Critical Thinking and Class Analysis:  
Historical Materialism and Social Theory

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Introduction: Marx, history and theory

At the core of Karl Marx’s contributions, both to politics and to our wider understanding of the world, is the recognition that the capitalist form of society is but one in a history of successive forms of exploitative class societies. It is, however, crucial that in Marx’s analysis the capitalist form of society is not only different from earlier forms, but unique. Because capitalist social relations are qualitatively different from other historical forms of social organization – as different from all other forms of class society as class society is from non-class society – they mark a terminal point to the development of class exploitation. Unless warfare or unsustainable technologies thrust humanity back into non-industrial savagery, we could persist in the capitalist mode of production forever if we fail to bring about a transition to socialism. Within the structural logic of class relations, capitalism constitutes an apex that cannot be transcended.

All pre-capitalist forms of class exploitation are founded on undisguised relationships of formal inequality, fundamentally backed by forms of extra-economic coercion.¹ Capitalist social relationships, by contrast, are grounded in the formal equality of economic actors engaged in commodity exchange. A central point of Marx’s critique of political economy was that despite the political freedoms characteristic of modern capitalist society, and despite any extensions of formal equality within it, it remains a form of exploitative class society.

The inherent logic of capitalist economic relations has made it more difficult to justify and maintain formal inequality in other social relations. Of course many formal inequalities persisted long after

capitalist relations of production developed, not least in the extreme form of slavery. Yet, although there are countries in which capitalist production continues to coexist with a substantial range of formal inequalities among persons (and although real and substantial if not formal inequalities remain widespread), the dramatic reduction in social and legal inequality in advanced capitalist nations over the past 70 years marks an epochal turning point in human social development. As recently as 1970, women were denied the right to vote in some western European countries. Today, same sex marriage is recognized in a growing number of jurisdictions.

Unfortunately, far from being understood as an integral element of historical materialist social theory, the qualitative difference between capitalist and pre-capitalist class relationships stressed by Marx is not even incorporated into most approaches to class analysis. There have, of course, been many good accounts of the critical analysis Marx offered with respect to specifically capitalist class society. Yet, consciously or not, such accounts can only exist in connection with a particular conception of historical social change leading to modern

2. Marx’s own works remain unparalleled as accounts of how it is that workers who enjoy full civil rights equal to those of their employers are nonetheless exploited by the very employment contracts based on the principle of exchange of equivalents, into which they enter voluntarily. Though his arguments are presented clearly and systematically in Capital (MECW, Vol. 35, 1997), and in a somewhat incomplete but very short and simple form in Value, Price and Profit (MECW, Vol. 20, 1985, 101–149), they remain widely misunderstood and debated even among those who consider themselves Marxists. Still, in comparison with the issues of the historical dimensions of his thought, the nature of his critique of political economy in respect of capitalism is well-established. Ernest Mandel’s Marxist Economic Theory (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1970) is one of many guides. For particular insight into the enduring relevance of Marx’s essential analysis for workers in all sectors of advanced capitalist society (though with a few unorthodox elements related to monopoly capitalism), see Harry Braverman, Labor and Monopoly Capital (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974).

Ellen Meiksins Wood has primarily been concerned with exploring the relationship between Marx’s critique of political economy and his socialist class politics, on the one hand, and his conception of the history of class society on the other, making her work of central relevance to the arguments put forward in the present essay. At the same time, much of what she has written is very helpful in clarifying Marx’s ideas on the nature of capitalism. See especially the first part of Democracy Against Capitalism: Rethinking Historical Materialism (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), and The Origin of Capitalism: A Longer View (London: Verso, 2002).
hostile to capitalist society. It is Marx’s understanding of the processes of social change during the history of class societies, culminating in capitalism, that is the foundation for historical materialism. Ironically, however, Marxists on the whole have probably paid less attention to the nature of Marx’s historical materialism than have non-Marxist social theorists, and very few of either have recognized in its fundamentally critical character his most original contribution to social theory.

It has certainly always been understood that Marxism included a theory of history. Most Marxists, however, have been almost exclusively concerned with the political and economic issues of capitalist society, and with the problem of socialist revolution. Very few have given serious consideration to the central importance of a truly historical conception of social development – one not rooted anachronistically in the presuppositions of contemporary social life – to Marx’s critical theoretical project. A signal exception has emerged from the line of inquiry into the role of class struggle in history among British Marxist historians, from Maurice Dobb to E.P. Thompson. This inquiry has given rise to a conception of historical materialism, often dubbed Political Marxism, which radically challenges the economic determinism so widely associated with Marxist thought.

3. The meaning of the term capitalism is the subject of great debate. All forms of modern social theory recognize some qualitative difference between modern industrial capitalist society and earlier forms of society (as between Gesellschaft and Gemeinschaft), but they do not all associate this difference with capitalism as such. Weber is particularly noted for having identified capitalism in the ancient world, etc., defining it simply in terms of systematic profit-making through exchange. Yet Weber acknowledged that “in the modern West, there exists a completely different form of capitalism, which has developed nowhere else in the world: the rational capitalist organization of (formally) free labour,” in “The Origins of Industrial Capitalism in Europe,” Max Weber: selections in translation, W.G. Runciman, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 336. This roughly corresponds to what Marx had in mind in conceiving of capitalism as a system of social reproduction through generalized production of market commodities by formally free labourers who have commodified their labour-power. It is this qualitatively different industrial form of capitalism, defined not with reference to technology but (as even Weber noted) by the organization of labour, that is intended by the term throughout this essay.


Otherwise, however, the predominant expressions of Marxist theory remain bound by concepts drawn from specifically capitalist society. These theoretical elements have been incorporated both at the level of concrete social categories and in the central paradigm of what is taken to constitute Marxist historical social theory. Ideas rooted in the social reality of capitalist class society are anachronistically projected into the past, forming the basis for what is then construed to be a historical dimension of analysis. This allegedly historical theory is inherently unable to depict the social forms and relationships of capitalist society as anything other than natural and inevitable products of social evolution, based on seemingly timeless principles drawn from capitalist social experience in the first place.

It is entirely appropriate, of course, that the conceptual categories with which capitalist society is described and theoretically analyzed should reflect the particularities of capitalism. Indeed, it is essential to the analysis within Capital that Marx opens with the form of the commodity, not with history. But it is an entirely different matter when such categories are applied to historical societies that differed from capitalism, or to the processes of historical transformation that led to the capitalism’s emergence. The latter approach precludes drawing meaningful distinctions between historical and contemporary forms.

Within the capitalist system of production, for example, competition compels capitalists to seek market advantage through technological innovation in the production process (in Marx’s terms, increasing the rate of relative surplus-value). As Ellen Meiksins Wood stresses, this characteristic compulsion of the capitalist market does not exist where markets merely offer producers an opportunity to sell surplus product. It is thus wrong to project into history a type of pressure toward technological innovation that is specific to capitalism. Neither can the generalized economic rationality of capitalist societies be projected historically – not because the peoples of pre-capitalist societies were ignorant, slothful, or ideologically blinkered, but because non-market aspects of social life held greater material import. Nobles in ancien régime France did not irrationally “squander” fortunes on conspicuous displays at Court – they played to the expectations of a King who dispensed the munificence of state revenue.

When such distinctions are ignored, no methodological basis exists for conceiving a process of development through qualitative social transformation. Fundamental categories become timeless, and social change is limited to variations on a theme. Consider the State. If the

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very concept of the State is premised on fundamental separation between a sphere of strictly political social action and an opposed sphere of economic social action, then a distinction between feudal and modern forms of State makes no sense. If the underlying premise of such separation does not hold with respect to the feudal period – and it does not – the theoretical category of the state must be opened up, and the opposition between political and economic spheres must be conceived as specific to the capitalist State.

It is in fact precisely this question of separation between political and economic spheres that reveals the extent to which Marxist analyses have incorporated a specifically liberal theoretical paradigm grounded in capitalist social experiences. That Marxists have understood class to be an economic category has been based on just this separation of the political and the economic. In most formulations of Marxist thought, class is conceived to be an integral aspect of the economic base, which supports and (in one or another sense of the term) determines a social superstructure that includes the State. The problem with this whole economic determinist framework is not that there is no basis in modern capitalist society for distinguishing between economic and political spheres, but that Marxists have failed to rise above the prevailing liberal paradigm, which takes for granted the separation of politics and the economy as natural, inevitable, and essentially timeless, very much as it conceives capitalism.

The work of Ellen Wood has been particularly important in clearing the ground for a historical materialist methodology based on Marx’s thought. Wood asserts that the prevailing conceptions of Marxism have essentially lost sight of Marx’s critical theoretical project:

In particular, this is so to the extent that Marxists have, in various forms, perpetuated the rigid conceptual separation of the economic and the political which has served capitalist ideology so well ever since the classical economists discovered the economy in the abstract and began emptying capitalism of its social and political content.

These conceptual devices do reflect, if only in a distorting mirror, a historical reality specific to capitalism, a real differentiation of the ‘economy’; and it may be possible to reformulate them so that they illuminate more than they obscure, by re-examining the historical conditions that made such conceptions possible and plausible.7

The method of historical materialism is grounded in critical confrontation with social thought that takes for granted the world as it is. As Wood suggests, in order to understand historical materialism, one must first recognize that the prevailing conceptions of economic categories and processes of social development leading to capitalism are fundamentally ideological, even while based upon real and unique characteristics of capitalist society.

The development of capitalism and the idea of progress

It is, in fact, only the historically specific and peculiar context created by capitalist social relationships that makes it possible even to conceive of society in terms of separate economic and political spheres. Liberal social thought emerged to give novel articulation and intellectual systematization to these new capitalist relationships, and at the same time constructed a new conception of history as progress to conform with them. In the context of this new form of social structure, and the new forms of social theory based upon it, the foundation of Marx’s social theory must be recognized to lie not merely in a critique of the legitimation of contemporary capitalist social relations by liberal social theory, but in a more basic critique of the ways in which modern social thought adopts from liberalism a conception of the economy and of social progress through processes of economic development. Indeed, far from being historical materialist, economic determinism is a quintessential expression of the incorporation of liberal social thought into Marxist theory.

The failure of Marxism to develop and sustain a truly historical materialist methodology has had far more significant effects than...
those narrowly interested in the study of capitalist society might suppose. The deeply flawed theories of historical social development that have been accepted as Marxism have created profound distortions not only with respect to European history, but also in conceptions of the relationship between Europe and the rest of the world. They also undermine the critical foundations of Marx’s account of capitalism as a class society. For in not only building upon categories drawn from capitalist society, but doing so in terms derived directly from liberal social theory, these theoretical approaches stand in stark contrast to the critique of liberal ideology in the form of political economy that is the basis of Marx’s approach to capitalism.

Indeed, without a self-conscious methodological commitment to ongoing critique of the liberal categories and concepts of development integral to the predominant modern paradigm of social theory, Marxist thought can only remain bound by the ahistorical constraints of liberal ideology. Social concepts are necessarily grounded in a particular cultural framework, imparting a bias even where they are not associated with ideology, per se. Much like the cultural predispositions of an anthropological fieldworker, this intrinsic bias and concomitant blindness to whole varieties of social experience cannot be eliminated, only confronted. In the case of modern social theory, however, the formation of the prevailing concepts of history and society is widely recognized to be connected to the rise of liberalism as political, economic, and social ideology. A critical approach in social theory is therefore even more necessary.

It is in this regard particularly ironic that Marxists, too, have failed to attend to the theoretical injunction to criticize, since few social

theorists have been as explicit or categorical on this point as Marx. It is a further irony that while the Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy is usually cited as evidence of economic determinism in Marx’s work, it is the general introduction that he wrote for but omitted from this work – since published as part of the Grundrisse – which offers the clearest refutation of this idea. What Marx has to say in this introduction is so crucial to understanding the critical nature of his method, and yet so strikingly absent from both Marxist and non-Marxist accounts of his thought, that substantial reference to its key passages is warranted.

Marx begins with the question of theoretical method, and asserts that in social theory the subject, society, must always be kept in mind as the presupposition.

The simplest abstraction, then, which modern economics places at the head of its discussions, and which expresses an immeasurably ancient relation valid in all forms of society, nevertheless achieves practical truth as an abstraction only as a category of the most modern society.

Taking the example of “abstract labour,” as it might be said to exist both for barbarians and in the capitalist United States, Marx continues:

This example of labour shows strikingly how even the most abstract categories, despite their validity – precisely because of their abstractness – for all epochs, are nevertheless, in the specific character of this abstraction, themselves likewise a product of historic relations, and possess their full validity only for and within these relations.

Bourgeois society is the most developed and the most complex historic organization of production. The categories which express its relations, the comprehension of its structure, thereby also allows insights into the structure of and the relations of production of all the vanished social formations out of whose ruins and elements it has built itself up...

At this point, Marx offers the observation that “Human anatomy contains a key to the anatomy of the ape” – and likewise the forms of capitalism can retrospectively shed light on earlier social forms, “but not at all in the manner of those economists who smudge over all historical

11. It must of course be acknowledged that many of the most important of Marx’s texts in this regard were unknown or generally unavailable until relatively recently.
14. Ibid., 105.
15. Ibid.
differences and see bourgeois relations in all forms of society.” The critical awareness of difference is absolutely necessary.

Although it is true, therefore, that the categories of bourgeois economics possess a truth for all other forms of society, this is to be taken only with a grain of salt. They can contain them in a developed, or stunted, or caricatured form, etc., but always with an essential difference. The so-called historical presentation of development is founded, as a rule, on the fact that the latest form regards the previous ones as steps leading up to itself, and, since it is only rarely and only under quite specific conditions able to criticize itself... it always conceives them one-sidedly.16

Marx then sums up this analysis in a powerful statement of the necessity of critical self-awareness in all matters of theory.

In the succession of the economic categories, as in any other historical, social science, it must not be forgotten that their subject – here, modern bourgeois society – is always what is given, in the head as well as in reality, and that these categories therefore express the forms of being, the characteristics of existence, and often only individual sides of this specific society, this subject, and that therefore this society by no means begins only at the point where one can speak of it as such; this holds for science as well.17

Yet Marxists have consistently put forward precisely the sort of “historical presentation of development” that Marx warned against – conceptions of social evolution as “progress” which rely on familiar forms of social categories as if they were ubiquitous and natural, rather than peculiar to capitalism.

The economic determinism expressed in the idea of “base and superstructure” is for many Marxists essentially synchronic, having to do with a relationship existing between economic and political spheres in capitalist society. There is no synchronic conception of economic determinism, however, that does not draw upon a historical conception of progress which is in the end equally economically determined. This idea of progress has unquestionably been a central fact of Marxist theories of history. Intrinsic to the idea of progress is an inexorable law of motion, leading from the conditions of the past, to those of the present.18 As a concept of history, the idea of progress emerged uniquely in modern Europe, clearly bound up with the spread of political, economic and social liberalism in thought and practice – though it was never restricted to liberals.19

16. Ibid.
17. Ibid., 106 (original emphasis).
19. For a comprehensive and sympathetic overview of this development, see Pollard, Idea of Progress.
The idea of progress clearly developed in conjunction with the rise of capitalism. Progress was consciously associated with the extension of markets, increased division of labour, and a tendency toward “economic rationality” and growth in conjunction with both.20 One crucial and very influential expression of the idea of progress was the stages theory of history – the natural sequence of hunting and gathering, pastoral, agricultural, and commercial stages of society – first put forward by Turgot and Adam Smith, following the lead of Locke. Ronald Meek has brilliantly analyzed this first fully articulated theory of progress, which combined specifically liberal social and economic conceptions, with Montesquieu’s less specifically liberal assertion of a connection between the patterns of laws and mores and the ways societies acquire subsistence, to become the dominant Enlightenment view of historical development. As Meek argues, the idea put forward by Turgot and Smith “that ‘progress’ normally took the form of the unconscious but law-governed development of society through four successive stages based on four different modes of subsistence” – hunting, pastoralism, agriculture, and commerce – established a crucial point of reference for all subsequent social theory.21 Turgot and Smith became recognized as two of the greatest specifically economic thinkers of the eighteenth century, and it was accepted implicitly that hunting and gathering on the one hand, and commercial exchange on the other, were “economic” social forms in the same sense, by association with gaining subsistence – notwithstanding the fact that commerce is not a form of production, nor was agriculture superseded, as hunting and pastoralism were.

European thinkers from the start took this economically conceived progress to express a natural and universal law of human social development. Locke had already associated the original state of nature, in which hunters had no landed property, with America, while a comparative approach to the nature of non-Western societies was central to Montesquieu’s work. Through the four stages theory, Europeans came to assert simultaneously a general law of progress, and their own preeminence within it. As Meek notes with particular reference to the development of Rousseau’s thought, there is:

20. This is not to say that these ideas about economic progress actually reflected the essential characteristics of capitalist development, only that these were the terms with which the rise of capitalism was depicted.
a movement which is observable over a period of time in the social thought of
the Enlightenment taken as a whole: a movement from the simple idea that ‘in
the beginning all the world was America’ to the broader and more sophisti-
cated idea that while ‘in the beginning’ the world may indeed have been
America, it was not long before it became Arabia and Tartary, and then
Palestine.22

The rapid development of industrial capitalism, and with it the rise of
European states to world domination by the end of the nineteenth
century, greatly exacerbated both the real and the theoretical
problem of the relationship between the historical development of
European society and the rest of world.

The central theoretical problem has been reconciling the fact of
Europe’s unrivaled internal development, and resultant world domi-
nation, with the idea that progress itself is natural and universal.
There are basically three theoretical alternatives. The first is to sidestep
the profound differences between Western history and that of other
peoples, and to conceive of the precedence of the West as little more
than a matter of timing. While this has not been compelling as a
theory of world historical development, it is, however, easily assimili-
ated with the view that no qualitative process of historical social devel-
opment existed to begin with. Since the political economy of Smith’s
later Wealth of Nations, liberal social theory has inclined strongly
away from the original historical concept of progress as a process of
qualitative social transformation. If the forms of social organization
(including, of course, the economy) are taken to be timeless, there is
no real issue of comparative historical development, simply the
problem of “modernization.” Yet, at the same time, “progress” has
remained an intrinsic element of economic liberalism and other var-
ieties of liberal social theory, in the form of a constant tendency for
competitive market relations – conceived as essentially timeless – to
generate economic and social improvement.23

A second alternative asserts that progress itself, in the development
of modern capitalism, necessarily generates differentials in social
development, to the disadvantage of the world’s “periphery.”24 In
the much debated views of theorists of “dependency” or “world

22. Meek, Social Science and the Ignoble Savage, 91.
23. Pollard, Idea of Progress, 77. The literature on modernization is simply too enormous
and too familiar for discussion here.
24. The works of André Gunder Frank and Immanuel Wallerstein are of course central
to this perspective, which has its own enormous literature. For a specifically histori-
cal materialist critique of these ideas, see Brenner, “On the Origins of Capitalist
Development.”
systems,” progress is therefore both decried, and yet affirmed. The third alternative is to assert that while there is in some sense a natural and universal character to progress as it occurred in the West, it is based upon some advantageous preliminary condition which the West enjoyed uniquely, or to a peculiar degree. This view, found in both Marxist and non-Marxist forms, relativizes progress to some extent. Yet, in maintaining the idea of the whole of the West as the social, cultural and/or geographic basis of development, it cannot avoid the implication that there was at least relatively a “lack of progress” in the rest of the world.25

In its origins, therefore, the concept of progress, which became a central feature of the Enlightenment, was fundamentally a liberal economic determinist approach to history. While liberalism, as such, came generally to abandon its original stages theory of history, it has not entirely escaped the underlying economic determinist tendencies of the idea of progress. Yet it is also clear that liberalism is not the only form of modern social theory that has incorporated the concept of “progress” into its paradigm of historical social development, though the idea has often come to be conceived in less frankly economic determinist terms.

Varieties of modern social theory

A prevalent approach to the development of modern social theory holds that there are in fact three distinct traditions that must be recognized within it: liberalism, Marxism, and sociology. The three are conceived to be fundamentally linked – Marxism is taken to have emerged from a critical confrontation with liberalism, and sociological thought in response to Marxism. Not surprisingly, it has been sociological theorists in particular who have tended to see liberalism and Marxism in this light, as foils for the further development of social theory. In the first place, notwithstanding the enduring influence of liberalism in capitalist society, a good many social theorists have had difficulty with the individualism

that lies at the core of liberal concepts and methodology. Yet, equally, while Marx has himself been accorded substantial recognition as a social thinker, most theorists have been reluctant to embrace any of the frameworks presented as Marxism, for a variety of reasons that have usually included the rejection of economic determinism quite as much as opposition to class politics and the project of socialist revolution.

The prevailing view of the development of social theory, therefore, starts with the Enlightenment, and the ascendance of optimistic liberalism. It then conceives that, in opposition to liberalism, Marx united scientific rationalism with the critical/revolutionary elements of eighteenth-century thought. Sociology, finally, is thought to have adopted both scientific and liberal values from the Enlightenment, but to have fused them with a preoccupation with moral order derived from the conservative counter-Enlightenment.

In *Liberalism and the Origins of European Social Theory*, Steven Seidman took up and summarized this conception in order to challenge it. In Seidman’s view, there is one real divergence between theoretical traditions in modern thought – that between Anglo-American liberalism and European social theory, the recognition of which he traces to Talcott Parsons.

Parsons maintained that in the Anglo-American tradition, from Hobbes and Locke to the classical economists, utilitarians, and social evolutionism, the controlling analytical disposition was individualistic... instrumentalist, and rationalist, and tended toward ahistorical conflict models of society. By contrast, the European tradition, influenced by the powerful counter-Enlightenment, was characterized by collectivist, idealist, and historicist assumptions and inclined toward organic models of society. In addition, historians have frequently observed parallel ideological differences between the two traditions...

It is, then, specifically with respect to the relationship between Marxism and sociology within European social thought that Seidman objects to the prevailing view.

Taking account of the work of Alvin Gouldner, Irving Zeitlin, and a number of other contemporary theorists, Seidman outlines the “conventional wisdom” of a fundamental divergence between sociology and Marxism in European theory, citing Daniel Rossides’s assertion of the key point:

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27. Ibid., 6–7.
“Despite the similarity between Marxism and sociological thought, Marx worked outside the main assumptions and methods of both liberalism/capitalism and sociology.” A consistent historical articulation of this thesis maintains that sociology, from Comte through Durkheim and Weber to functionalism, developed as a reaction against the revolutionary tradition as that was elaborated from the philosophe through utopian socialism to Marxism.  

In the prevailing view, then, the three main streams of modern social thought stand in clear distinction from each other.  

Seidman’s work, with obvious affinity for the views of Anthony Giddens, challenges this conventional wisdom of opposing Marxism to “bourgeois” sociology. In pursuit of a non-Marxist reconciliation of Marx and sociology, Seidman rejects the view that Marxism and European sociological thought diverged fundamentally in their descent from the Enlightenment. He thus brings together Marxism and sociology in “a common analytical program.” But by grounding the origin of both in “the critique and reconstruction of liberalism,” he reiterates that a confrontation of theoretical perspectives is at the heart of the formation of modern social theory.

The development of modern social theory is thus consistently conceived in terms of one or another framework of fundamental theoretical opposition. In the first place, Marxism may be recognized to stand in critical opposition to all forms of “bourgeois ideology” (or alternatively, the varieties of social science may be taken to oppose “Marxist ideology”). In the second place, following the prevailing conception of the history of sociological thought, the three traditions of liberalism, Marxism, and sociology may be juxtaposed to each other. Finally, as Seidman (and Giddens) would have it, Marxism and sociology may together be held to stand in opposition to liberalism.

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29. Seidman, 11–18; see 299 fn. 2, referring to Giddens, *Capitalism and Modern Social Theory* (1971). See also Giddens “Liberalism and Sociology,” *Contemporary Sociology* 14 (3), 320–322. I use the term “bourgeois” in this context reluctantly, adopting conventional usage for the purposes of this essay. Marxists and their critics alike have generally understood the term as virtually synonymous with “capitalist”, with implications of broadly “liberal” values, relations, and ideology. I have argued in Rethinking the French Revolution, 34–5 and 180ff, that this conflation of “bourgeois” and “capitalist” is quite mistaken. It is symptomatic of the very conceptual paradigm that the present essay seeks to confront. My use of the term here does not imply acceptance of the view that the French bourgeoisie of the ancien régime had specifically capitalist characteristics, even remotely, or tendentiously.
The common paradigm of modern social theory

There is in fact some validity to each of these views. Certainly, there are real differences among the liberal, Marxist and “bourgeois” sociological expressions of social theory. And the basis for opposition between Marxism and liberalism is apparent to all. Yet it is equally clear that affinities exist between the main currents of sociological thought and both Marxist and liberal social theory, in turn. What is most fundamental in this regard is precisely that liberalism, Marxism, and sociology have very similar conceptions of historical social development, based upon variations of the underlying idea of progress.

Each of these approaches incorporates elements that are specifically derived from modern capitalist society, making them an integral part of the historical process of development. Liberal theory projects into the past, as a timeless “universal,” that relationship which exists between production and markets in capitalism. Against this, as the non-Marxist economic historian and anthropologist Karl Polanyi argued decades ago, it must be recognized that the “market economy” – which he characterized as “an economic system controlled, regulated, and directed by markets alone; order in the production and distribution of goods is entrusted to this self-regulating mechanism” – is not only not “universal,” it is an absolutely novel feature of modern capitalism. This was also Marx’s position in the *Grundrisse*.

There are a number of varieties of sociological theory, but the general reliance upon specifically capitalist phenomena in formulating conceptions of development is evident from the seminal work of Durkheim and Weber. Durkheim’s concept of the effects of the division of labour in history, for example, conflates the division of labour in the workshop with the *social division of labour*, associating the two with a biological metaphor to create a continuous, universal principle of progress.

We need have no further illusions about the tendencies of modern industry; it advances steadily toward powerful machines, toward great concentrations of forces and capital, and consequently to the extreme division of labor…

But the division of labor is not peculiar to the economic world; we can observe its growing influence in the most varied fields of society…

The recent speculation in the philosophy of biology has ended by making us see in the division of labor a fact of a very general nature, which the economists, who first proposed it, never suspected. … This discovery has had the effect
But the development of technical division of labour in industry – the sort Adam Smith described in pin making – is not at all a “general” characteristic of production. It is a specific aspect of the peculiar organization of labour that becomes a defining characteristic of capitalism. The technical division of labour has the character of eliminating the need for skill and specialized knowledge, breaking down tasks into routine patterns that can be repeated quickly by anyone, with little training. The “social” division of labour, however, has no direct bearing on the technical processes of production at all, referring instead to the differentiation of specialized roles in society. Indeed, in contrast to the division of labour in capitalist workshop or factory, the social division of labour will if anything tend to increase the extent of specialized knowledge and skills. An ineluctable general principle of division of labour only appears to lead naturally to capitalist production because a specifically capitalist character was built into the conception from the start, following the lead of Adam Smith.

In turning to Max Weber, it is obvious that his use of ideal types creates the opportunity for drawing on the experience of specifically capitalist social forms in the conception of historical development. For example, in the section on “Stages in the Formation of Political Association” in Economy and Society, Weber insists that the state is “a product of evolution,” yet he then immediately turns to the capitalist state in defining his subject. Weber also precisely defines the historical social category of “class situation” in terms of attributes clearly drawn from capitalist society – “economic interests in the possession of goods and opportunities for income...under the conditions of the commodity or labor markets.” He identifies “property” and “lack of property” as the “basic categories of all class situations,” on the grounds that, “in accord with the law of marginal utility,” life chances are different for people with and without property “meeting competitively in the market for the purposes of

35. Ibid., 927.
exchange.”

He then discusses class situations from ancient times to the present, offering in summary the view that “the struggle in which class situations are effective has progressively shifted from consumption credit toward, first competitive struggles in the commodity market and then toward wage disputes on the labor market.”

In these regards, Weber’s approach is virtually indistinguishable from economic liberalism. Where a different conception of historical development appears to come into play, of course, is in relation to his ideas on rationalization and “disenchantment,” focused on the different contexts for historical development associated with the major religions. Yet in attributing the process of Western social development, culminating in the rational capitalist organization of production, to an association between a particular form of religious mentality, a particular form of jurisprudence, and a particular form of State organization, from which emerged a particular form of calculating rationality, it is quite evident that the conception informing each of these particular forms is drawn from the example of modern capitalist society.

Finally, it has already been noted that Marxists, in their historical conception of base and superstructure, have in general failed – quite as much as Weber – to distinguish between “economic class” in its capitalist sense, and the basis for classes in pre-capitalist societies. Indeed, Marxists have generally applied the base/superstructure concept to history through a sequence of modes of production that do little more than combine the liberal modes of subsistence identified by Turgot and Smith with the liberal principle of division of labour.

This concept of base and superstructure has even been construed to imply a wholly technological determinism based on productive forces, as in the work of G.A. Cohen. Yet, as Ellen Wood has argued:

what Cohen’s technological determinism does is to repeat the error of the political economists: he generalizes the particular historical experience of

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37. Economy and Society, 930–931.


39. On Marxist conceptions of mode of production and division of labour, see Comninel, Rethinking the French Revolution, and Brenner, “Bourgeois Revolution and Transition to Capitalism” (note 10).


Thus, though ubiquitous in orthodox Marxist theory, the idea of “progress” has not been distinguished in any fundamental way from the forms of its expression in liberal and sociological thought.

Notwithstanding other genuine differences, a common “modern paradigm” can be seen to inform the three main traditions of social theory. Both Marxist theory, as it has developed since Marx, and sociology, share with liberalism its essentially “bourgeois” paradigm. The liberal framework of historical economic determinism became central to Marxism, while a broader Enlightenment model of integral economic, political, social, and cultural progress was incorporated into classical sociological thought. This common paradigm of modern social thought was in the first place ideologically constructed, traceable to the origins of liberal thought in polemical confrontations with absolutist politics, cultural intolerance, and state regulation. Its pervasive acceptance has meant that virtually all modern social theories have viewed the historical processes of the development of capitalist society, as well as the processes of their own ideational formation, through the same distorting prism. However significant the differences in these varieties of social theory, they simply reinforce each other with respect to the underlying idea of progress. This should in itself give pause to those Marxists who have embraced economic determinism.

**Historical materialism vs. economic determinism**

One of the most significant distinguishing features of the various conceptions of Marxism under debate in recent decades has been the position that each takes with respect to economic determinism. Non-Marxists have not, as a rule, questioned the association of Marxism with economic determinism.\footnote{Even Anthony Giddens, who proposed rescuing from Marx “snippets” of “the more abstract elements of a theory of human Praxis” (A Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1981, 1–2), understands Marxism, and the bulk of Marx’s writing, in economic determinist terms. Melvin Rader’s Marx’s Interpretation of History (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979) stands out among non-Marxist approaches for asserting that Marx’s use of the base and superstructure metaphor was subsidiary to a more fundamental social paradigm of “organic totality.”} Frankly economic determinist positions
have been common among Marxists from the start, and G.A. Cohen’s defense of not merely “economic” but indeed productive-force, or technological, determinism, has enjoyed substantial influence. Yet there have also been many efforts by Marxists to qualify or temper the economic determinist implications of texts such as the Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy. A key attraction of Althusserian structuralism to many Marxists, for example, was precisely that it relegated “determination by the economic” to “the last instance,” an approach which became central to Nicos Poulantzas’s theorization of the “relative autonomy” of the State. Yet in the absence of any clearly developed alternative conception of the historical processes of social change, Marxists have continued to resort to the idea of progress, generally in terms of a sequence of “modes of production.” The result has inevitably been that that which is most in need of explanation – the origin of specifically capitalist society – is taken for granted from the start.

Before considering the main lessons to be taken from Marx’s critical method, it remains necessary to account for the fact that so fundamental an error was so universally accepted, across such a broad range of Marxist thought, for so long. The error is, in fact, in many ways quite easy to explain. For, as will be seen, there are two different, ultimately contradictory, paradigms of historical social development that can be identified in Marx’s work. One of these paradigms is grounded in the same critique of liberal ideology that informs Capital, though it can be traced back to its origins in Marx’s 1844 Manuscripts. The other paradigm – which regrettably became dominant in Marxist thought – was adopted more or less uncritically from its liberal original: the stages theory of historical progress,

43. Cohen’s ideas have played an important role in “rational choice” formulations of Marxism, especially as put forward by John Roemer. For a critical account of the relationship between this approach and Cohen’s version of Marxist historical theory, see Ellen Meiksins Wood, “Rational Choice Marxism: Is the Game Worth the Candle?” New Left Review 177 (1989), 41–88, and her analysis in Democracy Against Capitalism.


45. I have dealt with this issue in relation to both “orthodox” and structuralist versions of Marxism in Rethinking the French Revolution, 77ff.
through successive modes of subsistence, driven primarily by the division of labour.46

Marx began his intellectual development as a radical democrat, concerned to explore the limits of the French Revolution with respect to the task of human emancipation.47 His earliest works were critiques of both Hegelian and Left-Hegelian political philosophy, from which he derived the necessity of fundamental social revolution, as opposed to merely political revolution of the sort that had occurred in France.48 Having moved to Paris, hotbed of socialist ideas and workers’ activism, Marx encountered Frederick Engels’s critical views on capitalism, and the prospect of social revolution as the result of working-class struggle.49 Then, as he further developed his thought by entering into a critique of British political economy, Marx put forward an analysis in which the critique of liberal historical conceptions played an equally important role.

In his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx was concerned with the alienation of labour. Yet he was not concerned with it only as a phenomenon of capitalist society. Rather, this concept – which refers primarily to appropriation of the products of labour, or exploitation, although Marx also acknowledged its significance as an existential condition – was recognized to be the key to “the evolution of mankind,” the entire historical process of human social development.50

Liberal thinkers, Marx saw, attributed the existence of poverty to the effects of property, and relegated the origins of property to a “fictitious primordial condition.”51 Rejecting this approach, Marx argued that property was “the product, the result, the necessary consequence of alienated labour” – it was not property that caused poverty, but the existence of forcible impoverishment that was the basis for property:52

47. On the early development of Marx’s thought, see my “Emancipation in Marx’s Early Work,” *Socialism and Democracy*, 24: 3 (2010), 60–78.
51. Ibid., 270–271.
52. Ibid., 279.
How, we now ask, does man come to alienate, to estrange, his labour? How is this estrangement rooted in the nature of human development? We have gone a long way to the solution of this problem by transforming the question of the origin of private property into the question of the relation of alienated labour to the course of humanity’s development.53

Marx had in fact raised this issue of the role of exploitation in the history of human social development at the outset, in criticizing political economy for reducing human beings to the condition of mere factors of production, no different from “any horse”: “What in the evolution of mankind is the meaning of this reduction of the greater part of mankind to abstract labour?,” he had asked.54

Based on his analysis that property arises from the alienation of labour (i.e., from class exploitation), Marx went on to assert that “the entire movement of history” is the process of human social development, through “the movement of private property,” to “the transcendence of private property, or human self-estrangement” in communism (and simultaneously the process of developing consciousness by which this social development becomes known).55 This movement of property, “the material perceptible expression of estranged human life,” is the perceptible revelation of the movement of all production until now, i.e., the realisation or the reality of man. Religion, family, state, law, morality, science, art, etc., are only particular modes of production, and fall under its general law. The positive transcendence of private property, as the appropriation of human life is, therefore the positive transcendence of all estrangement – that is to say, the return of man from religion, family, state, etc., to his human, i.e., social, existence.56

Addressing the place of modern European society in a historical process of social development, Marx saw history as he knew it – the history of the development of Western societies – to have the character of movement through human estrangement to a point where estrangement itself could be transcended.

However much Marx may have actually been concerned with exploitation in contemporary society, his conception of historical process is not rooted in specificities derived from capitalist social experience. Although the fully developed form of the alienation of labour is found in specifically capitalist relations, and revealed

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53. Ibid., 281.
54. Ibid., 241.
55. Ibid., 297.
56. Ibid.
through the critique of political economy, this is the result of a long process of development:

The antithesis between lack of property and property, so long as it is not comprehended as the antithesis of labour and capital, still remains an indifferent antithesis, not grasped in its active connection, in its internal relation, not yet grasped as a contradiction. It can find expression in this first form even without the advanced development of private property (as in ancient Rome, Turkey, etc.). It does not yet appear as having been established by private property itself. But labour, the subjective essence of private property as exclusion of property, and capital, objective labour as exclusion of labour, constitute private property as its developed state of contradiction – hence a dynamic relationship driving toward resolution.57

Only at the culmination of the development of private property does this, its secret, appear again, namely, that on the one hand it is the product of alienated labour, and that on the other it is the means by which labour alienates itself, the realisation of this alienation.58

The alienation of labour is thus not specifically a form of capitalist class exploitation. It is rather the general form of class exploitation through property relations. Previous historical forms of the alienation of labour – forms of opposition between the propertied and the labouring propertyless – developed, through the movement of property, into the confrontation of capital and wage-labourers, the most complete expression of this fundamental antithesis.

In contrast to political economy, as also to Weber’s concept of “class situation,” this basic social opposition of propertied and propertyless is not intrinsically tied to market exchange. Indeed, Marx criticized the economist who “assumes in the form of a fact, of an event, what he is supposed to deduce – namely, the necessary relations between two things – between, for example, division of labour and exchange.”59 Marx began with a contemporary fact, with the production of commodities. In this, however, he recognized the existence of a relationship of labour, and not simply of the market – of labour as “an activity performed in the service, under the dominion, the coercion, and the yoke of another man.”60 Historical materialism is rooted in the existence of a relationship by which the majority of humanity labour to create for the propertied their wealth.

57. Ibid., 293–294.
58. Ibid., 280.
59. Ibid., 271.
60. Ibid., 278–279.
There was, of course, still a tendency for Marx to think like a philosopher in 1844. He claimed, for example, that

The relations of private property contain latent within them the relation of private property as labour, the relation of private property as capital, and the mutual relation of these two to one another.

It is in one sense profoundly true that private property has latent within it the ultimate potential of the capitalist labour relationship. Yet this potential is in no way obvious from the forms of actual property relations in pre-capitalist societies. It can only be known after the fact, given the capitalist point of view.

Marx, however, did still tend to attribute to the “perfected” character of the property relations of capitalism a teleological inner necessity as the endpoint of development of alienated labour. This philosophical teleology did not persist in his later historical materialist thinking, and it must in any case be rejected. The fact that capitalist relations can be described as the logically most perfect, fully abstract forms of property relations does not mean that their emergence in history was in any real sense “necessary.” In fact, as is discussed below, one of the central claims of the historical materialist critique of “progress,” directly challenging liberalism, sociology, and conventional expressions of Marxism, is precisely that capitalism did not emerge from some universal, necessary, or even typical pattern of development – not even in respect of Western European society – but that it originated in England alone, on the basis of historically specific social relationships that emerged there.

The key point remains, however, that Marx did not incorporate any uniquely capitalist characteristics into his conception of the process of development leading to capitalism. Capitalism is instead, as he explicitly recognizes throughout his subsequent work, one specific form of class society, all forms of which – in distinction from other types of society – have the character of being founded on exploitative labour. The history of social development leading to capitalist society is the history of class societies, driven by the inner development of relations of class exploitation (“the movement of private property”).

The point of departure for historical materialism is therefore the specifically critical recognition of the alienation of labour – appropriation of the fruits of the labour of others realized through relations of property – which has existed historically, and continues to exist. Much as Marx refused to return to some “fictitious primordial condition” in order to explain property, but began with the “fact” of the
alienation of labour, so his conception of historical social development does not begin with “production,” “the market,” or “the economy.” Instead, it begins with the development of the alienation of labour in the relations of property.

The alienation of labour is not in any way a natural or necessary condition of production. On the contrary, “the historical necessity of private property” is only the fact that the history of humanity has actually been realized in this way.\textsuperscript{61} History – Western history as Marx knows it – has emerged as the history of class societies. The process of historical social development that leads to capitalism, therefore, must be seen in terms of the history of the development of class exploitation, and not the history of “economic development.”

The Manuscripts conclude with a lengthy critique of Hegel’s \textit{Phenomenology}. While deeply philosophical in character, it starts from the inadequacies of Feuerbach’s critique of Hegel with respect to “the whole process of history,” and from the fact that Hegel’s conception of the negation of the negation, “has only found the \textit{abstract, logical, speculative} expression for the movement of history.”\textsuperscript{62}

Through the whole of this seminal work, therefore, Marx has laid at least the foundation for a historical materialist project of understanding the processes of historical social development in class societies which are founded on exploitative systems of property relations. And the point of departure for this social theory has been a thoroughgoing and self-conscious critique of British, French, and German liberal ideology – from political economy, to political philosophy, to the philosophy of history. It is precisely this sort of critical perspective to which Marx would once again return in the \textit{Grundrisse}.

Unfortunately, much of his work in the intervening period, including \textit{The German Ideology}, \textit{The Poverty of Philosophy}, and even \textit{The Communist Manifesto}, saw Marx put forward ideas on historical development that owed very little to his original critique, and a great deal to the standard liberal histories of progress. In light of the conclusions he drew from the critique of political economy, Marx abandoned his original plan to undertake a critical history of the French Revolution, to turn definitively instead to the study of capitalist society.\textsuperscript{63} As a result, however, whereas he continued to sustain a conscious critique of liberal \textit{political economy} throughout

\textsuperscript{61. Ibid., 298.}
\textsuperscript{62. Ibid., 328, 329.}
\textsuperscript{63. Karl Marx, “Conspectus of the \textit{Mémoires de R. Levasseur},” (MECW, Vol. 3, 1975), 361–374, especially footnote 117.}
his life’s work on capitalist society, he never seriously undertook an original historical analysis of class societies, or offered a critique of liberal historiography.

Indeed, far from carrying the implications of his criticism of liberal historical conceptions into a developed critique of liberal historiography, Marx went so far as to give credit to the liberals for discovering the role of class in history. Concerned above all with capitalist society and the transition to socialism – just as Marxists since have been – Marx simply accepted the judgement of liberals with respect to the class character of the French Revolution as a “bourgeois revolution,” driven by contradictions between the development of productive forces and the relations of property, taking it to be a model for class revolution by the proletariat.64 As he made clear in the Grundrisse, Marx also consciously examined the “history” of some of the central social forms of capitalist society – money, for example – from the point of view of capitalism, in order to clarify the nature of the form in contemporary society, and not as a means to understanding any actual historical process of social development. These observations necessarily focused on the commercial relations with strongest formal affinity to the capitalist market economy, however, and therefore tended if anything to lend credence to the standard liberal conception of economic progress.

If Marx himself therefore failed to be completely clear and consistent in his critique of the pervasive social concepts of liberalism, it is hardly surprising that his followers have systematically preferred the familiarity – even the comforting “scientific” certitude – of the historical conceptions rooted in progress. This has tended to be reinforced by the fact that the Marxist version of the essentially liberal paradigm of historical development has often found some favour among non-Marxist theorists, especially in comparison with the more triumphant of the straight-forwardly liberal accounts. The sweeping interpretation in The German Ideology and the Manifesto has generally been taken, along with the short summary in the Preface to the Contribution, to articulate Marx’s historical thought. “Nevertheless,” as Robert Brenner has written with respect to this conception:

its real originator was Adam Smith, upon whom Marx was profoundly dependent for his own formulation, and it bears all the characteristic marks of

64. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, Manifesto of the Communist Party (MECW, Vol. 6, 1976), 477–519. It is Marx’s profound error in this regard, failing to carry through a critique of liberal historiography to match his critique of political economy, that is the subject of Rethinking the French Revolution.
Smith’s theory of history. The central explanatory notion at the core of this theory is the self-developing division of labour.65

The regrettable, lasting consequences of Marx’s failure to maintain and extend his original critical thought in these early works are indeed nowhere more evident than in the central role that the concept of “bourgeois revolution” – once generally accepted, but now thoroughly discredited by historians – has long played in Marxist theory, even though it was adopted in its entirety from the standard liberal texts of the early nineteenth century.

Yet while Marx never offered any adequate history of the development of class society, his later work does consider in theoretical terms the process by which capitalism emerged from pre-capitalist society. As Brenner has observed, this theoretical framework was presented in Grundrisse, Capital, and other later works of Marx, but was never fully worked out by him. Its master principle is the mode of production, conceived as a system of social-property relations which make possible, and thereby structure, societal reproduction – in particular, the maintenance of society’s individual families and constituent social classes.66

This later conception of “mode of production” is profoundly different from that appearing in The German Ideology, which was little more than the liberal mode of subsistence. This approach returns in fact to Marx’s original insight into the centrality of the social relationship between the producer, and the owner of the means of production, who – through the social relations of property – appropriates from the labour of the producer.

Theorists must therefore choose between contradictory theoretical approaches within Marx’s own work in deciding what they will take as the basis of “Marxist” theory. It is not as if there was nothing of value in Marx’s earlier works, of course. The German Ideology contains a great deal that is insightful on the relationship of consciousness to social existence, and The Communist Manifesto not only remains a stirring polemic, but it contains a famous, key formulation of precisely the sort of analysis that is central to historical materialism: “The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles.”67

Rather than being the story of economic progress, history is a record of the oppressive alienation of labour for the majority, over many centuries, and of their struggles against it. Yet the clarity of this conception is

66. Ibid., 273.
67. Marx and Engels, Manifesto of the Communist Party, 482.
easily lost once one enters upon the muddled terrain of pre-determined modes of production, based upon the necessary development of productive forces, through the natural dynamic of division of labour.

To the extent that Marxists fail to recognize the ways in which the critique of liberal social thought provides a foundation for historical materialism, they are doomed to conceive of a Marxism that combines the critical rejection of political economy’s view of capitalism, with an account of how and why capitalism came about that is drawn directly from the liberal conceptual framework which underlies political economy. It is in the very nature of this profound misconception of historical materialism that it contributes to the preservation of the dominant ideological paradigm. Instead, Marxists must direct attention to how Western history actually reveals specific processes of social development, realized through a succession of characteristic forms of oppressive and exploitative social relationships – the history of class society. This requires systematic critical analysis, including constant awareness of the tendency to project contemporary expectations upon the past. Even Marxists preoccupied with the capitalist present and socialist future have an obligation to understand the forms of class exploitation in the past. Only from such a critical historical understanding is it possible to imagine what Marx’s project of human emancipation might really mean.

The historical specificities of class societies

In previous work I have discussed the essential methodological principles of historical materialism, so I will offer in what follows only a few key points, and some preliminary historical conclusions. I will then briefly return to consider how these points, particularly with respect to the immediate historical origins of capitalism, bear directly on our understanding of the origins of modern social theory. It will be seen not only that the claims of this sort of historical materialist analysis can – at least in principle – be tested against evidence, but also that this approach best accounts for the divergence between Anglo-American liberal and European sociological traditions of social theory.

The most crucial statement of Marx’s historical materialist conception appears in Volume III of Capital, in a chapter that considers the transformation of rent from its role as the essential form of class exploitation in feudal society, to its particular and subsidiary role within capitalism. It is, he asserts, the direct relationship of exploitation – embodying both domination and appropriation through property
relations, as he originally conceived the alienation of labour – that is the key to social structure. Rather than economic “base” determining political “superstructure,” the structures of economic and political relations are together based upon the fundamental relationship of exploitation:

The specific economic form, in which unpaid surplus-labour is pumped out of direct producers, determines the relationship of rulers and ruled, as it grows directly out of production itself and, in turn, reacts upon it as a determining element. Upon this, however, is founded the entire formation of the economic community which grows up out of the production relations themselves, thereby simultaneously its specific political form. It is always the direct relationship of the owners of production to the direct producers… which reveals the innermost secret, the hidden basis of the entire social structure, and with it the political form of the relation of sovereignty and dependence, in short, the corresponding specific form of the state. 68

It is precisely in this context that Marx offers an instructive observation on the “Asiatic mode of production,” a concept that has been much debated in Marxism. 69

From the point of view of historical materialism, there is no natural, necessary, or even “typical” ladder of modes of production for the history of class society to ascend, and much of what has been said by Marxist theorists about pre-capitalist societies must simply be rejected. Marx’s own observations on the concept of Asiatic mode of production, however, remain significant, though the term itself is misleading. Ellen Wood, for example, has identified a society that fits the concept in Bronze Age Greece. 70 It might well also be said to apply to the earliest of the hierarchically organized ancient states of both Old World and New, perhaps to “pristine” states in general, as well as to a number of Asian and other empires or kingdoms. 71

It is particularly significant, however, that the concept does not apply to classical Greece or ancient Rome. For in Marx’s conception this term refers to agrarian societies in which it is the State itself that appropriates the surplus labour of the direct producers – in which,

that is, there is no private ownership of land as the basis of exploitation. There is exploitation through the exaction of rent – identical in this case to “taxes,” but the ultimate control over land as means of production that we understand as “ownership” is vested directly in the coercive apparatus of the State.

In the difference between the Western line of societies descended from Greece, but especially Rome, and these State-centric systems of exploitation lies the explanation for the remarkable historical dynamism of class society. Western class societies have been characterized by a fundamental duality in the relations of exploitation, since the appropriation of surplus has been based throughout Western history on the private ownership of property in the context of a State structure of political power. It is in this regard that the history of Western class societies can be conceived as a whole, in contrast with other historical experiences. As Ellen Wood has written:

The long historical process which ultimately issued in capitalism should be seen as an increasing - and uniquely well-developed - differentiation of class power as something distinct from state power, a power of surplus-extraction not directly grounded in the coercive apparatus of the state. 72

This perspective, which does not generalize from capitalism, but emphasizes its specificity, sheds important light on the nature of capitalist social relations and the historical process of their development.

The capitalist organization of production can be viewed as the outcome of a long process in which certain political powers were gradually transformed into economic powers and transferred to a separate ‘sphere’…. The supremacy of absolute private property appears to have established itself to a significant extent by means of political devolution, the assumption by private proprietors of functions originally invested in a public or communal authority.

Again, the opposition of the ‘Asiatic’ mode of production at one extreme and the capitalist mode at the other helps to place this devolutionary process in perspective. 73

While the “logic” of this line of development can be recognized retrospectively, from the point of view of capitalism – the “perfection” of capitalism as a system of private property as Marx recognized it in 1844 – historical materialism does not claim a deterministic “necessity” either for the emergence of capitalism, or for its transcendence in socialism. 74 Rather, different specific historical conditions have

72. Wood, Democracy Against Capitalism, 33.
73. Ibid., 36–37.
74. See Wood, Democracy Against Capitalism, 108–145.
created different possibilities for structured processes of social development, which must always take form through the interaction of people who are shaped by history and society, but who make history and society in turn.\textsuperscript{75} It was indeed precisely in the claim that the social development of capitalism was \textit{not} necessary, natural, and universal – even within the confines of the history of Western Europe – but peculiar and historically specific to England, that Robert Brenner helped lay the foundation for recovering the historical materialism of Marx’s thought in opposition to the economic determinism of Marxist theory.

As Brenner, Wood, and I have argued, industrial capitalist social relations – the employment of workers through the commodification of labour-power, by capitalists using their property rights to establish control over the labour process, through which they strive to increase productivity, driven by market-price competition with other capitalists – developed indigenously only in England. Industrial capitalism emerged from the unique social system of \textit{agrarian capitalism}, characterized by relations between three fundamental classes – capitalists, labourers, and landlords – which must be distinguished from the various forms of “capitalist agriculture” that have followed the spread of capitalism through industrial production. Only in England did agrarian capitalism emerge from the historical process of enclosures by which, over a span of several hundred years, English society completely lost its peasant character prior to the introduction of industrial capitalism.\textsuperscript{76}

Commercial relationships expanded impressively throughout Europe during the modern period, and dating back to the Dark Ages. But it is our claim that only in England was the underlying system of social reproduction itself fundamentally transformed into a market system: first in agriculture, dissolving the normative structures of social reproduction in traditional peasant communities; and then in industry, through the extension of new social relationships, and through the effects of productivity increases in agriculture and the social dislocation of the rural population. Industrial capitalism – significantly, never agrarian capitalism or the English pattern of enclosures – was then able to spread to other European societies, and

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{75} Brenner, “Agrarian Roots of European Capitalism” (note 5), 213–215.
\end{itemize}
beyond, through the market networks of commodity exchange that long antedated specifically capitalist relations of production.

It is held by virtually every other modern social theory that Western European societies developed historically through fundamentally parallel social processes. Whether conceived in conventional liberal economic terms, in properly economic determinist terms, or in any of the sociological versions of the idea of progress, it is virtually an article of faith that Western Europe as a whole – above all England and France – developed in parallel, with perhaps slight recognition of differences in timing. Against this, it is the claim of the “Political Marxists” that the societies of England and France differed from the eleventh century in important aspects of their feudal social relations, as a result of which they diverged increasingly over time, never being more dissimilar than in 1789. At that point, England was just beginning a transformation from agrarian to industrial capitalism, its landed ruling class having long since become a class of agrarian capitalist landlords. France, however, showed no signs of the development of capitalism in either agriculture or industry. Instead, it entered into a social revolution based upon political conflict among the members of an entirely non-capitalist ruling class, comprising nobles and bourgeois alike, who struggled for control of the State, the privately owned offices of which played a central role in surplus appropriation.77

This claim is based on a critical historical materialist re-examination of the evidence of social, economic, and political history. It is informed by theory, but it does not depend on acceptance of any article of faith. The claims of historical materialism must be supported by history, or else discarded. In theoretical terms, for example, a distinction must be drawn between capitalism as a specific organizational form of social reproduction, and Weber’s sense of it as profit-making through commerce. This is not, however, an argument over two versions of the “fact” of capitalism; but in the first place a careful specification of subject, and in the second place an assertion of discernible difference between two possible senses of the term, with which Weber himself agreed.

Through such careful attention to specificities in meaning, the questioning of long unquestioned presumptions, and fresh appraisal of evidence, historical materialist analyses offer the potential for a very different understanding of the past, with profound implications for the present. Ellen Wood, for example, has undertaken an original examination of slavery and democracy in ancient Greece. Not only has this once again meant challenging a paradigm common to Marxist and “bourgeois” analyses – in this case the view that Athenian democracy depended upon the existence of slavery, which is revealed to have a profoundly anti-democratic basis – but the insights that Wood offers with respect to the real connection between democracy and labour, and the culture of democracy, bear important lessons for contemporary democratic theory.

Moreover, Wood has shown that understanding the genuinely admirable features of Athenian democracy in relation to its specific social foundation in a regime of small-holding peasants under pressure from a propertied aristocracy, also has important implications for how we understand the oppression of women, both in Greece particularly, and in pre-capitalist class societies generally. Beyond this, of course, Wood may perhaps be best known in many circles for her championing of class politics, against the tide of post-structuralist and “post-Marxist” criticism. At the core of her contemporary political work lies recognition of the enduring significance of class and class struggle in history in precisely the historical materialist terms of “Political Marxism.” To the extent that virtually all feminist, post-structuralist, and/or post-Marxist theorists of the “politics of identity” rely on criticism of the very characteristics of “Marxism” which are rejected by historical materialism, and to the extent that, ironically, virtually all of these theories resort, consciously or unconsciously, to the same modern paradigm of historical development, it is clear that historical materialist class analysis can in fact have enormous implications for contemporary political theory and practice.

Conclusion: historical materialism and modern social theory

Finally, historical materialist class analysis has something to say about the very question of the origins of modern social theory. Once the divergence in historical social development between England and

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78. Wood, *Peasant-Citizen*.
79. Ibid., 115–120; *Democracy Against Capitalism*, 264–83.
80. Wood, *The Retreat From Class*. 
France has been recognized, it is clear that there can have been no “dual revolution” at the end of the eighteenth century, driven by common underlying processes of progress.81 Only as a result of the subsequent spread of industrial capitalism, as it developed in England, did France (slowly) and the rest of Western Europe (often more quickly) come to converge in the familiar capitalist social forms of “modern society.” France entered the second half of the twentieth century with an enormous peasantry, and a real “peasant problem,” more than two centuries after it is reasonable even to speak of an English peasantry. Yet this profound social difference no longer holds, however great the sectoral differences in their economies remain. Given this social convergence under capitalism, it would not be surprising to find increasing similarities in contemporary patterns of politics and culture. But what of the past?

On the one hand, England and France both belong to the line of Western class societies descended from Rome. A central issue throughout the history of specifically class societies has been the relationship between class power and State power. The history of the West has been characterized by continuous tension between the individual interests of propertied members of the ruling class, and their collective interest in a strong central State. This can be seen from the rise of the senatorial aristocracy in Republican Rome, to the civil wars that ushered in the Empire; from the withdrawal of ever greater resources from the ambit of Imperial taxation in the Later Empire, under protection of the senatorial nobility, to the reconsolidation of political power under Germanic kings after the “fall” of the Western Empire. Again and again in Western history – in France the examples can be mounted almost century by century from Charlemagne to the Second Empire – there has been flux and reflux in the balance between class and state power.

This tension, with its recurrent political crises, has been an important factor in the development of Western political theory. Quentin Skinner, in fact, has written a very influential account of political theory from the twelfth to the seventeenth centuries, focusing primarily on the development of claims made for and against central political power.82 A further theme, though very much less an issue of debate

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81. The “bourgeois” dual revolution – the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution – was a staple of classical liberal accounts of progress, and of orthodox Marxism. Perhaps its best known expression – and in many ways one of the most admirable – is Hobsbawm’s Age of Revolution.

among those theorists who have accepted the social order as it is, has been that of the relationship between the State and private property.\textsuperscript{83} Since these and other important themes of social and political thought have related to experiences common to all of the societies in the Western line of development, it is only to be expected that writers on these issues have drawn upon, and responded to, each other’s ideas across not only time, but national social boundaries as well.

Yet, on the other hand, there have been crucial specificities in national historical social development, perhaps nowhere so striking as in the divergence of French and English societies from the late middle ages, through the whole of the early modern era. This divergence meant that even though French and English social and political theorists continued to exchange ideas, they did so from increasingly distinct contexts of social reference. Seventeenth century English thinkers read the works of sixteenth century French theorists debating constitutionalism and absolutism, but the new formulations of political ideas put forward by both Hobbes and Locke did not simply build upon these. Rather, they created new conceptions – in the first case absolutist, and in the second liberal – that drew upon the novel English social context produced by enclosures, a context of economic individualism that was qualitatively different from anything known in French society.\textsuperscript{84}

Similarly, Rousseau’s conception of “the general will” must be understood in light of the norms of corporative social organization and collective regulation that existed in France.\textsuperscript{85} It makes an enormous difference, when judging whether or not Rousseau is “totalitarian,” if one recognizes that French norms of social relationship had not been transformed through any process like enclosure, and that a natural, organic community of interest was generally still presumed to exist, in a way that was no longer the case in the liberal, and increasingly capitalist, England of the eighteenth century. It is equally clear that however much the French Physiocrats absorbed from English

\textsuperscript{83} An entire essay could be devoted to such issues as a comparison of the way conservative and radical utopians have dealt with property and the State; the positions of non-socialist critics of existing society, such as Machiavelli and Rousseau; the peculiarly “modern” emphasis on property in Cicero; and the necessity for John Locke to provide a conception of the origin of property and its relationship to the State which differed fundamentally from the ideas of both Hobbes and Filmer.

\textsuperscript{84} See Wood, \textit{The Pristine Culture of Capitalism}.

liberalism and the early development of political economy, they added to it a peculiar insistence upon agriculture as the *unique* source of social wealth, lumping the entrepreneurs and labourers of industrial production *together* as a “stipendiary Class.”

It is not that Adam Smith later improved on the Physiocrats, to generalize the source of all wealth as labour in any form – this was already present in Locke’s conception of value in the *Second Treatise of Government*. From the point of view of historical materialism, it is obvious – not only from the works of the Physiocrats, but also from Saint Simon, Comte, Hegel, and others – that truly capitalist social relationships were not properly understood on the Continent, even into the early nineteenth century. They simply had had no experience of capitalist society.

In English liberal political theory, “civil society” referred to the condition of living in a state, as agreed by mutual consent. Hegel, drawing on Adam Smith’s political economy, gave the concept of *bürgerliche gesellschaft* – which means bourgeois society as well as civil society – the meaning of a sphere of individuals engaging in egoistic social and economic relations, in contrast to the institution of the State, in which social unity is realized. Yet for Hegel – certainly one of the most profound of the Continental theorists – the point was precisely that society required the “universal” principle of the state as true capstone to its inherent organic unity. This concept is clearly at odds with the classic English liberal conception of the “invisible hand” of the market, with its protean capacity to serve social needs while leaving no more than a minimal role to the State.

It is from this point of view evident that the concern of European social thinkers with the issues of moral order is not so much a reflection of a conservative questioning of the wisdom of liberal optimism, as it is an indication of the extent to which Continental society came only belatedly to the social transformations associated with capitalism. Not only did the European thinkers have a harder time understanding what capitalism was all about, but they had to deal with capitalism as it was introduced – fully formed – into fundamentally non-liberal social contexts, as a result of market competition. This was very different from England, where agrarian capitalism arose through a long,

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difficult process of social transformation in the countryside, laying the foundations for rapid transformation into industrial capitalism. As a result, it is hardly surprising to find that Emile Durkheim, as late as the 1890s, rejected the injustice and moral incoherence that he discerned in capitalist relationships, but without rejecting capitalism itself.\footnote{Durkheim, \textit{The Division of Labor}, 353ff, 374ff.}

English thinkers – and the English people – had long since come to accept the individualist framework of liberalism, which had also been introduced from the very beginning in what would become the United States. There is indeed, as Seidman argued, a fundamental divergence between European and Anglo-American social thought, which reflects the very real fact that capitalism was English in its origins, and was intrinsically connected to the development of liberal social conceptions. There were no truly liberal thinkers anywhere else until after liberalism was established in England. From this perspective, then, it is apparent that European social theory did not emerge from a project to reconstruct liberalism, because it had critically transcended naive liberal optimism.

On the contrary, the initial response of European thinkers to liberalism reflected real ignorance of its capitalist social context, and ambivalence as to its possibilities. The European preoccupation with endorsing normative, and essentially anti-capitalist proposals for completing or improving capitalist society, really expressed the fact that capitalist liberal individualism, which was fully established by the nineteenth century in England, was completely without precedent, and largely incomprehensible, to Continental theorists. The elements of liberal thought that had been ingested by Continentals since the early eighteenth century had never amounted to a capitalist perspective. The French Revolution was fought over specifically political liberal principles, which bore upon the question of distribution of power within a ruling class for whom the State was a central “economic” locus. The Revolution neither reflected, nor did very much to advance, the social basis for specifically capitalist production. Throughout the eighteenth century, English liberal thought had been accepted, or – as in the case of Rousseau – criticized, entirely on the basis of what it had to say for Continental societies that were not capitalist.

As it increasingly became apparent that some profound change was afoot by means of capitalist industrialization, and as capitalism itself began to spread through the networks of trade, it was no
longer enough to confront English ideas. It was necessary to come to
terms with capitalism itself. Social theory on the Continent began to
reflect more than longstanding liberal self-satisfaction with the
effects of the rise of trade. Some more fundamental understanding of
qualitative social change was required.

European social theory approached capitalism as an alien phenom-
enon, impressed by its power, increasingly recognizing its potential as
a force not only for material change, but for social change, dissolving
Gemeinschaft and introducing Gesellschaft, for better or worse. Hegel
still did not even see how there might be a problem with the bürgerliche
gesellschaft of English political economy coexisting with the “universal-
izing” functions of the Prussian State’s bureaucracy. Durkheim was
troubled by the alienation of labour – both as existential anomie and
as forced division of labour – yet his proposals for amelioration combined
the very corporatism that capitalism tends systematically to corrode,
with the fantastic suggestion that capitalist society might abolish inher-
ted wealth. With Weber, the principles and premises of capitalism
proper are fully understood and embraced – he even accepts marginal
utility theory as his basic tool of social analysis. What he offers is not
even critical of capitalism, but, from a European point of view shaped
by the absence of liberal social traditions, he is merely pessimistic with
respect to the social and political claims made for liberalism.

None of the European social theorists ever challenged the liberal
capitalist view of how and why capitalist society came into being.
Building upon essentially liberal theoretical premises, their hesitations,
qualifications, and reformulations in approaching liberal social and
political ideology are all beside the point with respect to a critical
apprehension of the history of class societies. Torn between the Euro-
pean experience of the past and the capitalist experience of the
present, these social thinkers were willing and able to give more con-
sideration to Marxist criticisms of liberal capitalist society than to liber-
als proper.

Yet, ultimately, they accepted capitalism and they accepted its con-
ception of the economic processes of social life in past and present. Their
tendency to reinforce the modern “bourgeois” paradigm of history had
implications not only for liberals, but regrettably for Marxists too. Forced
to choose between two points of view in Marx’s work, Marxists on the
whole have not even recognized those ideas that were original and critical.

History is not only the past that humankind has experienced, but
also the future that we will forge. George Santayana’s famous aphor-
ism, so often quoted in relation to history, was specifically directed
at progress:
Progress, far from consisting in change, depends on retentiveness. … Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.89

This, however, is not at all akin to why Marx looked to the past. When he proposed that we can learn about the anatomy of apes from the anatomy of humans, the goal was above all to learn what made each distinct. Only by understanding how the past was different can we understand the world of today, and only then can we hope to understand how our future can be different again. It is long past time, therefore, for the theoretical unity embracing “progress” to be broken, and for a truly critical alternative to be heard.