

## **SOCIETY AND MIND IN MARXIAN PHILOSOPHY**

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#### **I**

Marx's theory of social development is known as the "materialistic conception of history" or "historical materialism." Before Marx the word "materialism" had long been used in opposition to idealism, for whereas idealistic philosophical systems assumed some spiritual principle, some "Absolute Idea" as the primary basis of the world, the materialistic philosophies proceeded from the real material world. In the middle of the nineteenth century, another kind of materialism was current which considered physical matter as the primary basis from which all spiritual and mental phenomena must be derived. Most of the objections that have been raised against Marxism are due to the fact that it has not been sufficiently distinguished from this mechanical materialism. Philosophy is condensed in the well-known quotation "it is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but, on the contrary, their social existence determines their consciousness." Marxism is not concerned with the antithesis matter-mind; it deals with the real world and the ideas derived therefrom. This real world comprises everything observable -- that is, all that by observation may be declared an objective fact. The wage-relations between workman and employer, the constitution of the United States, the science of mathematics, although not consisting of physical matter, are quite as real and objective as the factory machine, the Capitol or the Ohio River. Even ideas themselves in their turn act as real, observable facts. Mechanical materialism assumes that our thoughts are determined by the motions of atoms in the cells of our brains. Marxism considers our thoughts to be determined by our social experience observed through the senses or felt as direct bodily needs.

The world for man is society. Of course, the wider world is nature, and society is nature transformed by man. But in the course of history this transformation was so thorough that now society is the most important part of our world. Society is not simply an aggregate of men; men are connected by definite relations not chosen by them at will, but imposed upon them by the economic system under which they live and in which each has his place.

The relations which the productive system establishes between men have the same stringency as biological facts; but this does not mean that men think only of their food. It means that the manner in which man earns his living -- that is, the economic organization of production -- places every individual in determinate relations with his fellow-men thus determining his thinking and feeling. It is true, of course, that even up to the present nearly all the thoughts of men have been orientated around the getting of food, because a livelihood has never been assured for everybody. The fear of want and hunger has weighed like a nightmare on the minds of men. But, in a socialist system, when this fear will have been removed, when mankind will be master of the means of subsistence, and thinking will be free and creative, the system of production will also continue to determine ideas and institutions.

The mode of production ( *Produktionsweise* ), which forms the mind of man, is, at the same time, a product of man. It has been built up by mankind during the course of centuries, everyone participating in its development. At any given moment, its structure is determined by given conditions, the most important of which are technics and law. Modern capitalism is not simply production by large scale machinery; it is production by such machines under the rule of private property. The growth of capitalism was not only a change from an economy utilizing small tools to large scale industry, but at the same time, a development of the guild-bound craftsmen into wage laborers and businessmen. A system of production is a determinate system of technics regulated for the benefit of the owners by a system of juridical rules.

The oft-quoted thesis of the German jurist, Stammler, that law determines the economic system ( "*das Recht bestimmt die Wirtschaft*" ), is based upon this circumstance. Stammler thought that by this sentence he had refuted Marxism, which proclaimed the dominance of economics over juridical ideas. By proclaiming that the material element, the technical side of the labor process, is ruled and dominated by ideological elements, the juridical rules by which men regulate their relations at their own will, Stammler felt convinced that he had established the predominance of mind over matter. But the antithesis technics-law does not coincide at all with the antithesis matter-mind. Law is not only spiritual rule but also hard constraint, not only an article on the statute books, but also the club of the policeman and the walls of the jail. And technics is not only the material machines but also the power to construct them, including the science of physics.

The two conditions, technics and law, play different roles in determining the system of production.. The will of those who control technics cannot by itself create these technics, but it can, and does, make the laws. They are voluntary, but not capricious. They do not determine productive relations, but take advantage of these relations for the benefit of the owners and they are altered to meet advances in the modes of production. Manufacture using the technics of small tools led to a system of craft production, thus making the juridical institution of private property necessary. The development of big industry made the growth of large scale machinery possible and necessary, and induced people to remove the juridical obstacles to its development and to establish laissez-faire trade legislation. In this way technics determines law; it is the underlying force, whereas law belongs to the superstructure resting on it. Thus Stammler, while correct in his thesis in a restricted sense, is wrong in the general sense. Just because law rules economics, people seek to make such laws as are required by a given productive equipment; in this way technics determines law. There is no rigid, mechanical, one-to-one dependence. Law does not automatically adjust itself to every new change of technics. The economic need must be felt and then man must change and adjust his laws accordingly. To achieve this adjustment is the difficult and painful purpose of social struggles. It is the quintessence and aim of all political strife and of all great revolutions in history. The fight for new juridical principles is necessary to form a new system of production adapted to the enormous modern development of technics.

Technics as the productive force is the basis of society. In primitive society, the natural conditions play the chief role in determining the system of production. In the course of history technical implements are gradually improved by almost imperceptible steps. Natural science, by investigating the forces of nature, develops into the important productive force. All the technicalities in developing and applying science, including the most abstract mathematics, which is to all appearances an exercise in pure reason, may therefore be reckoned as belonging to the technical basis of the system of production, to what Marx called the "productive forces." In this way material ( in a physical sense ) and mental elements are combined in what Marxists call the material basis of society.

The Marxian conception of history puts living man in the center of its scheme of development, with all his needs and all his powers, both physical and mental. His needs are not only the needs of his stomach ( though these are the most imperative ), but also the needs of head and heart. In human labor, the material, physical side and the mental side are inseparable; even the most primitive work of the savage is brain work as much as muscle work. Only because under capitalism the division of labor separated these two parts into functions of different classes, thereby maiming the capacities of both, did intellectuals come to overlook their organic and social unity. In this way, we may understand their erroneous view of Marxism as a theory dealing exclusively with the material side of life.

## II

Marx's historical materialism is a method of interpretation of history. History consists of the deeds, the actions of men. What induces these actions ? What determines the activity of man ?

Man, as an organism with certain needs which must be satisfied as conditional to his existence, stands within a surrounding nature, which offers the means to satisfy them. His needs and the impressions of the surrounding world are the impulses, the stimuli to which his actions are the responses, just as with all living beings. In the case of man, consciousness is interposed between stimulus and action. The need as it is directly felt, and the surrounding world as observed through the senses, work upon the mind, produce thoughts, ideas and aims, stimulate the will and put the body in action.

The thoughts and aims of an active man are considered by him as the cause of his deeds; he does not ask where these thoughts come from. This is especially true because thoughts, ideas and aims are not as a rule derived from the impressions by conscious reasoning, but are the product of subconscious spontaneous processes in our minds. For the members of a social class, life's daily experiences condition, and the needs of the class mold, the mind into a definite line of feeling and thinking, to produce definite ideas about what is useful and what is good or bad. The conditions of a class are life necessities to its members, and they consider what is good or bad for them to be good or bad in general. When conditions are ripe men go into action and shape society according to their ideas. The rising French bourgeoisie in the eighteenth century, feeling the necessity of laissez-faire laws, of personal freedom for the citizens, proclaimed freedom as a slogan, and in the French Revolution conquered power and transformed society.

The idealistic conception of history explains the events of history, as caused by the ideas of men. This is wrong, in that it confuses the abstract formula with a special concrete meaning, overlooking the fact that, for example, the French bourgeoisie wanted only that freedom that was good for itself. Moreover, it omits the real problem, the origin of these ideas. The materialistic conception of history explains these ideas as caused by the social needs arising from the conditions of the existing system of production. According to this view, the events of history are determined by forces arising out of the existing economic system. The historical materialist's interpretation of the French Revolution in terms of a rising capitalism which required a modern state with legislation adapted to its needs does not contradict the conception that the Revolution was brought about by the desire of the citizen for freedom from restraint; it merely goes further to the root of the problem. For historical materialism contends that rising capitalism produced in the bourgeoisie the conviction that economic and political freedom was necessary, and thus awakened the passion and enthusiasm that enabled the bourgeoisie to conquer political power and to transform the state.

In this way Marx established causality in the development of human society. It is not a causality outside of man, for history is at the same time the product of human action. Man is a link in the chain of cause and effect; necessity in social development is a necessity achieved by means of human action. The material world acts upon man, determines his consciousness, his ideas, his will, his actions, and so he reacts upon the world and changes it. To the traditional middle-class mode of thinking this is a contradiction -- the source of endless misrepresentations of Marxism. Either the actions of man determine history, they say, and then there is no necessary causality because man is free; or if, as Marxism contends, there is causal necessity it can only work as a fatality to which man has to submit without being able to change. For the materialistic mode of thinking, on the contrary, the human mind is bound by a strict causal dependence to the whole of the surrounding world.

The thoughts, the theories, the ideas, that former systems of society have thus wrought in the human mind, have been preserved for posterity, first in material form in subsequent historical activity. But they have also been preserved in a spiritual form. The ideas, sentiments, passions and ideals that incited former generations to action were laid down in literature, in science, in art, in religion and in philosophy. We come into direct contact with them in the study of the humanities. These sciences belong to the most important fields of research for Marxian scholars; the differences between the

philosophies, the literatures, the religions of different peoples in the course of centuries can only be understood in terms of the molding of men's minds through their societies, that is, through their systems of production. It has been said above, that the effects of society upon the human mind have been deposited in material form in subsequent historical events. The chain of cause and effect of past events which proceeds from economic needs to new ideas, from new ideas to social action, from social action to new institutions and from new institutions to new economic systems is complete and ever reenacted. Both original cause and the final effect are economic and we may reduce the process to a short formula by omitting the intermediate terms which involve the activity of the human mind. We can then illustrate the truth of Marxian principles by showing how, in actual history, effect follows cause. In analyzing the present, however, we see numerous causal chains which are not finished. When society works upon the minds of men, it often produces ideas, ideals and theories which do not succeed in arousing men to social or class-motivated action, or fail to bring about the necessary political, juridical and economic changes. Frequently too, we find that new conditions do not at once impress themselves upon the mind. Behind apparent simplicities lurk complexities so unexpected that only a special instrument of interpretation can uncover them at the moment. Marxian analysis enables us to see things more clearly. We begin to see that we are inside of a process fraught with converging influences, in the midst of the slow ripening of new ideas and tendencies which constitute the gradual preparation of revolution. This is why it is important to the present generation, which today has to frame the society of tomorrow, to know how Marxian theory may be of use to them, in understanding the events and in determining their own conduct. Hence a more thorough consideration of how society acts upon the mind will be necessary here.

### III

The human mind is entirely determined by the surrounding real world. We have already said that this world is not restricted to physical matter only, but comprises everything that is objectively observable. The thoughts and ideas of our fellow men, which we observe by means of their conversation or by our reading are included in this real world. Although fanciful objects of these thoughts such as angels, spirits or an Absolute Idea do not belong to it, the belief in such ideas is a real phenomenon, and may have a notable influence on historical events.

The impressions of the world penetrate the human mind as a continuous stream. All our observations of the surrounding world, all experiences of our lives are continually enriching the contents of our memories and our subconscious minds.

The recurrence of nearly the same situation and the same experience leads to definite habits of action; these are accompanied by definite habits of thought. The frequent repetition of the same observed sequence of phenomena is retained in the mind and produces an expectation of the sequence. The rule that these phenomena are always connected in this way is then acted upon. But this rule -- sometimes elevated to a law of nature -- is a mental abstraction of a multitude of analogous phenomena, in which differences are neglected, and agreement emphasized. The names by which we denote definite similar parts of the world of phenomena indicate conceptions which likewise are formed by taking their common traits, the general character of the totality of these phenomena, and abstracting them from their differences. The endless diversity, the infinite plurality of all the unimportant, accidental traits, are neglected and the important, essential characteristics are preserved. Through their origin as habits of thought these concepts become fixed, crystallized, invariable; each advance in clarity of thinking consists in more exactly defining the concepts in terms of their properties, and in more exactly formulating the rules. The world of experience, however, is continually expanding and changing; our habits are disturbed and must be modified, and new concepts substituted for old ones. Meanings, definitions, scopes of concepts all shift and vary.

When the world does not change very much, when the same phenomena and the same experiences always return, the habits of acting and thinking become fixed with great rigidity; the new impressions of the mind fit into the image formed by former experience and intensify it. These habits and these concepts are not personal but collective property; they are not lost with the death of the individual. They are intensified by the mutual intercourse of the members of the community, who all are living in the same world, and they are transferred to the next generation as a system of ideas and beliefs, an ideology -- the mental store of the community. Where for many centuries the system of production does not change perceptibly, as for example in old agricultural societies, the relations between men, their habits of life, their experience of the world remain practically the same. In every new generation living under such a static productive system the existing ideas, concepts and habits of thinking will petrify more and more into a dogmatic, unassailable ideology of eternal truth.

When, however, in consequence of the development of the productive forces, the world is changing, new and different impressions enter the mind which do not fit in with the old image. There then begins a process of rebuilding, out of parts of old ideas and new experiences. Old concepts are replaced by new ones, former roles and judgments are upset, new ideas emerge. Now every member of a class or group is affected in the same way and at the same time. Ideological strife arises in connection with the class struggles and is eagerly pursued, because all the different individual lives are linked in diverse ways with the problem of how to pattern society and its system of production. Under modern capitalism, economic and political changes take place so rapidly that the human mind can hardly keep pace with them. In fierce internal struggles, ideas are revolutionized, sometimes rapidly, by spectacular events, sometimes slowly, by continuous warfare against the weight of the old ideology. In such a process of unceasing transformation, human consciousness adapts itself to society, to the real world.

Hence Marx's thesis that the real world determines consciousness does not mean that contemporary ideas are determined solely by contemporary society. Our ideas and concepts are the crystallization,

the comprehensive essence of the whole of our experience, present and past. What was already fixed in the past in abstract mental forms must be included with such adaptations of the present as are necessary. New ideas thus appear to arise from two sources : present reality and the system of ideas transmitted from the past. Out of this distinction arises one of the most common objections against Marxism. The objection, namely, that not only the real material world, but in no less degree, the ideological elements -- ideas, beliefs and ideals -- determine man's mind and thus his deeds, and therefore the future of the world. This would be a correct criticism if ideas originated by themselves, without cause, or from the innate nature of man, or from some supernatural spiritual source. Marxism, however, says that these ideas also must have their origin in the real world under social conditions.

As forces in modern social development, these traditional ideas hamper the spread of new ideas that express new necessities. In taking these traditions into account we need not leave the realm of Marxism. For every tradition is a piece of reality, just as every idea is itself a part of the real world, living in the mind of men; it is often a very powerful reality as a determinant of men's actions. It is a reality of an ideological nature that has lost its material roots because the former conditions of life which produced them have since disappeared. That these traditions could persist after their material roots have disappeared is not simply a consequence of the nature of the human mind, which is capable of preserving in memory or subconsciously the impressions of the past. Much more important is what may be termed the social memory, the perpetuation of collective ideas, systematized in the form of prevailing beliefs and ideologies, and transferred to future generations in oral communications, in books, in literature, in art and in education. The surrounding world which determines the mind consists not only of the contemporary economic world, but also of all the ideological influences derived from continuous intercourse with our fellow men. Hence comes the power of tradition, which in a rapidly developing society causes the development of the ideas to lag behind the development of society. In the end tradition must yield to the power of the incessant battering of new realities. Its effect upon social development is that instead of permitting a regular gradual adjustment of ideas and institutions in line with the changing necessities, these necessities when too strongly in contradiction with the old institutions, lead to explosions, to revolutionary transformations, by which lagging minds are drawn along and are themselves revolutionized.