



What Is Living and What Is Dead in the Marxist Theory of History

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Abstract

During the 1980s and 1990s, the debate on the Marxist theory of history centred largely around the work of Robert Brenner's property-relations-centred construal of it, and G.A. Cohen's attempt to revive the classical, determinist argument. This article examines two influential arguments by Erik Wright and his colleagues, and by Alan Carling, which acknowledge important weaknesses in Cohen's work, but which also try to construct a more plausible version of his theory. I show that the attempts to rescue Cohen are largely unsuccessful. And, to the extent that they render the argument plausible, they do so at the cost of turning it, willy-nilly, into a kind of class-struggle theory. I conclude that this spells the demise of the classical version of historical materialism, but also observe that this does not leave us with a voluntaristic understanding of history, as some of its defenders fear.

Keywords

Class, class-struggle, exploitation, mode of production, optimality-thesis, production-relations, productive forces, social forms

Introduction

Over the past decade or so, the debate over the Marxist theory of history has seemed to have run out of steam. This is not altogether surprising, given the enormous energy that poured into the issue for around a quarter of a century – no debate can last forever. On the other hand, lulls such as this can be taken as an opportunity to take stock, as it were.¹ This is especially true of the debate on historical materialism, as this is an area where the protagonists have striven to maintain clarity, and scrupulously followed the thread of one

1. I would like to thank Charles Post, Erik Wright and Robert Brenner for their extensive comments on earlier versions of this paper, and also the *Historical Materialism* board. Special thanks to Sebastian Budgen for persuading me to dust off the paper for publication. For a good recent summing up of the debate since the 1990s, see Callinicos 2004.

another's arguments. It is actually possible to chart the extent to which particular propositions have withstood scrutiny, and contending arguments held their ground successfully. Much of the credit for instilling this culture into Marxist debates must go to G.A. Cohen, whose book *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence* almost single-handedly elevated the quality of arguments around the issue.² Indeed, the recent publication of a new edition of his book offers an opportune moment to see where the theory stands.³

Cohen's book was not merely noteworthy for the clarity and force with which it presented its case. It also had the distinction of resuscitating a version of historical materialism that had, by the late 1970s, fallen into disrepute. This was, of course, the canonical version of the theory – as elaborated by Engels in the *Anti-Dühring* and popularised, above all, by Plekhanov at the turn of the century – which pointed to human-productive forces as the engine which drove history. For more than half of the twentieth century, canonical historical materialism was taken as the natural interpretation of Marx's rather elusive claims to having a distinct theory of historical development. It had become the common sense of official, as well as dissident, Marxism. It was only in the 1960s, partly under the influence of Maoism, partly in celebration of the recent anticolonial movements, that this theory came under attack – not only by the mainstream, but also by the New Left. Technological-determinist historical materialism was now countered by a version which elevated class-struggle to a position of primacy. The theorists who gained popularity within the New Left – Althusser, Gramsci, Habermas and others – consistently downplayed the importance of the productive forces, and elevated that of class and class-struggle, as the heart of historical materialism. Hence, by the time that *Karl Marx's Theory of History* was released, the version of historical materialism that it was enunciating had fallen decidedly out of favour with its constituency.

The immediate effect of Cohen's work was to breathe new life into canonical historical materialism – an impressive achievement in itself. But the clarity with which Cohen presented his case also had the effect, predictably, of revealing the theory's weaknesses. We will examine these in some detail presently; for now, the point to note is that, given these apparent weaknesses, canonical historical materialism did not reclaim its status as *the* natural interpretation of the Marxist theory of history. On the contrary, the class-struggle version of historical materialism received its own boost, primarily through the work of historian Robert Brenner. At first, his challenge was

2. Cohen 1978.

3. Cohen 2002.

indirect. In a highly influential series of articles, Brenner developed an account of the European transition from feudalism to capitalism that relied very little on the explanatory mechanisms central to canonical historical materialism.⁴ It was not the developmental requirements of the productive forces that drove the transition, but, rather, the contingent outcomes of the struggle between lord and peasant. Soon thereafter, Brenner issued a direct challenge to Cohen and technological determinism in two pieces, arguing, not only that the theory was unsound, but also that it may not even have been one to which Marx subscribed in his later years.⁵ At the same time, a number of criticisms of Cohen's work appeared, further shaking confidence in the technological-determinist version of historical materialism he had developed.⁶ So, by the end of the 1980s, the debates on the theory of history began to coalesce around two poles – canonical historical materialism and the class-struggle version – each of which could claim some degree of fidelity to Marx's scattered comments on the subject, and each of which was grounded in carefully crafted arguments.

In this essay, I propose to take stock of the more recent attempts to manoeuvre out of the deadlock between the different versions of historical materialism – the attempts in question are by Alan Carling and the team of Erik Wright, Andrew Levine and Elliott Sober.⁷ What makes both of these works interesting is that they recognise Brenner and Cohen as the two contending models of historical materialism, and both advance arguments which are located in the Cohen-Brenner debate, either explicitly (Carling), or implicitly (Wright, Levine and Sober). Both recognise the challenges posed to the canonical version of historical materialism by Brenner, and strain to modify the former so as to render it immune to the criticisms in question. In the case of Carling, this is achieved by presenting what is claimed to be a fusion of the two models, a genuine reconciliation; in the case of Wright, Levine and Sober, what is offered is not so much a fusion as a weaker version of Cohen's historical materialism, one that is more modest in its claims, and, we are informed, able to accommodate the criticisms levelled against it. I will argue that, while the two rescue-attempts do achieve some measure of success, in the end, they falter in one of two ways: either they simply fail to convince, or they end up weakening the theory's claims so much that it loses its distinctively Marxist flavour. What this amounts to is a verdict in favour of the alternative, class-struggle or property-relations based version of historical materialism.

4. These are contained in Ashton and Philpin (eds.) 1985.

5. For the former, see Brenner 1986, and for the latter, Brenner 1989.

6. See, *inter alia*, Wright and Levine 1980; Katz 1989; Rigby 1987; Martin 1983.

7. The relevant works are Carling 1991; Carling 1993; Wright, Levine and Sober 1993.

The two components of historical materialism

That the two interpretations of historical materialism cluster around property-relations and the propulsive development of the productive forces is not a coincidence. In so doing, they draw upon two distinct components of the theory itself. The Marxist theory of history in fact consists of two analytically distinct sub-theories: one is a theory of *social forms*, and the other a theory of *transitions* from one form to another. The former is primarily concerned with individuating different types of social systems or modes of production; the latter takes as its object the mechanisms by which history traverses *across* modes of production. The theory of social forms is understandably taken as an under-labourer of sorts to its more illustrious cousin: it serves to identify the individual societal-types that have populated the historical record, analyses their internal dynamics, and, finally, notes their sequence. Once this preparatory labour is completed, the theory of historical transitions steps in to provide an explanation for the overall sequence of modes of production that have been identified. It is primarily devoted to explicating the mechanisms which kick into play once a mode of production descends into its final crisis, and which thus govern the consolidation of the new mode.

The theory of social forms

Marxists insist that history can be divided into discrete periods, or epochs, and that each epoch has its own distinctive economic dynamics – or ‘laws of motion’. The mechanisms that generate these different dynamics, and which serve to mark off each epoch from the other, are the set of property-relations – relations of production – prevalent at the time. Property-relations also form the basis for class-relations.

The micro-dynamics of production-relations

At the micro-level, production-relations set what Brenner has called the ‘rules of reproduction’ for individual agents. This they do by virtue of the fact that property-relations, by definition, govern the distribution of productive assets in a social order. The assets possessed by social agents determine the strategies open to them for individual reproduction. As Erik Wright pithily remarks, ‘what you have determines what you have to do’ to make a living.⁸ This is a quite powerful structural claim, namely that it is possible to predict, albeit at a somewhat general level, the reproductive choices made by agents, on the basis of the assets at their disposal. A rural producer with secure rights over his

8. Wright 2005.

land is likely to undertake a quite distinct economic strategy from that of a producer who has been deprived of these rights, and so on.

Property-relations do not automatically generate class-relations. They do so only when they assign power over assets *unequally*, so that one group of agents can enforce claims on the productive activities of another.⁹ When the former group can actually live on the claims it makes on the labour of the latter, Marxists regard it as a relation of exploitation, and hence, a class-relation. The fact that productive assets are distributed *unequally* means that one class *can* exploit another; the precise *enumeration* of those rights will determine *how* the one class exploits the other. So, for example, the fact that rural landlords under feudalism enjoy superior, but not absolute, rights over land means that they can claim some of their tenants' labour as rent; but, because their claims are not absolute, and peasants also have partial rights to the land through custom, lords must wield the threat of physical force to realise their claims. This contrasts with the rights of rural landlords under capitalism, who enjoy exclusive rights over land; in this case, physical threats become redundant as an enforcer of claims to rent, since eviction of peasants becomes a much more realistic option. 'Rent' is thus common to both feudalism and capitalism, but it is extracted through very different mechanisms in the two systems. A particular kind of class-structure thus generates a corresponding régime of exploitation.

When access to productive assets is distributed *unequally*, it not only locks agents into an interdependent and exploitative relation, but, in doing so, it ensures that the relation is fundamentally conflictual. The enforcement of property-rights always brings with it some kind of political domination – whether at the point of production, or at an institutional level, where property-rights are secured. This domination – the forcible usurpation of a part of the social product – in turn generates resistance from the producing classes. This, in turn, requires that ruling classes secure their political domination over the producers as a precondition for the latter's exploitation – hence locking the groups into an ongoing conflict. Although Marxists have been slow to recognise this, the theory of social forms is committed to some kind of philosophical anthropology – a minimal description of human nature – which must include the assumption that agents have an interest in autonomy. Without the commitment to autonomy as a basic human drive, it is impossible to justify

9. The element of coercion is, I think, necessary for any relation to be regarded a class-relation. Purely voluntary transfers – donations, gifts, etc. – would not be considered exploitative. They would count as class-relations only if it was discovered that their voluntary nature was an ideological cover, and that they were systematic in their occurrence.

the idea – to which Marxists most certainly hold – that exploitation necessarily generates resistance, and, through that, class-struggle.

Class-struggle plays a dual rôle in the theory of history. On the one hand, it forms a fundamental axis of political conflict in any social formation.¹⁰ On the other hand, it constitutes the means by which societies traverse from one set of property-relations to another – it is the mechanism that drives history forward. This should not be cause for surprise. Class-struggle concerns the terms on which actors secure access to the means of production – the security of their property-rights, the pitch and level of exploitation, etc. It is a natural corollary of this that such struggles should also lead to changes in the basic framework of property itself. This much Marxists have stressed throughout the previous century. It is Brenner's contribution to have argued, correctly, I think, that, until the advent of capitalism, all previous transitions have been *unintended* consequences of the defence of *existing* property-rights.¹¹ Transitions have, in turn, been catalysed by deep economic crises, during which, normal means of surplus-extraction break down, suddenly heightening the level of conflict between producer and rulers. The resolution to the crisis – the re-emergence of stable surplus-extraction – need not issue in the form of new property-relations, but it does create a window for such epochal shifts to come about. Whether or not they occur is a contingent outcome of class-struggle.

The theory of transitions

The theory of social forms makes some fairly strong claims about the dynamics internal to an historical epoch, and the mechanism by means of which new social forms come about. What it has to say about transitions from one social formation to another, however, is basically formal: that they will be brought about by class-struggle. It has very little to say about the substantive characteristics of the transition, and especially about the new social form. What the new formation looks like, what its structural features will be, depends on which class ultimately secures hegemony following a system-wide crisis.

10. This is a somewhat controversial claim, even among Marxists. Some have averred that class-struggle ought not to be privileged above other kinds of conflict, while others maintain that it occupies a unique space. For the purposes of this essay, it is not important which of the two is correct. But note that, even for the defenders of the weaker claim, class-conflict may not be the central conflict, but it must be within the set of conflicts which are deemed central to the dynamics of a social formation. Marxists have to commit to the view that it is *a* fundamental cleavage, if not *the* most important one.

11. Compare this with Paul Sweezy's account of the rise of capitalism, in which lords make a more-or-less conscious switch to new property-relations to garner higher revenues. See his contribution to the famous Dobb-Sweezy debate, contained in Hilton (ed.) 1976.

Hence, the actual sequence of social forms cannot be predicted on the basis of this theory alone, since it stresses the contingencies of class-struggle.

It is at this stage that the theory of transitions steps in. This component of historical materialism is directed specifically at the moment of transition from one mode of production to another. Its main function is to stipulate a set of conditions which *constrain* the transition to a new mode of production. Whichever set of production-relations emerges as the new dominant form – whichever class establishes its rule – must, on this theory, exhibit certain properties. In fact, according to the traditional theory, the successor-class is really only constrained by *one* particular property: it must be a class that can oversee the continued development of the productive forces. At any historical juncture, this drastically narrows the range of candidates that can succeed a crisis-ridden social formation. How narrow the constraints are depends upon how stringently the conditions are taken to operate – how strongly the theory is interpreted. In its weakest form, the theory simply predicts that the new mode of production will *preserve* the level of development fostered by the previous one; in its strongest form, it insists that the class that establishes its rule will be the one suited to the *most rapid* development of the productive forces. The debate on historical materialism is basically about just how strong a claim the theory can defend.

The term ‘historical materialism’ has, over the course of the twentieth century, loosely encompassed both of the theories just outlined. For most Marxists of the Second International and after, there was a basic division of labour between the two components. The theory of social forms was primarily concerned with individuating different types of social systems or modes of production – it would identify their distinct relations of production, show the ‘laws of motion’ and the forms of class-struggle specific to each such type, and the manner in which the struggle between classes led to the demise of one social order and the rise of the next. The theory of transitions served to explain how the transitions across modes of production were non-arbitrary, in a very specific sense: the mode of production that replaced the previous one was not simply determined by the vagaries of class-struggle, but was constrained by the functional requirements of the productive forces. These constraints are what impart a certain logic to the course of history. It is not simply that history is driven forward by the contingencies of class-struggle. The resolution to class-conflicts at certain key-junctures – namely, when social formations descend into crisis – is itself governed by the demands of the productive forces. The class that wins, which establishes its rule, will be the one that conforms to these demands. It follows that the classes which *did* win at key-points *were* the ones most suited to this task. And this, finally, means that there is a fairly

strong determinism with regard to the trajectory of human history. If it were to be ‘re-played’ from some initial starting-point, the observed path of development would be relevantly similar, perhaps even identical, to the one taken on this particular iteration. History is, in this sense, law-governed.¹²

What is at stake

We can now appreciate what is at stake in the debate surrounding historical materialism. The central issue would appear to be, which of the two components of historical materialism should bear the primary explanatory weight, the theory of social forms, or the theory of transitions? This, in turn, would seem to depend on just how narrow are the constraints imposed by the productive forces on new production-relations. The stronger the constraints, the lesser the rôle of class-struggle in explaining the movement from one historical epoch to another.

At its strongest, the theory of transitions insists that the functional demands of the productive forces are so strong that, when modes of production descend into crisis, the range of possible-successor production-relations can be narrowed down to just *one* – that set which is best for the further development of the productive forces. As we shall see, this seems to be the interpretation offered by Cohen. On Cohen’s stringently-canonical historical materialism, once production-relations set A descends into a final crisis, the candidates for successor production-relations are winnowed down to just one – set B, since this is the one that is best-suited for further developing the productive forces. Class-struggle is the mechanism which brings about the transition to B, but the fact that B followed A was, in a sense, hard-wired into the system. The explanation as to why mode of production B follows mode A need make no reference to the *details* concerning class-struggle. The explanation of why B – and not production-relations sets C or D – followed A has to do with the virtuous effects of B for the productive forces. Note that, on this version of historical materialism, each of the two components does its work in a distinct dimension: the theory of social forms explains the dynamics *within* a social form, while the transition-theory explains the movement *from* one social form to another.

Now consider the consequences if we make the constraints less stringent. A weaker claim for the transition-theory would be that the production-relations that might replace the crisis-ridden ones are not those that are *best* for the

12. I do not wish for this to be taken as an invitation to a debate about laws in historical development. I have simply tried to explain what Marxists mean when they say that there are such ‘laws’.

productive forces's future development, but simply those which are *adequate* to the *ongoing development* of the productive forces – even if it is at a less-than-maximal rate. Now, the potential-successor production-relations at particular historical junctures will expand from one set to several sets. Note how this affects the burden carried by each component of historical materialism. Suppose that we are concerned with explaining the transition from social form A to form B, just as in the previous paragraph. In the more demanding version of transition-theory, also as outlined in the previous paragraph, B's following A was hard-wired into the system, since B was in fact the set of production-relations best suited to the further development of the productive forces. But, if we drop this assumption, then the potential successors to A now broadens to include not only B, but also C and D, if both of these would also foster the continued development of the productive forces – even if it is at rates that are lower than those brought about by B. Now, class-struggle begins to loom large as an explanation of which set of production-relations takes its place after the demise of A. On this less-demanding version of the theory of transitions, the set of production-relations that in fact ends up succeeding A *will* depend on the *facts* about the class-struggle. It could be set B, but, depending on which classes are the best-organised and manage to win over other classes, it could also turn out to be set C or D. The functional requirements of the productive forces now only explain *the range* of potential production-relations that can succeed A; the one that *actually* succeeds A from within that range is to be explained by class-struggle. The explanatory work of the class-struggle – and hence, the theory of social forms – has dramatically expanded.

As we continue to weaken the constraints that transition-theory places on the process of transition, the explanatory burden on the theory of social forms increases commensurately. As we ratchet downward the demands that the productive forces place on successor production-relations, the explanation for which production-relations in fact replace the ones in decline will rely more on details of the class-struggle, and less on the 'law-like' relation between the productive forces and the production-relations. The range of possible 'futures' at any nodal point, which marks the switch from one social form to another, increases dramatically; crucially, this means that historical materialism's power as a theory of the *overall* historical record also weakens. It can explain why human history did turn out the way it did, *post hoc*; but it cannot make a strong argument that it *had* to take the course that it in fact did. Had class-movements and organisational dynamics been different, the sequence of social formations might also have been different, and so, on that basis, the overall trajectory of history.

These are the implications for historical materialism if the arguments in support of a strong transition-theory cannot find secure warrant. The critical point, then, is to examine if there is any reason to believe that the functional requirements of the productive forces can exercise strong constraints on the emergence of new production-relations, as history moves forward. In what follows, we will examine what arguments have in fact been advanced – by Cohen, Carling, and Wright, Levine and Sober – to shore up the canonical version of historical materialism, which claims that the productive forces do wield just such a power. Cohen and Carling try to shore up the most ambitious version of the argument, in which the productive forces' constraints on the production-relations are at their narrowest. Wright, Levine and Sober, recognising the difficulty of these arguments, respond by weakening the claims, and by presenting an historical materialism with a less ambitious theory of transitions. I shall show that Wright, Levine and Sober are right in their pessimism regarding Cohen's gambit – neither he, nor Carling, can make a convincing case for the plausibility of canonical historical materialism. But the remedy sought by Wright, Levine and Sober comes at a cost. Their less ambitious version of historical materialism is certainly more plausible, but it is one in which the explanatory weight shifts markedly away from transition-theory, towards the theory of social forms. So, even though they advertise their argument as a defensible version of canonical historical materialism, it is in fact a version which cannot but rest its weight on the theory of social forms, and not on transition-theory. In doing so, it is more plausibly an *alternative* to canonical historical materialism, rather than its incarnation. What we are left with, for all *practical* purposes, is a 'class-struggle' version of history.

Cohen's canonical historical materialism

G.A. Cohen's rigorous presentation of a canonical historical materialism has generated a veritable avalanche of responses. Most of these have questioned the defensibility of the theory as he develops it, and quite convincingly so. I shall therefore describe his argument in summary-form, and quickly lay out its weaknesses, since I do not say anything here that is especially novel. This section is more in the way of a ground-clearing exercise, intended to lay the foundation for the meat of the essay, i.e. an examination of the attempts by Carling and Wright, Levine and Sober to salvage the theory.

It is to Cohen's credit that he has enunciated, more clearly than anyone before him, just what is entailed in canonical historical materialism. The

theory has conventionally been described as consisting of the following two theses:

- (i) The development-thesis: The productive forces have an autonomous tendency to develop through history.¹³

The capacity to develop in this manner suggests a certain power that not only stands independent of social structures and circumstances, but indeed stands *over* them. As Cohen argues, the independent power of the productive forces seems to be supported by the stylised fact that societal change rarely involves a retrogression in the level of social-productive power. In fact, it appears that social structures connected to production tend, on the whole, to be propitious for the further development of the productive forces. From this, Cohen suggests, we can hazard a further, stronger claim, viz.:

- (ii) The primacy-thesis: The nature of the production-relations in a society is explained by the level of its productive forces.

In Cohen's construal, this claim involves a commitment to the presence of a functional relation between the productive forces and the production-relations: the latter are selected on the basis of their functionality for the further development of the productive forces. Now, before proceeding to a discussion of the fortunes of this theory, we should note that the primacy-thesis as enunciated by Cohen needs amplification. As it stands, Cohen's theory states that the production-relations which emerge in the transition to a new mode of production will be propitious for the further development of the productive forces. But there may, at any time, be a variety of production-relations which

13. Cohen correctly observes that for the productive forces to have an autonomous tendency to develop is not to be confused with the claim that the productive forces have a tendency to develop autonomously. The latter construal can be taken to suggest that the productive forces develop independently of the production-relations within which they are embedded. This is impossible to maintain, since, as noted above, the structure of incentives for producers is set by the production-relations within which they find themselves. The reproductive strategies that they choose are thus responses to the production-relations, and it is these strategies that develop the productive forces. In choosing the former claim, Cohen is arguing, not that the productive forces develop autonomously of the production-relations, but, rather, that the production-relations which endure do so because of their beneficial effect on the productive forces. The productive forces thus develop because of the production-relations, but, if production-relations were adopted which did not develop the productive forces, they would be discarded in favour of more congenial ones. It is because of this power to select appropriate production-relations that we can regard the productive forces as having an autonomous tendency to develop. See Cohen 1988, Chapter 5.

are capable of this function. It cannot be sufficient for canonical historical materialism that the productive forces select, without further specification, any one of these rival production-relations. As pointed out by Wright, Levine and Sober, it would be irrational for social actors, on Cohen's assumptions, to choose production-relations that are anything less than the optimal for the further development of the productive forces. Furthermore, it is insisted by Cohen that the productive forces explain the *actual* production-relations in a mode of production. And, if the selectional mechanism is not an optimising one, then all it could explain is that the production-relations selected do not fetter the productive forces; in other words, all that the productive forces could confidently be said to select are any production-relations which do not further fetter the productive forces. The theory could not explain why *this* set of production-relations was in fact selected, which is in fact what it must do.¹⁴ Hence, we must add a third component to the theory:

- (iii) The optimality-thesis: The production-relations selected by the productive forces are the ones optimal for the further development of the latter.

So, canonical historical materialism asserts that the production-relations of any mode of production endure because they are optimal for the further development of the productive forces. Now, it follows that for this argument to have bite, it is not enough to observe that the production-relations which obtain with respect to a new mode of production are the best ones in the sense just specified; it must also be shown that they were selected *because* they were optimal, and not as a happy coincidence. This demands that the votaries of canonical historical materialism adduce a mechanism capable of this sort of discrimination. It requires the presence of some factor that serves to sift through the existing set of possible production-relations, and selects the one best suited for further developing the productive powers of society. In the absence of some such mechanism, historical materialism would not have a theory of history. It would merely have a manner of classifying the course history has taken. It could only point out that history *has* developed in this fashion, and not that it *had to* develop thus. Understandably, the debate on canonical historical materialism since the publication of Cohen's book has largely focused on the plausibility of this assumption.

The selection of a thing on the basis of its functionality can rest on two broad types of mechanisms: an intentional one, and what might be called a

14. See Cohen 1978, pp. 170–1. The significance of this point was first appreciated by Wright and Levine 1980, and is amplified in Wright, Levine and Sober 1993, pp. 31–2.

Darwinian one. The former relies on the possibility of a conscious selection made on the basis of the effects of the thing in question; the latter, on the efficacy of a feedback-loop connecting the effects of the thing and the chances for its reproduction, so that only those with the appropriate effect-generating attributes survive over time. Intentional mechanisms can, in turn, be divided into two kinds: a conspiratorial one, in which actors select institutions through some kind of collective deliberation, and a non-conspiratorial one, in which decisions are made individually, and aggregate into a social pattern. Certain caricatures of classical Marxism have sometimes presented the transition to socialism as the selection of new productive forces through a kind of working-class conspiracy – a version of the former kind of intentional explanation. But, while this may have a grain of plausibility as a forecast for conflict within capitalism, it seems wildly outlandish as a general model for modal transitions. Non-conspiratorial mechanisms, unlike their counterparts, usually take the form of some kind of structural explanation, and are hence more plausible. Actors are taken to have a set of preferences, and social institutions are selected by them to the extent that they mesh with the preference-ordering. In this case, the preference would be for institutions which optimally increase labour-productivity.

Cohen offers an historical materialism that relies on a non-conspiratorial intentional mechanism.¹⁵ In other words, he suggests that new production-relations are selected by social agents on the basis of their productivity-enhancing capacity, and that the choices are made individually.¹⁶ What is

15. This might appear as an odd assertion in light of the fact that Cohen has advertised historical materialism as an instance of functional explanation, and these are often contrasted with intentional explanations. Now, it is indisputable that Cohen does offer an intentional version of his argument, once he is forced to unpack it. What is at stake, then, is whether this means that he has abandoned his earlier commitment to the functional character of historical materialism. I do not think anything of substance rides on the verdict to this question. If we define functional explanations in such a fashion that they cannot advert to an intentional mechanism in their defence, then, of course, we must conclude that Cohen, in relying on just such a strategy, abandons the earlier commitment. This is Alan Carling's verdict in Carling 1993, p. 38. But if, instead, we allow that functional explanations may survive a causal rendering, then his commitment to the former stands. Our verdict derives entirely from our definition of functional explanations. But whatever we conclude on the matter, it carries no consequence for the defensibility of the explanation itself.

16. Cohen 1988, pp. 89–92. In point of fact, Cohen does not say that actors actually choose those production-relations which are optimal for the productive forces. What they in fact choose is those production-relations which minimise their work-effort and thus maximise leisure, *ceteris paribus*. It may be ventured, therefore, that what he offers is a version of a Darwinian mechanism, in that, strictly speaking, the effect on the productive forces is, to the actors, secondary to the effect on their work-leisure tradeoff. The effect on the productive forces just rides in the latter and could vary independently of it. This is strictly correct, but, in the case of Cohen's argument, pedantic. It is certainly possible to imagine new production-relations which would decrease

implausible about this theory is not that it is impossible to imagine social agents seeking to select from among social relations while using such a calculus; rather, as critics have pointed out, what makes it difficult to accept is the assumption that they will *be able* to do so in the manner specified. First, it is hardly warranted to presume that a menu of options is ever presented to social agents in the fashion required by Cohen's theory, allowing them, not only to simply choose from among its items, but also to reject one choice in favour of another. In other words, agents have to be aware, not only of the *possibility* of alternative production-relations, but also of their *availability*, and there is no reason to assume that this will be the case. Moreover, once a set is adopted, it will tend to generate interests in its defence, on grounds other than productivity-maximising ones – like its effects on class-power. It follows that agents will then organise in the defence of the less-productive production-relations, and it is doubtful that the necessary power could consistently be mustered to abandon one set just chosen in favour of another, suddenly more attractive candidate, given the likely opposition.¹⁷

Cohen's version of canonical historical materialism thus appears to flounder, unable to bear the weight of the optimality-thesis. There are, on the face of it, two means to salvage historical materialism in its canonical form. First, we could try to adduce another type of mechanism capable of sustaining the functional character of the production-relations and hence preserve the theory in its present form; second, we could dilute the claims of the theory, so as to render it more plausible, but also preserve its putative core. Alan Carling's work represents an effort at the former sort of enterprise, while Wright, Levine and Sober present a theory which purports to accomplish the second, by defending a weaker interpretation of the thesis about directionality. It is to these efforts that we now turn.

Carling's synthesis

Alan Carling has presented his version of historical materialism as not only preserving the claim about the primacy of the productive forces, but also as a synthesis of Brenner and Cohen. If successful, this effort can surely lay claim

work-time without developing the productive forces, simply from, say, increasing the monitoring costs of the new ruling class, and hence making it easier for the labouring class to 'slack'. But Cohen clearly assumes that the minimisation is occurring through increasing labour-productivity. In other words, this is taken as part of the preferences of the actors. Hence, in his theory, counter-examples of the kind just offered are assumed away. To choose on the basis of effects on work-time is just to choose on the basis of effects on productive forces. This may be wrong, of course, but we are interested, for the moment, only in the details of his theory, not in its correctness.

17. See Carling 1993, pp. 39–40.

to having inaugurated the next stage in the Marxian research-agenda, as well as having brought to an end one of the most important debates in recent years. Carling's argument proceeds in two steps: first, he provides a theory of capitalist *origins* which, we are informed, seamlessly melds Cohen's historical materialism to Brenner's; second, he offers a theory of capitalism's *spread* which rides on the presence of the very selectional mechanism which Cohen was unable to adduce, and hence resuscitates canonical historical materialism.¹⁸

In Brenner's explanation of the rise of capitalism, its occurrence in England, as well as its non-occurrence in France and Eastern Europe, is attributed to the diverging responses to the Black Death, which, in turn, were explained by the different class-capacities of lords across regions. While the French lordly class is unable to reverse peasant-proprietary rights over land, its counterpart east of the Elbe is able to foist a new serfdom onto the peasant-producers. It is only in England that the medieval pattern of economic growth is sundered by the rise of new social-property relations, and this breakthrough, Brenner argues, is made possible by the unique configuration of forces in the region: while lords are unable to impose a new serfdom like their counterparts in eastern Germany, they are also able to prevent the sorts of gains over the land made by French peasants, thanks to the historical legacy of villeinage. English peasants are thus able to escape the serfdom of their Eastern-European counterparts, but are also unable to forestall the deepening of lordly rights over land, which eventuate in the emergence of full-proprietary rights, and hence capitalism. The English breakthrough is thus attributed to the fact that its lordly class was stronger than the French, but weaker than the German; it was able to prevent the rise of a free peasantry, but unable to drive its producers into general servitude.

Carling now submits that we can conceptualise the three cases as models, as it were, of forms of feudal power: a 'French', 'Polish', and 'English' model. Each one represents a different institutional form of feudalism, with corresponding constellations of power and systems of organising surplus-extraction. Assume two background-conditions: first, that, in any region marked by different forms of feudalism, such as the model-ones just mentioned, there is an enduring political decentralisation, which ensures a corresponding permanence of variation in feudal forms; second, that the region is subjected to the recurring cycle of demographic booms and busts that typified medieval-European development. Each period of demographic collapse also weakens existing ownership-structures and hence creates the opportunity for a transmutation of property-relations, or of types *within* those relations. In a

18. Both arguments can be found in Carling 1993, although the synthesis of Brenner and Cohen is fully developed in Carling 1991.

region marked by heterogeneous feudal forms, Carling argues, the collapse occasioned by the demographic cycle and the class-struggle over the re-establishment of lordly control allows for a range of possible resolutions, from the preservation of the existing forms, to a change in their frequency, to the transition of one of them to a new mode of production. Among the three, Carling argues, the ‘English’ variant of feudalism is the most propitious for an eventual transmutation into capitalism.

So long as there is an ‘English’ feudalism within the variants, and so long as the demographic cycle continues, there will, at some point, be a breakthrough from an English type of feudalism to capitalism. Once this initial transition is successful, the second component of Carling’s theory swings into action. Recall that the weakness of Cohen’s theory is that it is unable to inspire confidence that there exists some mechanism that selects the production-relations optimal for developing the productive forces. Carling now argues that it is possible to imagine the presence of a Darwinian mechanism that selects for the kind of production-relations that canonical historical materialism requires. And this mechanism is inter-societal competition. This competition can, it appears, take two forms: a direct economic one, such as under conditions where capitalism enters precapitalist regions through trade or direct investment; or, more directly, as military engagement. Societies with greater productive efficiency are more successful in mobilising resources for war, and therefore, over the long run, more apt to enjoy military success over rival, and less productive, societies. Carling is somewhat opaque on this matter, but, presumably, conquest is to be followed by a forcible imposition of the victors’ production-relations, which alter the old régime in a fashion more congenial to growth.¹⁹ The forward-march of the productive forces thus proceeds, in this theory, through the competition between societies endowed with different types of production-relations.

Carling illustrates his argument by using the transition to capitalism as an example. The assumption appears to be that this simply lays out a logic that can be generalised to other cases of transition in history. In any geographical zone which contains multiple units of economic systems, when a shift to a new set of production-relations occurs in one of the units, a competitive battle is set between it and the units with older, less-productive sets of

19. I infer this from other, more parenthetical remarks Carling makes, since he is frustratingly vague on just how inter-societal competition conduces to replacing arthritic production-relations with ones more congenial to growth. For example, there is nothing in his argument to exclude the possibility that such replacement occurs through an *extermination* of the older production-relations, along with the people who form their *relata*. This would be a direct – albeit sickening – parallel to the story in natural selection. See Carling 1993.

production-relations – and the newer production-relations end up displacing their rivals. But, if we pause for a moment, it would seem apparent that this whole argument is biased by the case that has been chosen as its exemplar – the rise and spread of capitalist production-relations. It is easy to believe that an economic unit in which capitalism dominates will win out in its competition with other units, because the difference in productivity between capitalism and precapitalist modes of production is simply unprecedented. With a difference this large, of course, capitalist production-relations will tend to spread into other zones. But will this logic work when the competition is at an earlier stage of history, where the difference in the level of the forces of production was not as dramatic?

Carling is surprisingly vague on what the mechanism is that can serve to transmit new, more congenial production-relations across the terrain of stagnating productive forces, but it appears that the two most likely candidates are, first, their simple imposition through military conflict; and second, through some kind of demonstration-effect. As to the first, its success depends on the fulfilment of two conditions: first, the society with efficiency-inducing production-relations must be expected to win out over its less-productive rivals, and second, the conquerors must be expected to successfully force or induce their vanquished subjects to adopt the new production-relations. Perhaps, when the conflict is between capitalist and feudal economies, we can expect that, as the conflict continues, the dynamic efficiency of capitalism will generate resources so much greater than those of the feudal one that military success will follow. But, when the conflict is between forms of non-capitalist class-societies, this does not seem warranted.

As Carling himself admits, there is really no reason to expect that, in military conflicts, societies with productivity-enhancing production-relations will consistently defeat those with arthritic ones. Apart from the vagaries of war, the outcomes of which frequently depend on tactics, ideology, political organisation, etc., there is in fact no reason to expect that the greater efficiency of the new production-relations will raise the chances of success. What is more important in such circumstances is not the efficiency of raising new resources, but, rather, the quantum actually raised. As Carling notes, ‘a large and lumbering empire at a low technical level might nevertheless concentrate its forces sufficiently to overcome a small but nimble competitor at a higher technical level’.²⁰ But if this is true, then the case for such competition acting as a transmission-mechanism for new production-relations is, to say the least, considerably weakened. What war selects for most directly, is, not surprisingly,

20. Carling 1993, p. 51.

military capacity. Since such capacity is the composite outcome of a host of factors, only one of which is productive efficiency, it cannot be expected to select consistently in favour of the latter. But, even if societies at greater technical levels are able to secure military victory, it is an entirely different matter to expect that, in the postbellum-scenario, they will also be able to impose their new production-relations on the losers. Such transformations of the productive structure presume a capacity on the part of the victors that far exceeds the power required to simply win in war. It presumes a state-capacity, and a class-capacity, that beggars belief.

The problem of class-capacity and interests also undermines the case for a second route to the imposition of new, optimal production-relations – through a kind of demonstration-effect of better ones. It is possible to believe that rulers will note, and even be impressed by, more-productive economies elsewhere. It is not so easy to believe, however, that they will be so impressed as to initiate a transformation of their own production-systems. In the first place, since the rival economic systems rest on different production-relations, a transition to those production-relations will involve the dismantling of the very social relations on the basis of which these rulers maintain their power. The likelihood of their doing so will, we can expect, be quite low. Moreover, even if they are so inclined, it is a stretch to assume that they will, a) have the capacity to transform the existing production-relations, and b) transform them in the intended direction. The historical record does not lack examples of transformations that have yielded a result very different from that which was intended.

Carling appears aware, painfully so, that the theory of competitive selection that he offers is in danger of being buried under a mountain of caveats. ‘Perhaps’, he submits, ‘all that can be said is that history exhibits a *bias* imparted by competitive primacy; a bias weaker than a tendency but considerably stronger than nothing at all’.²¹ Perhaps, but this would seem a far cry from the canonical historical materialism that Cohen has excavated, and which Carling so admirably tries to defend. If there is a law-like relation between the productive forces and the production-relations which govern historical development, it has become awfully weak – at best imbuing it, as Carling notes, with a bias, rather than a powerful drive. The production-relations that take their place after periods of transition cannot be expected to have been selected by the functional requirements of the productive forces. Instead, there would appear to be several sets of production-relations compatible with a given level of the productive forces. It cannot be prejudged as to which ones

21. Ibid.

will win out, even through a competitive struggle between economic systems – unless we are taking as our example the transition to capitalism. But the point is that the direction in which *this* transition was resolved does not seem to be generalisable to other instances. And, until it can be, we cannot claim to have found a mechanism that can save Cohen’s optimality-thesis.²²

Wright, Levine and Sober’s reconstructed historical materialism

If the productive forces are not successful at selecting the production-relations optimal for a continuing development of the productive forces, then must the Marxian commitment to a theory of historical development also be discarded? In a series of articles subsequently collected into a book, Erik Wright, Andrew Levine and Elliott Sober valiantly argue that it need not. Historical materialism in its stronger form, as embodied in the optimality-thesis, may not be defensible; a more nuanced and concessive historical materialism, however, can retain the core of what canonical historical materialism tries to defend, while offloading its more embarrassing baggage. Wright, Levine and Sober take the core-motivation behind Cohen’s project to be a defence of the directionality of history, generated endogenously through the dynamic between the productive forces and the production-relations. If properly reconstructed, they argue, these core-components of the theory can still be defended. History can still be viewed as being driven through the development of the productive forces, and the direction of this development can still be regarded as being toward greater-and-greater productive power.

Abandoning the optimality-thesis

At the heart of Wright, Levine and Sober’s reconstruction of historical materialism is the abandonment of the optimality-thesis. They agree, indeed they were among the first to argue, that it cannot be assumed that there exists any mechanism which can serve to select those production-relations optimal for a further development of the productive forces.²³ But, if the productive

22. Carling’s views have evolved since his early work. For his more recent position, see Carling 2006; Carling 2009.

23. See Wright and Levine 1980. This article was in fact the first to highlight the centrality of the optimality-thesis for Cohen’s theory. Cohen himself did not call attention to it in his book, although he was apparently aware of its importance. In fact, this early article was clearly more critical of Cohen than the later incarnations. The change seems to have come around the time of Wright’s engagement with Giddens’s work, and his defence of Marxism against the latter’s critique. This was the first time Wright unveiled his ‘sticky-downward’ version of directionality, which has since, well, stuck. See Wright 1983.

forces lack this capacity, then in what sense does Marxism have a theory of history? What are the limits to the contingency that is now imported into the theory? Wright, Levine and Sober argue that, while transitions to new modes of production do become less predictable, there are still appreciable limits to the possible variety of outcomes – it is not that ‘anything goes’. In particular, while it is now possible for a larger variety of production-relations to be likely candidates for selection, it is nonetheless also true, they argue, that the new set will be one which, minimally, preserves the existing level of technical development. So long as new production-relations are more likely to preserve the existing level of development than they are to allow its regression, the aggregate outcome will be that the productive forces’s development will be ‘sticky downwards’. This is not to say that they will never regress; such instances of regression, however, will be historically rare, and it will be far more typical that the productive forces will continue to advance, or, at worst, remain stationary.

In this version of historical materialism, the theory of social forms occupies a much more prominent position than in the version enunciated by Cohen. Instead of there being one set of production-relations compatible with the productive forces during a period of transition, there now emerge a range of such sets. Which of these actually takes its place as a successor will depend on the details of the struggle between social classes. So the explanatory burden, when we try to apprehend the actual sequence of social formations, has already shifted away from the theory of transitions in its classical form. The reason this should be seen as a version of canonical historical materialism, and why it could be seen as an interesting one, is two-fold: first, the range of production-relations that is the ‘menu’ of options at a given juncture is still limited; it is not the case that, once we jettison the optimality-thesis, ‘everything is possible at every juncture’.²⁴ Second, the limits on the range of candidates from which a new set of production-relations will be selected are such that, whichever production-relations take their place, they will preserve the ‘law-like’ relation between the productive forces and the production-relations – that relation being, of course, that the production-relations must be compatible with the further development of the productive forces.²⁵ This preserves what Wright, Levine and Sober take to be the central motivation for historical materialism, the idea that history has a clear *direction*, from lower to higher levels of productivity.

24. Wright, Levine and Sober 1993, p. 90.

25. Wright, Levine and Sober 1993, p. 91.

In the new incarnation of historical materialism, the impulse for a continuous development of the productive forces is appreciably weaker than in Cohen's canonical historical materialism. It may now be possible for there to be long expanses of history in which there is not steady technological progress. Even in transitions to new modes of production, all that is required is that the new set of production-relations be of a sort that resolves the problem of incompatibility which generated the crisis. Despite this considerable latitude, the authors argue that the theory still retains its commitment to a directionality in history, since the following conditions obtain:

- (i) The probability of remaining stationary is greater than that of regressing.
- (ii) There exists some alternative set of production-relations more conducive to developing the productive forces.
- (iii) The probability of moving to this new set of production-relations is greater than regressing.²⁶

If these conditions obtain, then the direction of history will be from less-productive to more-productive productive forces. And, so long as this obtains, there also exists a determinate limit to the variety of new modes of production possible at any given level of the productive forces; if such a limit obtains, then the abandonment of the primacy-thesis does not imply that 'anything goes'. Wright, Levine and Sober are tantalisingly brief in their discussion of the new theory, as well as in their comparison of the new product to the older one. To appreciate the burden of the new and weaker historical materialism, it is thus of some interest to tease out its implications.

From weak historical materialism to minimalist historical materialism

To begin, we may note that there is now an ambiguity as to the precise claim being advanced with regard to the productive forces. Once we abandon the optimality-thesis, there emerge two possible 'curves' of history's developmental trajectory. *Weak historical materialism*: the production-relations that obtain at any given time do so because they are conducive – though not necessarily optimal – to the ongoing development of the productive forces. *Minimalist historical materialism*: the production-relations that obtain at any given time do so because, minimally, they maintain the existing level of development of the productive forces, even if they do not systematically develop them further.

26. Wright, Levine and Sober 1993, p. 79.

Weak historical materialism is the stronger of the two, of course, because it sustains a forward-thrust for the productive forces, and, in doing so, insists that the latter exercise a significant constraint on the menu from which new production-relations are selected. Minimalist historical materialism endorses a much weaker claim, namely, that the property for which the productive forces select the production-relations is the latter's ability to sustain the former's level of development. What the production-relations do, then, is prevent a *regression* of the productive forces. But, precisely because of its weaker ambitions, this minimalist historical materialism runs the danger of being of less – and perhaps of little – interest. Whether it is of interest is a theme to which I shall return presently. I should first like to examine whether there is enough muscle in Wright, Levine and Sober's theory to defend weak historical materialism over minimalist historical materialism.

Wright, Levine and Sober do not offer any compelling reason to expect that weak historical materialism will be more likely to be true than minimalist historical materialism. Consider their arguments for the developmental prospects of the productive forces. The two core-reasons adduced for why we should expect a cumulative tendency toward development are as follows: first, while all agents may not have an interest in advancing productivity, few agents will benefit from its consistent *reduction*; second, while there will be no pervasive social interest in reducing productivity, there is good reason to assume that there will always be agents with an interest in *increasing* it. Increasing productivity allows for the decrease of toil, and since all agents have an interest in decreasing their own toil, they can be expected to retain new innovations whencesoever they find them.²⁷ Society's productive capacity will therefore certainly be sticky downward, and, depending on the force of the second mechanism, have a bias toward development.

But it is precisely the force of the second mechanism that we must call into question. It is true that agents have *an* interest in reducing toil, and hence in increasing productivity. But the interest in reducing toil has also to be weighed against other interests, which agents may regard as no less important. There is first the issue of who benefits from the *fruits* of the toil. The presence of an effectively organised lordly class, or an overweening monarchical state, may serve to usurp enough of the new product to render the positive incentive offered by the latter neutral. This would not only be so with regard to the welfare-effects of their extractions, but also because of the added oppression flowing from the increased political and military presence of the extractors.

27. Wright, Levine and Sober 1993, p. 81. Note that this claim is at the micro-level. There may be agents who have an interest in preventing reductions in the toil of *others*, and hence who could have an interest in the reduction of toil socially.

This kind of increased presence would ‘overflow’ into other dimensions, like freedom and autonomy, which, on historical materialism’s own assumptions, form part of the core-preferences of human agents – no less than the desire to decrease toil. Even if we ignore such externalities, there could, and often are, other, more direct, odious effects of new innovations, like added risks, which producers may not be willing to take on.

Not only is there no reason to believe that agents, upon considering their net effects, will adopt new innovations in their own work-régimes; there is good reason to believe that there may be agents with an active interest in *preventing* the adoption of such technologies by *others*. This is most obvious in the case of ruling classes, who have a direct interest, for example, in preventing the adoption of technologies that might increase the autonomy of producers, or increase their own monitoring costs, etc. Wright, Levine and Sober gloss over this issue by pitching their argument at the level of the agent, while abstracting matters from the social structures in which the agents are placed. It is certainly true that agents will be inclined to adopt innovations that reduce their own toil, since any such reduction is in their material interest. However, in a class-society, the reduction in toil for one group may very well increase labour-effort for others; it could very well destabilise the process of surplus-extraction if it results in greater power for the immediate producers. Hence, it is entirely possible that rulers will prefer a social order that is less productive, as long as it promises their stable reproduction.

The upshot of all this is that, absent an appropriate environment, comprised most crucially by the type of property-relations in place, there is simply no reason to assume that the net impact of new innovations on agents’ interests will be such as to facilitate the *consistent* acceptance of new innovations. Note that what is at stake here is not the adoption of new technologies by particular individuals, but, rather, the presence of a mechanism that allows their *spread* throughout society at large. It is for this reason that Brenner, and some of his defenders, have insisted that absent a compulsion to innovate, producers will opt for more conservative strategies, focused more on *protecting* existing levels of welfare, as against taking the kinds of risks required for increasing it. If the trajectory of historical development depends on the net effects of the two mechanisms adduced by Wright, Levine and Sober, in particular on the effects of the second, then there is scant warrant for accepting weak historical materialism over minimalist historical materialism.

If minimalist historical materialism is the version that Wright, Levine and Sober’s reconstruction can support, then what we are left with is not a theory that predicts an ongoing-upward ascent of the productive forces, but one in which the productive forces are seen to simply resist regression – their level of

development tends to be ‘sticky downwards’. But, if this is the case, then the theory must admit to the possibility of long periods of historical stagnation – periods of ‘steady-state’ reproduction of the productive forces.²⁸ This need not occur only within a mode of production. There is every reason to expect that, in transitions to new modes of production, non-developmental production-relations will happily combine with the productive forces, so long as they do not force a regression upon the latter.²⁹

The implications of a minimalist historical materialism

Now, there are two conclusions that may follow from a slide into minimalist historical materialism. First, it may be admitted that the more powerful claims about the constraints imposed by the theory of transitions cannot be sustained, and that the menu of options at a given juncture in history is quite large. In other words, the demise of canonical historical materialism could simply be embraced. This certainly makes the theory more plausible, but it has implications that cascade into other regions of historical materialism. Consider what it means for the ambition to explain historical development as an artefact of the ‘law-like’ relation between the productive forces and the production-relations. In Cohen’s theory, part of the appeal of his claims came from the clearly identifiable rôle that the productive forces play in historical development. While there are other, growth-impeding factors in society which interact with the effects of the productive forces, the latter can be confidently assumed to be causally superior, as it were – they will have the capacity to dominate and overcome the effects of the other mechanisms, so that the net effect will be toward development. Cohen’s theory is, in this respect, a direct avatar of the monist tradition of historical materialism encoded by the First International. To admit of the possibility that production-relations might emerge which only preserve the existing level of the productive forces – or which might even reverse them somewhat, such as might accord with the interests of the new ruling classes – removes this monism in favour of a more pluralist view of causation in historical development. While the productive forces (barely) retain their capacity toward an upward ascent, the realisation of this capacity is now contingent upon its interaction with other mechanisms in society, and the net outcome need not necessarily be in favour of growth.³⁰ But if this is

28. Wright, Levine and Sober 1993, p. 80.

29. Wright, Levine and Sober seem to recognise this possibility. See Wright, Levine and Sober 1993, pp. 37–9.

30. See the discussion of the Asiatic mode of production in Wright, Levine and Sober 1993, p. 52, n. 11.

true, then it is hard to see why the actual course of history should be explained by the ‘dialectic’ between the productive forces and the production-relations. This duo now does exercise a constraint, but it is so wide as to make its explanatory pay-off rather more meagre. The explanatory work in any concrete analysis of historical transitions will be done, not by the causal influence of the functional needs of the productive forces, but by the course of events as driven by class-struggle.

A second reaction to the possible slide into minimalist historical materialism is to claim the following: while it is indeed true that a modal crisis may not trigger the emergence and consolidation of new, growth-enhancing production-relations, this cannot remain an indefinite state of affairs. Sooner or later, a class with the appropriate interests will also develop the requisite capacity. Even more, we may presume that with each iteration of the cycle, this probability increases, especially if the level of the productive forces is marginally greater in each cycle.³¹ Hence, while the productive forces may not themselves generate new, more-appropriate production-relations, they do serve to put these latter on the agenda. In this case, the productive forces would still be relevant explanatory factors in the event that new production-relations are adopted, precisely because it was their prior development that created the possibility for the rise of the new production-relations.

This is an argument that would parallel another argument Wright, Levine and Sober endorse for the rise of the welfare-state. Marxists have traditionally argued that the welfare-state is the product of class-struggle, in particular, the growing organisational power of the working class. Their mainstream-critics have rejected this argument, pointing out that other, non-class factors have played a crucial rôle, a fact unjustifiably ignored by Marxists. Wright, Levine and Sober point out that there are two dimensions to the rise of the welfare-state, which need to be distinguished – the *fact* of its rise, and the variations in its form, timing, etc. The fact that the welfare-state arose only within capitalism, and, more specifically, the fact that it arose when it did within the broad history of capitalism, is explained by the logic of class and class-struggle. But the actual timing of welfare-legislation, and the varieties of such states, may not be directly explained through class-struggle, as Marxists traditionally tried to argue. It was the development of large working-class movements in industrial countries which put this kind of state on the agenda; once it was on the slate, the precise timing of its adoption, and well as the precise institutional design it embodied, can be explained by other factors, to which

31. Erik Wright suggested this to me in comments to a paper I wrote some years ago.

non-Marxian analyses frequently allude: geopolitics, bureaucratic manoeuvres, other movements, etc.

This is the sense in which the productive forces would also operate as a cause for the emergence of new, more propitious production-relations. In both cases, one set of causes – the productive forces in the case of epochal transitions, and working-class movements in the case of the welfare-state – puts new developments on the agenda, while another set selects the particular thing from the items on the agenda. Hence, in both cases, the former set of causes retain explanatory relevance.

I should like to suggest that the parallel drawn is false. The force of Wright, Levine and Sober's argument here turns on the meaning attached to 'putting something on the agenda'. On their construal, it is taken to mean that the causal agent serves as a *structural cause* of the outcome. In cases which embody structural causation, the basic (structural-) causative factor is not the trigger for the event being generated; nevertheless, an increase in the weight of the structural cause serves to increase the likelihood of the predicted outcome. Once the magnitude of the structural cause reaches a certain threshold-level, it radically increases the likelihood that *some* trigger will bring about the predicted outcome.

The relevance of working-class movements to the formation of welfare-states is a successful example of structural causation. Note that, in order for this to work, there needs to be present some mechanism which links the structural cause – the power of the working class – to the outcome. And this link is provided by the *class-interests* of the workers: given that workers have an interest in the formation of a state which decommodifies labour-power, insulates workers from market-fluctuations, socialises household-labour, etc., an increasing index of their associational power renders it more likely that that power will be used to alter existing states toward the provision of welfare. The actual chain of events leading to the formation of a welfare-state – by electoral victories, enlightened bureaucratic reform, civil war, etc. – can be regarded as beside the point. They are relevant to explaining not the *fact* of a welfare-state, but its timing, particular form, and such. For explanations as to why the welfare-states arose in the first place, all we need to know is the fact of working-class power, and that of their interests in such states.

Now, it is not at all clear that a mechanism exists to connect the productive forces as a structural cause with some putative triggers, which might bring about transitions that embody the productive forces's 'law-like' relation with the production-relations. In other words, it is not possible to show that increasing levels of the productive forces are a structural cause of the rise of new production-relations. Consider again what the structure of the argument

needs to be: as the level of the productive forces gradually increases over time, crises in the mode of production will be resolved in a way that makes it more likely that a new, more congenial set of production-relations will be established. This is, in structure, much like the case of working-class power and the welfare-state: if the causal factor is increasing in magnitude, it increases the chances of the kind of outcome predicted by the theory. But there is a difference – while there is a clear mechanism in the case examined above, which links the putative cause to its effects, it is impossible to discern a corresponding link in the case of the productive forces. Why, in other words, should increases in the productive forces render a new, congenial set of production-relations more likely?

If we were to hazard a thorough symmetry with the case of the welfare-state, the argument would have to presume an *interest* on the part of social actors for new production-relations, as well as an increase in their *capacity* to do so. *Given* this interest in new production-relations, a growth in social actors' capacity will be used to hasten the emergence of new production-relations. But I have already argued that, while it is true that social agents have an interest in increased productivity, *ceteris paribus*, it can be, and typically is, smothered by other interests threatened by the externalities accompanying better-productive forces. There is, therefore, no reason to assume that the class-situation of historical actors will include an interest in this sort of development. Furthermore, even if such an interest does exist, there is no reason to believe that more powerful productive forces will increase the capacity of the relevant actors in the necessary direction. It is true that better productivity will increase the social surplus, and hence will generate greater resources. But the *distribution* of these resources cannot be taken for granted. It may just as easily flow toward social actors with a strong interest in the reproduction of the existing order. Hence an increase in the technical level of the productive forces will have no determinate effect on the likelihood of new production-relations replacing the crisis-ridden ones. It is difficult to see how this can be prejudged. If the divergences between this case and the case of the welfare-state is as explained, then the option of regarding the productive forces as a structural cause behind new production-relations is not available to Wright, Levine and Sober. And, if it cannot count as a structural cause, then to say that it puts new production-relations 'on the agenda' in the sense that working-class power put the welfare-state 'on the agenda' is misleading.

Hesperus is Phosphorus! Or, minimalist historical materialism is a class-struggle theory!

Let us take stock. I have argued that, if Wright, Levine and Sober reject the optimality-thesis, as they must if they are to salvage historical materialism, then there are two interpretations of historical materialism available to them: weak historical materialism, which asserts that the progression of the production-relations in history is such that they facilitate the further development of the productive forces, albeit not at an optimal level; and minimalist historical materialism, which reverts simply to the assertion that the progression of the production-relations is such that the productive forces just do not regress. In their exposition of the new version of historical materialism, Wright, Levine and Sober hint that the second of the two weak versions may be the one that they will have to settle upon. It has been the burden of my argument that, indeed, this is the version that they must accept. On their own assumptions, it is difficult to sustain a thesis arguing for the continual development of the productive forces through history. There is no mechanism available that could serve to consistently select growth-enhancing production-relations, even if these latter need not be optimal. Further, agents may, in fact, have it in their interests to sacrifice growth-enhancing production-relations for ones which are biased toward other interests, like stability or political power. What remains, then, is a theory which argues that what is law-governed in the observed course of history is merely that the production-relations across epochs will be such that they prevent a regression in the level of the productive forces.

The implications are far-reaching. Minimalist historical materialism is certainly plausible as a theory of historical development. But its explanatory power is considerably weakened for understanding the actual sequence of social forms observed in history. This sequence cannot now be explained by the functional needs of the productive forces. Recall that, as the set of permissible production-relations widens so that the number of candidates increases, the functional requirements of the productive forces recede as the mechanism that selects for new production-relations. If the production-relations of kind B are the ones that follow the production-relations of kind A, then it cannot be assumed that this was because of suitability to the needs of the productive forces. For there will also be production-relations of kind C, D, E, etc., that conform to the requirements of preserving the existing level of the productive forces. The fact that it was B that followed A, and not one of the other sets, will have to be explained by some recourse to other factors – most likely, the class-struggle. As I suggested earlier, as the potential candidates for

new production-relations increase in number, the explanatory contribution of the productive forces decreases.

But this just amounts to saying that, as the demands on canonical historical materialism are softened, as they are by Wright, Levine and Sober, the theory cannot but place greater weight on the explanatory rôle of class-struggle in explaining the actual course of historical development. In other words, as the theory is weakened, it veers toward becoming a theory of history based on class-struggle. *The cost of making the theory more plausible is that it starts to look more and more like a class-struggle theory of history.*

Note that this does not mean that the productive forces now are rendered irrelevant to the theory. It is that the nature of their rôle now shifts. In the strongest version of the theory, as developed by Cohen through the optimality-thesis, the productive forces select *for* the particular production-relations that replace the ones that have fallen into crisis. But as the theory is weakened, it cannot be assumed that the productive forces enjoy this kind of power. They must settle, as it were, for one among a list of production-relations, all of which have in common the needed property – which, in minimal historical materialism, amounts to the property of preventing a regression to lower levels of productivity. What the productive forces are doing now is not selecting for a particular set of production-relations, but, rather, selecting against those which would induce a regression in the level of the productive forces. The selectional rôle of the productive forces switched from selecting for a *particular* set of production-relations to selecting *against* a *class* of production-relations. The productive forces now set the (rather wide) limit on the range of potential production-relations that will replace the existing, decrepit ones, while the selection from within the permissible range of production-relations will be decided by class-struggle.

Conclusion

Historical materialism has always been marked by a kind of division of labour between its two components, the theory of social forms, and the theory of transitions. The debate within the Marxian tradition has been about the specific domain of each in relation to the other. In the canonical version of historical materialism, it was the theory of transitions which reigned supreme – history was taken to have been driven by a law-like relation between the productive forces and the relations of production. As human societies moved from one mode of production to another, the economic structure which served as the foundation for production and distribution was able to endure only so

long as it remained optimal for ongoing technological progress. In this theory, the remit of the theory of social forms was quite limited: it was primarily to show how the prevailing production-relations generated the characteristic ‘laws of motion’ of that mode of production, and the class-struggle that was related to them. The *explanatory* function of the theory of social forms was basically confined to dynamics *within* social formations. The task of explaining why the movement *from* one social form *to* another turned out the way it did – that was the job of the theory of transitions. The reason for this dominance of the theory of transitions was that, during transitions from one mode to another, the outcome of the class-struggle was ‘wired’ into the system by the functional requirements of the productive forces. The game was fixed so that only one set of production-relations could possibly win.

The challenge for defenders of canonical historical materialism has been to adduce a mechanism that might account for the productive forces having such powers to select production-relations. What I have tried to show in this article is that Carling and Wright, Levine and Sober fail in their attempts to shore up canonical historical materialism. On the other hand, as they steadily weaken the claims that can be made on behalf of the productive forces, they end up expanding the explanatory rôle of the class-struggle – the main component of the theory of social forms. Recall that canonical historical materialism has to commit to the view that the functional requirements of the productive forces so constrain the production-relations that they winnow the range of candidates down to a very small band – perhaps even down to a single set. The explanatory weight of the productive forces is directly related to the force of its constraints on the selection of production-relations. Carling is unable to show that military conflict can act as an appropriate selectional mechanism. Wright, Levine and Sober, for their part, are forced to take a weak historical materialism as their starting-point, but, even here, I argued that weak historical materialism must give way to a minimalist historical materialism. With this, the constraints exercised by the productive forces must widen even further. And with each widening of constraints, the explanatory rôle of the class-struggle increases. Hence, *by its own logic*, the search for a defensible historical materialism has led to a reversal of the balance between the theory of transitions and the theory of social forms. Somewhat perversely, the ambition to defend canonical historical materialism has so weakened its claims that its rival theory has emerged as a more natural and robust choice.

Hence, Marx’s dictum, that ‘all history hitherto is the history of class-struggle’, is the more defensible version of historical materialism. This emphatically does not mean that the productive forces have no causal rôle in the theory of history. The functional requirements of the productive forces are

still non-trivial – they do induce agents to reject production-relations that would force a significant regression in technological levels. Hence, they do impose some constraints on the range of potential production-relations during transitions from one mode of production to another. The point is that this constraint is now weak enough as to seldom figure in explanations of historical transitions. The reason for this is simple: no theory of history – none, in any case, of which I am aware – claims that significant regressions of the productive forces are just as likely as their preservation. To the contrary, the fact that history is marked by an overarching aggregation of technical knowledge, and that a regression from higher to lower levels is rare, is central to two of the most widely-regarded non-Marxian theories of history, viz. those developed by Ernest Gellner and Michael Mann.³² Hence, when we set out to explain why production-relations set A was followed by set B, the contrast-class against which B's emergence is considered will be set C, which would also have maintained the level of the productive forces, and not sets G and H, which would have forced a significant regression. But, precisely because these are rarely the contrast-class, the regression-inhibiting power of the productive forces will seldom figure in the explanation for why B followed A. We will rely, instead, on the vicissitudes of the class-struggle.

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32. See Gellner 1988 and Mann 1986.

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