

The Reflection on Historical Materialism: Does the Concept Have a Future?

Leonid E. Grinin

*National Research University Higher School of Economics,
Moscow; Institute for Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy
of Sciences, Moscow*

Anton L. Grinin

Lomonosov Moscow State University

Abstract

The article examines academic and intellectual merits of the central part of Marxism – historical materialism. The authors argue that historical materialism has many valuable findings and conclusions and analyze some of them, showing that they together with its methodology can be helpful for a social scientist and for a historian theorizing and aspiring for broad analogues. New explanations for this phenomenon are given as the restrictions of the existing model of historical materialism are revealed. A peculiar attention is paid to Marx's conclusion that the changing developmental level of productive forces inevitably leads to changes in all other spheres of societal life; moreover, these changes do not happen automatically and immediately but through the resolution of structural and systemic crisis in a society. The article presents a survey on the history of the Western studies within historical materialism framework starting from the end of the 19th century at the general background of the ups and downs of the Western Marxism and its crisis after the collapse of socialism. The authors show the waves of the Western Marxists' attenuating and increasing interest in historical materialism. The latter to a certain extent should be considered as a program for scientific research which is far from its realization. The authors also make a conclusion that today one can hardly work within the framework of historical materialism conception since many of its postulates should be revised. It is very important that historical materialism can affect social science mainly in an indirect way through a creative acquiring and interpretation of its method, approaches, and partially of its categories and dis-

Evolution: Complexity in Nature, Society, and Cognition 2023 104–134
DOI: 10.30884/978-5-7057-6261-3_08

course and with integration of other concepts. Within social science some directions are discussed which can be combined with some ideas of historical materialism. On the other hand, today the fate of historical materialism and Marxism is defined by a certain paradox: its influence increases along with the merge with other theories. Therefore, they nevertheless continue to exist. Since it has become a part of the general intellectual legacy, one can figuratively speak about its genetic drift.

Keywords: *Karl Marx, historical materialism, Western Marxism, productive forces, productive relations, basis, superstructure, production principles, Marxist historiography, post-historical materialism, methodology, general intellectual legacy, driving forces of historical process.*

Introduction. The Legacy that We do not Reject

Inheritance

Lenin was convinced that 'The Marxist doctrine is omnipotent because it is true' (Lenin 1973: 24). As it is known, history did not prove the validity of Marxism while building socialism and communism failed in practice. However, in a paradoxical way and despite the crash of the world socialist system, the interest in Marxist thought remains undiminished (Jeffries 2012; Wood 2007). There are different opinions concerning reasons of sustainable interest to Marxism and this point is debated both by its supporters and non-Marxists (see, e.g., Eagleton 2011; Jeffries 2012). The interest to Marxism among people and some part of society appeared persistent because exploitation and inequality continue to exist while the latter even increases. There are also social struggle and revolutions, and in the course of development of social programs of modern states socialist ideas gain popularity, especially in the USA in recent years. Perhaps, those are right who argue that Marxism will survive as long as capitalism exists since a society with private property will always have critiques and Marxism is indispensable and inexhaustible in this case. Besides, with collapse of the real world of socialism Marxism (especially among young people) has stopped to be associated with Stalin's repressions and Soviet totalitarianism (Jeffries 2012).

However, in the present paper we are interested not in social reasons of survival of Marxism but in its scientific and intellectual merits. And in this context, the interest to it also appeared persistent since Marxist methodology and its approach to the study of society contains rather valuable findings, successful and productive methods which have been and remain rather useful for a social scientist and a historian aspiring for broad analogues. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (along with Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer, John Stuart Mill, Emile Durkheim and Max Weber and some other prominent sociologists) actually laid foundations for modern sociology and theory of history (Aronowitz 1990: 3).

It is not without reason that in the preface to the Russian edition of his book Daniel Bell wrote, 'How can a sociologist be anti-Marxist?' (Bell 1999: xci). However, the fact that Marx and Engels's legacy is quite valuable was recognized in Western science far from immediately – only by the mid-20th century or even in the 1960s – 1970s.

There are also other reasons why Marxism and historical materialism remain in the toolkit of modern social sciences. First, it is obvious that they give many accurate characteristics to capitalism which remains relevant despite the latter's transformations. Further, although many revolutionary predictions did not come true, Marx and Engels still have made some relevant estimates, in particular, concerning the convergence of states and nations due to close economic relations in the course of capitalist development; it is not in vain that they are called today the precursors of ideas about globalization (*e.g.*, in their 'Manifesto of the Communist Party' [1848]). Finally, similar to other profound thinkers they left works that intellectually enrich a reader and help to understand many epochs and events even if one can hardly agree with many ideas in classic Marxist works.

The article consists of Introduction, five sections and Conclusion. In the Introduction we will speak about ambiguity of Marxism, its strong and weak points. In the first section 'Major ideas and achievements of historical materialism' we argue that historical materialism has many valuable findings and conclusions and we analyze some of them to show how they together with its methodology can be helpful for a social scientist and for a theorizing historian searching for broad analogues. The second section 'Further elaboration of historical materialism' presents a survey on the history of Western studies within historical materialism framework starting from the end of the 19th century at the general background of the ups and downs of Western Marxism. The third section 'Marxist historiography' is devoted to the history of Marxist historiography which in theoretical terms always relied on the concept of historical materialism. We reveal its strong and weak points as well as its rises and crises. The fourth section 'Crisis in Western Marxism' describes causes and consequences of the crisis in Marxism and historical materialism which turned especially strong in connection with the collapse of the socialist system. Finally, the last, fifth, section 'What is the genuine heritage of historical materialism?' is devoted to the analysis of how historical materialism may survive and develop as a powerful intellectual source. The authors make a conclusion that today one can hardly work within historical materialism conceptual framework since many of its postulates should be revised. It is very important that historical materialism can affect social science mainly in an indirect way through a creative acquiring and interpretation of its methods, approaches, and partially of its categories and discourse and with integration with other concepts. Within social

science some directions are discussed which can be combined with ideas of historical materialism. Finally, in a brief Conclusion we argue that today the destiny of historical materialism and Marxism is defined by a paradox: their influence increases as they merge with other theories, and therefore, they continue to exist. So they have become a part of the general intellectual legacy and one can figuratively speak about a genetic drift.

Marxism's Structure and Methodology

In this article we will discuss an important – and in some respect central – part of Marxist legacy, namely, historical materialism with its methodological approach which underlies historiography. Until the present, Marxist methodology, terms, and approaches to the study of society remain in some respect relevant and valuable in many fields.

As it is well known, historical materialism was created by Karl Marx (1818–1883) and Friedrich Engels (1820–1895) during four crucial decades from the 1840s to the 1880s. Although we may distinguish several dimensions within it,¹ Marxism is a unified system whose components, as conceived by its founders, must serve a single purpose of justifying the overthrow of capitalism and attaining a new communist society. Therefore, it is often difficult to distinguish historical materialism from Marxist economics or revolutionary philosophy, and, more generally, academics from ideology.

Unlike the Marxist political economy, historical materialism has never been developed as an integral system, and only a few topics have been thoroughly elaborated – often as a response to criticism.² So ‘like any other theorist who frequently swam in political waters, Marx was forced to emphasize one or another aspect of the theory of historical materialism depending on the polemical conditions under which it labored’ and Engels spent much time trying to clarify that or this point of Marxian ideas’ (Aronowitz 1990: 6). Therefore, speaking about the major ideas of historical materialism, one should always remember that it is not a completed philosophical theory, but rather the preliminary outlines to be interpreted in various ways. According to Max Adler, one should rather consider it as an unimplemented project of scientific research. Marx and historical materialism were – and remain – what Raymond Aron called them: equivocal and inexhaustible (Aron 1970).

But like any other prominent theory, Marxism contained opportunities for development of various lines and ideas; that is why its diversification occurred

¹ Including political economy, communist doctrine and philosophy (dialectical and historical materialism).

² With respect to historical materialism, one should mention Marx and Engels 1976 [1846], 1976 [1848]; Marx 1978 [1859], 1993 [1867]; Engels 1878, 1884.

and still goes on (Anderson 1976, 1983; Timpanaro 1974; Aronowitz 1990; Burawoy 2020; for details see below).

With this in mind, in what follows we will speak about fundamental principles, methods, merits, and prospects of historical materialism and also highlight its most valuable ideas worth further elaboration.

Historical materialism was always considered by its followers as an immediate methodology for historical study (*e.g.*, Anderson 1974a, 1974b; Labriola 2005; Ilyushechkin 1986; Iggers 2010; see also Aronowitz 1990; Blackledge 2006). So its task was reduced to a search for particular variation of general statements of historical materialism (about classes, origin of state, the ratio between basis and superstructure, *etc.*) in a particular society in certain epoch. At that, for the societies that were more in line with models described in historical materialism, its categories, principles and methods fitted quite well their historical narrative and produced a good analytical effect. Respectively, around historical materialism there was formed a peculiar Marxist historical problematics, for which the ideas and terms of historical materialism appeared much more productive than common positivist methodology³. However, with respect to many other epochs, societies and problems (including the issue of the Orient, nomadic and other societies) its application turned unproductive or even harmful for historical research (see, *e.g.*, Ilyushechkin 1986, 1990; Nikiforov 1977; Blackledge 2006: ch. 4; Grinin 2007, 2009, 2012). In fact, historians had to make facts fit the theory which often led to false conclusions and abundance of dogmas not confirming reality. And since a Marxist historian was required to fit historical materialism, he faced a difficult choice to be faithful either to scientific truth or to ideology.

Criticism

The main drawback of Marxism and, respectively, historical materialism as its part was its founders and followers' belief in *inevitable* socialist revolution and resulting future establishment of communist society without state, private property and exploitation.

The Marxist belief that the future of a particular type is inevitable and predetermined, which implied inevitable communism, was based on 'determinism', that is, on the idea of some 'iron' historical laws as non-historical forces or essences governing the historical process and realizing a certain historical scenario. Determinism was supplemented by the so-called essentialism – a claim to discovery of a profound essence of history which is hidden behind phenomena and remains almost unchangeable and only its manifestations change in different epochs, circumstances and personalities. However, determinism and es-

³ This problematics was connected with the analysis of history of classes and class struggle in some epochs, of popular movements, revolutions, ideologies, exploitation, development of productive forces, *etc.*

sentialism were characteristic not only to Marxism but also to a number of previously existing and contemporary scientific and philosophical approaches. This was also due to the fact that Marxist philosophy had originated from Hegelian idealistic philosophy.⁴ Besides, Marxism was criticized for its features which were related to determinism and the faith in inevitable communism and which were generally interconnected and formed a common philosophical methodology. In particular, that referred to providentialism which is a perception of the course of history as an eventual achievement of certain result immanently determined by its laws or as a predestination of the future. Also, they often speak about eschatology which is closely connected with providentialism and states that history has an end or that history has certain sense and ultimate goal. To these features Karl Popper also added an accusation of historicism (*e.g.*, Popper 1957) which is a belief that there exist invariant historical laws that can be discovered and which can help make predictions about the future as well as scientifically govern and change society.

One could generally agree with most of these critical assessments. At that, even Marxists themselves reluctantly agree with some points, yet, with some restrictions (about essentialism see, *e.g.*, Rainko 1979: 60; about determinism: Eagleton 2011; ch. 3). The drawbacks were involuntarily inherited from the philosophical paradigms that served as the basis for historical materialism (in particular, Hegel's philosophy and Saint-Simon's theory of history). Besides, when defining universal historical laws, Marx and Engels strongly underestimated the impact of external factors on societal development (about this weakness of Marxism see in Bertram 1990). Therefore, the society was mostly represented as an endogenous system weakly affected by external challenges, while the internal contradictions were considered critical. The role of individuals in history was also underestimated (see Grinin 2010, 2012).

In the present work it is important for us not to point out mistakes and fallacies but to systematize what is valuable and confirmed by time and what can be further elaborated. In this respect one should consider historical materialism not as a completed theory but according to Max Adler, as a program of scientific research which is far from completion (Aron 1968).

1. Major Ideas and Achievements of Historical Materialism

Materialist Conception of History

The most important contribution of Marxist philosophy of history was its consistent materialism in explaining historical process, which launched the search for objective, not mystical or speculative, causes of historical development. Prior to Marx and Engels there did not actually exist any materialism in

⁴ About their close connections see Korsch 1923. URL: https://scepssis.net/library/id_672.html.

comprehension of history and all the more in philosophy of history. At best one could speak about some bent for materialist conception of history (e.g., Turgot in Popov-Lensky 1924) or about its some directions, in particular about geographical-economic materialism of Antoine Barnave (Ilyushechkin 1996; Popov-Lensky 1924). In general, the emergence of the materialist conception of history was generally determined by an obviously growing importance of material production. The genius of Marx and Engels, as it happens in history of science, consists in the fact that they gathered already existing ideas into a unified system that gained a new quality and peculiar emergent properties. Although in philosophical and sociological terms this system was incomplete and it was just a preliminary outline, but even at this stage it showed up its powerful heuristic and methodological merits.

It is extremely important that when building materialist conception of history Marx and Engels tried to give top priority to the development of production (productive forces). For materialist conception of history and understanding of the reasons of deep changes in society it turned essential in philosophical and methodological terms that 'it is not consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness' (Marx 1978 [1859]).

Another merit of the approach was the historical method of considering processes and phenomena in their development. As Marx and Engels declared in *The German Ideology*, 'We know only a single science, the science of history ... the history of nature and the history of men' (Marx and Engels 1976 [1846]: 28). In the Marxist historical model, societies and humankind generally pass through five stages of development, or socioeconomic formations: primitive commune, slavery (or ancient), feudalism, capitalism, and communism (the latter being just a vain prediction). Respectively, the model distinguishes five modes of production denoted similarly to formations.

The Idea of Primacy of Productive Forces

The economy of different societies varies greatly. The Marxism's success was in identification of category that could unify both barbarian and modern economies. When in the second half of the 20th century the study of technologies and material production became an important topic in Western social science, some Western authors (like Aron or Bell) made Marx's virtue the employment of this category and the attempts to define levels of productive forces.

Let us remind that according to historical materialism the changing level of development of productive forces inevitably leads to changes in all other spheres, at that this change proceeds not automatically and immediately but follows the resolution of structural and systemic crisis in a society (see below). Besides, one should add another important idea that explains the mechanism of operation of some historical processes so that 'No social order is ever destroyed

before all the productive forces for which it is sufficient have been developed, and new superior relations of production never replace older ones before the material conditions for their existence have matured within the framework of the old society' (Marx 1978 [1859]: 4).

Among historians of economy and thinkers there became popular the idea that it is just the long-term changes in material life (first of all, these changes were connected with changing technologies, *i.e.* in productive forces) that determine fundamental changes in other spheres of life, yet with a considerable time lag. As Fernand Braudel (1993: 67) figuratively expressed it, the material life carries everything on its huge back. From time to time within historical materialism they also tried to develop these approaches as well (see, *e.g.*, Cohen 2004 [1978]). However, in Marxism due to its aspiration to reorganize the world in a revolutionary way this idea was not developed to the full (and probably could not be developed).

Productive Forces and the Relations of Production. Mode of Production

In *Capital* Marx introduced the concept of productive forces, which includes means of production, that is the subject of labor (the natural objects/materials which are worked on, such as soil, water, wood, mineral resources, *etc.*) and the means of labor (*i.e.*, tools and other equipment, transportation, storage facilities, *etc.*) (see Marx 1993 [1867]: 189). This concept of productive forces with some modifications can also be employed in modern science.

The relations of production were defined as relations independent of people's will, which altogether form the economic structure of a society (Marx 1978 [1895]: 4). They include phases of production, circulation, distribution, and consumption. Unfortunately, in this model, the relations of production, as associated with property in the means of production, were considered determinant.

The categories of 'relations of production' and 'property relations in the means of production' were considered almost identical since each form of property (*e.g.*, slave-owning, feudal, and bourgeois, *etc.*) determines a certain mode of production. Hence, Marx pointed out that the property relations virtually became the criterion for periodization, but not for the 'stages of development' of productive forces. It is important to understand that property relations are but a legal expression for the relations of production while juridical forms of property were weakly developed in the most pre-capitalist countries. In many societies, the distribution or circulation (taxes, trade) or even external forms of violence (from military plunder to colonial exploitation) were the major forms of redistribution. So the Marxist idea about the primacy of property in the means of production in the relations of production contradicts in many cas-

es with historical reality. *The exaggerated role of property relations in pre-capitalist formations brought Marxist historiography to deadlock.*

Mode of production is a major category explaining in systemic terms how a society functions and why it is transformed. A mode of production is a unity of productive forces and relations of production. The main idea clarifying the relations between the two components of the mode of production is that a certain level of development of productive forces correlates to a certain system of relations of production. And vice versa: the relations of production should 'correspond to a certain stage of development of their material productive forces' (Marx 1978 [1895]: 4). 'The hand-mill gives you society with the feudal lord; the steam-mill society with the industrial capitalist' (Marx 1976 [1847]: 166). But the unity of productive forces and relations of production is not permanent, since it passes through certain stages. At first, they completely correlate with each other; but later this correlation disappears, thus providing the most powerful source for development. As Marx noted, 'At a certain stage of development, the material productive forces of society come in conflict with the existing relations of production... From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters' (Marx 1978 [1895]: 4–5). The increasing contradictions within society, along with class struggle, trigger social revolution, which eventually eliminates obsolete relations and transforms the whole societal structure, since 'with the change of the economic foundation the entire immense superstructure is more or less rapidly transformed' (Marx 1978 [1859]: 5). Thus, the transition to a new mode of production is determined by changing productive forces and leads to radical transformations of all elements and relations in society.

Unfortunately, these insightful ideas obtained no systematic elaboration since the classics of Marxism applied them only to two formations: feudalism and capitalism; while the attempts to find essential distinctions of productive forces between slavery and feudalism failed. Moreover, hunters-gatherers and early farmers (*i.e.*, societies with fundamentally different productive forces and divided by one of the greatest technological revolutions in history – the Agrarian or Neolithic one, which triggered the transition from foraging to food production) were attributed to the same formation.⁵ Thus, the idea that just productive forces determine the type of relations of production and consequently the whole

⁵ We managed to avoid the above-stated contradictions and derived the following concept (Grinin 2007; Grinin L. and Grinin A. 2016). In human history (but not in every society), one can distinguish four largest production (technological) epochs which we denoted as *production principles*: 1. Hunter-Gatherer; 2. Craft-Agrarian; 3. Trade-Industrial; and 4. Scientific-Cybernetic (the latter connected with the transition to information and self-regulation technologies). They correlate to societies with the most different structural patterns united by a respective common characteristic. Thus, those were societies with different *types of alienation*: pre-economic, non-economic, semi-economic, and economic. It is obvious that we apply Marx's notion of *alienation*.

societal structure was in Marxism only a declaration that undermined the entire system of historical materialism and Marxist historiography (see below).

The Base and Superstructure: Social Being and Social Consciousness

Marx considered the totality of relations of production to be ‘the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness’ (Marx 1978 [1859]: 4–5). As a result, the emerging formula was far from indisputable, since it implied that the relations of production, or property relations (= base), determine all relations in a society. Most opponents of Marxism rather vigorously argued against this standpoint (about debates among Marxists see Wood 2007: Ch. 2).

The idea of relations of production determining the whole range of relations within societies was closely associated with the statement that ‘it is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but their social being that determines their consciousness’ (Marx 1978 [1859]: 4). This concept underlies such meaningful categories as social being and social consciousness later employed both by the followers of Marxism and by other schools (*e.g.*, in the concept of ideologies as false consciousness and collective unconscious Karl Mannheim and others).

Socio-Economic Formation and World Historical Process

Mode of production and superstructure together constituted an important category of socio-economic formation, which actually duplicated the category of mode of production due to overemphasizing of forms of property. Due to the failure to accurately and logically distinguish between the level of individual society and universal level, there emerged insoluble contradictions in application of the five-stage periodization to histories of individual societies. In particular, it was absolutely false to assume (as it was de-facto adopted in historical materialism) that all societies and peoples pass through the same developmental stages though at different periods. In fact, the transition to a new formation becomes possible only at a supra-societal level (first within a large region, and later at a larger scale). During the transition, most societies either disappear (*e.g.*, merge into a larger society like tribes into a state) or turn incapable of transformations (perish, or are subjugated, or stagnate). Quite a few societies which developed in favorable environment succeeded to evolve into a new formation since a society could make an evolutionary breakthrough to a qualitatively new level only due to a previous collapse or stagnation of most other societies (see Grinin 2012; Grinin, Markov, and Korotayev 2009). Since one society can remain the World-system leader only for a limited time period we

may speak about a kind of a relay race⁶ in which leader of a certain period after having exhausted his resources passes the leadership to another society, at that the size of leading societies increase from formation to formation.

Systemic Character, Structural Properties, Modelling and Methodology

Although it is infrequently mentioned, one should bear in mind that Marxism anticipated the application of a systemic method which later, in the 1950s – 1970s, obtained a theoretical foundation and powerful development in the world science. Marx and Engels actually presented a society as a system (yet, they hardly used the term) which can exist due to the unity and struggle of opposites. Constantly opposing classes were among important components of such system. The categories showing the systemic character of a society which exists due to its conforming elements and changes (also with a transition to a new qualitative level) when proportions change also include *the base and superstructure, productive forces and relations of production, social existence and social consciousness, etc.*

This was a novel method of analysis which allowed discovering important driving forces of history (see below). In this respect (as in many others) Marx and Engels actually formulated methodological ideas (which seemed to them to be ontological) and thus developed important principles of study (although to them and their followers this seemed already a solution). The mentioned categories (base-superstructure, productive forces – relations of production) essentially present binary oppositions. Let us remind that binary oppositions making the source of building social relations and mental construction are used in structuralism as a universal means of rational description of the world. In other words, the described method forestalled modern structuralism.

Another productive method outlined in historical materialism – the idea of a dominating element in the system whose development may lead to changes in other spheres (thus, the development of productive forces leads to changes in relations of production and later in other spheres). But one should realize that there can be no absolutely dominating element in a system, and there is only an opportunity to take it as a point of logical speculations.⁷ But with such an assumption the choice of some elements as relatively dominating opens heuristic opportunities for understanding of positive and negative correlations in society's development.

⁶ So we can suggest the 'relay race' or the 'torch-relay' theory of historical process (see Grinin 2012; Grinin, Korotayev, and Tausch 2016; Bertram 1990).

⁷ Friedrich Engels tried to make these reservations, *e.g.*, with respect to reverse influence of superstructure on base (in particular, in his letters to K. Schmidt from August 5 and October 27, 1890 [Engels 1965 [1890]]) but this approach was not generally developed within the framework of historical materialism.

Driving Forces, Laws of Dialectics and Methodology

Historical materialism always paid particular attention to class struggle and revolutions. But we would like to focus on other driving forces of historical processes (conventionally speaking, some more profound and less visible on short time spans). First, as we demonstrated above, this results from interaction between staying in dialectical opposition elements of the system but which are realized indirectly and beyond people's will and often unnoticed by them or in an unclear manner. Thus, in particular, according to Marx, the correlation between productive forces and relations of production becomes violated and this gradually leads to change of the whole system and creates conditions for social revolution (Marx 1978 [1859]: 4). Second, these are even more abstract forces in the form of laws of dialectics. Marx and Engels applied its three (Hegelian) laws to materialistic conception of history. Of course, to fulfil this methodological operation to the end, it was necessary to reject determinism with respect laws and from the idea that consciousness more or less accurately reflects reality but not models it by means of logical categories and linguistic constructions. However, in general this was a productive approach allowing revealing endogenous forces in society. In particular, the law of passage of quantitative changes into qualitative changes at abstract level explained in what way the slow and unnoticeable changes, for example, in development of technologies could, if accumulated, lead to broken balance in a society and realization of the need to change social relations. The law of unity and conflict of opposites showed in what way the struggle between antagonistic classes could be considered as a driving force of a society; it could be also applied to the analysis of interrelation between base and superstructure, productive forces and relations of production.

2. Further Elaboration of Historical Materialism

Completing Historical Materialism

Until the end of the 19th century, historical materialism was a prime focus of the foremost Marxist theorists. In the last decades of the 19th century in connection with the emergence of legal mass social-democratic parties the issues of historical materialism became less important in comparison with issues of political struggle and theory of revolutions. Nevertheless, problems of historical materialism remained within the focus of prominent theorists of the second-generation Marxists – the sophisticated Second International (which was founded in 1889) thinkers (Blackledge 2006). In the 1890s, there were published a number of works including *On Historical Materialism* by Franz Mehring (1893), *To a Question of Monistic Understanding of History* by Georgiy Plekhanov (1895), and *Essays on the Materialistic Conception of History* by Antonio Labriola (1896). Nikolai Bukharin's *Theory of Historical Materialism* (1921) and the two-volume *Die materialistische Geschichtsauffassung*

by Karl Kautsky (1927) came out much later (besides, Bukharin belonged to a younger generation of Marxists). The task of these theorists was to present problems of historical materialism in a more or less systemic way, to clarify obscure and controversial points, to find solution to the problems that had not been resolved by Marx and Engels. In other words, these theorists' efforts were aimed at elaboration of historical materialism (Anderson 1976) but they failed at large, because, being custodians of Marxist 'orthodoxy' (Blackledge 2006) they failed to go beyond its restrictions which we spoke about earlier.

The subsequent generation of Marxists (Otto Bauer, Vladimir Lenin, Leo Trotsky, Rudolf Hilferding, Rosa Luxemburg and others) was not much concerned with building historical materialism although they definitely contributed to it. The issues of the nature of state, financial capital and imperialism, classes and nations are especially worth mentioning. The latter was especially urgent for Austrian Marxism and Russian social democracy.

The main issues that concerned this generation of Marxists were associated with party problems and interpretation of historical materialism within new realities but especially with revolutionary theory including proletarian dictatorship, organization of armed insurrection and building a new society after revolution. However, this is beyond our subject matter.

After the revolutionary wave and eventual defeat of revolutions in European countries in the 1920s the Western Marxists' attempts to develop and systematize historical materialism were abandoned. The above-mentioned work of 1927 by Karl Kautsky, the dominant intellectual of the Second International (Blackledge 2006) can be considered to be the last work in this context.⁸

Of course, in the USSR the attempts to develop and systematize historical materialism were made for a longer time. But here historical materialism was dogmatized and developed within the frames that were set by small and devoid of real dialectics works by Joseph Stalin, for example, his article 'Dialectical and Historical Materialism' published in 1938 in *Pravda* newspaper (Stalin 2013).

Western Marxism Prior to the 1960s

In Jean-Paul Sartre's opinion, from 1924 to 1968 'Marxism stopped' (in Anderson 1976). Perry Anderson notes that after 1920 Marxism started to develop more slowly than non-Marxist culture; moreover, during two decades after WWII the contribution of Western Marxism to creation of its own original

⁸ In our opinion, this is, perhaps, the best Marxist work about materialist conception of history since Kautsky managed to integrate ideas of some other researchers into Marxism and depart from the deadlock restrictions of classic Marxism, in particular with respect to depreciation of external factors in history (and with respect to conquering and formation of states), as well as succeeded to contribute to the solution of the problem of the role of a personality, *etc.* Unfortunately, this Kautsky's work is not famous enough and seldom referred to.

economic and political (and, let us add, historiosophic) conception as such in terms of fundamental works was next to none (*Ibid.*). Of course, it is an exaggeration; however, it is not an excessive one. This slowing development was connected, first, with decreasing relevance of revolutionary Marxism in the situation of attenuating revolutionary movements and gradually improving quality of life. Second, the Western theorists themselves more or less successfully integrated into capitalist society and got well-paid and honored professor positions. Third, this was a reaction to Soviet historical materialism. Due to these and other reasons the subject matter of Marxist studies changes and historical materialism becomes not major but marginal sphere of its research.

It is considered that between the 1920s and 1940s three Marxist theorists – Georg Lukács, Karl Korsch, and Antonio Gramsci – set the main directions for Western Marxism, which generally experienced a crisis while historical materialism went to the periphery of Marxists theorists' interests.⁹ Their main works are devoted to revision of orthodox Marxism and historical materialism as well as of the revolutionary practice in connection with defeats of revolutions and stabilization of capitalism. All of them were the leaders of their parties and participated in revolutionary actions (the first two of them also in revolutionary governments). That is why their ideas can be comprehended to the full only in the context of their revolutionary activities.¹⁰

In the interwar period the Marxist theorists, among which there were many professional revolutionaries, statesmen and workers' leaders, were to a large degree occupied with explaining the delay of revolution and comments on imperialism and also with the issues of economic crises.¹¹

⁹ During this period, the term 'Western Marxism' became widespread. The description 'Western Marxism' was first used pejoratively by the Comintern in a 1923–1924 polemic against Lukács and Karl Korsch (see Dabrowski and Merleau-Ponty 2012; for the discussion in the Comintern see Aronowitz 1990: 4–5). It is important that the historical contexts within which this term was employed were different among different researches (Aronowitz 1990: 5, 6; see, e.g., Merleau-Ponty 1970; Korsch 1979; Anderson 1976, 1983).

¹⁰ Among the major works one should mention *History and Class Consciousness* by Lukács (1972 [1923]), *Leading Principles of Marxism: A Restatement* by Karl Korsch (1937), and Gramsci's famous *The Prison Notebooks* (Gramsci 1975). The latter was first published only in 1948–1951 and their language is sometimes quite unclear because of the conditions they were written in, strong censorship and prison limits and also peculiarities of their author's personality. The difficulties with understanding of Gramsci's texts were one of the reasons why his legacy became the starting point for various lines within Marxism. His ideas appeared compliant with even such direction as political ecology. E.g., Geoff Mann (2009: 335) argued that political ecology should be Marxist, if by Marxist we mean Gramscian. In the 1970s Gramsci was so popular that there was even idea that the 1980s are likely to usher to a new phase of Marxism what may be called 'Gramscism' (Piccone 1976: 485).

¹¹ Among many works we would like to mention the book by Paul Sweezy *The Theory of Capitalist Development* (Sweezy 1968; about it see in Anderson 1976). About the situation with Marxism in the USA in the 1920–1950s see Aronowitz 1990: 4, 5.

As we said earlier, the Western Marxist theorists more or less successfully integrated into capitalist society. As a result, Marxist theory completely moves to universities and even Korsch and Lukács became professors¹² not to mention the younger generation of Marxist professors – Henri Lefebvre, Herbert Marcuse, Galvano Della Volpe, Theodor Adorno, Lucio Colletti, and Louis Althusser and others. Thus, a distinctive feature of the whole Western Marxist tradition after the 1930s and especially after WWII from Lukács to Althusser and from Korsch to Colletti was an overwhelming domination of professional philosophers (Anderson 1976; see also Adamson 1980: 186). That was a different situation in comparison with previous epochs when Marxists (although this made them a kind of sectarians) would treat university professors with some scorn. As a result, the language of the majority or even of all Western Marxists became too complicated for understanding and overloaded with specific terms, while the subject matter became too narrow.¹³ ‘Method as impotence, art as consolation, pessimism as quiescence’ – these are the characteristics of the Western after-war Marxism (Anderson 1976: 93). There was also observed a synthesis between Marxism and non-Marxist ideas (including Freudism) as in works by Adorno, Marcuse, Althusser, Sartre and many others. But the synthesis did not bring any significant effect unlike in the opposite case – when Marxist ideas were employed by a number of non-Marxist researchers (see the last Section of the present paper).

The Western Marxists' approach differed so much from traditional Marxism that not without reason Aron would call it ‘Marxismes imaginaires’ (Aron 1970) while some others, like Frederic Jameson (1996) denoted it as post-Marxism.¹⁴ Historical materialism in Western Marxism lost its relevance and hardly anyone would deal with it – mostly those were representatives of the Marxist old guard who were alive and continued to work in the period under study.¹⁵ But let us repeat that between the 1940s and 1960s the Western Marxists' contribution to creation of original economic, political, and historiosophic theory was negligible (Anderson 1976).

¹² Lukács was a Professor of the Budapest University.

¹³ There was observed a bias towards epistemology and actually unproductive methodologism. E. g., quite illustrative is the set of major works of Western Marxists presented by 1976; *The Destruction of Reason* by Lukács (1954), *Reason and Revolution* by Marcuse (1941), *Critique of Dialectical Reason* by J.-P. Sartre (1960), *Logic as a Positive Science* by Della Volpe (1950), *The Problem of Method* by J.-P. Sartre (1957), *Negative Dialectics* by Adorno (1966), *Reading Capital* by Althusser (1965).

¹⁴ Sebastiano Timpanaro (1974) pointed out that perhaps the sole characteristic common to all contemporary varieties of Western Marxism is, with very few exceptions, their attempt to defend themselves against the accusation of materialism.

¹⁵ E.g., Roman Rosdolsky or Ernest Mandel. Here one can mention the postmortem publication in 1968 of the work by Roman Rosdolsky ‘Marx's Preface to the “Critics of Political Economy” and its Relation to “Capital” and Ernest Mandel's “Late Capitalism”’.

A number of Marxists aspired to realize and adjust changes in society of their days into their perception. Of course, in such case they would cover topics connected with historical materialism. But since the development of industrial society proceeded in a way different from what classics of Marxism and their followers had predicted, these works were quite ambiguous. As an example one can point to Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947). On the one hand, they gave interesting and profound characteristics to new phenomena, including increasing totalitarianism caused by penetration of market relations into all spheres of society, subjugation/alienation of personality, the emergence of mass culture and cultural industry, *etc.* On the other hand, the cornerstone of historical materialism – growing productivity – now scares them and inspires pessimism, while the endless scientific-technical progress looks as a regress. However, let us point that rejection of progress and fear of technologies would spread in different schools in the 1960s – 1970s. The change of social structure of modern society, the blurring of working class and loss of its leading role were among the subjects of Marcuse's works (*e.g.*, in 'One-Dimensional Man' and 'Eros and Civilization'). Here comes quite a logical conclusion that in this sense Marxism becomes old-fashioned but the attempts to develop historical materialism on the basis of its merge with Freudism appeared unsatisfactory.

Interest to Historical Materialism

The interest to historical materialism and intellectual activity started to grow in the 1960s and early 1970s (Aronowitz 1990; Anderson 1983). And in the 1970s – early 1980s one may even speak about a rise of Marxism and return to the problematics of historical materialism. The changes in the topics and keynotes of Marxism occurred by the mid-1970s and were associated with the biggest post-war economic crisis in capitalist countries and political crisis in the United States, connected, in particular, with the Vietnam War. Contrary to this, the socialist world seemed stable and having promising future and the emerging Third World inspired hopes for further weakening of capitalism. Besides, Marxism became more accepted and respected in academic and intellectual community thus creating a necessary left wing although with a radical bias. Due to this and other reasons the center of Western Marxism shifted to the United States, Great Britain, and other countries, where Marxism used to be weakly spread; while in France and Italy Marxism faded and stagnated (Anderson 1983). On the American and British basis and in combination with modern theories there occurred a certain raise of Marxism and historical materialism which also gained growing popularity. This was also supported by the rising activity of different movements: antiwar, leftist, racial, youth, students, female, LGBT, *etc.* Marxism turned connected with these movements and supported

such protests while these movements in the USA could draw up Marxism for the arguments and slogans to criticize capitalist society.¹⁶

The number of works published in the late 1970s and early 1980s and devoted to Marxism, including Marxist philosophy of history, was extraordinarily large (Anderson 1983; see also Adamson 1980: 186). Moreover, they were published in the most prestigious publishing houses (since their authors worked at Cambridge, Oxford and other Universities). Among these books, one should mention *Marx's Theory of History* by William Shaw (1978), the book with the same title by Melvin Rader (1979), and D. Ross Gandy's book *Marx and History: From Primitive Society to the Communist Future* (1979). The books were written both by supporters of Marxism and by its renegades (like, e.g., Kolakowski 1978).

There came out new works returning to former Marxism including a number of economic works on modern capitalism (Braverman 1974; Aglietta 1979). Among economic works on modern capitalism, particularly noteworthy is Ernest Mandel's *Long Waves in Capitalist Development* (1978) in which the author combined historical materialism and Marxist political economy with the theory of long waves (or cycles) lasting for 50–60 years (the theory created by Nikolai Kondratieff in the 1920s and later elaborated in a number of works including Joseph Schumpeter [1939]). This was an interesting and generally prospective vector of development of Marxist theory through its merge with another, non-Marxist one (yet, one can hardly deny that Marxism produces a certain impact on Nikolai Kondratieff's theory). Mandel connected the alternation of upswing and downswing phases of long waves with oscillations of profit ratios; but it is also important that he attracted attention to technological revolutions and pointed to their important role, emphasizing that he did it following Marx (Mandell 1995).

In the late 1970s there appeared the so-called analytical Marxism aiming at reconstructing Marxist theory on the basis of modern generally accepted scientific methods. In this respect, we would like to mention Gerald Cohen's *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence* (Cohen 2004 [1978]). In his book Cohen defended Marx from leading critics. But it is even more important that the author tried to return the discussion to the major aspect of historical materialism – the role of productive forces and their interaction (correlation) with relations of production and in general with a superstructure (*Ibid.*). Cohen tried to update the theory of productive forces, yet, in our opinion, he did not quite succeed.¹⁷

¹⁶ Starting from the 1970s this link was strengthening and expanding, at that as Paul Gottfried (1990: 21) correctly noted, there occurred Americanization on the European left.

¹⁷ Jürgen Habermas (1975) tried to analyze the merits and limitations of historical materialism for theoretical explanation of social evolution but in our opinion it is not productive.

3. Marxist Historiography

About the Methodology of Marxist Historiography

Within Marxist approach historical materialism has always been considered as an inherently methodological approach to historical research, since the latter aims at searching for specific variations of general assertions (about classes, origin of state, correlation between base and superstructure, *etc.*) in a particular society at a certain period. As a result, history became a servant for philosophy. Yet, one should mention that for those societies that best fit the models described by historical materialism, the categories of the latter, along with its principles and methods, correlated rather well with historical data and had a valuable analytical impact. However, with respect to epochs, societies, and issues beyond the domain of historical materialism (since it was elaborated for the analysis of capitalist and pre-capitalist societies in Western Europe), for example Eastern or African societies, its application turned unproductive, and even harmful for historical research. This often led to false conclusions, while dominating dogmas remained inconsistent with reality.

Among the merits of historical materialism as a methodology not only of historiography but also of historical sociology one may point out the following ones.

First, *historism*, which can be applied to many cases as a historical-genetic method of a search for origin and beginnings. It was not discovered by Marxism but was carried by the latter to apogee.

Second, the search for materialist grounds to explain events. Within historical materialism it far from always was performed correctly since the above described drawbacks would interfere, but nevertheless, it could give good results. In particular, the search for class interest, the analysis of changes in material life and technological changes, the study of economic processes and other could give a key to a more profound comprehension of things. A good example is the study of English economic crises performed by Mikhail Tugan-Baranovsky (1954). In this respect Marxist historiography considerably surpassed other schools of thought.

Third, consideration of history as a process with certain logic. The historical sequence of events was often sacrificed for the sake of logical interpretations, to be exact of the dogmatic ideas. But with a correct approach the method can give a result if one treats the logical not as an unchangeable essence but as a methodological approach of a specific kind allowing abstracting from some peculiarities.

Fourth, the consideration of contradictions of different levels as driving forces of development (and the general search for driving forces and sources of development).

Marxist Historiography between the 1920s and 1960s

Prior to the October Revolution in Russia Marxist historiography was a minor dimension of Marxism and historical materialism. Between the 1920s and 1960s, however, the emerging parties, along with creation of communist archives, promoted the development of historiography. The range of problems and epochs studied by Marxist historians expanded beyond their initial concentration on nodal epochs of national histories, for which they worked out Marxist conception. Marxist scholars usually could not take part in academic societies and teach in universities due to direct or indirect bans, and the publication of their studies was also effortful. Nevertheless, the systemic and academic character of historiography is quite obvious; and there have been even created specialized institutions. For example, the American Institute for Marxist Studies headed by Herbert Aptheker, a historian who made a considerable contribution to systematization of material on the African-American people's history and movements. By the 1930s – the 1940s, several national schools of Marxist historians had been formed. The subject matter of their works remains mostly the same and focuses on revolutions, workers' or other movements, problems of exploitation or struggle of working people. First, Marxist historians paid attention to the node epochs of their native countries. For example, Italian Marxists (Giuseppe Berti, Franco Della Peruta and others) paid much attention to the history of the Risorgimento; the American historians (James S. Allen, Jack Hardy, William Z. Foster, *etc.*) were developing problems associated with capitalist development and civil war in the USA, and Philip Foner and William Pimeroy – with American foreign policy. Let us separately mention the work by the English historian Sam Lilley (1966 [1948]) on the history of technologies and machines and technological progress, this is the problem of utmost importance for historical materialism though it is insufficiently studied. Second, the Marxist historians in different countries started to work on the Marxist conception of national histories (Foster and Aptheker on the US history; Arthur Leslie Morton on the British history; Stanley Bréhaut Ryerson on Canadian history; Giorgio Candeloro on history of Italy). Third, there appeared multi-volume studies of different problems. Thus, Philip S. Foner wrote a multi-volume *History of the Labor Movement in the United States* (published from 1947 to 1980).

To conclude this section, we would like to mention some important, even key ideas of Georg Lukács with respect to historical materialism as a historical methodology. In his *History and Class Consciousness* Lukács (1972 [1923]) points out that historical materialism in its current state cannot be applied to the studies of the world history without its creative elaboration. He emphasized that in academic terms historical materialism meant but a little more than a program and a guidelines how to write history. In particular, Lukács summing up the already existing practice of Marxist and other historiography made an important conclusion that historical materialism cannot be applied to pre-capitalist

social formations in the same way it is applied to capitalist development. He emphasized that in this case a more complicated and thorough analysis is needed.

Lukács considered it as an important task to make historical materialism a true methodology of history and of particular historical studies. In particular, he wrote that at that period, that is, in the 1920s, Marxists had the task to write actually the whole history from the very beginning, to highlight, organize and evaluate the events of the past in terms of historical materialism. Unfortunately, in Western Marxism this task has been solved only to a small extent and if it has been solved within Soviet historiography (see below), it is still far from what was needed.

Thus, despite certain progress of Marxist historiography in the period under study in this section and its rise in the 1970s, one can hardly ignore the fact that this was mostly the success of qualitative and professional growth while there occurred no radical development of historical materialist ideology with respect both to the theory and interpretation of history and historiography in general.

The Rise of Marxist Historiography

The rise of Western Marxist historiography started from the 1970s, and it developed most effectively in Great Britain and the United States. Some signs of the starting rise (especially in Britain) were observed already in the 1950s–1960s. According to Anderson, in Great Britain the Marxist historians constituted a constellation of brilliant scholars who transformed many conventional interpretations of the English and European past (Anderson 1983).¹⁸ Here one can mention Christopher Hill, Eric Hobsbawm, Edward Thompson, Rodney Hilton, *etc.* But, despite the profound and considerably increasing systemic character and coherence of research, the agenda remained generally reduced to the traditional Marxist agenda. Some of them were published only in the 1960s and became famous in the 1970s and later, they were at the origin of the rise of Marxist historiography. Many researchers got professor positions which supported the work of historians, popularization, and creation of scientific schools. As a result, the American and British historiography unexpectedly became the vanguard of Marxist historiography in the world.

Although the depth, systemic character and relevance of studies considerably increased, their subject matter still remained narrow to a large extent, and

¹⁸ In Perry Anderson's opinion, it was famous Marxist economist Maurice Herbert Dobb who stood at the origin of the rise, by the way he was among those few who had a teacher position in one of the American or British universities in pre-war time. Although he was an economist, his most famous historical work was *Studies in the Development of Capitalism* (Dobb 1946) in which he touched on the transition of feudalism to capitalism in Western Europe with special emphasis on the emerging class of wage earners devoid of property.

mainly continued to follow the traditional frames of Marxist problematics.¹⁹ And despite the general success of Marxist historiography, such limited character of subjects led to the situation where in many respects it simply failed to compete with non-Marxist historiographies. Perry Anderson (1974b) expressed this carefully but quite clear: there are areas of historiography where Marxist studies dominate but there are even more areas where non-Marxist researchers surpass Marxists in the number and quantity of studies and even more areas where Marxist researches are simply absent.

It is also worth noting Perry Anderson's works. Two of them are devoted to history and analysis of Western Marxism (Anderson 1976, 1983) and provide a good idea of the latter, even for an unsophisticated reader. His earlier work applies the theory of historical materialism to complex historical issues (*Idem* 1974b). However, the author failed to make significant progress towards a more adequate application of historical materialism to the issues he investigated. In particular, he pays almost no attention to the topic which we consider to be of utmost importance in historical materialism – the levels of development of productive forces and their correlation with social relations in respect of the historical materialist periodization and conception (see also Blackledge 2006: ch. 4).²⁰ However, his attempts by themselves and the idea that different historical schools should compete with each other were of great importance.

After the 1980s and especially in the 1990s, the rise of Marxist historiography was followed by modest progress and then crisis (Hobsbawm 2011: 385) leading some to pessimism, some to a return to Marxist origins, and some – because of the unsuccessful attempts to reform historical materialism – to its rejection (for the analysis of modernism see Iggers 2012).

4. Crisis in Western Marxism

The rise of Marxism and Marxist historiography in the 1970s was followed by a crisis amplified by the disintegration of the socialist system in the 1990s (see Aronson 1985; Aronowitz 1990; Wood 2007). Eric Hobsbawm (2011: 385) believed that the decline of Marxism had started even earlier – from 1983, that is,

¹⁹ Of course, there were good exceptions here, *e. g.*, 'Lineages of the Absolutist State' (Anderson 1974a) since the concept of an absolutist state was poorly developed in Marxism.

²⁰ With respect to Marxist periodization it makes sense to mention that there were continuous debates in Soviet and Western historiography around this subject. The most interesting were the debates on the difficulties in application of the five-stage periodization to the real course of history and real events. Another notable discussion was held on the so-called Asiatic mode of production (the category Marx used in a number of works [Ilyushechkin 1986, 1990; Nikiforov 1977; Shaw 1978]). Besides, these ideas were used by Karl Wittfogel (a communist before his emigration to the USA) who employed Marxian idea about the Asian mode of production to criticize Stalin regime as a modern despotism similar in type with despotism of the pre-capitalist periods (Wittfogel 1957).

after the actual end of the crisis epoch of the 1970s – early 1980s and lasted for about a quarter of a century until the start of the recent crisis of 2008. But this process was accelerated by the collapse of the socialist system. And respectively there is observed certain dismay and some decline of Marxism.²¹ Many intellectuals, who had previously cast themselves as Marxists, departed from it or even became anti-Marxists. Some still inessential revival of Marxism occurred at the end of the 20th century (Hobsbawm 2011: 385) and after the world crisis of 2008 (*e.g.*, Jeffries 2012), which proves that Marxism rises during the anti-phase of economic recovery. Many researchers still argue that even today despite the obvious limits of Marxian conceptions the depth of understanding provides a powerful tool of critical historical analysis (see, *e.g.*, the book edited by Chris Wickham [2007]. Ellen Wood (2007) argues that, with the collapse of Communism, the theoretical project of Marxism and its critique of capitalism are more timely and important than ever (see also Negri 1996, 2011). Some saw the outcome from crisis (as it happened many times in the history of Marxist thought) in pessimism, others – in the appeal to the roots of Marxism, third – in the attempts to reform historical materialism which cannot succeed and some insisted on a simple rejection of historical materialism (for the analysis of new lines see Iggers 2010, 2012; see also below). At present, Marxism persists, and books and articles are published in rather large numbers (see, *e.g.*, Eagleton 2011; Hobsbawm 2011; Furner 2011; Negri 2011; Woods and Grant 2015; Rockmore 2016) although this number, especially on the issues of historical materialism, becomes smaller.²² Marxism is destined to survive (Williams 2018). The vitality of Marxism consists in the fact that, as Jameson (1996) correctly notes, it is actually the discipline about capitalism and it is aimed at description of capitalism, so its epistemological deference consists in its unprecedented ability to describe historical novelties of capitalism while the basic structural contradictions of capitalism give political and forecasting purpose to Marxism hardly separable from its analytical purpose. That is why whatever the vicissitudes the post-modern capitalism inevitably brings post-modern Marxism to life.

That is why every new crisis (and in connection with difficulties experienced by the USA and Europe and the rise of new states – India, China and others – crises in recent years became almost a norm) will support Marxism and historical materialism. Now we again face a deep crisis which capitalism has never experienced. And given the challenges faced by the United States and

²¹ About this see, *e.g.*, Jameson 1996; Hobsbawm 2011: 386; Iggers 2012; Wood 2007. Even Perry Anderson considered that the starting point for realistically biased of the left at that moment is to univocally admit the historical defeat (Anderson 2000).

²² However, the name of historical materialism is met in titles quite often. *E.g.*, here are just some of the articles published in 2020 (Tomlins 2020; de León and Rockhill 2020; Noonan 2020).

Europe, new crises will surely continue to break out. However, historical materialism is unlikely to evolve since it hardly goes beyond the limits defined by dogmatic theory. It can remain relevant in scientific, but not in political, terms (see below).

5. What is the Genuine Heritage of Historical Materialism?

As Jameson fairly notes, whatever the historical ups and downs of Marxism, post-modern capitalism will inevitably revive post-modern Marxism (Jameson 1996). Yet, the latter will remain marginal anyway. At that, historical materialism should reduce its political claims and strengthen theoretical foundations. In particular, Anderson (1983) appealed (contrary to what others would suggest) to make the main part of Marxism not the analysis of the present but of the past, that is to drastically strengthen historical materialism. However, let us note once again that a real development of the post prospective in historical materialism may occur only with a radical moving beyond the frames of historical materialism conception. The rejection of conception with preservation of some part of methodology and problematics – that is the prospect for revival of historical materialism.

That is why, in our opinion, the impact of historical materialism will show up not in the frames of the pure Marxist movement but in a wider and undefined intellectual environment which is only partially connected with Marxism. This movement, accompanying historical materialism, comprises several currents.

In the first place, this is a broad leftist culture associated with Marxism and historical materialism. The second movement can be denoted as *post-Marxism* in the broadest sense. In 1973 Daniel Bell wrote that, ‘We have all become “post-Marxists”’, meaning that, ‘yet the source of our interest in social change is necessarily Marx’. And anyone who wants to discuss the developmental prospects of the capitalist industrial society must proceed from Marx's predictions (Bell 1973: 55, 56). He also repeated this 25 years later (see his preface to the Russian edition of the *Coming of Industrial Society* [Bell 1999]). However, half a century after these Bell's words the problems of development of capitalist society must be considered in many respects beyond Marx's and Engels's predictions since the society itself surpassed long ago the limits of industrial society while the socialist experiment has failed. But in this situation it is easy to recall that Marx and Engels also set a certain logics in the analysis of historical process which has been and remains attractive with its methodology, approaches and problematics.

One should mention the theorists who somehow apply methodology, fundamental categories and valuable approaches of historical materialisms but overcame its dogmatism and even diverged from orthodox system in order to

create new concepts. We denote this approach not as post-Marxism, but a *post-historical materialism*. The main point is not an anti-capitalist protest, but a modern materialistic perception of history, recognizing the fundamental impact of material factors. In fact, with the post-historical materialists one can include the so-called post-industrialists, including Bell, Toffler, Touraine, *etc.* who considered technological development as the basis for periodization and as driving forces of history promoting predicted future changes (Bell 1973; Toffler 1980).²³ Historical materialism has set several important tasks but given no valid solution. Among them one may distinguish the necessity to show how one can explain the change of societal forms through the change in the qualitative levels of development of productive forces. And the importance of this task (which may be compared with the attempts to prove Euclid's fifth postulate) requires a new interpretation of historical process which opens new research horizons (see, *e.g.*, Grinin 2007; Grinin and Grinin 2016).

The third and, perhaps, most influential school emerged in the late 19th century, and it was formed by the scholars who positively or negatively employ historical materialism (that became more than a field of purely academic knowledge, with little practical importance). One may conventionally distinguish several groups within it. First, these are scholars who do not criticize Marxism but rather partially employ it in new concepts. The vivid example here is Nikolai Kondratieff, who used Marx's ideas about basic means of production and their change in the theory of long cycles (see above and also about Ernest Mandel). Secondly, these are scholars who are influenced to some extent by Marxism or even recognize their 'intellectual dependence on Marxism' (Rainko 1979: 26). Although these researchers do not directly rely on historical materialism and, on the contrary, often criticize it vigorously, still one can trace its influence in their works. Moreover, their theories to some extent oppose Marxism in the search for a positive solution of the problems under study. Among these researchers one can mention Thorstein Veblen, Max Weber, Joseph Schumpeter, Gordon Child, Karl Mannheim, Pitirim Sorokin, Ralf Dahrendorf, Jean Fourastié, Raymond Aron, Fernand Braudel, Walt Whitman Rostow, John Kenneth Galbraith, and many others (Aronovitz 1990: 2).²⁴ There are a number

²³ We identify ourselves to the post-historical materialists who aspire to study at the global scale the role of productive forces and their change, the role of technological revolutions and their impact on the change of the whole structure of societies of large epoch, including future ones (see, *e.g.*, Grinin 2006, 2007; Grinin and Grinin 2016; Grinin and Korotayev 2015; Grinin, Korotayev, and Tausch 2016).

²⁴ *E.g.*, Robert Lynd, Robert Brady and C. Wright Mills were not Marxists during most of their academic lives, but the stamp of Marxist modes of social inquiry is indelible on their writing. Similarly, historians such as Edward Kirkland, Charles Beard and others who followed their so-called economic interpretation of American history were denounced for that orientation by Marxists who vehemently asserted that their theoretical system was not 'economic' but a materialistic interpretation of history.

of researches in theory of revolution which have experienced influence of historical materialism (e.g., Theda Skocpol directly recognized it in the Preface in her *States and Social Revolutions* [Skocpol 1979]).

Some of them, like Aron or Schumpeter, devoted a number of their works to direct analysis of Marxism or socialism. The third sub-group is formed by often aggressive opponents aiming at disproving Marxism and in many respects their works are premised as anti-Marxism. Among them there are quite prominent figures (like, e.g., Karl Popper or Friedrich Hayek). There still appear works whose authors, like Mikhail Mann, want to refute Marx (Mann 1986; see also Aronowitz 1990; for the critics of Mann see Wickham 2007). The application of historical materialism methodology in the 1960s – the 1990s for criticizing socialism, for example its social structure, contradictions, *etc.* was observed among some dissidents and critics of socialism in socialist countries (see, e.g., Voslensky 1991; see also Nowak 2009).

Thus, historical materialism continues to impact social science, acting as a sharpening stone to help a considerable number of outstanding researchers refine their theoretical bases and criticism. Ironically, at times, these researchers have even begun to work in a certain field determined by Marxism in order to prove that theoretical bases of historical materialism are wrong or partially correct. Marxism and historical materialism, however, remain influential only if combined with other theories. In our opinion, the ideas of historical materialism and Marxism in general can be efficiently applied in the development of theory of social evolution (see, e.g., Bertram 1990; Grinin and Korotayev 2016; Grinin 2018). A very good example here is the world-system theory, in particular its application to analysis of historical periods, which is performed not at the level of individual societies, but at the level of group of societies, regions, and larger systems of societies. It helps explain the processes and phenomena that cannot be comprehended in any other framework; thus, breaking the deadlock of the civilizational approach and diffusionist restrictions.

The world-system theory, although today it passes through difficult times, remains among those theories showing that to overcome the drawbacks of historical materialism by using its merits may give a synergetic effect. We have already spoken above that historical materialism made no distinction between development within individual society and within large suprasocietal systems up to the whole humanity. The world-system theory has been developed by left-biased American sociologists under the influence of national-liberation movement in the Third World and emerging revolutionary movement in capitalist countries and it employed the ideas and terminology of Marxism especially in Lenin's interpretation. In particular, these were the idea of imperialism which divides the world among imperialist powers and exploits the retarded societies and the idea of large corporations spreading their tentacles throughout the world. Thus, having expanded the theory of exploitation to the suprasocietal

level this theory created the conception of the World-System exchange and World-System exploitation and respectively presented the world as a system with a center (core) and periphery (and also semi-periphery). The core formed by the most developed countries exploits peripheral countries. At that, the World-System center shifts from time to time from one leading state to another. This idea was developed in the theory of the so-called cycles of political hegemony which also predict the weakening of the USA (see, *e.g.*, Arrighi 1994, 2007; Thompson 1988; Modelski and Thompson 1996). The theory appeared rather effective for the analysis of modern capitalism and explanation of many phenomena so it is constantly used both by the Marxists and non-Marxists (see, *e.g.*, Grinin, Korotayev, and Tausch 2016). But still as a conception explaining current processes it faces certain restrictions and loses its merits. But in terms of historical methodology it is important that the founders of this theory were historical sociologists so they started to go deeper into the history and the period when the World-System emerged. And this allowed creating a specific methodology for the studies of historical processes not at the level of individual society but at the level of a group of societies, regions and the whole World-System. This helped to explain previously unexplained processes and phenomena and reveal synchronous processes (*e.g.*, between nomadic and sedentary societies) and exchange of achievements and information as well as the diffusion of innovations and societies' interaction (Frank and Gills 1993; Chase-Dunn and Hall 1997; Chase-Dunn and Manning 2002; Chase-Dunn *et al.* 2010).

Conclusion

Georg Lukács (1972 [1923]) argued that Marxism can be expanded and reinforced as a proper method of study but all attempts to 'improve' it may end in nothing else but its banal transformation into eclectics. In terms of integrity of Marxism, he was right. In terms of survival and maintaining influence, though, he was wrong. In our opinion, Marxism will be rather relevant not as a unified theory but so to say 'in parts', for example, if some of its achievements in methodology, ontology and terminology will be employed with proper interpretation and through its major subjects-ideologems (capitalism, classes, exploitation, alienation). Thus, Marxism and historical materialism can remain influential only in combination with other theories.

In any case the least required for a new rise of historical materialism from its supporters is, in Anderson's opinion (1983), to subject Marxism and historical materialism to a strict revision and reject all dogmas. But he is right arguing that this will demand larger courage which has been absent so far.

Finally, one may conclude that to work strictly within the frames of properly historical materialism today means to condemn oneself to scholastic or feeble imitation. But historical materialism, in its historical and explanatory im-

pact, can affect social science mainly in an indirect way through a creative acquiring and interpretation of its method, approaches, and partially of its categories and discourse. Thus, this will impact through fusing in different directions.

Thus, today the destiny of historical materialism is determined by a paradox: its value increases as it merges with other theories. Since it has become part of a common intellectual heritage, we can speak about a figurative genetic drift of historical materialism, which still remains a valid theory. In other words, historical materialism, if applied with creativity, still remains an intellectual reserve.

References

- Adamson W. L. 1980.** Review of Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence by G. A. Cohen; Rader, *Marx's Interpretation*; and Marx's Theory of History by William H. Shaw. *History and Theory* 19(2).
- Aglietta M. 1979.** *Theory of Capitalist Regulation: The US Experience*. London.
- Anderson P. 1974a.** *Lineages of the Absolutist State*. London: New Left Books.
- Anderson P. 1974b.** *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism*. London: New Left Books.
- Anderson P. 1976.** *Considerations on Western Marxism*. London: Verso.
- Anderson P. 1983.** *In the Tracks of Historical Materialism*. London: Verso.
- Anderson P. 2000.** Editorial. Renewals. *New Left Review*, January, February: 13–15.
- Aron R. 1968.** *La Révolution introuvable: Réflexions sur les événements de Mai*. Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard.
- Aron R. 1970.** Equivoque et inépuisable. UNESCO Conference, May 1968, on the 150th anniversary of Marx's birth. *Marxismes imaginaires: D'une sainte famille à l'autre* / Ed. by A. Raymond, pp. 207–307. Paris: Gallimard.
- Aronowitz S. 1990.** *The Crisis in Historical Materialism: Class, Politics and Culture in Marxist Theory*. London: Houndmills.
- Aronson R. 1985.** Historical Materialism, Answer to Marxism's Crisis. *New Left Review* 152: 74–94.
- Arrighi G. 1994.** *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power, and the Origins of Our Times*. London.
- Arrighi G. 2007.** *Adam Smith in Beijing: Lineages of the Twenty-First Century*. London: Verso.
- Bell D. 1973.** *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society*. New York: Basic Books.
- Bell D. 1999.** *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society*. Moscow: AST. In Russian (Белл Д. Грядущее постиндустриальное общество: опыт социального прогнозирования. Москва: АСТ).
- Bertram Ch. 1990.** International Competition in Historical Materialism. *New Left Review* 183: 126–128.
- Blackledge P. 2006.** *Reflections on the Marxist Theory of History*. Manchester – New York: Manchester University Press.

- Braudel F. 1993.** *Dynamics of Capitalism*. Smolensk: Poligramma. In Russian (Бродель Ф. Динамика капитализма. Смоленск: Полиграмма).
- Braverman H. 1974.** *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century*. 25th anniversary. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Burawoy M. 2020.** A Tale of Two Marxisms. *New Left Review* 121: 67–98.
- Chase-Dunn Ch. et al. 2010.** Cycles of Rise and Fall, Upsweeps and Collapses: Changes in the Scale of Settlements and Politics since the Bronze Age. *History & Mathematics: Processes and Models of Global Dynamics* / Ed. by L. E. Grinin, P. Herrmann, A. V. Korotayev, and A. Tausch, pp. 64–91. Volgograd: Uchitel.
- Chase-Dunn Ch., and Hall Th. D. 1997.** *Rise and Demise: Comparing World-Systems*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Chase-Dunn Ch., and Manning S. 2002.** City Systems and World-Systems. *Cross-Cultural Research* 36(4): 379–398.
- Cohen G. A. 2004 [1978].** *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Dabrowski T., and Merleau-Ponty M. 2012.** Lukács, and Western Marxism. *Telosscope*. Tuesday, April 3. URL: <http://www.telospress.com/merleau-ponty-lukacs-and-western-marxism/>.
- Dobb M. 1946.** *Studies in the Development of Capitalism*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Eagleton T. 2011.** *Why Marx Was Right*. New Haven – London: Yale University Press.
- Engels F. 1965 [1890].** To Conrad Schmidt in Berlin in London, August 5. To Conrad Schmidt in Berlin. London, October 27. *Collected Works*. 2nd ed. Vol. 37 / Ed. by K. Marx, and F. Engels, pp. 369–372, 414–422. Moscow: Gos. izd-vo polit. literatury.
- Frank A. G., and Gills B. K. (Eds.) 1993.** *The World System: Five Hundred Years of Five Thousand?* London – Routledge.
- Furner J. 2011.** Marx's Sketch of Communist Society in 'The German Ideology' and the Problems of Occupational Confinement and Occupational Identity. *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 37(2): 189–215.
- Gandy D. R. 1979.** *Marx and History: From Primitive Society to the Communist Future*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Gottfried P. 1990.** *The Strange Death of Marxism. The European Left in the New Millennium*. Columbia – London: University of Missouri Press.
- Gramsci A. 1975.** *Quaderni del carcere. A cura di V. Gerratana*. Torino.
- Grinin L. 2006.** *Productive Forces and Historical Process*. 3rd ed. Moscow: КомКнига. In Russian (Гринин Л. Е. Производительные силы и исторический процесс. Москва: КомКнига).
- Grinin L. 2007.** Production Revolutions and Periodization of History: A Comparative and Theoretic-Mathematical Approach. *Social Evolution & History* 6(2): 75–120.
- Grinin L. 2009.** The Pathways of Politogenesis and Models of the Early State Formation. *Social Evolution & History* 8(1): 92–132.
- Grinin L. 2010.** The Role of the Individual in History: A Reconsideration. *Social Evolution and History* 9(2): 95–136.

- Grinin L. 2012.** *Macrohistory and Globalization*. Volgograd: Uchitel.
- Grinin L. 2018.** Revolutions and Historical Process. *Journal of Globalization Studies* 9(2): 126–141.
- Grinin L., and Grinin A. 2016.** *The Cybernetic Revolution and the Forthcoming Epoch of Self-Regulating Systems*. Moscow: Moscow branch of 'Uchitel' Publishing House.
- Grinin L., and Korotayev A. 2015.** *Great Divergence and Great Convergence. A Global Perspective*. Springer: New York.
- Grinin L., Korotayev A., and Tausch A. 2016.** *Economic Cycles, Crises, and the Global Periphery*. New York: Springer International Publishing, Heidelberg.
- Grinin L., Markov A., and Korotayev A. 2009.** Aromorphoses in Biological and Social Evolution: Some General Rules for Biological and Social Forms of Macroevolution. *Social Evolution and History* 8(2): 6–50.
- Habermas J. 1975.** Towards a Reconstruction of Historical Materialism. *Theory and Society* 2(3): 287–300.
- Hobsbawm E. 2011.** *How to Change the World: Reflections on Marx and Marxism*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Iggers G. 2010.** Review on Chris Wickham, ed., *Marxist History-writing for the Twenty-first Century* (Oxford, 2007). *American Historical Review* 115: 186–188.
- Iggers G. 2012.** The Marxist Tradition of Historical Writing in the West: A Retrospect from the Beginning of the Twenty-First Century. *Storia Della Storiografia* 62: 63–78.
- Ilyushechkin V. P. 1986.** *The Class-Estate society in the History of China (A Systemic and Structural Analysis)*. Moscow: Nauka. In Russian (Илюшечкин В. П. Сословно-классовое общество в истории Китая (опыт системно-структурного анализа). М.: Наука).
- Ilyushechkin V. P. 1990.** *Exploitation and Property in Class-Estate Societies*. Moscow: Nauka. In Russian (Илюшечкин В. П. Эксплуатация и собственность в сословно-классовых обществах. М.: Наука).
- Ilyushechkin V. P. 1996.** *The Theory of Stage Development of Society: History and Problems*. Moscow: Vostochnaya literatura. In Russian (Илюшечкин В. П. Теория стадийного развития общества: История и проблемы. М.: Восточная литература).
- Jameson F. 1996.** Actually Existing Marxism. *Marxism beyond Marxism* / Ed. by C. Casarino, R. E. Karl, and S. S. Makdisi, pp. 14–54. New York: Routledge.
- Jeffries S. 2012.** Why Marxism is on the Rise Again. *The Guardian*. 4 July. URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/jul/04/the-return-of-marxism>.
- Kolakowski L. 1978.** *Main Currents of Marxism*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Korsch K. 1923.** Marxism and Philosophy. *Skepsis*. URL: https://skepsis.net/library/id_672.html. In Russian (Корш К. Марксизм и философия. Скенсис).
- Korsch K. 1937.** Leading Principles of Marxism: A Restatement. *Marxist Quarterly*. URL: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/korsch/1937/restatement.htm>.
- Korsch K. 1979.** *A Study in Western Marxism*. 1st ed. Palgrave Macmillan.

- Labriola A. 2005.** *Essays on the Materialistic Conception of History*. New York: Cosimo Classics.
- Lenin V. I. 1977.** The Three Sources and Three Component Parts of Marxism. *Collected Works* Vol. 19, pp. 21–28. Moscow: Progress Publishers.
- Lilley S. 1966 [1948].** *Men, Machines and History*. New York: International Publishers.
- Lukács G. 1972 [1923].** *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Mandel E. 1995.** *Long Waves of Capitalist Development: A Marxist Interpretation: Based on Marshall Lectures Given at the University of Cambridge*. 2nd ed. London – New York: Verso.
- Mann G. 2009.** Should Political Ecology be Marxist? A Case for Gramsci's Historical Materialism. *Geoforum* 40(3): 335–344.
- Mann M. 1986.** *The Sources of Social Power*. Vol. 1. *A History of Power from the Beginning to A.D. 1760*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Marx K. 1978 [1859].** Preface to a Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy. *The Marx-Engels Reader* / Ed. by R. C. Tucker. New York: Norton.
- Marx K. 1993 [1867].** *Capital*. Vol. I–II. Transl. by D. Fernbach. Harmondsworth: Penguin Group.
- Marx K. 1976 [1847].** The Poverty of Philosophy. *Collected Works* / Ed. by K. Marx, and F. Engels, Vol. 6, pp. 105–212. New York: International Publishers.
- Marx K., and Engels F. 1976 [1846].** The German Ideology. *Collected Works* / Ed. by K. Marx, and F. Engels, Vol. 5. New York: International Publishers.
- Marx K., and Engels F. 1976 [1848].** The Communist Manifesto. *Collected Works* / Ed. by K. Marx, and F. Engels, Vol. 6. New York: International Publishers.
- Merleau-Ponty M. 1970.** Western Marxism. *Telos* 6: 140–161.
- Modelski G., and Thompson W. R. 1996.** *Leading Sectors and World Politics: The Coevolution of Global Politics and Economics*. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press.
- Negri A. 1996.** Twenty Theses on Marx: Interpretation of the Class Situation Today. *Marxism Beyond Marxism* / Ed. by S. Makdisi, C. Casarino, and R. Karl, pp. 149–180. New York: Routledge.
- Negri A. 2011.** Is It Possible to Be Communist Without Marx? *Critical Horizons* 12(1): 5–14.
- Nikiforov V. N. 1977.** *The Orient and World History*. Moscow: Nauka. In Russian (Никифоров В. Н. *Восток и всемирная история*. М.: Наука).
- Noonan J. 2020.** Historical Materialism as Mediation between the Physical and the Meaningful. *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 47(9): 1043–1059.
- Nowak L. 2009.** Class and Individual in the Historical Process. *Idealization XIII: Modeling in History* / Ed. by K. Brzezechynsky, pp. 63–84. Amsterdam – New York, NY: Rodopi.
- Piccone P. 1976.** Gramsci's Marxism: Beyond Lenin and Togliatti. *Theory and Society* 3(4): 485–512.

- de León J. P., and Rockhill G. 2020.** Towards a Compositional Model of Ideology: Materialism, Aesthetics, and Cultural Revolution. *Philosophy Today* 64(1): 95–116.
- Popper K. 1957.** *The Poverty of Historicism*. London: Routledge.
- Popov-Lensky I. L. 1924.** *Antoine Barnave and Materialistic Conception of History. Characteristics of Historical-Philosophical Ideas in the 18th Century*. Moscow: Krasnaya nov. In Russian (Попов-Ленский И. Л. Антуан Барнав и материалистическое понимание истории. К характеристике историко-философских идей в XVIII веке. М. – Л.: Красная новь).
- Rader M. 1979.** *Marx's Theory of History*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Rainko S. 1979.** *Marxism and Its Opponents*. Moscow: Progress. In Russian (Раинко С. Марксизм и его критики. М.: Прогресс).
- Rockmore T. 2016.** Piketty, Marxian Political Economy and the Law of the Falling Rate of Profit. *Voprosy Filosofii* 6: 29–37. In Russian (Рокмор Т. Пикетти, марксистская политическая экономия и закон тенденции нормы прибыли к понижению. Вопросы философии 6: 29–37).
- Schumpeter J. A. 1939.** *Business Cycles*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.
- Shaw W. H. 1978.** *Marx's Theory of History*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Skocpol T. 1979.** *States and Social Revolutions*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Stalin J. 2013.** *Dialectical and Historical Materialism*. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform.
- Sweezy P. 1968.** *The Theory of Capitalist Development. Principles of Marxian Political Economy*. 2nd ed. New York.
- Thompson W. R. 1988.** *On Global War: Historical-Structural Approaches to World Politics*. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press.
- Timpanaro S. 1974.** Considerations on Materialism. *New Left Review* 85 (May–June).
- Toffler A. 1980.** *The Third Wave*. New York: William Morrow & Co., Inc.
- Tomlins Ch. 2020.** *A Poetics for Spatial Justice: Gaston Bachelard, Walter Benjamin, and the Return to Historical Materialism*. Law & Literature.
- Tugan-Baranovsky M. I. 1954.** Periodic Industrial Crises. *Annals of the Ukrainian Academy of Arts and Sciences in the United States* 3(30): 745–802.
- Voslensky M. S. 1991.** *Elite of Functionaries*. Moscow: Oktyabr. In Russian (Восленский М. Номенклатура. М.: Октябрь).
- Wickham Ch. (Ed.) 2007.** *Marxist History-Writing for the Twenty-First Century*. Oxford: Oxford University Press for the British Academy.
- Williams R. 2018.** The Future of Marxism. *New Left Review* 114 (November–December).
- Wittfogel K. 1957.** *Oriental Despotism*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Wood E. M. 2007.** *Democracy against Capitalism: Renewing Historical Materialism*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Woods A., and Grant T. 2015.** *Reason in Revolt: Marxist Philosophy and Modern Science*. Wellred Books.