

Lecture 6&7. Outline: Critiques & Reconstructions of Historical Materialism. Sept 24

1. Critique of Development Thesis: Is there really a transhistorical tendency for development of the PF?

Response: Sticky downward interpretation: *the probability of development of the forces of production is greater than the probability of their regression.*

2. Critique of the inevitability of “fettering”, especially in capitalism

Response: shift of theory of capitalism’s longrun collapse to deepening irrationality (irrationality = widening gap between the potentials capitalism opens up and how we actually live)

3. Critique of “Economic Reductionism”: Many noneconomic phenomena cannot be functionally explained by economic structure

Response: *Restrictive vs Inclusive* historical materialism

Inclusive HM: the superstructure = all noneconomic phenomena

Restrictive HM: the superstructure = only those features of noneconomic phenomena that help explain the stability of the economic base. *Those*, and only those, should be functionally explained by the economic base if HM is correct.

Example: Weber’s analysis of the Protestant Ethic

4. Critique of Functional Explanation

Critique #1: The problem of underlying mechanisms: Elster: Most functional explanations are sloppy intentional explanations

Response: mixing together intentional and functional explanations: *whether or not a given attempted change becomes consolidated and deeply institutionalized depends, in significant ways, on its actual effects, not simply its prior anticipated effects.*

Critique #2: Against optimality assumptions: Optimality implies the *best possible* relations (or superstructures) are created in response to functional needs.

Response: functional compatibility rather than functional optimality. Implication: multiple possible compatible outcomes.

Critique #3: Contradictory functionality in superstructures: Superstructures are not smoothly functional systems; implication: more potential “room to manoeuvre” in struggles within over institutions. (More on this when we study state & ideology).

5. Where does this Leave Us?

1. There is a “sticky-downward” tendency for the forces of production to develop in history.
2. Different forms of PR are functionally compatible with different levels of development of the PF
3. Taken together, this is the basis of a fairly compelling theory of the trajectory of epochal history that culminates in capitalism.
4. But this does not give us what we really want: a compelling theory of capitalism’s demise and future.
5. However, we do have a powerful critique of capitalism rooted in the theory of exploitation and emancipatory potential resulting from the incredible productivity capitalism has created.
6. And we do have basic elements of a powerful theory of the contradictory institutional impediments to the realization of that emancipatory potential within capitalism – the theory of the state and ideology.
7. And these in turn can form the basis for creative thinking about how to take advantage of those contradictions for the advancement of the emancipatory project.