986–87), reprinted in Erik Olin Wright et al., *The Debate on Classes* (London: Verso, 1990).

6. See Richard Lachmann, “An Elite Conflict Theory of the Transition to Capitalism”, *American Sociological Review* 55, 3 (June 1990).

feudalism to capitalism, the central struggles revolved around conflicts between the crown, the nobility, and various categories of landlords and church elites; not between lords and serfs, or between emerging capitalist and feudal exploiting classes. To be sure, the outcomes of these conflicts are, in Lachmann’s view, conditioned by the character of the existing economic structure and the level of development of the forces of production; but it is not class struggles as such that propel epochal transformations. A theory of this sort retains the first two elements of the orthodox theory, but drops the third and fourth. Needless to say, quasi-historical materialism diverges substantively from both the letter and spirit of Marx’s theory of history. Yet it still retains the essential historicity of more traditional forms of historical materialism. The forces that push the system forward remain endogenous to the system, and the opening and closing of historical possibilities are still anchored to the level of development of the productive forces and their interconnection with relations of production.

A third mitigation of historical materialism maintains (a), but at least partially abandons (b). Weak, like orthodox, historical materialism purports to account for the large-scale features of history’s overarching structure and trajectory from the earliest times to the present and into the future. *Limited* historical materialism might hold that the theory pertains not to all of human history, nor even just to the history of class societies, as *The Communist Manifesto* suggests, but only to the history of certain kinds of class societies. The most natural way to construe a claim of this sort is as a claim about the relative causal importance of the historical materialist dynamic. Limited historical materialism would then claim that historical materialist development is, as a matter of fact, overwhelmed by rival causes—perhaps of an exogenous character—for some, but not all of human history. Marx plainly did accord considerable generality to the theory he proposed; it would remain to provide an alternative rationale, distinct from the indications Marx provided, for limiting historical materialism’s generality as a theory. Still, a limited historical materialism—satisfying (a) and (c), but applying to less of human history than historical materialists commonly suppose in (b)—is conceivable. Such a theory would be no less historical than historical materialisms of a more general ambition.

The Base/Superstructure Thesis

G.A. Cohen has suggested that for historical materialism to be plausible it should be restricted to a theory of economic structures and of other

social practices only in so far as they affect these economic structures.⁷ Thus there *could* exist endogenous, dynamic historical processes even at the level of abstraction at which historical materialism is pitched that are distinct from the one the Primacy Thesis identifies so long as they do not interfere with the historical materialist dynamic. On this basis Cohen draws a distinction between “inclusive” and “restricted” historical materialism. This distinction has important ramifications for the Base/Superstructure Thesis.

On the traditional “inclusivist” view, the “superstructure” consists of all non-economic social phenomena. To claim that the base explains the superstructure, therefore, is equivalent to saying that the economic structure explains all non-economic properties of society. This claim is preposterous if it is taken to mean that the economy explains every fine-grained aspect of non-economic institutions; and no Marxist, however committed to the orthodox theory, has ever supposed otherwise. Inclusive historical materialism, therefore, implies that only “important” or “basic” or “general” properties of superstructures are explained by the economic base.

The problem with this formulation, as Cohen points out, is that there is no good way to distinguish important from unimportant properties of superstructures. Thus there is no basis for understanding the explanatory scope of the Base/Superstructure Thesis. To solve these problems, Cohen argues that historical materialism should be reconstructed in a more restricted way. What Cohen suggests is that historical materialists need only hold that economic structures explain functionally those aspects of non-economic phenomena that have effects on the social relations of production. He thus identifies the “superstructure” with those non-economic institutions and practices that serve to stabilize the economic base. It is only these phenomena that historical materialism purports to explain functionally. Thus, for restricted historical materialists, many erstwhile “superstructural” explananda with little or no relevance to the reproduction of relations of production fall outside the scope of the theory.

Inclusive historical materialism was a theory of general history—that is, of virtually everything historical. Restricted historical materialism, in contrast, would hardly count as a theory of general history. To suggest that Marxists ought to endorse restricted, not inclusive, historical materialism, is therefore to diminish the theory’s explanatory pretensions substantially, while enhancing its plausibility.

7. G.A. Cohen, “Restricted and Inclusive Historical Materialism”, *Irish Philosophical Journal* 1 (1984), pp. 3–31; reprinted (with modifications) in G.A. Cohen, *History, Labour and Freedom: Themes from Marx* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), Chapter 9.

However, restricted historical materialism is still an ambitious theory. It explains many aspects of non-economic phenomena functionally. To be sure, it need not imply that superstructures invariably reproduce class relations. But it does maintain that there will be a systematic *tendency* for functional arrangements to emerge and persist. The underlying claim is that *dysfunctional* arrangements—political institutions, for example, that undermine the dominant property relations—will be unstable and will therefore tend to be transformed. The situation is analogous to incompatibilities between forces and relations of production. Certain combinations of base and superstructure are incompatible in the sense that they generate systematic instabilities. When such incompatibilities arise, something has to give—the relations have to change or the superstructures must. The general Marxist assumption is that the power of ruling classes is such that, in general, they will be able to prevent fundamental changes in the production relations. Thus there will be a stronger tendency for political institutions and policies to be transformed to restore compatibility with economic structures than vice versa.

A further retreat from the Base/Superstructure Thesis would involve a rejection of even this restricted form of the functional argument. Thus instead of claiming that state policies are functionally explained by relations of production (in so far as they affect these relations), one could regard them simply as consequences of the balance of power of classes engaged in struggles over the state. Different class actors command different resources and have different capacities to impose sanctions on their opponents and generally to make their will prevail. The trajectory of state policies could be viewed as the outcome of conflict among these forces. On this understanding, no endogenous mechanisms, geared towards selecting functional outcomes, would play any explanatory role.

Arguably, this kind of account would remain Marxist in the sense that its explanatory apparatus is still rooted in class analysis. However, by dropping the functional explanation of the superstructure, which restricted historical materialism upholds, the linkage between a society’s base and its superstructure becomes less determinate. This in turn would have considerable ramifications for the kinds of explanations Marxists might provide. If the functionalist Base/Superstructure Thesis were dropped altogether, it would be easy to allow for the persistence of suboptimal and contradictory “superstructural” forms, contingent upon the power and intentions of social actors. On this view, for example, a myopic but powerful bourgeoisie might sustain policies or institutions that undermine its class interests.

We believe that the degree of determinacy implied by restricted historical materialism is helpful in making sense of the social world.

However, in the end, the viability of restricted historical materialism—and, indeed, of historical materialisms generally—can only be settled empirically. Our belief is therefore speculative. At this stage in the reconstruction of historical materialism, it is not yet clear—beyond the most general indications—even how to formulate hypotheses that the evidence can then corroborate or infirm.

Historical Materialisms

We have considered a number of modifications of the orthodox theory that retain its essentially historical character, while diminishing its explanatory pretensions but enhancing its plausibility. In sum, we have distinguished four types of historical materialism, as illustrated in Table 5.1. These types vary in their account of the linkage between forces and relations of production, on the one hand, and the linkage between sets of production relations or economic structures and noneconomic structures, on the other.

In *strong historical materialism*, the level of development of the forces of production functionally determines a unique economic structure. In *weak historical materialism*, the forces of production only determine a range of possible sets of relations of production; selections within this range are determined by historically contingent causes that bear particularly on the capacities of class actors to transform the relations. *Inclusive historical materialism* holds that economic structures determine all important properties of non-economic institutions (at appropriate levels of abstraction). On this view, the historical trajectory of economic structures determines the basic contours of human civilization overall. *Restricted historical materialism*, finally, holds that economic structures explain only those non-economic institutions that bear on the reproduction of the economic structures themselves.

Marx himself, and most Marxists after him, endorsed a strong, inclusive historical materialism. For reasons already discussed, today this

Table 5.1 A Typology of Historical Materialisms

		Relation of Base to Superstructure	
		<i>Inclusive</i>	<i>Restricted</i>
Relation of forces of production to relations of production	<i>Strong</i>	1	2
	<i>Weak</i>	3	4

ambition seems indefensible. Weak, restricted historical materialism is a far more plausible version of the core insight all historical materialisms articulate. We would venture that, if a defensible Marxist theory of history can be maintained, it will have to be along such lines. We have already suggested that the jury is still out and is likely to remain out for some time.

From Historical Materialism to Sociological Materialism?

We have only gestured towards defending weak restricted historical materialism. We have spoken of a roadmap of historical trajectories, but the actual routes still remain only vaguely understood. We have endorsed the classical argument that the level of development of the forces of production imposes limits on possible relations of production, but we have not pushed that argument beyond the very abstract idea of compatibility proposed by Cohen. Neither have we elaborated it in a way that puts substance behind the idea of multiple possibilities and alternative trajectories. We have, in other words, provided only a few brief indications of what a full-fledged reconstruction of historical materialism would involve.

Because of the uncertainties that cloud even the most plausible versions of historical materialism, it is tempting to retreat even further from the core elements of the Marxist theory, perhaps all the way towards sociological materialism. It is in this spirit, though undoubtedly for different reasons, that Etienne Balibar advanced a view of historical materialism as a theory of social forms, but not of *transitions* between social forms.⁸ In doing so, he continued to use the term “historical materialism”. But what he suggested is only a materialist sociology—a sociology that explains by means of materialist categories.⁹ Balibar’s “historical materialism” is, at most, only vestigially historical. In so far as it appears otherwise, it is because he assumed the typology of modes of production that genuine historical materialisms propose. But a materialist sociology is not a materialist theory of history. Purported historical materialisms that do not theorize transitions—that fail to postulate any direction of change between epochal structures—are not

8. See, for example, his “The Fundamental Concepts of Historical Materialism”, in L. Althusser and E. Balibar, *Reading Capital* (London: New Left Books, 1971).

9. “Materialism” in this context is a view about the nature of social causality. For a materialist, the pertinent social causes are material—that is technological or economic, as opposed to ideas or other “ideal” factors (like values or norms). A materialist sociology, then, is a sociology that explains by reference to material causes.

historical materialisms in our sense. They are not even historical theories in the sense that Darwinian evolutionary theory is historical.

It may be necessary, however, to go Balibar's route. Eventually, even weak restricted historical materialism may prove indefensible. A materialist sociology could, however, remain distinctively Marxist in its conceptualization of class and in its focus on the effects of class structures and class struggles. We shall argue in Chapter 8 that there is a sense in which Marxism can be identified with class analysis. Thus, arguably, the Marxist agenda could sustain even the abandonment of historical materialism. Some consequences of such an outcome will be examined in Chapter 8 as well.

The Politics of Historical Materialism

From an orthodox perspective, individuals in advanced societies confront only two epochal alternatives: capitalism and socialism. If, as we have suggested, the actual choices are more complex—if there are alternatives to capitalism and socialism, as traditionally conceived—a simple, bipolar politics would be profoundly ill-informed. Historical events have shown that the consequences of being ill-informed in this regard can be devastating. A flawed roadmap has led many anti-capitalists to support despotic state socialisms, arguably setting the socialist project back for decades. Weak historical materialism, reconstructed and elaborated, can help rectify this potentially damaging situation.

However, we should be careful not to exaggerate the political implications of moving from strong to weak historical materialism and from inclusive to restricted historical materialism. It is easy to be misled because of the role historical materialism has played, not always with good reason, in some historically important intra-Marxist political debates. Two examples, important mainly in the historical period in which historical materialist orthodoxy held sway, illustrate these points.

Reform vs. Revolution

For Marxists of the Second International, and then in a different way after the Bolshevik Revolution, the principal political division on the left was between revolutionaries and reformers. In this dispute, historical materialism seemed to weigh in on the revolutionaries' side. In depicting economic structures as discrete *sets* of production relations that change discontinuously (to accommodate to ever increasing levels of development), historical materialism suggested, even if it did not strictly imply, that history advances in revolutionary leaps. Reformers, on the other

hand, appeared to endorse a model of change that denied radical discontinuities. It might therefore appear that acknowledging a variety of possible economic structures in addition to capitalism and socialism would mitigate the revolutionary implications of the orthodox theory. A series of small leaps can look increasingly like continuous motion.

However we would suggest that weak historical materialism is equally compatible with the views of reformers and revolutionaries. The reform vs. revolution debate, properly understood, concerns the extent to which political superstructures can withstand attempts at small-scale transformations in social relations of production. Very generally, reformers hold that structural changes can take place gradually, without the superstructure inevitably undoing their effects. Revolutionaries, on the other hand, hold that superstructures are so powerful that production relations can only be transformed abruptly and totally. Seen in this light, it is evident that the reform vs. revolution debate is orthogonal to disputes between strong and weak historical materialists. The former debate can be engaged, in principle, no matter how many discrete economic structures historical materialists acknowledge. Indeed, it is worth noting that, even as the reform vs. revolution debate raged, reformers never challenged the idea that socialism and capitalism are distinct modes of production, and that ostensible alternatives to one or the other are only hybrid and generally transitional forms. They adhered to the orthodox account of historical possibilities as steadfastly as the revolutionaries did. What reformers and revolutionaries disputed had to do with how to go from one place to another on the same impoverished roadmap; not with where there was to go.

Normative Judgments vs. Material Interests

Within the Second International and thereafter many Marxists have disparaged the role of moral denunciation and normative argumentation in the struggle for socialism. By asserting an *inevitable* sequence of epochal historical stages, orthodox historical materialism seemed to make normative assessments of alternative economic structures superfluous. According to the received view, moral arguments might, in some cases, stir class actors to mobilize against existing arrangements. They might therefore help facilitate epochal transformations. But in the end, transformations occur, in the orthodox view, because insurgent social classes have a material interest in their occurrence. For classical Marxism, therefore, it is strictly unnecessary, even if it can be marginally helpful, to fault capitalism on normative grounds.

Strictly speaking, however, the traditional Marxist distaste for normative argumentation is not a consequence of strong historical materialism

per se, of a commitment to a theory that provides an account of necessary *and sufficient* conditions for insurgent social classes bringing about epochal historical transformations. It follows instead from the *additional* conviction that it is workers' material interests, not their moral judgments, that propel them to overthrow capitalism. Around the turn of the century, this idea was sustained by the conviction that "the laws of motion" of capitalist societies would lead to stagnation and ultimately to breakdown. In Cohen's strong historical materialism, a different material interest—in diminishing burdensome toil—plays a similar role. Thus Marxists, following Marx's own lead, have generally argued that moral revulsion is not historically efficacious, except marginally. But they could have thought otherwise and remained strong historical materialists nevertheless. Strong historical materialists could have argued, for instance, that workers inevitably become socialist revolutionaries in part because they inevitably come to be moved by capitalism's injustice. That they did not so argue is perhaps a consequence of the fact that they were embroiled in polemical controversies with "utopian socialists", or because they were inclusive historical materialists who thought morality part of a society's superstructure—and therefore tendentially supportive of existing social and political arrangements. It was not because they thought that contradictions between forces and relations of production suffice to account for the actual trajectory of epochal historical change.

But even if the move from strong to weak historical materialism and from inclusive to restricted historical materialism does not by itself move normative considerations to center-stage, it plainly suggests this shift in focus. If nothing else, it moves the question of the development of class capacities into the foreground. More importantly, if a restructured historical materialism presents a more complex roadmap than was traditionally conceived, the need for normative argumentation becomes all the more urgent. For it then becomes crucial to reflect normatively on post-capitalist social and political arrangements. It is now clear that the reluctance of traditional Marxism to do so was naive and even pernicious.

However, it is one thing to motivate class actors; and something else to defend socialism normatively. For weak historical materialists, historical materialism only reveals what is *materially* possible. But to hold that socialism is materially possible is not automatically to imply that it is also desirable. That case must be made. Thus weak historical materialism, joined with the political convictions all Marxists share, makes the normative defense of Marxist political objectives unavoidable. To defend Marxist political commitments, and also to mobilize individuals in their behalf, weak historical materialists, unlike their orthodox forbearers, cannot be silent or derisive in moral debates.

PART II

Explanation
