

# Why is Marx still relevant to understand contemporary capitalist society?

A Debate into 'Historical or Structural'?

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*“There is no royal road to science, and only those who do not dread the fatiguing climb of its steep paths have a chance of gaining its luminous summits.”*

*(K. Marx, Capital I)*

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# Marxist methodology

- Marx and Engels's method is difficult to summarise. They never explained their own method completely.
- On a large scale different interpretations of their method derive from distinct views of the role and objectives of their theory.
- These methodological controversies have played a significant role in the development of Marxist social theory.

# Historical or Structural?

- This presentation shows how different variants of Marxist theory approach the structure-agency relation.
- I draw upon a set of classifications, following Bob Jessop (1999; 2004), Alex Callinicos (2004) and Alfredo Saad-Filho (2002), which allows for arranging conceptualisations of structure and agency according to their complexity.

- First, there is dichotomous approach which highlight exclusively one side of the relation in determination of the social.
- Second, there are dualist approaches which conceive of the structure-agency relation as a single causal one and overstate the importance of its poles.
- Third and the last one, there is dialectical approach which based on Marxist materialism. This conceptualisation is the most convincing one described with notion of dialectic because it emphasise that the social is co-constituted by both factors.

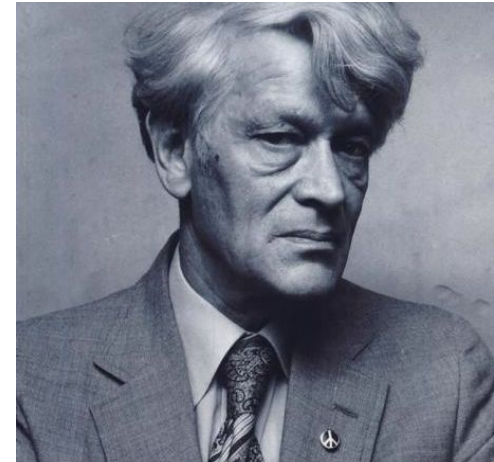
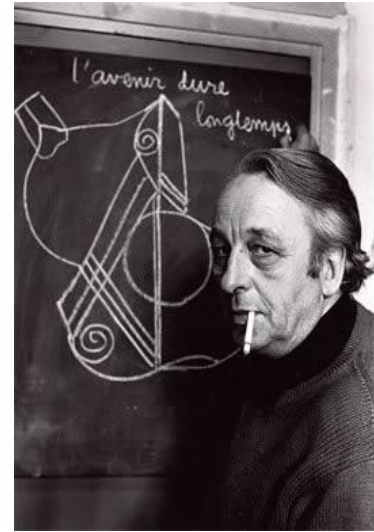
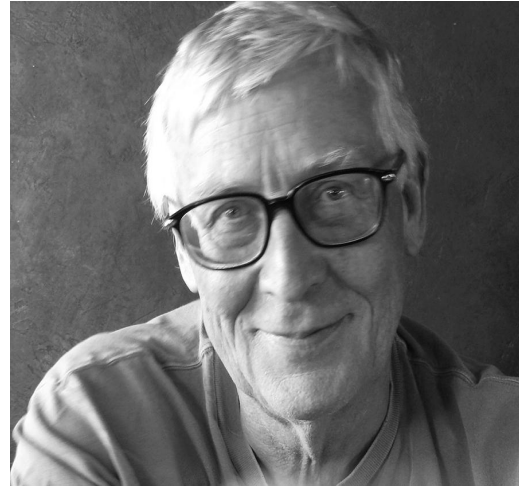
How can we  
explain historical  
and social reality  
under  
capitalism?

What this means  
for our  
understanding of  
contemporary  
capitalist society?

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- My hypothesis is that main deficiency of the first two approaches to ignore dialectic which is the key point of Marxist theory.
- Materialist dialectic uses dialectics to describe the essential features of the concrete, in order to reveal the structures, tendencies and contradictions associated with reality.

● In the second half of the twentieth century most of Marxist theoreticians (Lois Althusser, Edward Palmer Thompson, Gerald Allan "Jerry" Cohen, Perry Anderson etc.) took part in this debate.





In brief, the debate centred largely around these two questions:

- In terms of Marxist theory, what are the conditions of social change?

- How to combine the structural and the historical elements within Marxist social theory?

*“Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past”.*

*Marx, 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*

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*“In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness. At a certain stage of development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production or – this merely expresses the same thing in legal terms – with the property relations within the framework of which they have operated hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an era of social revolution. The changes in the economic foundation lead sooner or later to the transformation of the whole immense superstructure.”*

*Marx, A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*

# Dichotomous Approach:

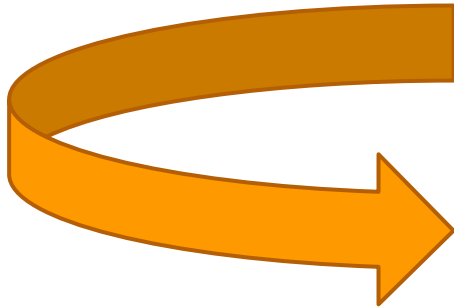
Structure without Agency

- The most prominent dichotomous approach is without doubt economic determinism or "economism".
  - Economic determinism is a theory that economic relationships are the foundation on which all other social and political arrangements are built.
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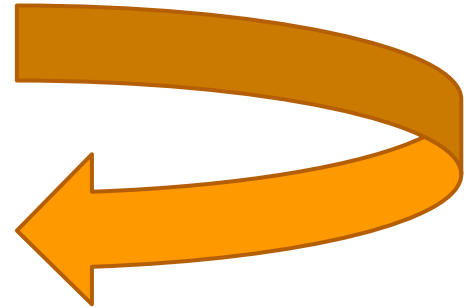
# Economic Determinism

- Economism saw Marx's *Capital* as a set of rigid “laws of history”.
- This approach implies a theoretical framework in which any notion of ‘agency’ is absent.
- In here action is nothing more than the execution of the laws of history and actors play no role in the formation of the latter.

# Dualist Approaches



**Structural Marxism**



**Marxist Humanism**

# Structural Marxism

## The Althusser School

- Althusser developed a theoretical position often labeled ‘Structuralist Marxism’, which attributed a pre-eminence to social structure in the thought of Marx.
  - The intervention undertaken by him and his followers (Étienne Balibar, Pierre Macherey, Jacques Rancière) can be seen as attempting to fend off the humanist line of attack.
  - They propose to re-establish historical materialism as a “science of history” (Althusser 1965: 14)
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- Althusser's work created a sensation because it rejected both mechanical/vulgar Marxism and humanist Marxism, arguing that they were merely two sides of the same coin.
- Influenced by Heidegger's critique of Sartre as well as his own reading of Marx, Althusser announced that history was "a process without a subject".
- In his theory, subjects are "carriers" of structure and are deprived of agency. Hence he constitutes subjects so hegemonized by the ideology of the ruling class.



Mode of  
production

The diagram consists of three main elements. On the left is a large green arrow pointing to the right, containing the text 'Mode of production'. On the right is a large green arrow pointing to the left, containing the text 'Social formation'. In the center, between the two arrows, is a rounded green rectangle containing the text 'Structural causality'. The arrows are positioned such that they appear to be pointing towards each other, with the central box acting as a bridge or a point of interaction between them.

Social formation

Structural  
causality

- To sum up, determinist assumptions on an ontological level cannot be transferred onto the epistemological level.

- It is exactly school of Althusser disregard for the dividing line between ontology and epistemology.

# The Making E.P. Thompson

**Marxism, Humanism and History**

- Thompson's defence of "actual history" against mechanic materialism shaped by the structuralist Marxism of Althusser
  - *In the Poverty of Theory* (1978), which contained severe polemical tone, Thompson accused Althusser of dissolving history into structure.
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Socialist  
Humanism



Peculiarities of  
society

# Class as a makers of history

- In *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963), Thompson emphasized: “The working class made itself as much as it was made”.
- Class, he insisted, is not a structure or category; it is "something which in fact happens in human relationships".
- He aimed to set up "history from below" against "socialism from above" (Wood, 1982: 45).
- He claimed that the concept of ‘experience’ is the missing "genetics" of Marx's account of social change.

# Critics of Thompson

- Ignoring the objective and structural conditions of class in a primarily subjective and contingent notion of "experience".

- His historical project as an optimistic and a romantic "populist socialism" which based on "subjectivism" and "voluntarism" (Anderson, 1980: 55; Cohen, 1978: 75).

- Thompson's argument presented fairly by Stuart Hall (1981: 384): "To resolve class-in-itself and class-for-itself into the catch-all category of 'experience' is to imply -despite all the complexities of any particular analysis -that the class is always really in its place, at the ready, and can be summoned up for socialism."

- As a result, employing a significant role to human agency and experience which in fact happened, Thompson's account still leaves the issue of what sort of happening it is and how we are realize it.

- In terms of dialectic, Thompson's effort means that absorb or elevate structural 'conditions' into the level of 'experience' is to dissolve dialectic at the heart of the theory.

# Dialectical Approach

Rethinking dialectical approach, in other words, materialist dialectics

- Materialist dialectics uses dialectics to identify the essential features of the concrete and their real contradictions, in order to explain the reality and the potential sources of historical change (Saad-Filho, 2002).
  - For dialectical approach recognition of the fact that history and logic are inseparable, a consequence of the fact that reality cannot be reduced to concepts.
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- Rethinking the dialectic between the logic of historical process and historical specificity, we should pay detailed attention to the complex variability of empirical reality and the agency (Callinicos, 2004).

- In this context, Marxist have struggled to avoid both economic determinism, which reduces diverse societies to few simple economic formulate, and a sort of hopeless particularism, which treats every society as unique and struggles to make useful generalisations across time and space.

- Eventually, we need a dialectical approach, in other words materialist dialectics, that integrate both factors.

# Conclusion

- Consequently, materialist dialectics will entail moving from conceiving of the connection between structure and agency as a causal relation.
- This then allows for seeing both factors as mutually shaping each other: their connection can be portrayed as consisting of a double causal relation and a double relation of co-existence.