

# Historical Materialism

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**EDITOR'S NOTE:** The following is a report (from "The Forward," Glasgow) of a lecture by Professor Lindsay delivered at the Metropole Theatre there.

I want to discuss tonight the doctrine of economic determinism. It is in itself a doctrine difficult and abstract enough. And to save us from needless difficulties, let me begin by saying that I don't want to discuss the general or metaphysical doctrine of determination or freewill. That is a subject the discussion of which Milton assigns to the devil in hell with eternity before them.

My subject is simple, more concrete, and more practical. It is the doctrine that there is a relentless necessity about the development of economic conditions—that in economic history we see a development which the will of no one can effect, which comes about by the necessity working out of blind laws, which we cannot alter or change but only classify. It is sometimes called Economic Determinism, sometimes Historic Materialism.

The best statement of the doctrine is in the preface to Marx's "Critique of Political Economy." You will find it printed at the end of Engels' pamphlet on Historical Materialism, published by the Socialist Labour Party.\*

The doctrine as stated in that passage and in Engels involves two assertions, connected but distinct. The first is that economic development proceeds according to inevitable, necessary and predictable laws. "The material transformation of the economic conditions of production can be determined with the precision of natural science," says Marx. Engels and many of Marx's followers have tried to show how various stages in the development of production and exchange have illustrated in their evolution this necessary predictable law. According to them, if we had enough knowledge we could in the light of this theory predict the future development of economic conditions with the same certainty with which astronomers predict eclipses).

That is the first assertion, economic determinism in the strictest sense of the term. It is not a view peculiar to Marx. The individualist economists of the early nineteenth century held it, talking as they did of the iron laws of political economy.

The second, and perhaps more striking, assertion is that this scientifically predictable economic development is the only real factor in social development.

The ideals that men have—that they believe in and work for; their moral notions, their political aspirations, have, according to this view, no independent reality, they are simply the reflexions of the automatic reactions to the facts of economic necessity which determine our whole existence.

We find statements in Marx that express with uncompromising bareness this historical materialism or Economic Determinism in its full sense. It is a theory which claims (1) that economic development can be foretold with scientific accuracy, because it is not the product of the living will. (2) That economic development determines all other forms of social activity.

Now, here is a case of doctrines whose power lies in union. "How happy could we be with either were t'other dear charmer away." For, say, only the first doctrine were true—that economic developments worked by laws not to be modified by human will. Well, we get on after all, very well with a great many forces and activities, the laws of whose nature is not to be modified by human will. We cannot alter the habits and nature of electricity by any known amount of human will or thought, but we can control largely the part electricity is to play in our social life. We can use it more or less;

\* See also "Capital," First Nine Chapters (Vancouver

we can introduce it here and exclude it there. Its use to society in a sense depends on our being able to count on the invariable laws of its nature. If, then, we were faced merely with the inevitableness of economic development we should still feel masters of our fate, inasmuch as we might control our social activities and control the amount and place of economic activity in the social scheme; use it as we use electricity.

If again the second only were true—if economic development controlled all other social activities, but were itself controllable by human will, we could at least feel our problems simplified. Once we attended to the economic problem and set that right, all else would be added to us, since that controls all other social activities.

But if you must accept both doctrines unmodified, what they come to is this:—

Will cannot determine or change economic development.

Economic development determines all the rest of social life.

Therefore will determines, and can determine, nothing in your life.

Socialist ideals and individualistic ideals alike are ineffective—mere mirages—fallacious reflexions of necessary economic changes!

I am not here tonight to attack or to defend Marx. But let me say before passing on that though there is a very striking statement of this theory in Marx to which I referred, it is not at all certain that the theory in its rigid form was permanently held by him.

Engels said at a later date, that "when anyone distorts our statement so as to read that the economic factor is the sole element, he converts the statement, into a meaningless, abstract, and absurd phrase."

What Marx was really after, can, I think, be seen by his repeated contrast between scientific and Utopian Socialism. He was insisting that ideals must spring from actual facts and actual possibilities, that the source of all successful action is an unprejudiced survey of all possibilities of the situation, that if we would make society what it is capable of becoming, we must first learn to know it as it is. That is a lesson that all idealists have to learn, and a very important one. And the Socialism of Marx's time was perhaps especially in need of it. Action to make things what they might be, must be preceded by knowledge of what they are.

I think myself that that is what Marx was really after, but, as I say, I am not concerned with Marx but with the theory.

Now, notice in the first place what a depressing and deadening theory it is, if you hold it consistently, if you really hold that our wills and purposes, even our collective purposes, are nothing—are not a real factor at all. How ill that suits with the idealism and the mutual self-sacrifice which is so evident in the Labour movement. Even if your economic determinism is optimistic, as the Marxian is, even if it tells you that the mechanical processes of economic change are bringing about a state of affairs when all man's wants will be satisfied; do you think man would really accept that at the price of having to hold that his will is completely ineffective, that his purposes are not really his but the mere reflection of mechanical causes? I don't believe that for a moment. Determinism has sometimes been an inspiring creed when it has been allied with religion. Our forefathers were inspired to do great things by believing that they were the instruments by which God worked out his purposes in the world; but can anyone be inspired to action by believing that he is the passive instrument of blind, purposeless, economic force?

But the fact that a theory is depressing and dead-

ening doesn't prove that it is untrue. Let us begin by noticing how it has an obvious appearance of truth at first sight.

You know the American story of Rip Van Winkle, the young man who had a magical sleep in a cave, and, after sleeping for 50 or 100 years—I forget how long—woke up to find everything changed and unfamiliar. Well, imagine a man to have fallen into such a magical sleep in, say about 1770, and to have slept for 100 years—or, if you like, longer—and to wake up either in 1870 or 1920. He would be dumfounded at the change that had come over the country. Imagine him put down in an industrial district of Lancashire, and suppose he felt he simply must find out what had put it into the heads of people to change the beautiful green Lancashire he had known into that great sprawling mass of drab, ugly brick; or suppose him to go into a modern factory and contrast it with the kind of handiwork he had known. Wouldn't he begin to say: What has put it into people's heads to make England like this? You can imagine him asking men and women he met if they liked the country to be like that, or if they liked factory production, and he would mostly be told: No! they didn't. "Then why on earth have you made this change?" he would say. But to that question he would get no answer, and if he persisted and went from the common people to the people in power, he might find some people more pleased with what had happened than others, but he would never find the man who had done it. They would all have to say: It has just grown up, or steam power has done it. And if by another miracle you could suppose him to go gradually back in time till he got to 1770 again, he would never find anyone who had willed the state of affairs that has come into existence. He would find that people had all sorts of purposes—good, bad, and indifferent—and had often achieved their purposes—but for this whole transformation of England with which we suppose him concerned, he would find no author. If he met an economic historian, he would perhaps be told that the whole thing began with the discoveries made in the last quarter of the Eighteenth Century, with the inventions of Watt and Arkwright, and we may imagine him saying: "Well, I knew James Watt before I fell asleep in 1770, and he was a decent fellow, but I am sure he had nothing like this in his head. He was interested in improving machines, but no more." So long as he asked the question, Why? he would get no answer to any effect.

And so he would find most people agreeing that this stupendous change had just happened: had been willed and intended by nobody. So he could easily come to think that these economic changes have come about independently of will, and must be due to some blind necessity outside of man altogether.

These are the facts that make men speak of economic determination. They find themselves part of a great new system of industry over which, as individuals, they have no control: which seems to have no author, whether hero or villain—which has been wished by none, and which weighs with irresistible force upon their lives.

Now, notice this further curious fact. Our imaginary Rip Van Winkle might well say in reflecting on all his experiences: "The funny thing about this period is that it has been one in which men have laid enormous stress on the freedom of the individual. This tremendous change has been accompanied by a gradual cutting away of all restrictions on economic freedom. Men have insisted on making themselves free, and they find themselves in chains to an economic system." I think that the economic historian would support this paradox and say that the economic interpretation of history applies much more forcibly to a time when economic relations are