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PART I

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# The Theory of History

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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.