

Does Historical Materialism Imply Socialism?

Conference in Honor of Kai Nielsen

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The publication in 1978 of G. A. Cohen's *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defense* marked the beginning of an exciting new genre of Marxist scholarship in the English-speaking world.¹ "Analytical Marxism" was the (soon-to-be applied) official appellation. "Marxism without the bullshit" was the unofficial label among core aficionados. Henceforth, the conceptual and logical rigor of analytical philosophy and the best methods of contemporary social science would be applied to the various elements of Marxist theory. Although most participants in the project thought of themselves as in-some-sense Marxists, there was a determination to let the chips fall where they may. What cannot be rigorously defended will be discarded, however sacred the pedigree.

In 1983 Kai Nielsen joined the analytical-Marxist debate on Cohen's book with his essay, "On Taking Historical Materialism Seriously."² Two theses are central to Cohen's defense of historical materialism: the "primacy thesis," which asserts that economic forces explain economic relations, and the "development thesis," which asserts that these economic forces tend to develop over time. Cohen, famously and controversially, appeals to the concept of "functional explanation" in defending the former. He sees the latter as less problematic, deriving from human intelligence and rationality in the context of material scarcity, and thinks it confirmed by historical experience.

But has it been? "Should we accept the development thesis?" Nielsen asks. He notes that some critics, even Marxists ones, are skeptical. (He cites Andrew Levine, E. O. Wright, Joshua Cohen and Milton Fisk.) Nielsen points to an extensive set of counterexamples, societies in which the tendency for productive forces to develop did not manifest itself over long periods of time (a century or more): the Roman Empire, the Incan Empire, the aborigines in Australia, the native peoples of New Guinea, the Ming and Xing Dynasties in China.

He then upsets the reader's expectation by pronouncing in favor of the development thesis. If we think of the thesis as applying, not to individual societies, but to "human society as a whole," then, he argues, the thesis is not disconfirmed by such examples. He argues further that the concept, "human society as a whole," does not involve reification, nor does it commit one to any problematic metaphysical doctrine of universals.

Well then, if the development thesis is true, does it follow that historical materialism is true? Nielsen grants that Cohen has shown it to be coherent and plausible, but that's not the same as being true. What about the most important element of the theory, the element that energized generations of socialists: the prediction that capitalism would be supplanted by a higher, more humane form of society? Cohen himself does not explicitly endorse inevitability, but the tenor of his work is decidedly optimistic. He argues that the productive forces of society are not now rationally deployed, given or technological capabilities and the needs and wants of the great masses of people. Hence, "capitalism is no longer justified, and no longer stable."³

Nielsen asks two obvious questions. Given the vast ideological resources of capitalist societies, will these great masses perceive the suboptimality of the system? Secondly, even if they do, will they risk their necks to bring a new order into being--given the awesome technological

means of supervision, control and oppression in the hands of the ruling classes of the world? He concludes that we can only hope that historical materialism is true. He invokes Gramsci: "Pessimism of the intellect and optimism of the will [is] a compelling way of ordering one's being."⁴

Let us look at this "successor-system" question more closely. I doubt that there are many people today who, when thinking seriously about the future, don't feel a sense of foreboding. If Nielsen endorsed "pessimism of the intellect" twenty year ago, what must he be thinking now? Twenty years ago the Soviet Union was on the verge a leadership change that would bring to its helm a committed socialist and energetic reformer who would open up his closed society and vigorously champion nuclear disarmament. Eastern Europe was rife with experiments in market socialism. China had recovered from the debacle of the Cultural Revolution and had instituted a socialist land reform that was lifting millions of peasants out of poverty and setting the nation on the path of exhilarating economic growth. The United States, meanwhile, had elected an ignorant, if telegenic, ex-movie actor whose economic strategists had ushered in the worst recession since the Great Depression. If Nielsen was a pessimist of the intellect in 1983, what must be his state of mind now? Soon enough we'll find out.

If he is persuaded by what I am about to say, he will surprise you. For I am going to argue--schematically to be sure--that if we take historical materialism seriously, we need not be pessimistic. Our spirits may be down right now, but pessimism of the intellect--at least with regard to long-term prospects--is unwarranted.

To establish this claim, or at least make it not implausible, I need to add another premise to the standard theory of historical materialism, as set out so rigorously by Cohen. If we take

seriously the driving force of technological development in shaping human history, we must note that technological development has not been confined to forces of production, that is to say, to the means by which we interact with nature to produce the goods and services we consume. Let me propose another development thesis. It, like Nielsen's version of Cohen's, is understood as applying to human society as a whole. If Cohen's thesis is D1, let us add: D2: Means to species solidarity tend to develop over time.

In my view, D2, although rarely theorized within the context of historical materialism, is central to any convincing account of epochal transition. Let us reflect on this thesis for a moment. Let us begin by observing that our capacity to identify deeply with other members of our species and with the human species as a whole (what Marx, following Feuerbach, calls our "species being") is a contingent biological fact. Our species needn't have evolved such a capacity.

Suppose, for example, that the human brain had sufficient memory for only one language, or was incapable of keeping separate languages distinct. Suppose any human child was capable of learning any language--but only one. New words could be added to one's vocabulary and to the language as whole, but they had to fit into the existing language, whose grammatical structures themselves altered over time. Under such conditions, as subsets of our species moved out of Africa and spread around the globe, we would have become ever more alien to one other--as is the case with all other species that have dispersed geographically. With languages not intertranslatable, there would be no possibility of eventual convergence, no possibility of mutual recognition resulting in a felt sense of common identity, no possibility of a common human project.

Technological developments have, over time, given this innate capacity to identify

ourselves with others ever greater scope. As a result, the size of communities with a real (as opposed to merely abstract) sense of identity has been growing steadily. Consider the technologies we have invented: story telling, which allowed for the development of tribal myths and hence a sense of historical identity; versifying, which enabled stories to extend themselves in length and complexity while preserving basic content (relatively) undistorted; then writing (and reading), printing, and, most recently, the explosion of electronic media.

These developments in means of communication have been complemented by technological developments in means of transport, facilitating trade as well as face-to-face contact among people of diverse lands and cultures. To be sure, initial contacts did not give rise to an immediate sense of common identity. Initial encounters often led to conquest and exploitation. But over time, identity has come to trump difference. It is more difficult today, surely, than at any time past to perceive the other as radically other and thus subhuman.

Needless to say, I am not claiming that the sense of common humanity, of "species being," is the dominant identity of a large portion of humanity at present--but the tendency to enlarge one's identity to include an ever larger segment of humanity is unmistakable--and is due to technologies that bring us into ever closer affective and intellectual contact with each other.⁵

So if we take the "long view"--as historical materialism urges--there would seem to be grounds for optimism about the future. Our productive capabilities continue to develop, making the brute fact of widespread poverty in the face of excess productive capacity, and the existence of related systemic irrationalities, ever more scandalous. And the technologies that draw us ever closer together increase the likelihood that more and more of us will see ourselves as co-participants, as human beings, in a global project to enhance our mutual security and material

well-being.

Of course there are countervailing forces. A third development thesis, D3, might be invoked: the forces of destruction tend to increase over time.

We hardly needed the recent display of U.S. military shock and awe to convince us of the truth of this thesis. However, its implications are worth pondering. Historical materialism has paid little attention to the development of military technologies--a deficiency, perhaps, but one flowing from the insight that warfare itself usually has an economic basis, and therefore should not be considered an independent variable. Wars, after all, are not sudden, irrational irruptions, but undertakings planned by political elites. In general (though of course not always) wars are initiated either for economic gain or to protect existing economic interests.

But if warfare is driven by the prospect of economic gain, then the ever-increasing destructiveness of military technology, in the context of the economic relations of production now in existence, is rendering warfare obsolete. Simultaneously, the potential costs of war have gone up, while the potential gains have gone down. It can no longer be considered even remotely worth the risk for a developed country to engage in warfare with another developed country, or even with a large poor country that possesses ample "weapons of mass destruction." The United States will never again go to war with Germany, nor will it go to war with France or Russia or China. There will never be a World War III.

Under existing conditions, poor countries (or subgroups within poor countries) will continue to wage war on one another, since there are often substantial gains to be had in terms of control of resources needed locally or valuable on the world market, and little to lose, given their economically desperate straits, but these wars will remain localized. Rich countries (one rich

country in particular) may still wage war on select poor countries, but it will soon become clear that there is little to gain in doing so. Such wars will not enhance the economic well-being of the developed countries, for even if the poor countries do contain, say, a honey-pot of oil, there is no way of extracting the benefits that is any better than the standard unequal-exchange arrangements of the global market. Indeed, military occupation will prove more costly. European nations learned that lesson decades ago. The United States is learning that lesson now.

In short, I do not think that the historical materialist prediction of a better future is in any way undermined by its neglect of D3. I would venture that the Pentagon's development of the internet will have far more impact on the shape of the twenty-first century than all of its research on high-tech weaponry during the past half-century or so combined.

If an historical materialist trying to remain optimistic can ignore D3, what about another development thesis, one suggested by Nielsen's deep reservations mentioned earlier? Let me call it D4: the means by which a minority can effectively control a majority tend to develop over time.

Here we come to the heart of the matter. Can the mechanisms of D4 contain the positive potential of D1 and D2? First-generation critical theorists were the first to theorize this possibility. Technological progress, the unsentimental grounding of Marxian hope, might usher in, not the realm of freedom, but its opposite. The dialectic of enlightenment might culminate in a one-dimensional consciousness incapable of revolt.

The question is a chilling one: Why should we think that developments in means of control will not be sufficient to keep developments in forces of production and means of species solidarity from transforming the economic structure of society? Indeed, in most societies at most times in human history, they have been sufficient.

But not always. Occasionally the controls break down. And when the controls break down in a particular society, and a new, more productive mode of production comes into being, the example tends to be contagious. Latent conflicts become open; suppressed classes become emboldened. We enter an epoch of social transformation. Notice: slavery as a mode of production no longer exists. Serfdom as a dominant economic modality no longer exists. Nor is there any prospect of large-scale regression to these forms, fevered science-fiction novels and films to the contrary notwithstanding.⁶

Why have the mechanisms of control, over the long term, been unable to prevent radical changes in relations of production, changes bitterly opposed by existing ruling classes? Why have the technical developments in mechanisms to which D4 refers been unable to keep pace with those of D1 and D2? Is this a matter of sheer contingency, with no predictive implications, or are there grounds for thinking that this pattern will extend into the future?

Needless to say, we cannot hope to find a law of historical inevitability here, but there are reasons for doubting that we are dealing with mere chance. Consider D4. Is this development thesis even true? The truths of D1, D2 and D3 are indisputable. Not so the truth of D4. For the technological developments that have enhanced the ability of a minority to control a majority have gone hand in hand with the declining effectiveness of older mechanisms. When referring to a general development in means of control, we have to consider the whole portfolio. But then it is not so clear that advances tend to outpace declines.

Take our present situation. Whereas it is incontestable that contemporary means of production, communication and destruction are more effective than those they have supplanted, it is by no means self-evident that contemporary means of control are more effective than earlier

means.

Consider the mechanisms that have long sustained the capitalist order. A short list would include authoritarian religion, the patriarchal family, systematically cultivated racism, and an educational system more or less explicitly geared to indoctrinating the young into unquestioning patriotism. Conservative moralists are not wrong to worry about the decline of "traditional values," deference to religious authorities, subservience to standard concepts of masculinity and femininity, overt racism, and "my country right or wrong" have been central underpinnings of historical capitalism.⁷

In place of these, what? Michel Foucault has delineated quite brilliantly the micro-mechanisms of surveillance and discipline that have become so pervasive in modern life.⁸ Frankfurt School theorists initiated a critique of a "consciousness industry," an industry that has become ever more sophisticated.⁹ No doubt about it, we are treated now, in developed countries, to more bread and more circuses than in times past (mindless consumerism, mindless entertainment), and, in the land of the current hegemon, there exists a truly massive (and truly brutal) surveillance/prison complex.

But do these developments offset the decline of the traditional mechanisms of control? Let's hold that question for a moment. We'll come back to it.

I've focused this paper exclusively on development theses. But if historical materialism consisted of nothing more than D1 and D2, it would be indistinguishable from the nineteenth century liberalism of John Stuart Mill, or indeed twentieth century liberalism generally. Our productive capabilities grow steadily; our sense of species solidarity grows apace; sooner or later we march together into the promised land.

But Marx's model is more conflictual than the liberal paradigm. Historical materialism posits a growing contradiction between steadily developing forces of production and relatively stagnant relations of production. Although a new set of economic relations initially advances forces of production, they eventually turn into--to use Marx's metaphor--"fetters." The time becomes ripe for a transformation to a new, more effective set of economic relations.

We need to make explicit an exceedingly important tacit assumption of this theory. The notion that a set of economic relations that "fetters" the development of means of production will yield to a set that does not, presupposes the imminent possibility of such a favorable set. There must exist a viable alternative to existing relations. This is another premise that has gone relatively untheorized by historical materialists. Why should we assume that an Hegelian *aufhebung* will present itself when the contradiction between forces and relations of production reach a certain intensity?

I will not pursue this question in its general form. What really interests us is the present. We see now that an historical materialist, looking at the world today and trying to make an informed prediction, must ask three questions, one of them the one we put on hold:

- # Do existing relations of production significantly *Afetter* the development of productive forces?
- # Does there exist a viable, more desirable alternative?
- # Can the development of mechanism of control block the emergence of this alternative?

As to the first--simply consider how much "human capital" is currently being squandered;

i.e., how many able-bodied human beings there are who want to work but can't find work, even though the human needs of billions remain unmet. Not so long ago there was renewed hope in many quarters that capitalism could save us. I submit that much of our current sense of foreboding is due precisely to the fact that the neoliberal project, capitalism's latest attempt to surmount stagnation, is in crisis. It has failed. Capitalism has been given an increasingly free reign for a quarter of a century now. The wreckage is everywhere on display. Global poverty remains scandalously severe; inequality and economic insecurity are on the rise in almost every country; those countries that most enthusiastically embraced the new paradigm--those of the ex-Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, as well as Argentina--have been bitterly disappointed.

Neoliberalism, when it emerged from the exhaustion of the social democratic project, had a certain energy and promise. That energy and promise have vanished. It is obvious, is it not, that capitalism no longer inspires? It sustains itself now on fear--nowhere more so in that most frightened of republics, the current global hyperpower.

The root problem is precisely that identified by Marx: forces of production have overwhelmed relations of production. Global competition has generated enormous overcapacity in manufacturing industries worldwide.¹⁰ Increasing productivity has rendered larger and larger segments of the workforce structurally unemployed. Rapid technological change and the hypermobility of capital have made those who do work increasingly insecure.

Is there an alternative? (Question Two.) I think there is. I think, at least in broad outline, the necessary structures are becoming clear. Consider what we now know:

Competitive markets are essential to the functioning of a complex, developed economy.

This is the negative lesson of the Soviet-inspired socialist experiments of the twentieth century.

Some sort of democratic regulation of investment flows is essential to rational, stable, sustainable development--for individual countries and for the world economy as a whole. This is the negative lesson of the neoliberal experiments of the last twenty-five years. (We need some sort of "investment democracy" to complement the "consumer democracy" of the market.)

Productive enterprises can be run democratically with little or no loss of efficiency, often with a gain in efficiency, and almost always with considerable gain in employment security. This is the positive lesson of a great many recent experiments in alternative forms of workplace organization. (We need "workplace democracy.")

This isn't the place for me to defend these claims, or to elaborate the institutional structures of an "Economic Democracy" that would preserve the strengths of capitalism while mitigating its defects. I've done so at length elsewhere.¹¹ Suffice it to say that a) the structural reforms necessary to fix what ails us call into questions some of capitalism's most basic institutions, and b) the superiority of the new institutions derive from the deep, contingent fact that what is true in the political realm today is also true in the economic sphere: Democracy works! Not perfectly by any means, and not without the proper sets of checks and balances, but in general democracy is, as Winston Churchill remarked, the worst possible system--except for all

the others that have been tried from time to time. Unregulated financial markets and workplace authoritarianism included--elements not noted by Churchill.

We return now to our deferred question. Can the development of mechanism of control contain the mechanisms that are enhancing our sense of species solidarity and pushing us to go beyond capitalism?

Perhaps. The vision is grim: global stagnation; elites holed up in gated communities; an ever shrinking middle class unable to protect, physically or economically, themselves or their children; an ever growing strata of the desperately poor; more and more police, prisons and border guards. That could be our future. Slavoj Zizak asks us to face "a bitter reality: that a new dark age is descending upon the human race."¹² In this he echoes Alasdair MacIntyre's pronouncement of two decades earlier: "The new dark ages are already upon us This time, however, the barbarians are not waiting beyond the gates, but have already been governing us for quite some time."¹³

Perhaps, but I'm not so sure. The collapse of the Soviet Union is instructive. In the face of long-term economic decline, its mechanisms of control--a wholly controlled press, massive surveillance, a huge number of prisons--couldn't stave off, first delegitimation, then structural transformation. Note too: the transformation was virtually non-violent-- no armed uprisings, no civil war. The second most powerful military machine in human history could do nothing at all to preserve the old order.

Unfortunately for the Soviet citizenry and the citizens of Eastern Europe the neoliberal model was still in ascendancy at the time the old order fell apart. The appeal of this model (well enhanced by Western consultants who should have known better) proved to be irresistible.

That model no longer inspires. To what then will we turn--if history has not in fact come to an end? Which it has not--as the rational part of our soul well knows, however much the spirited element, currently daunted, urges the contrary.

I submit that pessimism of the intellect is out of place. Perhaps optimism of the intellect is too strong, although I don't think so. In any event, bleak pessimism is intellectually unwarranted. Let me set Arundhati Roy against Gramsci. Her essay, "Come September," a mediation on the meaning of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, concludes as follows:

The time has come, the Walrus said. Perhaps things will get worse, then better. Perhaps there's a small god up in heaven readying herself for us. Another world is not only possible, she's on her way. Maybe many of us won't be here to greet her, but on a quiet day, if I listen very carefully, I can hear her breathing.¹⁴

Notes

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1. G. A. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defense* (Princeton University Press, 1978).
 2. Kai Nielsen, "On Taking Historical Materialism Seriously" *Dialogue* XXII (1983): 319-338.
 3. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History*, p. 203. (Emphasis Cohen's.)
 4. Nielsen, "Historical Materialism," p. 338.
 5. One small piece of supporting evidence: During the Vietnam War, the U.S. government celebrated the number of "enemy combatants" killed. The now-notorious "body counts" were a regular feature of the nightly news. By contrast, the U.S. government today has refused to

release even an estimate as to how many Iraqi soldiers were killed in our latest war. Why? Because those officials controlling the news flow know that Americans are not going to be thrilled by high numbers. Those much-maligned American TV viewers, for whom the presentation of the war was so carefully scripted, are far more likely to feel a pang of empathy for those young dead Iraqi soldiers than would ever have been the case thirty years ago for the dead Viet Cong.

6. I am not claiming that economic relations approximating slavery or serfdom have disappeared completely, for they have not. But these forms tend to exist in the interstices of contemporary economies. Nowhere are they economically dominant

7. All of these antedate capitalism, but all underwent significant modification so as to serve as legitimating factors of the new system.

8. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage, 1979).

9. The seminal text is Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: Continuum, 1988). Published in German in 1944.

10. Overcapacity relative to effective demand--not, of course, relative to the needs and wants of existing human beings. "Overproduction" does not stand in contradiction of Marxian "fettering," but is an exemplification.

11. See *After Capitalism* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2002); see also, *Against Capitalism* (Cambridge University Press, 1993). The former is a less technical version of the former, updated and with greater concern for historical materialism and the transition question.

12. Slavoj Zizek, "How Much Democracy is Too Much?" *In These Times*, June 9, 2003, p. 25.

13. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame University Press, 1981), p. 245.

14. Arundhati Roy, *War Talk*, (South End Press, 2003), p. 75.