



COMMENT ON “SHIFT IN MARX AND ENGELS’ HISTORICAL MATERIALISM PERSPECTIVE”

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COMMENT ON “SHIFT IN MARX AND ENGELS’ HISTORICAL MATERIALISM PERSPECTIVE”

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Shen’s excellent paper shows that Marx and Engels’ critique of Hegelian idealism and Feuerbachian humanistic materialism contributed to the emergence of historical materialism. They expounded the concept of historical materialism and discussed its basic principles in a systematic and detailed way, then a great transformation rose in the history of philosophy. Specifically, Shen (2024) selected Marx and Engels’ critique of Feuerbachian humanistic materialism to illustrate its transcendence of Feuerbach and the birth of historical materialism. It motivates reflections such as those presented here on the consequences of adopting historical materialism on the study of economic and social theory.

If it were possible to point to a driving motif present in all of Marx’s works, then it would be conflict. Each social conflict has peculiarities, which make it unique. In no case are the protagonists and their circumstances repeated. However, for Marx, they are all conflicts between individuals and/or groups with different interests. If something “suits me” or benefits me, I will be interested in it whether I want it or not. Marx frequently uses the qualified expression “material interest”. The adjective “material” serves to indicate not only that the interests are objective and not mere desires, but also the content of the type of interests about which he is speaking. The interests that divide society and bring it to the brink of civil war have a political-economic content. Thus, the interests of different individuals or groups

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can be related to each other in two interesting ways: they can be contradictory, or they can coincide.

1. If a rise in unemployment and a fall in wages is in the interests of two individuals, x and y , then we will say that the interests of x and y coincide or are identical.
2. If, on the other hand, a fall in unemployment and a rise in wages is in the interests of an individual z , then we will say that z has interests contradictory to those of x and y .

The fact that the interests of individuals or groups of different individuals can be related to each other in two ways, contradictory or coinciding, is an expression of what Shen (2024) makes explicit, namely, that “Marx and Engels criticized Feuerbach’s view of humans as purely natural and instead studied humans as active agents in society. They discovered the role of human practical activity, and thus determined that material production is the source of human history”.

Of course, although understanding these relations between interests at the level of individuals is valid, Marx rarely refers to individual persons. Generally, his analyses proceed at the level of groups of individuals. These groups of individuals correspond to social classes, i.e., groups of people who have the same ownership relations over some means of production. Thus, in Marx’s texts, we read that the bourgeoisie has interest’s contradictory to those of the proletariat and that the same thing happens between the bourgeoisie and the peasants, that it would be in the latter’s interest to tie their fate to that of the proletariat, etc. The problem Marx faces is that of what should be attributed to these relations between the interests of the different social classes:

Why do some classes have conflicting interests with each other?

Why is it that different classes can have identical material interests?

Marx’s solution to this problem consists in linking the relations between interests with the relations of exploitation that exist between social classes. In every relation of exploitation, we find two groups. The exploited are those who work and produce but can only enjoy part of what they produced. The exploiters appropriate the other party and do so without giving anything in return. So, the well-being of the exploiters depends causally on the deprivations suffered by the exploited and vice-versa. The form in which this appropriation is carried out defines the mode of exploitation: extra-economic violence in pre-capitalist modes of production and the logic of value in the capitalist mode of production. The proportionate share of the product taken by the operator determines the degree of exploitation. The greater this is, the greater the degree of exploitation will be. Exploitation is the element that explains

why the interests of the different classes relate in the way they do. If a social class sc (the patriciate, the nobility, the bourgeoisie) exploits another class sc' (the slaves, the serfs, the proletariat), we can be sure that the interests of sc' will be contradictory to those of sc .

The result would be the same if it were sc' that exploited sc . Whenever between two classes there is a relation of exploitation, their respective interests will be contradictory. This is irrespective of the manner and degree that the exploitation is carried out. Sometimes, we find that the same sc class exploits, in addition to sc' , other social classes sc'' , sc''' ... In these cases, the exploited classes share, because they have the same exploiter, the same interest. Something similar happens among the exploiting classes. If two classes sc , sc' exploit, jointly, the same class sc'' , we can therefore expect that sc and sc' will have an identical interest (which will also be contradictory to the interest of sc''). In this way, the exploitation relationship allows us to explain both contradictions and coincidences of interests.

The exploitative relationship is more than an idea. It only makes sense to talk about it because, as Shen’s (2024) paper shows so well, “Marx and Engels identified material production as the source of human history”.

In this context, it could be stated that the indispensable concepts required by Marx’s theory of social classes are few: “social classes”, “material interests”, “possession” (which links a social class with a material interest) and the relation of “exploitation” (which will be defined as a relation between two social classes). The central assertion would be that given any three social classes, each of them will possess a material interest such that the following conditions will be satisfied:

- a) If a relation of exploitation exists between two social classes, then the material interest of one class will be contradictory to the material interest of the other.
- b) If one social class exploits two other social classes, then the two exploited classes will have identical material interests in each other.

An example of a conflict context that could be analyzed from this perspective would be the English society in the 19th century. In England, capitalism acquires its “perfect form”, with its factories, as well as a well-organized working class confronted with the powerful bourgeoisie, in a context in which the State, the Church and national interests are subordinated to capital. That the data on which Marx (1867) constructed *Capital* where data from English society can be attributed, in part, to a simple biographical coincidence, since London was the last place where Marx was exiled and where he lived the longest, but it also tells us of the importance Marx attributed to England as a paradigm for his research.

Marx in fact touches the material world -- the world of our lives, with his reflection on social classes. Following Shen's work, we can argue that a reflection at this level would not be possible without Marx and Engels' critique of Hegelian idealism and Feuerbachian humanist materialism.

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