

# Marx's Historical Materialism and the Notion of Praxis

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## Abstract

The present paper examines Karl Marx's famous conception of "historical materialism," in his *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (Marx, 1970, p. 19-23), and focuses on the criticism that it has deterministic, both economically and technologically, and therefore it omits the role of human agency and free will. This paper aims at evaluating this criticism in closer detail, and showing that it is not founded. By considering two types of determinism, and the issue of human intentional behavior and its relation to history, it is shown that the allegation that historical materialism ignores the importance of conscious human conduct or *praxis* is untenable.

**Keywords:** *Historical Materialism, Determinism, Praxis, Free will, Unintended Consequences*

**Jel Codes:** *B12, B14, B24, B51*

## Marx'ın Tarihsel Materyalizmi ve Praxis Kavramı

### Öz

Bu yazı, Karl Marx'ın, *Ekonomi Politikin Eleştirisine Katkı* kitabında geliştirdiği "tarihsel materyalizm" görüşünü ele alarak bu yaklaşımın hem ekonomik anlamda hem de teknolojik anlamda determinist bir görüş olduğu, bu yüzden de insan eylemesi ve özgür iradeyi yoksaydığı eleştirisi üzerinde durmaktadır. Yazının amacı, bu eleştirileri derinlemesine incelemek ve bunların temelsiz olduğunu göstermektir. Yazıda, determinizmin iki biçimi ele alınarak, insanın niyetli davranışı ile tarih arasındaki ilişki sorunsal tartışılmakta, böylelikle de tarihsel materyalizmin bilinçli insan etkinliğini ya da *praxis*'ini gözardı ettiği eleştirisinin dayanaksız olduğu gösterilmektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** *Tarihsel Materyalizm, Determinizm, Praxis, Özgür İrade, Niyetlenilmemiş Sonuçlar*

**Jel Kodları:** *B12, B14, B24, B51*

## 1. Introduction

Karl Marx's famous account of "historical materialism," as outlined in the Preface to his *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (Marx, 1970, p. 19-23), has always been subjected to heavy criticism. Among these, the most prominent one is determinism, and therefore rejection of human agency and free will, which overlooks the importance of conscious human intervention into history. With respect to the issue of determinism, two specific though related forms can be distinguished: First, that causality in the society runs from the "economic base" to the "superstructure," or "economic determinism," and, second, that causation within the "base" itself runs from the forces of production to relations of production, or "technological determinism." The present paper aims at examining this criticism of determinism in historical materialism in closer detail, and at showing that it is not founded. For this aim, the paper discusses firstly these two types of determinism, and secondly the issue of human intentional activity and its relation to history, in order to show that the allegation that historical materialism ignores the importance of conscious human conduct or *praxis* is untenable.

## 2. Historical Materialism and Determinism

Marx's "historical materialism"<sup>1</sup> seems to advance three claims: First, that the "economic base," the "relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production," determines the "legal and political superstructure" and "definite forms of social consciousness" which correspond to the "economic structure of society" (Marx, 1973, p. 20). Second, that this economic structure of the society is independent of consciousness and will of the individuals living in this society: "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that deter-

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1 It is a well-established fact that Marx himself never used the terms "historical materialism" or the "materialist conception of history." Engels first used the latter expression in 1859 and the former in 1892 (Manicas, 1987, p. 100). Still, they will be used here too as convenient shorthand descriptions for Marx's views.

mines their consciousness" (Marx, 1973, p. 21). Third, social change is to be explained by the conflict between forces and the relations of production:

At a certain stage of development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production or—this merely expresses the same thing in legal terms—with the property relations within the framework of which they have operated hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an era of social revolution (Marx, 1973, p. 21).

There are numerous criticisms directed to historical materialism, but maybe the most important one is that it is flawed by economic and technological determinism, and therefore ignores the importance of free will and human agency. A second criticism is that Marx tends to confuse capitalism, whose distinguishing feature is the "supremacy" of the economic factors, with other social formations, in which economic factors do not play a significant role. In other words, the latter criticism implies that historical materialism is unable to explain the whole of the human history. Thus, it is worth considering these two criticisms separately.

As to the issue of determinism in general, philosopher Martin Hollis (1984, p. 8) argues that the "Preface" has three groups of claims:

1. *Ontological*: The reality of the social world which contains the hidden elements and relations determining the agents' consciousness;
2. *Methodological*: a scientific, more appropriately a naturalistic method, which is adopted by all sciences, is needed to identify the reality and to lead causal explanations.
3. *Epistemological*: Methodological claims are grounded upon epistemological ones, especially in the statement that "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness."

These claims support the view that historical materialism is both economically and technologically determinist. As to economic determinism, it is true that Marx always emphasizes the importance of economic factors and argues in the first volume of *Capital* that "the writers of history have so far paid very little attention to the development of material production, which is the basis of all social life, and therefore of all real history" (Marx, 1976, p. 286n). Along the same lines, in the third volume of *Capital*, he explains the social production process, which

is both a production process of the material conditions of existence for human life, and a process, proceeding in specific economic and historical relations of production, that produces and reproduces these relations of production themselves, and with them the bearers of this process, their material conditions of existence, and their mutual relationships, i.e. the specific economic form of their society (Marx, 1981, p. 957).

These quotes suggest that historical materialism sees human social actions and interactions through an economically deterministic point of view: "For the totality of these relationships which the bearers of this production towards nature and one another, the relationships in which they produce, is precisely *society*, viewed according to its economic structure" (Marx, 1981, p. 957; italic added).

Interestingly, the view that determinism of historical materialism is also defended by some Marxists as well, above all G. A. Cohen (2000), a founder of "Analytical Marxism,"<sup>2</sup> who adopts this line of defence from a functionalist point of view (Cohen, 2000, chs. IX and X). In his attempt to reconstruct historical materialism along the lines of analytical philosophy, Cohen advances two important theses, namely the "Development Thesis" and the "Primacy Thesis" (Tarrit, 2015, p. 76-77). The Development Thesis argues that the changes in the productive forces follow a pace towards improvement and progress, in an autonomous way, so that productive forces become an independent explanatory variable for historical change. This pace is based on three important assumptions, all of which implies a "rational choice theory,"<sup>3</sup> namely, assumptions of scarcity of resources, the means-ends rationality, and intelligence as source of knowledge as an important human trait. The combination of scarcity and rationality ensures that human history moves in a progressive way. The Primacy Thesis on the other hand argues that relations of production are driven by changes in the productive forces, and that the contradictions between the forces and relations of production lead to the transformation of the relations into a superior form. That is to say, forces have primacy over the relations (Cohen, 2000, p. 278; Tarrit, 2015, p. 77). According to Cohen, in the Preface, the correspondence between the relations and forces of production implies that "the social, political, and intellectual life process is conditioned by the mode of production of material life" and that "consciousness is determined by social being. In each case Marx distinguishes two items, the second of which he asserts to be in some way explanatory of the first" (2000, p. 278). This means "functionalism": "central Marxian explanations are functional, which means, very roughly, that the character of what is explained is determined by its effect on what explains it. One reason for so interpreting Marx: if the direction of the explanatory tie is as he laid down, then the best account of the nature of the tie is that it is a functional one" (Cohen, 2000, p. 278). Such a functionalist view is akin to a Lamarckian biological analogy, namely, that the existence of some specific trait for a species can be explained by the fact that "they are useful," such as the long necks of the Giraffe, evolved in a struggle to reach higher branches of trees (Tarrit, 2015, p. 78). In a similar logic, Cohen (2000, p. 278-79) argues that an economic structure is fruitful for the development of the forces, and that leading ideas in the society function "to sustain the structure of economic roles called for by the productive forces" (p. 279).

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2 For a brief discussion of the main thrust of analytical Marxism, see Cohen (2000, p. xvii-xviii). A more detailed presentation of this view is given by Howard and King (1992).

3 For this reason, Analytical Marxism is sometimes called as "Rational Choice Marxism" (Carver and Thomas, 1995), even if there are some minor differences between the two.

Sociologist Anthony Giddens, however, is highly critical of such a functionalist outlook, in his famous “Critique of Historical Materialism” (Giddens, 1981). Giddens defines functionalism as the “doctrine which holds, first, that societies or social systems have ‘needs,’ and second, that identifying the ways in which they meet these needs constitutes an explanation of why particular, given social processes are as they are” (Giddens, 1981, p. 16).<sup>4</sup> In this respect, the relationship between economic base and superstructure is definitely functionalist because superstructure “functions” to preserve the existing relations of production (Giddens, 1981, p. 18). Giddens’s dislike of functionalist explanation derives from the fact that functionalist explanation is not a causal explanation at all because it can, and must, be subsumed under some causal explanation in the end. By itself, a functional argument does not show any causal mechanism underlying the system. Second, in stressing the system’s needs, functionalists are unable to see human beings as reasoning agents who know a great deal about what they are doing (Giddens, 1981, p. 16). For him, functionalist “explanations” can be used only to answer to some counter-factual questions, such as “what would happen to item *x*, or system *y*, if certain social conditions *z* are not found?” (Giddens, 1989, p. 261). Such questions could be helpful to develop causal arguments. Against this, Eric Olin Wright (1983, p.14) argues that a functionalist “explanation,” though not a real one, can still be useful to devise some *descriptions* about the working of the system. Another strategy, proposed by Roy Bhaskar (1981), is to use of functionalist “explanations” as a “temporary placeholder” for a subsequent causal elaboration of the mode of connection between the functional fact and the consequent structure or institution. In this regard, Cohen’s attempt to elaborate might be justified, but if this is the case, there still remains an important problem: whether one should take the Preface’s historical materialism as merely a descriptive “narrative,” or a causal framework that explains the working of some underlying generative mechanisms or “deep structures.” It seems that the Preface itself should be taken as a narrative, which does not show the causal priority of the economic base over superstructure.

In a similar vein, Ferdinand Tönnies (1974, p. 6), a founder of sociology, argues (in 1894) that “it must be remembered that Marx himself never publicly stated that those sentences in the preface constituted a theory.” According to him, Marx never denies that the “ideological forms” have their own history and causality, and therefore, there is “no reason to assume that he was so foolish as to ignore that political action may be determined by scientific theories, or that it may be a determinant in social life with at least a modifying effect on it (Tönnies, 1974, p. 79).

Yet, for Tönnies, what this “architectonic analogy” (1974, p. 79), which implies that “the upper level is the upper by virtue of the fact that it is supported by the lower level” (1974, p. 80), in fact says is that “the higher activities of life need the lower ones, but the lower ones do not need the higher ones” (1974, p. 70). Still, the assertion that for Marx “the material

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4 According to philosopher Daniel Little, “*functional explanations* seek to explain a feature of society in terms of the beneficial consequences it has for the larger system” (1991, p. 91). For an important discussion of functionalism in social thought, see Mahner and Bunge (2001).

side has no mental quality, and that the mental side has no material quality" is a "gross error" (1974, p. 80). The Preface, says Tönnies, should be taken to mean that the way the "higher things" such as the arts and the sciences, and the "nobler cultural pursuits" are accomplished are conditioned by the manner and extent of doing the "mundane things," i.e., production of food, clothing and shelter (1974, p. 81). In other words, Marx's emphasis here is on the importance of the social production process as a whole, not its individual constituents. That is, the terms "base" and "superstructure" should be taken as metaphors instead of as causal variables that explain the whole of history, for what we have here is the inseparability of the "material" and the "ideal." In other words, the base-superstructure metaphor is a crude first approximation to the human life activity as embracing the material and mental, emotional and aesthetic aspects of human existence (Hunt, 1979, p. 291-92). Regarding the forces and relations of production, as Lucio Colletti (1972, p. 19) emphasizes, the relationship between them is not in the form of *before* and *after*. For Colletti, both the material and the ideological levels should be considered together; exclusion of the material relations of production leads to the abstraction of "society in general," whereas exclusion of the "ideological" sphere leads to a relation between individual and nature which is *presocial* or *asocial* (Colletti, 1972, p. 6-7). In other words, in order to understand the practical activity of human beings we should regard this unity of mental and material aspects of the reality. That is to say, the notion of "totality" (Jay, 1984) is an important one in Marx, to understand both human history and any specific social formation.

Another important point in this respect is that Marx always emphasizes that every society and/or historical epoch is historically specific and hence transient. Therefore, although it is important to examine the "correspondence" between the base and the superstructure, the analysis of a particular society may require a more "pluralistic" account. We shall return to this issue shortly, but for now, it is sufficient to note that historical materialism should not, or cannot, be justified through a functionalist reasoning for it cannot reveal causal relations that are produced by some real mechanisms. Now, we turn to another form of determinism, namely technological determinism in Marx.

### 3. Technological Determinism

That technological determinism is especially acute in this "Preface" can be observed readily: the "prime mover" of social change and therefore of human history is technological change, all other economic and social arrangements coming after it. Such a "reductionist" approach can be discerned in one of Marx's earlier works, namely *The Poverty of Philosophy*, published in 1847: "In acquiring new productive forces men change their mode of production, and in changing their mode of production, their manner of gaining a living, they change all their social relations. The windmill gives you society with the feudal lord; the steam-mill, society with the industrial capitalist. (Marx, 1995, p. 119). Likewise, this time in *Capital*, Marx talks about the development of capitalism as "at a certain stage of development, it brings into the world the material means of its own destruction. From that moment, new forces

and new passions spring up in the bosom of society, forces and passions which feel themselves to be fettered by that society. It has to be annihilated; it is annihilated" (Marx, 1976, p. 928). But perhaps one of the best, if not the best, formulation of this position is given in *The Communist Manifesto* (1847):

The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionising the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society. Conservation of the old modes of production in unaltered form, was, on the contrary, the first condition of existence for all earlier industrial classes. Constant revolutionising of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.<sup>5</sup>

That is to say, the supremacy of technological factors applies to all societies, including capitalism, a position implying that when the time has come, capitalism itself would give way to other modes of production, namely, to socialism and communism. Marx emphasizes the inevitability of these constant transformations when he talks about capitalist mechanization process: "By maturing the material conditions and the social combination of the process of production, it matures the contradictions and antagonisms of the capitalist form of that process, and thereby ripens both the elements for forming a new society and the forces tending towards the overthrow of the old one" (Marx, 1976, p. 635).

The view that historical materialism is a technologically determinist position has been frequently expressed both as a criticism and a defence. For example, whereas Alvin Hansen concludes that Marxism is a "technological interpretation of history" (quoted in MacKenzie, 1984, p. 473), Langdon Winner argues that Marx has "isolated *the* primary independent variable active in all of history" (MacKenzie, 1984, p. 474), and Bukharin believes that "the historic mode of production, i.e., the form of society, is determined by the development of the productive forces, i.e., the development of technology" (quoted in MacKenzie, 1984, p. 475). This position is based upon the equation "forces of production = technology" (MacKenzie, 1984, p. 477). Here, technology is seen as an explanatory variable in shaping society and history. Thus, William Shaw argues that Marx's determinism should be seen as the "forces of production determinism" (1979, p. 158). On this view, "forces of production" refers not only to machines and technology but also to "labor-power, the skills, knowledge, experience, and so on, which enable labor to produce" which are all important for production. "The forces of production are, for Marx, thoroughly human. They are the powers which society has at its command in its continuous struggle with nature, in the ongoing, and distinctively human, activity of material production" (Shaw, 1979, p. 158). Here, a cau-

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5 <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/ch01.htm#:~:text=All%20that%20is%20solid%20melts,entire%20surface%20of%20the%20globe.>

sal mechanism is provided. Otherwise Marx's views are to be seen as steering between "an absurd reductionism and a vacuous pluralism" (Shaw, 1979, p. 167). According to Shaw, the forces of production determinism give Marx's account its scientific character, since it reveals the "rythm" of history. Productive force determinism should be taken as "part of its hard core, part of its basic heuristic" (Shaw, 1979, p. 175).

Nevertheless, the term "technological determinism" itself is anything but clear. According to Bruce Bimber, for example, the accounts that can be labelled as technological determinism "range from positive descriptions of an inevitable or autonomous technological order based on certain laws, to claims that technology is the dominant factor in social change but that its influence derives from the cultural meaning or importance given to it by people" (1990, p. 333-34). For him, technological determinism can be understood in three distinct senses. First, a "norm-based" account rests on the claim that human will cannot control technical practices, and that the categories of efficiency or productivity replace those of ethics (Bimber, 1990, p. 337). Secondly, the "Logical Sequence Account," maintains that technology exerts a causal influence over social practice and that forces of production act as the independent agencies of history. On this conception, technological change, irrespective of the issue of their social desirability, necessitates new social and political organisations (Bimber, 1990, p. 338). The third type of technological determinism is what Bimber calls "Unintended Consequences Account," which maintains that technology has some relative autonomy in the sense that it is not completely independent of human will. Yet, even if there are some human interventions, they will also have some "unintended consequences" (Bimber, 1990, p. 340). According to Bimber, since the first and the third theses give some role to human free will, a true technological determinist position should be the "logical sequence" type. Now, the question is whether there is such a form of technological determinism in Marx. Bimber argues that in order for historical materialism to be of this type, it must hold, first, that social change proceeds strictly with technological change, and second, that social change must follow the characteristics and laws associated with technology in a strictly logically ordered sequence (Bimber, 1990, p. 342).

The answer to the first question depends on how Marx defines productive forces. According to him, forces of production, at the most general level, includes means of production and labor power. Within the means of production, on the other hand, are every kind of equipment, tools, raw materials and technology that are used in the labor process. Nevertheless, all these does not change the fact that production, or the labor process, is inherently social. According to Bimber, "Marx claimed that history is the development of the labour process into a social process," and "technology is used instrumentally by human actors whose actions are, in a collective sense, historically determined by their own characteristics. The intentional use of technology by human actors is an important theme in Marx's work, one quite contradictory in nature to technological determinism" (Bimber, 1990, p. 348). On this conception, technology is in the service of humanity, not the other way around" (Bimber, 1990, p. 348). Such an interpretation seems to be supported by Marx as well: "Technology reveals the active relation of man to nature, the direct process of the pro-



duction of his life, and thereby it also lays bare the process of production of the social relations of his life, and of the mental conceptions that flow from those relations” (1976, p. 493-94, n4). As such, the development of technology has its own history. That is to say, technology itself is a historical product, and therefore cannot be independent of the historical conditions within which it emerges. The general weakness of technological determinism can be seen at this point: “If Marx is right, there is no development of technology, in general: there is only the development of technology in the context of a given political, economic, and social environment. For this reason, technology *per se* has no essence” (Wendling, 2020, p. 374).

Such a point of historicity of technology gives rise to two important implications: First, one need to consider technology as an integral part of the production process, and hence of the human existence in general, without making it prior to all other elements of this existence. In other words, technology should not be seen as an external force that changes history, but it has to be “internalized” into human society. Second, technology therefore should be seen, as not being born in a vacuum, but as being determined within the human society itself through constantly interacting with other human traits and social relations. First implication can be discussed in relation to the place of human beings in Marx’s overall system, which will be discussed later. The second one can be discussed with reference to the role of technology in capitalism. Marx maintains that technology is an endogeneous variable in capitalism, and it is used deliberately by the capitalists, as a tool for the class struggle. For example, he argues that the tendency for the organic composition of capital to increase does not merely stem from the wish to extract greater quantities of surplus value on the part of the capitalists, but mostly from the wish to control and discipline the workers through increasing mechanization (Wendling, 2020, p. 371; Kurz, 2010, p. 1215; Ramirez 2019). For Marx, increasing mechanization makes the workers realize that their use values, and hence exchange values, decrease and leads them to rebel against this process. Increasing substitution of the machines with labor causes to increase the surplus population, and drives wages below labor values (Marx, 1976, p. 557): “It would be possible to write a whole history of the inventions made since 1830 for the sole purpose of providing capital with weapons against working class revolts” (Marx, 1976, p. 557).

The tendency that the worker is robbed off her skills through the mechanization process also plays a social role to diminish the political and social power of the working class as whole. That is to say, technology aims not only at achieving efficiency in production but also at the consolidation and control of capitalists’ power: “ideally, capitalist technologies can meet the two goals of efficiency and domination simultaneously: machines can both increase productive efficiencies and discipline workers. However, the two goals are perhaps most interesting when they come into conflict with one another. When this happens, efficiency often gives way to the political domination that conditions it” (Wending, 2020, p. 371).

From a broader perspective, it can also be argued that technological improvements themselves are formed in accordance with the needs of capitalism, and thus the relationship between technology and social change should be understood as a dynamic, two-way relationship (Özel, 2021). This dynamic interaction is beautifully captured in John Elliott’s

(1980) famous argument that in Marx there are two “creative destruction” processes at work under capitalism. First, Schumpeterian-type of the creative destruction process refers to technological changes and their transforming the structure of the industry and even the economy. And the second, specifically Marxian-type of creative destruction process refers to the transformation of the society and the undermining effect that capitalist relations of production produce on the social institutions. The two are not independent of each other in the sense that technology both influences social relations and institutions, and is itself influenced by them. In other words, here too, technology is part and parcel of a greater social and historical process, rather than being a “lonely” variable that explains both the working of the social formations and their transformations.

## 4. Historically General vs. Specific Categories

Right at this point, we might ask the question whether Marx actually adopts a dualistic attitude towards history in the sense that he seems to draw a sharp demarcation between capitalism and other, precapitalist modes of production in human history (Bimber, 1990, p. 344-45). This demarcation is especially acute in his discussion of the social role that technology plays in capitalism. But still, it is hard to maintain that Marx has some detailed observations and analyses on the role of technology in “precapitalist” social formations. This gives rise to two possibilities: either historical materialism is about the two-way interaction between the base and the superstructure, thus rejecting causal primacy of technology, or it acknowledges the limited role that technology plays in precapitalist formations, and thus argues implicitly that capitalism is radically different from these formations. Thus, we are reminded here of Karl Polanyi's famous notion of the “*economistic fallacy*,” which refers to the methodological tendency to extrapolate the categories that are prevalent in capitalism, above all the primacy of the economic and technological factors, to other societies and/or other times. Economistic fallacy according to him can best be characterized as the identification of “economic” phenomena with market phenomena (Polanyi et al., 1957, p. 270 and Polanyi, 1977, p. 20).

Giddens too argues that the supremacy of the economic and technological factors cannot be generalized to non-capitalist, “tribal” and “class-divided” societies” (1981, p. 156). In a class-divided society, according to him, “class analysis does not serve as a basis for identifying the basic structural principle of organization of that society” (Giddens, 1981, p. 108), whereas in a class society (actually capitalism and socialism), class analysis provides such a principle of organization. For him, in class societies allocative resources, namely means and forces of production,<sup>6</sup> are dominant whereas in class-divided and tribal societies authoritative resources, namely the organizations of production and of human relations are more important. In other words, analysis of a society merely on the basis of economic factors throughout human history is quite inadequate.

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<sup>6</sup> Alex Callinicos (1989, p. 105-147) notes the similarity between Giddens's analysis and Neoclassical economics, which emphasizes scarcity and “resource allocation.”

Interestingly, Georg Lukács, an important figure in Marxism, also argues that historical materialism explains capitalism in the first place, in the essay “Changing Function of Historical Materialism” in his famous book *History and Class Consciousness* (Lukács, 1971). In this essay, which is an attempt “to apply historical materialism to itself,” Lukács asserts that it is “no accident” that historical materialism developed around the middle of the nineteenth century, for historical materialism is the “*self-knowledge of capitalist society*” (Lukács, 1971, p. 229). He goes on to say: “Nor is it an accident that economics became an independent discipline under capitalism. Thanks to its commodity and communications arrangements capitalist society has given the whole economic life an identity notable for its autonomy, its cohesion and its exclusive reliance on immanent laws. This was something quite unknown in earlier forms of society (Lukács, 1971, p. 231-32). According to Lukács, although particular aspects of the economic process exist in precapitalist societies, they are independent of each other and they do not link into a separate economic system. Only with capitalism do these aspects form a close-knitted, insoluble unity which is independent of the rest of the society. In precapitalist societies, “economic life did not yet possess that independence, that cohesion and immanence, nor did it have the sense of setting its own goals and being its own master that we associate with capitalist society” (Lukács, 1971, p. 238). For Lukács, this “self-contained autonomy (which was what made it an economy, properly speaking)” (1971, p. 251) gave rise to the Classical political economy, for this view was nothing but a reflection of the emergent autonomy of the economy. For him, in capitalism, “economic relations have achieved complete autonomy, they lead an independent life, forming a closed, self-validating system. Hence it is no accident that capitalist society became the classical terrain for the application of historical materialism” (Lukács, 1971, p. 232). Of course, this does not necessarily mean that historical materialism cannot be applied to precapitalist societies; it only means that it “cannot be applied in quite the same manner to precapitalist social formations as to capitalism. Here we need much more complex and subtle analyses” (Lukács, 1971, p. 238). Still, according to Lukács, methodologically speaking, “historical materialism was an epoch-making achievement precisely because it was able to see that these apparently quite independent, hermetic and autonomous systems were really aspects of a comprehensive whole and that their apparent independence could be transcended” (1971, p. 230). Nevertheless, Marx may disagree with Lukács in this matter, for he argues that “the Middle Ages could not live on Catholicism, nor could the ancient world on politics. On the contrary, it is the manner in which they gained their livelihood which explains why in one case politics, in the other case Catholicism, played the chief part” (Marx, 1976, p. 176n).

Still, given the ambiguity of the causal role of the economic factors, we are led to the position that historical materialism can only give us a method of understanding historical activities of human beings in a brief way, or it provides us with a “skeleton” of history. In other words, the categories of historical materialism should be used as questions, or queries to understand the recognizable pattern in history. Beyond such a heuristic role they play, they should not be taken as “canons” or strict “laws” that could explain every kind of

social formations (Krieger, 1962, p. 375). Opposing to some deterministic interpretations of historical materialism, Engels, in his letter to Bloch, argued that “historical change is regarded as the result of ‘innumerable intersecting forces, an infinite series of parallelograms of forces which give rise to one resultant –the historical event’” (quoted in Manicas, 1987, p. 103). Furthermore, Engels in *Anti-Duhring* argues that

Marx does not dream of attempting to prove ... that the process [from capitalism to socialism] was historically necessary. On the contrary, after he has proved from history that in fact the process has partially already occurred, and partially must occur in the future, he then characterizes it as a process which develops in accordance with a definite dialectical law. That is all. (quoted in Manicas, 1987, p. 113)

Regarding the overall movement of history, it is perfectly legitimate to ask now whether historical materialism should be seen as a general evolutionary account that explains the entire human history. After all, it was Engels himself who declared, in Marx's funeral, that “Just as Darwin discovered the law of development or organic nature, so Marx discovered the law of development of human history.”<sup>7</sup> Giddens too thinks that historical materialism is an evolutionary account. Giddens equates evolutionary theory with the attempts to seek teleology and unidirectionality or at least a certain trajectory in history. According to him, although there are some passages in Marx's writings which “asserts that the stages of social development he portrays are simply a unique set of historical processes, not involving generalized mechanisms of change or ‘direction,’” other passages, like those in the Preface, “seem rather clearly to advance a version of evolutionism based upon the idea of the progressive development of the forces of production” (Giddens, 1989, p. 262). He argues that “except as used in a loose sense, as a synonym for ‘development,’ or ‘identifiable pattern of change,’ I do not think evolutionism has any useful part to play in the social sciences” (Giddens, 1989, p. 262).

Giddens's dismissal of evolutionary theories derives in part from his disavowal of functionalism, for evolutionary theories of societies use functionalist explanations, especially in that they use the notions of “needs” and “adaptation” of societies. For him, in human history, it is not warranted to suppose that the forces of production can play a similar role to that of natural selection and mutation mechanisms in biological evolution (Giddens, 1989, p. 263). As opposed to this criticism, Eric Olin Wright disputes Giddens's assumption that evolution is almost by definition a teleological process (Wright, 1983, p. 25). First and foremost, Darwinian evolutionary theory strictly rejects teleology: there is no necessary movement “from the simplest to the most complex organism” in the evolutionary process.<sup>8</sup> Also, if we define evolutionary theories in a loose way which argues that (1) a typology of social forms which *potentially* has some kind of directionality is possible to construct; (2) in this typology if it is possible to order these forms in a way that the probability of staying at the same level is greater than the probability of regressing; and (3) if in this ordered typology there is a positive probability of

7 <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1883/death/burial.htm>.

8 For a powerful refutation of a functionalist thought relying on rationality assumption in evolutionary biology, see Gould and Lewontin (1979). For a discussion of the legitimacy of applying biological notions of evolution to social sciences, see Güzel and Özel (2011).

moving from one level to the next higher level, then we can have an evolutionary theory that can explain a certain trajectory in history (Wright, 1983, p. 26). So according to Wright too, historical materialism can be seen as an evolutionary account.

However, such an evolutionary position is hard to be maintained for three reasons. First, from a methodological point of view, it can be argued that Marx's interest with history actually stems from his wish to understand capitalism, as E. K. Hunt argues: "Marx's definition of capitalism was the basis upon which he constructed his historical writings and ... the ultimate purpose of these historical writings was to give the reader a fuller comprehension of the meaning and implications of his definition of capitalism" (Hunt, 1991, p. 331). According to Hunt, "Marx's study of history was a study of the historical prerequisites of capital" (Hunt, 1984, p. 7). In order to provide an adequate comprehension of contemporary capitalism, argues Hunt (1984, p. 1), Marx first formulates an abstract, structural definition of capitalism as a historically specific system and then uses this definition to ascertain the chronological facts which are significant for his conception of capitalism. That is, the criticisms that Marx does not prove the necessity of the transition from feudalism to capitalism, or from capitalism to socialism for that matter, and that his examples are chosen merely to illustrate his theory, are no criticisms of Marx at all (Hunt, 1984, p. 7). For Marx's intention was not to show the general course of history. On the contrary, his analysis is directed to understand the peculiarity of capitalism as a historically specific mode of production. Likewise, Lucio Colletti (1972, p. 23) argues that Marx was not searching "general laws" or truisms that would be valid for all times. Rather, argues Colletti, "he opens a general perspective on history precisely to the extent that he develops his analysis of the present: i.e., precisely to the extent that he seizes the extreme or essential differences by which the present defines or illuminates, even if indirectly, to the past" (Colletti, 1972, p. 23).

Secondly, Marx, especially towards the end of his life, became highly critical about the "historical necessity" and the "unidirectionality" of the historical change. He writes against a critic of his,<sup>9</sup> whose critique is that Marx adopts a "a historico-philosophic theory of the *marche générale* imposed by fate upon every people, whatever the historic circumstances in which it finds itself," and continues:

Events strikingly analogous but taking place in different historic surroundings led to totally different results. By studying each of these forms of evolution separately and then comparing them one can find the clue to this phenomenon, but one will never arrive there by the universal passport of a general historico-philosophical theory, the supreme virtue of which consists in being superhistorical (quoted in Manicas, 1987, p. 115).

This passage supports Althusser's famous idea of "overdetermination," that the unity and diversity of different historical conditions may and usually do different effects (1969, p.

9 In a letter in 1877, to the editor of the Russian journal *Otycestvenniye Zapisky* [Notes on the Fatherland], as an answer to a criticism directed to him. For the full text of the letter see: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1877/11/russia.htm>.

100-101). Althusser still maintains that economic factor is effective only “in the last instance,” but immediately adds that: “From the first moment to the last, the lonely hour of the ‘last instance’ never comes” (Althusser, 1969, p. 113). Therefore, the dynamism that is inherent to historical materialism emerges due to the unpredictable nature of future occurrences that are created by the unity of diverse conditions, not from the working of some “iron necessities” (Marx, 1976, p. 91). In other words, historical materialism cannot produce some formula that would be valid at all times and places; it can only show the general tendencies, and counter-tendencies, in the course of human history. For example, just because the development from the “primitive communism” to capitalism that could be observed in Western Europe does not necessarily imply that same course of history must be followed by other societies in different parts of the world. This is what gives historical materialism its dynamic character: different premises would lead to different outcomes.

Third, the lack of a “*marche Générale*” of history refutes the view that Marx had a “stage” or evolutionary theory for historical change, which asserts that this form of evolution necessarily follows the same pattern everywhere and at all times. Such a position according to Marx would be a “superhistorical” assertion that derives from the failure to distinguish between historically specific and the general aspects of the human existence. He is always very careful about distinguishing between “human nature in general” and “human nature as historically modified in each epoch” (Marx, 1976, p. 759n). Failure to consider this distinction will have its price: “And then there is Don Quixote, who long ago paid the penalty for wrongly imagining that knight errantry was compatible with all economic forms of society” (Marx, 1976, p. 176n). As would be explained below, Marx argues that although the labor process or production as a conscious, purposive activity is an essential feature of the human existence, the specific forms of organization of this activity do not remain the same throughout history. On the contrary, it is the peculiarity of these forms of organizations, or “modes of production,” which gives a particular society its historically specific characteristic. Thus, it is essential to distinguish between the general and particular aspects of history, for, as Marx claims in the introduction to *Grundrisse*, “some determinations belong to all epochs, others only to a few” (Marx, 1973, p. 85).

Therefore, the allegation that Marx had a general evolutionary theory to explain the whole of history forgets the fact that for Marx, capitalism was of primary importance in his analyses. For Marx, capitalism “is a mode of production of a particular kind and a specific historical determinacy” and “that the relations of production corresponding to this specific and historically determined mode of production ... have a specific, historical and transitory character” (Marx, 1981, p. 1018). In fact, his criticism to the two most prominent political economists he admires most is that they lack a “historical” perspective: “Smith and Ricardo still stand with both feet on the shoulders of the eighteenth century prophets, in whose imaginations this eighteenth century individual ... appears as an ideal, whose existence they project into the past. Not as a historic result but as history’s point of departure” (Marx, 1973, p. 83). These economists present their theories “as encased in eternal natural laws independent of history, at which opportunity *bourgeois* relations are

then quietly smuggled in as the inviolable natural laws on which society in the abstract is founded” (Marx, 1973, p. 87). Therefore, the categories of capitalism are historically specific ones: “nature does not produce on the one hand owners of money or commodities, and on the other hand men possessing nothing but their own labour-power. This relation has no basis in natural history, nor does it have a social basis common to all periods of human history” (Marx, 1976, p. 273). This historically transient character of economic and technological factors is emphasized in a much earlier work, namely, *Poverty of Philosophy*, in 1847 (Marx, 1995). Right after the sentence “the windmill gives you society with the feudal lord ...” we read: “these ideas, these categories, are not more eternal than the relations which they express. They are *historical and transitory products*” and “there is a continual movement of growth in the productive forces, of destruction in the social relations, of formation of ideas; there is nothing immutable but the abstraction of the movement.” In short, the claim that Marx was generalizing the categories of capitalism to other societies is, to say the least, an unfortunate one, a claim which is due to, I believe, the failure to appreciate the importance of the distinction between general and particular aspects of human societies in Marx. However, having established this, a natural question emerging at this point is whether human beings are “plastic” enough to change their behavior according to historical conditions in which they live. In order to find an answer to this, and the equivalent question of the “intransient” elements in human history, we need to consider Marx’s conception of *praxis*, which also sheds light to the issue of the role of human conduct in history.

## 5. Human Consciousness and Praxis

One of the most frequent criticisms directed to historical materialism is that it leaves no room for active human agency and conduct. For example, Martin Hollis argues that “[here] individuals are puppets, controlled from offstage by the interplay of forces and relations of production. Societies have a ‘real foundation’ and a ‘superstructure.’ The puppets have a consciousness of what they are doing, but a false one derived from the superstructure and generated from deeper down” (1994, p. 6). Peter Manicas on the other hand argues that “social existence” that determines consciousness “means, at the very minimum, that ideas do not have an independent existence, that the *forms* of consciousness and the particular beliefs of a social group are the outcome of everything true of their *social* lives --a fairly innocuous claim and, of course, the basic premise of any sociology of knowledge” (1987, p. 102). This ambiguity is further aggravated if we consider what Marx and Engels say in the *German Ideology*: “Men are the producers of their conceptions, ideas, etc.; consciousness can never be anything else than conscious existence, and the existence of men is their actual life-process,” and, “life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life” (Marx and Engels, 1970, p. 47). However, these two claims seem contradicting, as to the status of “consciousness” or the “superstructure.” Yet, it is possible to think that the words like “life” or “social existence” embraces both economic and other aspects of the human existence. That is to say, to use Marx’s words in the *1844 Manuscripts*, the conception of his-

torical materialism can be understood as referring to the “human life activity” in the sense of “an activity in which humanity, individually and collectively, creates itself by socially transforming nature” (Hunt, 1986, p. 99). This unity or “totality” of human existence in its material and mental aspects is to be understood as human *praxis*, which refers to human conscious activity directed to self-realization process.

In general, *praxis* refers to all kinds of human activities; but it must be understood as referring to the free, universal, and self-creative activity through which the human species creates (transforms) her world and herself (Petrovic, 1991, 1969). Such a conception of *praxis* rooted in a particular notion of human nature is developed by Marx mostly in the *1844 Manuscripts* (Marx, 1975). The “essential human nature” is a “definition” of what it means to be a human being, and thus it should remain relatively constant throughout history. That is to say, as Eric Fromm emphasizes, human potential is given but human beings develop and transform themselves. Thus, human beings make their own history, in the form of self-realization, and in this sense a human being is her “own product” (Fromm, 1961, p. 26). Such an understanding follows the lines along which what Isaiah Berlin (1963, p. ch. 4) and Charles Taylor (1975, p. 547-58) call the “Expressivist” tradition, a German philosophical strand within the Enlightenment. This tradition sees human activity and human life as human “self-expression,” within which human freedom is given a primary role as the authentic form of this expression. According to Taylor, expressivism has four demands: the unity of human as forming an indivisible whole so that the separation of different levels (like life as against thought, sentience as against rationality, knowledge as against will) is rejected; freedom; communion with man and communion with nature. It can be demonstrated that these four demands occupy a crucial place in Marx’s work as well. For Marx too, the condition that characterizes the essence of a human being is that a human being is a unity of the particular, or more accurately individual, and the general, or social. In other words, using Marx’s *1844 Manuscripts*’ language, “man”<sup>10</sup> is a *species-being* for “he practically and theoretically makes the species —both his own and those of other things— his object” and “he looks upon himself as the present, living species, because he looks upon himself as a *universal* and therefore free being (Marx, 1975, p. 327). A person is a *species-being* in two senses, though these two senses are in effect identical: a person is a *species-being*, first, “because of the nature of human perceptual and conceptual faculties and human life-activity,” and, second, “because of the social nature of human activity” (Hunt, 1986, p. 97,98). That is, a person is a unity of individuality and sociality, or more appropriately, the individual is the social being; even his very existence is social activity (Marx, 1975, p. 350). For this reason, “it is above all necessary to avoid once more establishing “society” as an abstraction over against the individual. The individual *is* the *social being*” (Marx, 1975, p. 350). Then, human life activity, whose description is human history itself, is an interaction with nature in a social setting: human activity is a social one which is mediated through

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10 “Man,’ the agent of Marxist narratives, is not the equivalent of *Homo Sapiens*, though that agent is biologically enabled to emerge (uniquely) by the species-wide uniformities of *Homo Sapiens*” (Margolis 1989: 385).



human labor, and in this activity, or in the *praxis*, human beings transform both nature, their “inorganic body” (Marx, 1975, p. 328), and themselves. In other words, this activity is to be seen as “either a society-mediated interchange with nature or a nature-mediated interchange with other humans” (Hunt, 1986, p. 99). This conception of *praxis*, or the free purposeful activity of humans to transform nature and themselves, is essential in Marx's thinking, for only through this activity can humans “*objectify*” their essence: “the object of labour is, therefore the *objectification of the species-life of man*: for man reproduces himself not only intellectually, in his consciousness, but actively and actually, and he can therefore contemplate himself in a world he himself has created” (Marx, 1975, p. 329).

Therefore, the notion of *praxis* must be understood as referring to free, universal, and self-creative activity through which the human being creates (transforms) her world and herself. In other words, although human intentionality is a necessary condition for *praxis*, a human being can be regarded as a “being of *praxis*; she can only exist in *praxis*” (Petrovic, 1991, p. 435). Marx, like Aristotle, considers human essence as referring to “the inherent development potential of every human being when that development proceeded in the natural or proper way” (Hunt, 1986, p. 97). That is to say, the notion of *praxis* refers to human life activity within which human beings develop and realize their potentials.

On this conception of *praxis*, therefore, “thinking” and “acting” are not two different faculties: “human action is interested and purposive, and thinking is the reflexive element of distinctly human action” (Margolis, 1989, p. 368-69). We can think of *praxis* as referring to “consciousness,” not only in the sense of a state of mind, but also in the sense of an *act*; or to put it other way, *praxis* is a theory for *thinking*, (Margolis, 1989). According to Margolis, Marx opposed to the distinction between “the autonomous rational and cognitive powers of human agents and a discernible independent world confronted through the contingencies of human history. *Thinking itself is a history*” (1989, p. 368).

But such a conception clearly destroys the idea of the causal primacy of economic “base”; instead, we have a “correspondence” between the base and the superstructure for they are inseparable. For Margolis, the notion of *praxis* “precludes both the reduction of persons to mere material things (physicalism) and the elimination of the human altogether (structuralism, post-structuralism, anti-humanism). ... it neither collapses the individual into the social as a mere node of productive or market process nor does it construe the social or societal as an abstraction of some sort from the prior aggregated activity of distinct sets of individual persons” (Margolis, p. 369).

In other words, human consciousness is shaped through their life activity, for consciousness itself is “from the very beginning, a social product, and remains so long as men exists at all,” as is emphasized in *The German Ideology* (Marx and Engels, 1970, p. 51). Such a conception of the “production of life” (Marx and Engels, 1970, p. 50), to be conceived as both a natural and social relation “in such a way that the restricted relation of men to nature determines their restricted relation to one another, and their restricted relation to one another determines their restricted relation to nature” (Marx and Engels, 1970, p.

51), demonstrates the importance of the category of *labor* in Marx. This category is so important that it is even possible to argue that Marx's project is actually a "philosophical reconstruction" of the concept of labor, a meaningful process through which the species being both objectifies and recognizes itself in its own product (Ricour, 1986, p. 34). Marx defines the term "labor" as a process within which labor power is used, and the term "labor power" is to be defined as "the aggregate of those mental and physical capabilities existing in the physical form, the living personality, of a human being" (Marx, 1976, p. 270). Within this process, human beings objectify their essences, or realize their potentialities, through employing their labor power, or the power of transformation of both the natural world, and of themselves. "Labour is, first of all, a process between man and nature, a process by which man, through his own actions, mediates, regulates and controls the metabolism between himself and nature," and in this process, "he acts upon external nature and changes it, and in this way he simultaneously changes his own nature. He develops the potentialities slumbering within nature, and subjects the play of its forces to his own sovereign power" (Marx, 1976, p. 283). This process is of a fully conscious one "what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is that the architect builds the cell in his mind before he constructs it in wax. At the end of every labour process, a result emerges which already been conceived by the worker at the beginning, hence already existed ideally" (Marx, 1976, p. 283-84).

Therefore, three aspects of the human condition need to be emphasized in Marx: First, human beings are social beings, who appropriate nature in a social setting. Second, the terms "labor" and "production" refer to a general activity; what we have here is "production of lives" rather than merely material goods production. Above all, this activity, or the "labor process" is a general condition: "It is the universal condition characterizing the metabolic interaction between man and nature, the everlasting nature-imposed condition of human existence" (Marx, 1976, p. 290). On this conception, labor power is the "mediator" of the "metabolic" interaction between society and nature (Lukács, 1971: xvii) and "labor is man's effort to regulate his metabolism with nature. Labor is the expression of human life and through labor man's relationship to nature is changed, hence through labor man changes himself" (Fromm, 1961: 16). Therefore, labor is common to all forms of society because it is the process through which human beings realize their own essence; it actually characterizes what is human. The labor process as a purposeful activity is therefore an appropriation of nature for the requirements of humans. It is the universal condition for the interaction between human beings and nature, and therefore it is independent of every form of human existence; that is, it is common to all forms of society, even though specific forms of organization of this activity does not remain the same throughout history. On the contrary, it is the peculiarity of these forms of organizations, or modes of production, which gives a particular society its historically specific characteristic. Therefore, regarding the issue of human freedom and consciousness in the context of historical materialism, one can argue, like John Macmurray (1935), that the crucial question for Marx is "how does it come about that man, who is in the essence of his nature free and self-determined, becomes in the process of his history unfree and determined by the material forces of his environment?" (Macmur-

ray, 1935, p. 216-17). According to Macmurray, the economic interpretation of history is Marx's answer to this question. However, such an argument should make us think about the conditions under which human freedom is violated, an issue to which we now turn.

## 6. Human Agency and Contradictions in Social Reproduction

We have seen that human *praxis* is a conscious and free human activity, independent of specific historical social formations. This brings about the problem of human agency, for the notion of *praxis* is essential in the transformation and meditation (the two most essential characteristics of human life) relations in human societies for it emphasizes the transformative capacity of humans (Giddens (1981, p. 53-54). Here, according to Giddens, transformation refers to “could have done otherwise” feature of human capacity while mediation expresses the variety of ways in which interaction in social system is made possible across space and time. All interaction is “carried” across space and time by media, organized structurally (Giddens, 1981, p. 53). Giddens wants to make a sharp distinction between humans and nature, a distinction based on the hypothesis of intentionality as self-reflexive monitoring action. For him, since human agency is characterized by the idea that human actors “could have done otherwise” and therefore can qualify the “laws” in the social realm, the use of evolutionary approach in society is not warranted for there is a great discontinuity between natural realm and the realm of humans (Giddens, 1981, p. 53-54). However, apart from the issue of the existence evolutionary processes within the social realm, which we have already discussed, this argument seems a little inadequate: one can contend that the notion of agency is not limited to human beings only; almost all beings, living or not, have some agency power, in the sense of having some “causal power” which means “the potency to produce an effect in virtue of its nature, in the absence of constraint and when properly stimulated” (Harré and Madden, 1975, p. 16). Human agency also refers to a transformative power, or the power of making a difference, however small, in the state of affairs, in reality, or in herself. But the distinguishing feature of human agency is “intentionality,” which, is the answer to the question Wittgenstein raises: “what is left over if I subtract the fact that my arm goes up from the fact that I raise my arm?” (quoted in Bhaskar, 1989, p. 83). Another important aspect of human action, other than intentionality, is the humans’ capability of monitoring and controlling their own actions and performances. This capacity of monitoring also applies to monitoring the activity itself; humans have a “second-order monitoring” capability as well, which makes a retrospective commentary about actions possible (Bhaskar, 1989, p. 35).<sup>11</sup> In this regard, human agency

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11 This second-order monitoring capacity is usually related to morality or ethics in general. Charles Taylor emphasizes this feature in his notion of the “strong evaluator” (Taylor 1985): Humans are endowed with the capacity to evaluate their desires strongly in the sense that they are not only concerned with the outcomes of the motivations but also with the “quality” of the motivations. In other words, they go “deeper,” i.e. characterizes their motivations at greater depth (Taylor 1985: 25).

also involves the acknowledgement of the responsibility over actions (Bhaskar, 1989, p. 92).

Then, human action or *praxis* consists in causal intervention in the natural world and the reflexive monitoring of that intervention. Here the first aspect is both logically and temporally prior to the second, and these two aspects of *praxis* are represented in the material and psychological predicates respectively (Bhaskar, 1989, p. 81). Now, following from this is the notion of a *person* as a unitary entity to which both material and psychological predicates are applicable (Bhaskar, 1989, p. 81). On this conception, the capacity for a reflexive self monitoring (monitoring of monitoring one's own activity) is connected with the possession of a language as a system of signs or symbols for producing and communicating information (Bhaskar, 1989, p. 82). Then a *mind* can be defined as an entity possessing "the capacity either to acquire or to exercise the acquired ability to creatively manipulate symbols" (Bhaskar, 1989, p. 81).

Therefore, the "could have done otherwise" feature of human agency could not be taken as the only feature of human action, even if it is of utmost importance. Still, unlike Giddens, one can argue that such a feature neither involves nor even implies human freedom and its limits. To be fair, Giddens is also aware of this, for his understanding of the notion of the "duality of structure," acknowledges limitations of human freedom, but still, his criticism of Marx in this regard seems a little misleading, for he omits the full extent of the Marxian, or even Aristotelian, notion of freedom in the sense of realization of human potential, and violations of freedom. One of the most important forms of violation or annihilation of human freedom is, of course, captured in Marx's conception of alienation. Alienation refers to the contradiction between human essence and existence, when the conditions within which humans exists do not permit them to realize their own potential (Hunt, 1986, p. 97). Although the object that labor produces should be considered as the "objectification" of labor, under specific social relations this process also gives rise to the fact that "the object that labour produces, its product, stands opposed to it as something alien, as a power independent of the producer" and, "this realization of labour appears as a loss of reality for the worker, objectification as loss of and bondage to the object, and appropriation as estrangement, as alienation" (Marx, 1975, p. 324). Human beings will be alienated to what they produce, to their own productive activity, to their fellow human beings and society, and to the human species (Hunt, 1979, 304). This alienation reaches its "climax" under capitalism, in which human transformative power, labor power itself, becomes a commodity. Capitalism according to Marx creates the process of "commodity fetishism," in which the commodity form and the value-relation of the products of labor is a definite social relation between humans themselves which seems to be a relation between things.<sup>12</sup> This fetishism attaches itself to the products of labor as soon as they are produced as commodities and is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities. Yet, not the production of commodities per se but the peculiar social, abstract character of the labor which produces them gives rise to the fetishism of the world of commodities (Marx,

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<sup>12</sup> For a discussion of alienation and fetishism, and its importance in Marx's labor theory of value, see Özel (2008).

1976, p. 165). That is to say, labor as an abstract category comes to be completely separated from its “bearer,” human beings, and it becomes a “thing.” Put another way, commodity fetishism characterizes the process of the inversion of the “subject” into its “predicate” and the “predicate” into the “subject”: Human labor-power, a predicate, becomes an alien entity which transforms real subjects, human beings, into “things.” Therefore, we have a twofold process here: on the one hand things seem to acquire human attributes while on the other human relations take on the character of things and thus have a “phantom objectivity,” that is, these relations are “reified” (Lukács, 1971, p. 83). Human relations, however, appear as relations between things only when both the products of labor and labor power itself become alienated. In other words, whereas the objects produced by man appear as the bearers of social relations, i.e., fetishism, the social relations between real people appear as the relations between things, i.e., reification. Hence both the terms fetishism and reification refer to the same process, which is itself the result of alienation (Schaff, 1980, p. 80-82). Here, it should be stressed that capitalism needs to function as though abstractions are real; in capitalism, individuals see each other as commodities, purely as means to be exchanged for the sake of continued existence (Hunt, 1979, p. 309). Although the effects of alienation seem to be restricted to the worker, in fact it is an all-pervasive social relation in capitalism. For example, not only does the fertility of soil seem to be an attribute of the landlord (Marx, 1975, p. 311), but the powers of labor, of human beings, appear as the powers of capital, since “what is lost by the specialized workers is concentrated in the capital which confronts them” (Marx, 1976, p. 482). Moreover, the capitalist is “only capital personified. His soul is the soul of capital” (Marx, 1976, p. 342). In short, “we are in a spectral world, but in a world in which *spectres are real*. For the pseudo-life of the commodity, the objective character of exchange value, are *not* illusion” (Polanyi, 1935, p. 375). This process characterizes the violation of human freedom, and also the “alienation of tradition” (Schaff, 1980, p. 136) in which “a social relation of production appears as something existing apart from individual human beings, and the distinctive relations into which they enter in the course of production in society appear as the specific properties of a thing” (Marx, 1970, p. 49).

Nevertheless, apart from alienation and fetishism, human free action is also limited by the social structures, as was captured by the conception of the “Transformational Model of Social Activity.” According to this model, social actions consist of social practices, situated in time-space, and organized in a skilled and knowledgeable fashion by human agents. But such knowledgeability is always “bounded” by the unacknowledged conditions of action on the one side, and the unintended consequences of action on the other. This conception is called as the *duality of structure*, in the sense that “the structured properties of social systems are simultaneously the *medium and outcome of social acts*” (Giddens, 1981, p. 19). On this conception, societies or social systems cannot exist without human agency, but nevertheless it is not the case that actors create social systems; they reproduce or transform them, remaking what is already made in the continuity of *praxis* (Giddens, 1984, p. 25). However, according to Roy Bhaskar, the founder of Critical Realism, the notion of the duality of structure actually implies that the relationship between people and society is not a “dialectical” one for they

have different ontological status (1989, p. 33-34). Although society cannot exist without human activity and such activity cannot occur unless the agents engaging in it has a conception of what they are doing, it is not true to assert that humans *create* it. Rather, people *reproduce* or *transform* society. Since society is *already made*, any concrete human activity or *praxis* can only modify it. In other words, society is not the product of their activity but it is an entity never made by individuals though it can exist only in their activity (Bhaskar, 1989, p. 33). On the other hand, conscious human activity can be made only in given objects, that is, it always expresses and utilizes some previously existing social forms. Besides the fact that society is irreducible to the individual, it is a necessary condition for any intentional human activity. In other words, society and human praxis both have a dual character: society is both the material *cause* and the continually reproduced *outcome* of human agency (*duality of structure*); and praxis is both conscious *production*, and normally unconscious *reproduction* of the conditions of production (*duality of praxis*) (Bhaskar, 1989, p. 34-35).

However, intentionality and self-consciousness do not apply to transformation of social structure because the properties of society and individuals are strikingly different from each other. In this framework, people, when they are acting consciously, generally unconsciously reproduce and sometimes transform the structures governing their activities. For example, people do not marry to reproduce the nuclear family or work to retain the capitalist economy, but unintended consequences of their actions lead to reproduction. From this, we can see that the change in social structures cannot be explained on the basis of agents' desires, though these desires may impose important limits on the change (Bhaskar, 1989, p. 35). In sum, the Transformational Model of Social Activity asserts that people do not create society for it already exists and is a necessary condition for human activity. Society must be regarded as an "ensemble" of structures practices and positions which individuals reproduce and transform. But these structures cannot exist independently of their actions. The process of establishing necessary conditions for the reproduction and/or transformation is called by Bhaskar as *socialization*. This process refers to the fact that, though society is only present in human action, human action is always made in the context of social forms. However, neither can be reduced to or explained in terms of the other (Bhaskar, 1989, p. 37). On the other hand, this transformational model, by allowing the human agency, regards necessity in social life as operating via the intentional activity of man in the last instance (Bhaskar, 1989, p. 36).

With respect to the problem of the contact between structures and human agency, on the other hand, the fact that social structures are continually reproduced and exercised only in human agency requires a mediating system linking action to structure, which must endure and be occupied by individuals. This system is related to the *positions* (places, functions, rules, tasks, etc.) occupied (filled, implemented, established etc.) by individuals, and of the *practices* (activities etc.) in which they engage (Bhaskar, 1989, p. 40-41). And this "position-practice" (or positioned practice) system can be constructed rationally for only relations between positions. Some of these relations are *internal* in the sense that they are "necessary" or "essential" for the social systems, while others are not (Bhaskar, 1989, p.

42).<sup>13</sup> Internality of relations are especially important with respect to the *stratification*: Although most social phenomena can be explained in terms of a multiplicity of causes, their explanation must be based on a *totality* of real aspects, bearing internal relations between these aspects. In this framework, social sciences can be stratified such that different sciences deal with the structural conditions for particular types of social activity (Bhaskar, 1989, p. 44).

Returning to Marx, we are now in a better position to understand the relationship between the human agent and social relations. Human freedom and necessity, both in nature and the human world had always been very important for Marx, since his doctoral dissertation in 1841.<sup>14</sup> Regarding the social realm, Marx maintains that even if human agency and the notion of freedom is of primary importance, there are still limits to human purposive action, and human freedom can be violated. Isaiah Berlin (1963, p. ch. 4) and Charles Taylor (1975, p. 547-58) in this respect argue that Marx's whole enterprise can be seen as an attempt to synthesize between two contradictory positions. The first of these positions is the radical Enlightenment thought, which defends the view that for every question there is only one true answer and that, guided by his knowledge of the "laws of nature," man comes to shape nature and society to his purposes in accordance with those laws. The second position, on the other hand, is the expressivist aspirations, above all human freedom. Nevertheless, Taylor believes that Marx's attempt of synthesis between these expressivist aspirations and the Enlightenment idea of transforming society, especially with its emphasis on the laws of nature and perfectibility of society is not viable, for these two aims are incompatible. However, it can also be argued that Marx takes this incompatibility as a contradiction between causality and "teleology" in the sense of human purposiveness, part and parcel of being human. Second, with respect to the role played by the actions of individuals in human societies, an important point to be stressed is that Marx's historical materialism is actually a "fusion" between (material) causality and teleology; that is, teleology in the sense of purposive human action is encompassed in the causal framework (Colletti, 1972, p. 212): Although every human being is a free creator of herself and of her world in a social setting, at the same time she is partly unfree, passive, inert effect of her environment. In other words, human conscious, free activity must operate within a framework of material causality. That is, we should regard human activity as "both causality and finalism, material causality and ideal causality; it is ... man's action and effect on nature and at the same time nature's action and effect on man" (Colletti, 1972, p. 228).

According to Marx, although human purposeful behavior to realize her own potentialities comes to influence the society in accordance with her purposes, she nevertheless is subjected to the laws which limit her volition. Karl Polanyi's claim that it is "an illusion to assume a society shaped by man's will and wish alone" (Polanyi, 1944, p. 258) is quite an apt characterization of Marx's views. Also, Marx's assertion that "men make their own history,

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13 "A relation  $R_{AB}$  is internal if and only if A would not be what it essentially is unless B is related to it in the way it is" (Bhaskar 1989: 42).

14 <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1841/dr-theses/index.htm>.

but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past” (Marx, 1963, p. 15) can be understood in this connection. Although human history is being continuously made by intentional actions of individuals, unintended effects of these actions is the reproduction of social structures, independent of individuals’ purposes. On this conception, consistent with the “transformative model of social activity,” human purposive activity always presupposes preexisting social relations for it is the existence of these relations which makes the coordination and integration of individual acts possible and thereby makes the process a social one. Yet, these very social relations, which are prerequisites of individual action, are themselves the end result of the collective activities of the individuals involved in the process. Therefore, social relations, which both enable and constrain individual intentional actions, are continuously created and recreated by individual actions (Hunt, 1979, p. 285). This totality of the human essence, material and the ideal, and freedom and necessity involves, in other words, some important contradictions that are also acknowledged by historical materialism.

The first contradiction, is the one between individuality and sociality. A “species-being” is at the same time both an individual and a social being: “The human being is in the most literal sense a ζῷον πολιτικόν [*political animal*], not merely a gregarious animal, but an animal which can individuate itself only in the midst of society” (Marx, 1973, p. 84). That is, *the individual is the social being*; even her very existence is a social activity (Marx, 1975, p. 350).

Secondly, the contradiction between freedom and necessity is an all-pervasive one in the human world as well. As Marx emphasizes, human beings “make their own history”, but not “under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past” (Marx, 1963, p. 15). A manifestation of this contradiction within the social reproduction process is the contradiction between human agency and structure. Human transformative power, or human agency, will be limited by the social structures and relations, as the transformative model of social activity shows. In Marx too, as we have seen, this fact is acknowledged. Although human history is being continuously made by intentional actions of individuals, unintended effects of these actions is the reproduction of social structures, independent of individuals’ purposes. Human purposive activity always presuppose preexisting social relations for it is the existence of these relations which makes the coordination and integration of individual acts possible and thereby makes the process a social one. Yet, these very social relations, which are prerequisites of individual action, are themselves the end result of the collective activities of the individuals involved in the process. Therefore, social relations, which both enable and constrain individual intentional actions, are continuously created and recreated by individual actions (Hunt, 1979, p. 285). And the last, but not the least, contradiction is the one between human essence and existence, or the one between objectification and alienation. As we have seen, Marx, like Aristotle, considers human essence as referring to ‘the inherent development potential of every human being when that development proceeded in the



natural or proper way' (Hunt, 1986, p. 97). However, if the conditions within which they exist do not permit them to realize their own potential, their existence is in contradiction with their essence. Although the object that labor produces should be considered as the "objectification" of labor, under specific social relations this process also gives rise to alienation and fetishism. Human beings will be alienated to what they produce, to their own productive activity, to their fellow human beings and society, and to human species.

## 7. Conclusions

In conclusion, three related points can be emphasized regarding "Historical materialism." First, this conception should be taken, not as a "historico-philosophic theory of the *marche Générale*" but as a first approximation to the human life activity, embracing the material and mental, emotional and aesthetic aspects of human existence. Second, although human history is being continuously made by intentional actions of individuals, unintended effects of these actions is the reproduction and sometimes transformation of social structures, independent of individuals' intentions. And finally, therefore, history can be represented as a "fusion" of causality and teleology, implying free will and human volition to be restricted by the "realm of necessity" (Marx, 1981, p. 958-59). That is, human history is to be seen, among others, as the embodiment of a contradiction between freedom and the loss of it.

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