

## THE MATERIALIST CONCEPTION OF HISTORY

### General Introduction

The object of this course of 10 classes entitled “Aspects of Marxism” is to explore the nature of the relations between the SPGB’s thinking and Marxist theory on a number of well known topics.

The course of classes on “Aspects of Marxism” forms the first year of a two year programme of re-examination of Marx’s major writings. The second year’s course of classes will be devoted to examining Marx’s economic analysis of capitalism and extending our understanding of contemporary economics and politics.

It is hoped that this examination of the basis of Socialist theory will help us in the political analyses that are to form the subject of further education courses. These have not yet been planned in detail, but could include for example a series on Revolution; History of the Working Class Movement; Political Trends in Contemporary Capitalism. Any suggestions or offers of help would be greatly appreciated!

It must be emphasised that we see this educational programme as constituting an integral part of the Party’s work for Socialism and its on-going analysis of capitalism. It is hoped that in the discussions and in these bulletins, an opportunity will be provided for members to extend their understanding of the political situation facing the SPGB and that our effectiveness as a revolutionary organisation will be correspondingly increased.

Fraternally

P. Lawrence, Education Organiser  
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### **Contribution by Comrade Hardy on the Materialist Conception of History**

The first thing to ask is ‘What is the Materialist Conception of History?’ and I assume that all of you have read something about it, for example the Party’s pamphlet on the subject and other material. The Materialist Conception of History is an attempt to explain great social changes that have taken place in history, for example, why Feudalism gave place to Capitalism, and why such upheavals as the French Revolution took place. What was behind these events, and what is the part played in History by struggles between different classes, that is, one class trying to bring about a change and another class doing their utmost to resist the change?

The MCH is not the only attempt to explain History. Opposed to it is the view that what changes society are ideas, and that changes in society are the result of the application of the ideas that people put forward. For example, at a certain stage in British history, people came to accept the idea that slavery should be abolished because, in their language, it was morally wrong. The MCH will ask the question “Why did something that was formerly regarded as being morally right, come to be regarded as morally wrong, after a certain passage of years?”

Engels made an interesting statement about the MCH when he spoke at Marx’s funeral. He said “History was for the first time placed on its real basis. The palpable, but previously overlooked fact that men must first of all eat, drink, have shelter and clothing, and therefore must work, before they can fight for domination, pursue politics, religion, philosophy etc., this palpable fact at last comes into its own right”.

Marx summarised the MCH in his preface to the *Critique of Political Economy*. It is worthwhile going through that brief statement, and it is useful to break it up into its various sections and note how the argument moves forward stage by stage. He starts off by saying that in the social production of their life men enter into definite relations with each other, corresponding to stages of development of the material powers of production. The sum total of these relations of production constitute the economic structure of society. That this economic structure is the real foundation of society on which is built up the corresponding legal and political superstructure, and “definite forms of social consciousness, the social, political and spiritual processes of life”. Marx then goes on to say that it is not their consciousness that determines men’s existence but their social existence that determines their consciousness.

Then at a certain stage of development of the material forces of production, these come into conflict with the existing relations of production, particularly property relations. Then there is a phase of social revolution. The economic foundations are then changed, and with them the entire superstructure is more or less rapidly transformed. No social order ever disappears before all the productive forces for which there is room, have been developed. New, higher relations of production never appear before the material conditions of their existence have matured in the womb of the old society.

This should be read in conjunction with another statement Marx made, which is in the pamphlet on page 62 and comes from Marx’s own Preface to *Capital*. “Even when a society has got upon the right track for the discovery of the natural laws of its movement, it can neither clear by bold leaps, nor remove by legal enactments, the obstacles offered by the successive phases of its normal development.” This point I

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shall return to later. Finally, of course, Marx envisaged that the next phase of the evolution of society would be from Capitalism to Socialism.

Another point to look at is how Marx arrived at the MCH. In the speech that Engels made at Marx's funeral he described it as having been that "Marx discovered the law of evolution in human history", This could suggest that Marx achieved this by himself, but Engels went on to put the matter in some perspective when he said "Just as Darwin discovered the law of evolution in organic nature, so Marx discovered the law of evolution in human history." We should recognise that Marx, like Darwin, carried on from the work of people before him, and again, like Darwin, there were other people working more or less on the same lines. It is not true that Marx and Engels formulated the MCH in a vacuum. They had to work in the real world, and in the world of ideas that was then being developed, not only by themselves, but also by other people. It would in fact be a denial of the MCH if one took the view that Marx formulated the MCH all on his own and out of nowhere. Engels, for example, wrote of the German socialists "We were proud that we trace our descent not only from St. Simon, Fourier, and Owen, but also from Kant and Hegel." Only one of these started as a member of the working class, and that was Owen – a mill worker. But as well as this, Marx and Engels at least partly developed and acquired their ideas from contacts with workers in the Chartist Movement, and in London, with exiled German workers in the London Communist Club. These were people such as Schapper, Bauer, Moll, Pfaender, Lessner, J. F. Bray and others. Marx and Engels had these direct contacts with workers who were engaged in the political movement. Whilst Marx and Engels began by being chiefly interested in Philosophy and Anti-Religious ideas, it was with their contacts with people engaged in political movements, including a number of workers who were themselves working out ideas, that they developed the MCH and other Socialist ideas. It was on this real material basis that the MCH was formulated.

Comrade McClatchie, who drafted the party pamphlet on the MCH, was able to find quotations from various journals published before the *Communist Manifesto*, which showed that workers were putting forward ideas representing at least in part, the idea of the MCH.

On this subject, it is also important to acknowledge the debt that Marx and Engels owed to Lewis Henry Morgan and other anthropologists, particularly with regard to primitive communism. Marx and Engels had, in fact, worked out the main structure of the MCH before they came into contact with the writings of Morgan, or other people working in similar fields. In the opening passage of the *Communist Manifesto* it says "The history of all hitherto existing societies is a history of class struggles". Now of course that will not fit a conception which includes primitive communism, so in Engels' later Preface, he altered it to read "All written history has been a history of class struggles". This alteration allowed for the contribution made by Morgan and others. In other words, it should be remembered that Marx and Engels had formulated the main structure of the MCH before they had to take into account the idea of primitive communism.

The summary of the Materialist Conception of History in the *Preface to the Critique of Political Economy*, is a compressed statement which should be read together with further explanations in Marx and Engels' writings. I would like to deal with what is meant by "the relations of production". The reference from the Preface to the Critique

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is as follows: “In the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces”. Engels was asked a question in 1894 about the “relations of production”, and he answered it on 25th January, 1894 by listing what constituted “the relations of production”. First, the entire technique of production and transport. Second, the geographical basis in which they operate. Third, the survivals of earlier stages of economic development. Fourth, the external environment which surrounds this form of society.

In other words, Engels was saying that economic relations must not be interpreted narrowly, that they go into a whole field, that they take in not merely the technique of production, but a number of other things as well. In the same letter, Engels emphasised the point that whilst it is the economic conditions which ultimately condition historical development, it should not be overlooked that all the derivative factors, political, juridical, philosophical, religious and artistic, not only interact with each other but also “react upon the economic basis”. Engels is saying that it should be recognised that there is an economic basis and that it produces a superstructure corresponding to it, but these various aspects of the superstructure interact with each other, and all of them react on the economic basis itself, so things are not simply in a watertight compartment like economic basis and the rest, nor should it be thought that the rest is simply the result of the economic basis.

Engels gave some examples. “The State, for instance, exercised an influence by protective tariffs, free trade, and a good or bad fiscal system”. Engels also cited as a factor, and it is important to see how far Engels is carrying this: “The sentimentality and cringing servility to princes and nobles that existed in Germany, that arose out of the miserable and chaotic conditions in Germany before 1830”. Engels is saying this that “cringing servility” had an effect on the economic basis because it hindered the further development of it.

Marx never made the assumption that Capitalists and their Governments always understand what policies are really in their best interests. The situation facing the Capitalists is obviously confused. If we take, for example, the time when the struggle was beginning in this country, to take over power from the landed class, the argument does not go all one way. Some sections of the capitalist class were saying “Don't let's fight them – let's come to terms with them”. There was considerable doubt as to whether the capitalist class should go over to Free Trade. This was a very big and long campaign, yet it was very far-reaching in its effects on the economic basis.

The same doubts can exist at the present time. For example, Capitalists may some day come to the conclusion that their decision 30 or 40 years ago, in this and some other countries to resort to a continuing policy of inflation, was an error on their part. Inflation has certainly reacted on the economic basis of Capitalism in this and other countries. 30 years of inflation is bound to react on the actual structure of Capitalism and on companies themselves. One of the things that always happens with inflation, for example, is that companies tend to have a very large additional amount of capital tied up in stocks. If a company is afraid that prices are going on rising, they tend to hold stocks which, if prices were stable, they would not hold. In this way, Capitalism is, as it were distorted.

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Keynes, as Galbraith said, believed in “the idea”, as the formative factor in history. In this particular case – of inflation – it would appear that Keynes gave the Capitalists the wrong idea, but they accepted it, and some time or other they will come to see that they have made a mistake. Marx covered this possibility in *Capital*, saying that sometimes, although the intentions of Governments are clear enough, they make mistakes about financial policy, and then have to reverse it and put up with the consequences.

Another question which concerns the MCH is whether or not it is simply economic determinism. The MCH has been treated by some people who have failed to understand it, as a fatalistic doctrine which makes men puppets in the hands of economic forces. This was never Marx’s view. There is the famous statement he made, and repeated in various ways, that man makes his own history. Man is not somebody who has everything predetermined for him. This is not Marxism.

In his book *The Basic Writings on Politics and Philosophy of Marx and Engels* by Lewis S. Feuer, published by Fontana Books, he refers to the MCH as technological determinism and also as the economic determination of ideas. In spite of his being sympathetic to the MCH, Lewis Feuer has himself become confused. In some places he refers to the MCH quite correctly and some of his descriptions are quite good, but at the same time he can hold the idea that the MCH is a purely deterministic theory, which it is not.

This is dealt with in the Party pamphlet on page 63 in a letter written by Engels to Joseph Bloch on 21st September 1890. The whole letter is worth reading, but part of it reads as follows: “We make our history ourselves, but in the first place under very definite assumptions and conditions. Among these, the economic ones are ultimately decisive, but the political etc., ones and even the traditions that haunt men’s minds also play a part, though not the decisive one”. And again, “In the second place, however, history is made in such a way that the final result always arises from conflict between many individual wills of which each in turn has been made what it is by a host of particular conditions of life”. Here Engels, far from being a determinist, is recognising that you have a conflict of wills of individuals.

Engels also explained that he and Marx were partly to blame for the overemphasis of the economic factor. He wrote this: “Marx and I are ourselves partly to blame for the fact that the younger people sometimes lay more stress on the economic side than is due to it. We had to emphasise the main principle vis-à-vis our adversaries who denied it, and we had not always the time or the opportunity to give their due to the other elements involved in the interaction.”

Some opponents of the MCH have interpreted it as assuming that each individual acts out of his personal material interest, and making this assumption, they have had no difficulty in showing that this was not a tenable proposition. Some years ago, a writer in the *Manchester Guardian*, giving his interpretation of the MCH, that the MCH means that every individual acts out of material monetary motives, set out to show that it was not true. He had no difficulty in this, but what he was attacking was not the MCH. The MCH explains how basic ideas develop, and that once the ideas have been developed, the individual who has accepted them can take on family, group or class

ideas which may lead them to act against their own material interest.

One example of this is that during the Spanish Civil War a call went out for an International Brigade, and workers from all over the world set out for Spain. To suggest that they were doing this out of monetary interest is, of course, absurd. But it presents no problem for the MCH. They had developed an idea, muddled, often as it may have been, of working class solidarity against oppression, against Franco.

Marx and Engels carried this a stage further. In the *Communist Manifesto* they pointed out that in every revolutionary period, some sections of the old ruling class come over to the side of the revolution. They say, too, that individuals in the Capitalist Class who have raised themselves to the level of comprehending theoretically the historical movement as a whole, can go over to the Socialist movement. These people can hardly be said to have been acting out of their own personal individual interest. Again, this presents no problem for the MCH. Some people in the French Revolution, of the French nobility, quite early on turned themselves over to the side of the Revolution. This whole question of the error of taking the MCH to mean that individuals only act out of material self interest is discussed in Boudin's *Theoretical System of Karl Marx*, in the two Appendices to that book. There was also similar discussion in Kautsky's *Ethics and the MCH*. Boudin's material includes a lot of quotations from Kautsky and probably it is not necessary to read Kautsky in addition to Boudin.

One sideline is the place of science in historical developments. Starkenburg raised the question with Engels about the development of science, and Engels replied in a letter dated 25th January 1894. Starkenburg argued that technique largely depends on the state of science. Engels replied that science itself largely depends on economic technique and the needs of society. To quote Engels "If, as you say, technique largely depends on the state of science, science depends far more still on the state and requirements of technique. If society has a technical need, that helps science forward far more than ten universities." Engels gives a number of examples of how this has operated in history with regard to the development of scientific ideas. He also said to Starkenburg "Unfortunately it has become the custom in Germany to write the history of the sciences as if they had fallen from the skies."

Another important question concerns the influence of ideas on history. The MCH does not deny the influence of ideas and it sets out to explain where ideas come from, as against the idealists who say that ideas have an independent existence, and are the primary cause of social change. This is dealt with in the Party pamphlet on page 10. Marx and Engels left no doubt about their view on the influence of ideas. There is, for example, the passage from the opening chapter of Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*, where Marx says "the tradition of all past generations weighs like an incubus upon the brain of the living", meaning, of course, that the ideas of the last social system persist into the new social system and still weigh like an incubus on the minds of the living. (In the pamphlet, on page 62, the translation is different. It says "weighs like an alp". This is an interesting question of translation. The word "alp" in German can be translated into English in two ways. It can mean alp, that is, a mountain, or it can mean incubus, that is a nightmare or a demon that attends a person during sleep. Daniel De Leon, who translated the 18<sup>th</sup> Brumaire for the Kerr publishers, made a mistake and put "alp". McClatchie was well aware of this when he put it into the pamphlet but argued that as the mistranslation had been going round for

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30 years, and that the word “alp” did convey the meaning, as an alp is very heavy, and that moreover the word incubus was less well understood, then it should be left as “alp”.)

Marx gave examples of the way in which old ideas carry on into the minds of new generations, and he dealt particularly with the way revolutionaries themselves do it. When a revolutionary comes forward, aiming to revolutionise society, the first thing he has to do is win the support of the masses of the population, peasants, workers or others. Revolutionaries, whether they think this out clearly or not, invariably, as Marx says, hark back to some previous revolutionary situation. Marx’s words were “Revolutionaries conjure into their service the spirits of the past, assume their names, their battle cries, their costumes, to enact a new historic scene in such time honoured disguise”. Marx mentions Luther, who presented himself as the Apostle Paul. Marx gives the example of the French Revolutionaries who invoked the Roman Republic, and who later on saw themselves in the image of the Roman Empire. The revolutionaries of 1848 harked back to 1789. Cromwell drew “his language, passions and illusions from the Old Testament”, because he was talking to people for whom the Old Testament was practically the only literature they knew, and which they understood very well.

The point of these examples is that ideas, once they have been developed, attain a semi-independent existence of their own, and persist in their influence for quite a long time.

In connection with this, Engels repeated in a letter to Conrad Schmidt (5th August 1890) a statement that Marx was once alleged to have made. He wrote “All I know is that I am not a Marxist”. This arose out of a controversy which involved this question of the influence of ideas. Engels criticised a German writer, who, said Engels “has not discovered yet that though the material form of existence is the primary agent, this does not exclude spheres of ideas from reacting upon it in their turn, though with secondary effect.” Engels wrote that it showed that this particular writer, though he said he was a Marxist, did not understand the MCH, and he called him a “fatal friend of Marxism” and added “The Materialist Conception of History also has a lot of friends nowadays, to whom it serves as an excuse for not studying history.” This was another point that Marx made. The MCH is not just a formula which can be simply applied in all circumstances. Circumstances differ; and to interpret historical change it is necessary to look at the actual circumstances of the time, at the actual conditions, before it is possible to see how the MCH can explain them.

An example of this is the way in which Engels in *Socialism, Utopian and Scientific*, looked at the development of capitalism in this country. Engels looked at what was going on and attempted to say where it would lead. He laid down a general proposition that the development of great combines, trusts, and monopolies would force the state to take them over. Engels argued that no capitalist nation would put up with production being conducted with bare faced exploitation of the community, by a small band of dividend mongers, organised in Trusts. This looked a quite reasonable proposition, but it has not worked out in the way Engels thought.

Because of certain developments of English history, and because English political parties were different from the American, the reaction of American Capitalism has

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been different from British Capitalism. Engels wrote “this necessity for conversion into State property is felt first in the great institutions for intercourse and communications, the post office, the telegraphs, and the railways”, and he also noted, in another field, that United Alkali had become a very powerful concern in the chemical industry, and was ripe to be taken over by the Government. In fact, this has not happened uniformly. In this and other countries it happened more or less as Engels foresaw it, except that United Alkali, which is now vastly larger and more powerful as Imperial Chemical Industries has not yet been taken over, even a century later. But in America, the Bell Telephone System which, by far, the biggest telephone system in the world is still a private company, operating under Government regulation. What happened is that whilst in this and some other countries the Capitalists have dealt with too powerful monopolies by nationalising them, the Americans have gone on a rather different line. They have chosen to leave a lot of monopolies in private hands, but to have them operate under Federal Government regulations.

Even in this country, Gladstone, as a Conservative, got through an Act permitting the Government to Nationalise the railways in 1844, but it took just over a century before the Act, or a similar Act, was put into operation. Gladstone’s Act was a permissive Act. The Capitalists were saying that the railways were too strong, and were therefore giving themselves power to take them over, if this became necessary. In fact this never happened until the Labour Government nationalised them in 1946.

Another interesting difference is that in America the Capitalists control trusts by anti-trust laws, and under American law a monopoly is, by definition, illegal. It is only required to prove that a monopoly exists, and this is against the law, although they have made one or two exceptions where international companies are concerned. Under English monopoly law it is different. It is possible, under English law, to argue that although a monopoly exists, that monopoly is in the public interest.

These comparisons show the importance of what Marx said. The MCH cannot be applied as a simple formula. It is important to look at all the factors involved in each historical situation.

Another development which Engels could not have foreseen is the growth of multi-national companies, which will present the Capitalist Class with further problems of control

It is interesting to look at further examples of the persistence of ideas. We have already referred to the capitalist’s need to get rid of the Corn Laws and go over to Free Trade. There is an interesting sidelight on the independent development of ideas in the Anti-Corn Law Movement. Capitalists put forward an idea which they thought was in their interests. They said they wanted Free Trade. They then began to surround this idea with all the trappings of freedom, democracy and patriotism. Dr. Bowring a Free Trade advocate once made the statement that Free Trade is Jesus Christ, and Jesus Christ is Free Trade. By the time the campaign was under way, the arguments seemed a long way away from its economic basis, which was that they wanted free trade for cheap food so that they could pay lower wages. As Marx always emphasised, you cannot judge a movement by its slogans and banners. In the course of economic development, ideas are brought forward and when these have developed, people can hold them quite passionately apart from their economic basis.

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Other examples are in the religious sects. I once had to attend a little tin Bethel Church, and although the people of this church lived in the real world, they were still talking in the language of the 17th and 18th centuries. Their mental world was of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In our own time, there are the instances of religious sects who challenge the authority of the State. There are the Watch Tower people, all over the world, who will not serve in armies. It is very difficult now to relate these attitudes to economic bases though, presumably at one time or another, they had one.

There is another example which shows how group ideas can grow in the Trade Union movement. I had occasion years ago to read the original correspondence which passed between an official of the Seaman's Union and his opposite numbers on the Continent. This official became known later as a ferocious anti-German, and later still as an extreme reactionary in the TU movement. In this correspondence, which was going on from August 1914 well into 1915, he continued to address his fellow seamen in the usual way and carry on as if the war had not taken place. His attitude was that in the work of seamen, there had grown up what he called the law of the sea, and what he also called the brotherhood of seamen. He carried on this correspondence just as if there was no war, until the time when the Germans started sinking ships and not picking up the seamen. He then called upon the German seamen to denounce this, and as they would not, he then turned against them. He, so to speak, began his war sometime in the summer of 1915, whereas his own Government had been at war since 1914. Here it can be seen how TU ideas can develop out of the actual conditions of work, and out of working class organisation, reinforcing what Marx said about how the broader ideas of society can persist, even in situations where they seem inappropriate.

Another important question is how the MCH relates to "great men". Different views are held about the historical role of great men, ranging from the belief that history is made by great men, right to the other extreme, that great men have no existence at all, that they are pure figureheads, and that they are largely fictitious personalities created, like the great film stars, by the publicity departments of Hollywood. One view says that great men make history, the other view says that they only personify movements and events, which develop quite independently of them. We would say that the valid explanation is that "great men" do not fit into either of the categories.

I refer again to what Engels said about Marx at Marx's funeral. We cannot take literally and without qualification the view that Marx discovered the MCH. He owed it partly of course to what other people had been doing, the forerunners of it, and to his active contacts with people engaged in the working class movement. On the other hand, it is equally obvious that some individual may play an exceptional role in influencing certain historical developments, even if this only means that the individual understands the direction in which the events are moving in advance of other people. Even if we said that Marx only saw what was arising out of feudalism before other people saw it, he nevertheless played an exceptional role in bringing this to people's notice. Marx's education, and his interest in the question, and his ability to carry further what had been more or less seen by his predecessors, and his contacts with workers, enabled Marx to play this kind of part in historical development.

On page 57 of the pamphlet, reference is made to Napoleon, where Napoleon is

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quoted as having said “Mahommed’s case was like mine. I found all the elements to hand to found an empire. Europe was weary of anarchy, they wanted to make an end of it. If I had not come, probably somebody else would have done like me. I repeat, man is only a man, his power is nothing if circumstances and public sentiment do not favour him”. I do not know the date of this quotation, but I suspect that Napoleon did not write this when he was in the prime of his career, he probably said this later on in life, when he was reminiscing about the past. Nevertheless, it is a true statement about the role and position of great men.

Engels also mentioned Napoleon in his letter to Starkenburg of 25th February 1894. What Engels said was this: “That Napoleon, just that particular Corsican, should have been the military dictator whom the French Republic, exhausted by its own war, had rendered necessary, was an accident: but that if Napoleon had been lacking, another would have filled the place.”

The same could have been said of Cromwell and Abraham Lincoln. America, as it emerged from the Civil War, would not have been essentially different had Abraham Lincoln never existed. At some stage slavery would have been ended in America and modern industrial Capitalism would have taken over. The abolition of slavery might have taken longer, but the victory of northern industrial capitalism would have happened some time. What we can concede, however, is that Lincoln’s assassination at that particular point made possible a policy of the Federal Government towards the defeated Southern States which, had Lincoln lived, would probably not have happened. His assassination involved a certain setback which had to be recovered later on in American development.

There is also the example of Lenin. It can be said that Lenin and his Party, by seizing the opportunity offered by the breakdown of Tzarism and the defeat of the Russian army and the chaos in Russia, was able to influence the course of Russian history. Lenin was able to defeat Kerensky and was also able to get Russia to adopt a political structure that they might otherwise not have adopted, the dictatorship. Now, if we ask the larger question, was Lenin able, as he believed, to change the course of development by jumping from semi-feudalism to Socialism in Russia, then the answer is an emphatic No. The situation of Russia in 1917 provided Lenin and his party with certain possibilities, but it also included certain limitations, beyond which Lenin could not advance. The example of Russia is a vindication of the MCH, not a vindication of the idea that great men make history.

A further question is concerned with what will happen in Socialist society. The question has been asked what place will the MCH have after the abolition of Capitalism? That is, in Socialist society. In Marx’s reading of past history, an essential element is the struggle of classes for power, one class with an interest in changing society and another class with an interest in resisting change. The question has been put “what happens when there is no class struggle?” Does this mean that society will stagnate?

Marx's answers would be of course not. Man is always bound by the terms of his existence to engage in production activity. Man will still have to work to secure his livelihood and to solve the problems that will arise out of this, the problems of production and distribution, the struggle to control natural forces will still be there,

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and therefore there will still be a need for technical and scientific developments, which will go on. Marx's simple answer was this, he pointed out that social evolution will not cease, but it will cease to be political and we quote "It is only in an order of things in which there will no longer be classes or class antagonisms that social evolution will cease to be political revolutions." This quotation is from the end of Marx's *Poverty of Philosophy*.

## **SOME NOTES AND QUESTIONS ON THE MATERIALIST CONCEPTION OF HISTORY**

Why should Socialists be interested in a theory of history first put forward over 100 years ago? Why should Socialists be interested in history anyway? Surely, as Socialists, we are concerned with the present and the future, not the past?

In response to these questions, we would argue firstly that the MCH is not only a theory of history in the sense of past history, but a theory of social change in its broadest sense. It includes changes taking place now just as much as it covers past social change. It is, therefore, a way of looking at all social change that enables us to understand the pattern of social development.

Secondly, we would argue that as Socialists, our interests and activities are inextricably linked up with the issue of social change. As Socialists, we are working for a particular type of social change, the revolution from Capitalism to Socialism. Therefore, as Socialists trying to intervene in the course of history, it is necessary that we understand the factors underlying historical change – indeed, our activity as Socialists presupposes an understanding of social change, in the light of which Socialism is both practical and necessary.

The interpretation of social change that is presupposed in Socialist activity is what is known as the MCH. The MCH is a theory of social change that locates the ultimate causes of change within the material and economic conditions of life. This means that whether we want to understand say, the nature of the industrial revolution, or the outcome of the next general election in the UK, we have to examine the underlying economic factors.

As Comrade Hardy explains in his talk, this does not commit us to a form of economic determinism which falsely argues that only the economics is of significance, nor does it mean that we deny the importance of ideas in social change, but it does mean that if we want to understand the complexity of any society, if we want to understand the complex pattern of development of that society, then an understanding of its economic development is crucial to an understanding of its politics, its culture and its social development.

Given this understanding of historical development as essentially one of economic development, Socialists see in contemporary society a form of social organisation which they characterise as Capitalism, a form of class society that is different from previous class societies in that its mode of exploitation takes a different form (i.e. the

payment of wages in return for labour-power). The Socialists' proposal for Socialist revolution therefore follows on directly from the materialist analysis of society.

### **The History of the MCH**

As with many other subjects, the MCH has its own history which can only be very briefly touched on here. However, we can say that it was first put forward by Marx and Engels in the 1840's in opposition to the prevailing idealist notions of German philosophy. It was extended during Marx's lifetime and applied in the analysis of particular political events, e.g. 18th Brumaire, and was then further clarified by Engels after Marx's death.

Marx and Engels first outlined the MCH in *The German Ideology* (1845) in which Marx and Engels make their decisive break from idealist German philosophy. Consequently, many of Marx and Engels' forms of expression reflect their attempt to break away from this tradition, e.g. their inclusions of idealist propositions, and have to be interpreted in this light.

For Marx and Engels, the starting point of analysis is not some abstract idea or religious impulse, but the real activity of the people who together constitute the society.

“The premises from which we begin are . . . the real individuals, their activity and the material conditions under which they live, both those which they find already existing and those produced by their activity.” (Ch. I, p. 42)

Marx and Engels do not start with an abstract or ethical notion of what constitutes humanity, but argue that as people reproduce their conditions of life, so in that process they are also producing themselves, their ideas, their behaviour, their culture and the forms of social relations of that society.

“As individuals express their life, so they are. What they are, therefore, coincides with their production, both with *what* they produce and with *how* they produce.” (Ch I, p. 42)

Thus, not only is it the social relations that people enter into that are the product of their material activity, but even the ideas they have about themselves are the product of the general way of life.

“Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life.” (Ch I p. 47)

The job of historical analysis, therefore, is to examine in each particular case the actual interrelations between the material activities of society and its political and social relations.

“Empirical observation must in each separate instance bring out empirically, and without mystification and speculation, the connection of the social and political structure with production.” (Ch I. P. 46)

Here Marx and Engels warned that the MCH is not a simple formula to be used as a

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substitute for historical analysis, a point later repeated by Engels in a letter to Schmidt (5<sup>th</sup> August 1890):

“But our conception of history is above all a guide to study, not a lever for construction after the Hegelian manner.” (Engels to Schmidt, 5.8.1890)

However, in spite of this warning, a later passage written by Marx has come to be widely interpreted as a general model for explaining society. This passage occurs in the *Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859). In this Preface, Marx presented the MCH in an extremely condensed form in terms of the base-superstructure model that has influenced much of the later thinking on the subject. Here Marx characterises the relations of production as the economic base of society to which correspond the superstructural forms of politics and ideology.

“In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given state in the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life.” (Preface pp 20-21)

Using this base and superstructure model, Marx then goes on to characterise the nature of social revolutions in terms of a conflict within the economic relations, i.e. between the relations of production and the forces of production, which eventually permeates through and transforms the superstructural forms of political and legal relations and social consciousness. This conflict is seen as taking the form of class conflict, where a progressive class is associated with the development of the forces of production and a reactionary class is associated with the outmoded relations of production. Class conflict then takes the form of the political and economic battle between these classes as the progressive class tries to seize political control from the reactionary class, thus transforming the superstructural form to correspond with the changed relations of production. If we were to apply this model to Capitalism today, we could say that there is a conflict between the forces of production (i.e. the productive powers of society) and the relations of production (i.e. the ownership and control of wealth and production by the capitalist class). Hence, production is artificially restricted as a result of the form of ownership, e.g. lay-offs and depressions reduce output, crops are destroyed and poverty is guaranteed amidst potential plenty. In class terms, the reactionary class is the capitalist class clinging to outmoded relations of production, and the revolutionary class is (i.e. would be) the working class which aims to sweep away the restrictive nature of bourgeois social relations in order to allow productive activity to take place freely.

In spite of Marx’s detailed works of political analysis, e.g. 18th Brumaire, which revealed that the MCH was far more subtle than crude determinism, the kind of exposition of the MCH given in the *Preface to the Critique of Political Economy*, can give rise to a deterministic view of social development, where at any given time, the economic base is seen as directly determining all aspects of society. Another view of the MCH resulted in a technological determinist view of history, which sees technical

development as the sole determining factor in history.

Part of Engels' later writings were concerned to correct these interpretations of his and Marx's earlier works. Engels accepted that he and Marx were partly at fault here in that in trying to make absolutely clear the difference between their materialist position and the idealist position, they had over-emphasised the economic factor and so had unwittingly distorted their analysis in a determinist direction.

“Marx and I are ourselves partly to blame for the fact that the younger people sometimes lay more stress on the economic side than is due to it – we had to emphasise the main principle vis-à-vis our adversaries, who denied it, and we had not always the time, the place or the opportunity to give their due to the other factors involved in the interaction.” (Engels to J. Bloch 21/22-9-1890)

In these letters (see also Engels to Borgius 25.1.1894) Engels took great pains to emphasise that the economic factor was not the only determining factor, but that it was the *ultimately* determining factor.

“... According to the materialist conception of history, the *ultimately* determining factor in history is the production and reproduction of real life. Neither Marx nor I have ever asserted more than this. Hence if somebody twists this into saying that the economic factor is the *only* determining one, he transforms that proposition into a meaningless, abstract, absurd phrase. The economic situation is the basis, but the various elements of the superstructure – political forms of the class struggle and its results such as constitutions established by the victorious class after a successful battle, etc., judicial forms, and especially the reflections of all these real struggles in the brains of the participants, political, legal, philosophical theories, religious views and their further development into systems of dogma – also exercise their influence upon the course of the historical struggles and in many cases determine their *form* in particular.” (Engels to J. Bloch 22/27-9-1890)

Engels also stresses here that non-economic factors such as politics, ideology and the state, in reacting upon each other and the economic basis, also have a part to play, although not the decisive part. He also stressed that the economic basis itself should not be interpreted too narrowly, but should be taken to include the mode of exchange of products as well as their mode of production, together with the geographical factors, remnants of earlier stages of economic development, and the external environment. Finally, Engels stressed that actual outcomes were the complex result of many individuals wills and actions.

The result of Engels' later writings is to make it clear that the MCH as he and Marx understood it was neither technicist nor determinist, and that the model that Marx put forward in the 1859 Preface is not to be interpreted inflexibly as a simple formula to be applied rigidly in all cases, but as a general “guide to study” which emphasises that the economic factors must be the ultimately decisive ones.

But although these later writings of Engels clear up one set of misconceptions, they do not eliminate all theoretical problems. In particular, it leaves the actual relation between the economic and the non-economic in a state of some confusion. How is it that the economic factors are ultimately decisive? What is the mechanism of causality

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at work here? If the non-economic factors also affect the economic factors, then in what sense can it be said to be ultimately decisive? One answer might be that these problems have to be solved by empirical research into specific situations – but does this constitute an excuse for weak theory?

We will leave this question as an item of discussion, together with other problems associated with theories of history and the MCH, e.g.

(1) How useful is Marx's metaphor of base and superstructure, e.g. where should the state and TUs be located?

(2) How important is the role of class and class struggle to the MCH?

(3) If Socialism is not inevitable, and moreover, dependent upon the growth of Socialist ideas, how does this fit in with the MCH? And could Socialism have been possible prior to Capitalism?

(4) If ideas are the product (in some sense) of material conditions, then –

(a) can there be such a thing as Socialist ethics, and

(b) how can we account for ideological forms of consciousness? e.g. if we say that at any point in history the material basis of society shapes the ideas that people have, how is it that workers have developed ideas which are against their material interests?

Members will notice some duplication of material in this bulletin; this has been retained for the purpose of continuity of text.

### References

The page references in the text are to the pamphlet *The Socialist Party of Great Britain and Historical Materialism*.

Most of the quotations from Marx and Engels can be found in *Marx-Engels Selected Works in One Volume*, Lawrence & Wishart. These include (in the order they appear in the text) –

“Speech at the graveside of Karl Marx” by F. Engels.

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“Preface to Vol. I of Capital”.

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*Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (See preface to first edition for Engels' assessment of Morgan's contribution.)

*Communist Manifesto*

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“18th Brumaire”

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