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**THE EVOLUTIONARY THEORIES OF MARX AND ENGELS**

Stephen K. Sanderson  
Indiana University of  
Pennsylvania

Guest Lecturer, Institute of Social Studies  
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## ABSTRACT

Controversy continues to rage over the type of explanatory logic basic to the evolutionary theories developed by Marx and Engels. Thinkers such as G.A. Cohen and Jon Elster have presented Marx as a thinker who conceived of historical change as resulting from the operation of transcendent, teleological processes. Others, such as Maurice Mandelbaum, have strongly disagreed and have given us a Marx who interpreted directional trends in history as the cumulative result of the operation of particular conditions at particular times and places. This paper strongly criticizes the teleological interpretation of Marx and defends the view of historical materialism adumbrated by Mandelbaum. It also suggests that, despite certain important differences between the evolutionary theories of Marx and Engels, these theories were not markedly different in the type of explanatory logic on which they relied. Although Engels's grandiose statements about the operation of dialectics in history imply that he was a strong believer in transcendent laws that guide historical changes through fixed stages toward an ultimate goal, it is suggested that these abstract statements are highly misleading. Engels, like Marx, attempted to explain historical changes in ordinary causal terms.

## THE EVOLUTIONARY THEORIES OF MARX AND ENGELS

In recent years much attention has been devoted to the logical structure of evolutionary theories in the social sciences, particularly those theories developed by such nineteenth-century thinkers as Spencer, Morgan, Tylor, and Marx and Engels. Stephen Toulmin (1972), for example, has urged a distinction between evolutionist and evolutionary modes of explaining long-term societal changes. This is essentially a distinction between theories that attempt to account for such changes "as the 'conclusions' of a Cosmic Argument, which unfolds 'logical implications' operative throughout the whole History of Society" (1972:329), and those that try to explain them as responses to particular requirements imbedded in specific historical situations. Toulmin suggests that the nineteenth-century theories of social evolution were generally evolutionist rather than evolutionary. Similarly, in his famous book on social evolutionism, Social Change and History, Robert Nisbet (1969) has suggested that all theories of social evolution are grounded in the assumption of immanence, i.e., that evolutionary changes represent the logical unfolding of a pattern of change inherent in the basic character of human society itself. The latest version of this idea has been propounded by Anthony Giddens (1984), who claims that evolutionary theories are generally based on unfolding models of change.

The most systematic effort to analyze the logical structure of evolutionary theories, however, remains that of the philosopher Maurice Mandelbaum (1971). Mandelbaum has distinguished, in a way parallel to the distinction drawn by Toulmin, between two fundamentally different modes of explaining social change. One such mode rests on a conception that

Mandelbaum calls a directional law. To explain social change in terms of a directional law is to assume that it can be represented as a process in which the historical transformation of an entity occurs as the result of the actualization of the potentialities inherent in it from the very beginning of its existence. The other mode of explaining social change rests on what Mandelbaum calls a functional law, a type of law that is basic to the classic mode of scientific explanation. To explain historical changes in terms of a functional law is to explain them as the result of particular factors operating in particular ways within the context of a particular set of historical circumstances.

For the sake of terminological simplicity, let us use the term developmentalism to refer to what Toulmin, Nisbet, Giddens, and Mandelbaum refer to, respectively, by their terms evolutionist, immanence, unfolding model, and directional law. All of these thinkers reject developmentalism as an acceptable basis for explaining long-term societal changes, and I strongly agree with such a stance. Developmentalism reifies history and tends toward a mystical view of historical change as the product of transcendent laws inherent in the very nature of human society. It thereby reduces individuals and social groups to the role of mere "bearers" or "representatives" of history.

To reject developmentalism, though, does not necessarily imply the rejection of the claim that history exhibits orderly patterns or sequences of change. Mandelbaum, for example, does not deny that orderly sequences of change may be discovered in history. The point is how such sequences are to be explained, and the rejection of developmentalism means that such orderly historical sequences as may be found must be explained as the cumulative effect of a whole series of functional (i.e., causal) relationships operating over time.

How do these arguments apply to the nineteenth-century theories of social evolution? Mandelbaum claims that such nineteenth-century evolutionary thinkers as Spencer, Morgan, and Tylor were fundamentally developmentalist thinkers.<sup>2</sup> As for Marx and Engels, Mandelbaum claims that Engels was clearly a developmentalist but that Marx, despite certain appearances to the contrary, was not. He suggests that Marx's evolutionary doctrines followed a more classical mode of scientific explanation in accounting for long-term patterns of social change as the cumulative result of a complex series of functional or causal relationships.

There has always been much controversy surrounding the logical structure of Marx's evolutionary doctrines, for numerous other scholars over many years have maintained that Marx was indeed the kind of thinker that we have termed a developmentalist. This controversy has been rekindled in the last decade by G.A. Cohen's (1978) comprehensive exegesis of Marx's theory of history, an exegetical work that has attracted widespread attention. Cohen advances an interpretation of Marx that views him as a deeply developmentalist thinker whose developmentalist doctrines were rooted in a kind of technological determinism.

This paper is an attempt to evaluate the logical structure of Marxism as an evolutionary theory of social change, and it uses Cohen's interpretation of Marx as a point of departure. Did Marx, as Cohen asserts, give causal primacy to the productive forces, and did he link this causal conception to a deeply developmentalist conception of historical change? Or did he, as Mandelbaum claims, rest his explanations of long-term social changes on a causal rather than a developmentalist epistemology? As we will see, the prevailing viewpoint has been against Cohen's position. My own conclusions will be no different. Moreover, I

will argue that even positions similar to Cohen's--those that argue for a developmentalist Marx in a more general and less technologically determinist way--are wrong. I will attempt to defend the claim of Mandelbaum that Marx attempted to explain social transformations in ordinary causal terms.

And what then of Engels, whom Cohen does not discuss? The prevailing tendency, which Mandelbaum reflects, has been to separate him sharply from Marx and to suggest that he was a crudely developmentalist and teleological thinker in a way that Marx never was. While this view is understandable in light of a number of Engels's remarks, I will suggest that it is very likely incorrect. I will attempt to set forth an exegesis of Engels's writings that will show that his evolutionary doctrines and those of Marx were not markedly different in tone and character.

#### COHEN'S INTERPRETATION OF MARX

G.A. Cohen's Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence (1978) is perhaps the most important book on Marx's historical materialism to appear in the last decade. The interpretation of historical materialism presented in this book can be broken down into two essential theses, both of which are nonetheless inextricably intertwined. What Cohen calls the primacy thesis holds that, for Marx, the productive forces determine the basic character of the relations of production. Since for Cohen Marx's notion of productive forces reduces largely to technology, the primacy thesis essentially means that Marx attributed causal priority to technology and technological change in historical transformation. The development thesis is the notion that there is an inherent tendency for the productive forces to develop throughout history. Human beings are constituted so as continually to attempt to advance their level of technology to higher and

higher levels; they are highly rational beings who desire to advance their technology as a means of overcoming scarcity.

Cohen puts these two theses together and adds an interesting theoretical wrinkle to them to produce his unique interpretation of Marx. The wrinkle that Cohen adds is the notion that the relationship between the productive forces and the relations of production is a functional one: the productive forces determine the relations of production in the sense that the relations of production are functionally adapted to the productive forces, i.e., these relations are as they are because they are best suited at a particular time to advance the productive forces to the maximum extent. This leads Cohen to a specific viewpoint on Marx's explanation of both social stability and social transformation. Social stability prevails when the existing relations of production continue to promote the development of the productive forces. Yet at some point in any mode of production the relations of production exhaust themselves, as it were, and turn into barriers ("fetters") against any further development of the forces. At this point an upheaval in the relations of production occurs. The old relations are stripped away and replaced by new relations that can once again promote the development of the forces. Social stability is then regained, but only to be lost again when the new relations of production eventually turn into fetters on the productive forces, and so on throughout history until the stage of communism is reached.

Cohen thus holds that Marx was both a technological determinist and a teleological thinker. In this view, Marx saw history as being guided by an ultimate purpose, which was the existence of a socialist society in which people are free and in which their basic material needs are easily satisfied. This ultimate endpoint of history can only be achieved through a historical process of the unfolding of successive stages in the



development of the forces and relations of production. In early primitive communal society the lack of social class divisions made it impossible for people to work hard enough to advance their productive forces beyond a rudimentary level, and thus the development of class divisions (initially in the form of slavery) was necessary. A class was needed that could compel the mass of people to work harder than they were ordinarily inclined in order that they could advance the productive forces. Ultimately slave relations of production became a fetter and were stripped away to be replaced by feudal relations, which for that particular time were appropriate to advance the productive forces. When feudal relations of production turned into their fetters, capitalist relations of production emerged to promote technological development once again, and these relations in fact have been uniquely capable of promoting an extraordinarily rapid and massive development of technology. For Cohen, Marx saw capitalism as an essential prerequisite to the development of socialism because only capitalism is capable of producing the level of technological development that a truly free socialist society will require. In this sense, capitalism, as well as all earlier modes of production, can only be explained in terms of its role in a historical process whose endpoint is socialism.

It is obvious that Cohen's Marx is a deeply developmentalist one who views historical change as being explained in terms of a directional law, which in this case is the inherent tendency for humans to want to advance the development of the productive forces. At one point Cohen does admit that Marx frequently offers specific causal forces as explanations for historical changes, factors that especially involve aspects of class struggle. But Cohen asserts that, for Marx, such explanations are not his

fundamental explanations. His fundamental explanations of historical transformation are developmentalist ones that appeal to the need for productive relations to change in order to continue advances in the productive forces. Cohen says that "the explanatory power of the class struggle is . . . restricted. Capitalism develops when and because the bourgeoisie prevails against pre-bourgeois ruling classes, and socialism begins to be built when and because the proletariat defeats the bourgeoisie. But why does the successful class succeed? Marx finds the answer in the character of the productive forces" (1978:148-49; emphasis Cohen's). I therefore take Cohen to mean that Marx moved back and forth between proximate and ultimate forms of explanation but that the ultimate forms of explanation were always the really essential ones for him, the proximate causes only making sense in terms of their imbeddedness in larger ultimate causes.

Cohen regards his position not only as a correct interpretation of Marxian historical materialism, but as a valid theory of historical change as well. I am convinced that it is certainly not a correct theory of basic societal transformation, but demonstration of this point is well outside the bounds of this paper, and so I will leave this question aside. Whether or not it is a correct interpretation of Marx is much more debatable. Most of the textual evidence for Cohen's exegesis derives from Marx's famous 1859 Preface, where, allegedly in response to certain requests, Marx attempts to produce a succinct summary of his basic theoretical position. The part of the Preface that Cohen pays closest attention to, and that is obviously of great theoretical relevance, states that:

In the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of

society, the real basis, on which rises a legal and political superstructure, and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political, and intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness. At a certain stage of their development, the material productive forces of society come in conflict with the existing relations of production, or—what is but a legal expression of the same thing—with the property relations within which they have been at work hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an epoch of social revolution. . . . No social formation ever perishes before all the productive forces for which there is room in it have developed; and new, higher relations of production never appear before the material conditions of their existence have matured in the womb of the old society itself. . . . the productive forces developing in the womb of bourgeois society create the material conditions for the solution of that antagonism. . . .

It is not particularly difficult to see how these statements lend themselves to Cohen's interpretation, especially his primacy thesis. There is, of course, room for dispute as to Marx's meaning of "correspond" in his statement that the "relations of production correspond to the stage of development of the productive forces." To say that relations correspond to forces does not specifically say anything about what causes what, but Cohen's interpretation of Marx as asserting the primacy of the forces is certainly plausible if we take such a statement by itself.

Many commentators on Marx have suggested that the Preface is the only real source of apparently technologically determinist arguments, but Cohen has located numerous statements outside the Preface that he believes also offer strong support for the primacy thesis. The quotes he produces—from The German Ideology, The Poverty of Philosophy, The Communist Manifesto, Wage Labour and Capital, Capital-I, Capital-III, and the Grundrisse--are indeed extremely similar to some of the most fundamental statements of the Preface. Cohen is therefore able to show that a wide range of texts that Marx wrote over many years offer statements that are strongly consistent with the technological determinist and developmentalist interpretation.

Unfortunately for Cohen, Marx also makes many other statements, and engages in numerous historical analyses, that are either not especially supportive of Cohen's interpretation or that strongly contradict it. For these reasons Cohen has had no dearth of critics, and it is the arguments of some of them that we now need to consider.

#### WAS MARX A TECHNOLOGICAL DETERMINIST?

As noted earlier, in Cohen's interpretation the primacy and the development theses are actually inextricably intertwined, and thus Cohen's interpretation only makes sense when these theses are considered as part of a single argument. This means that if the primacy thesis is rejected the development thesis must fall with it. With this in mind, let us consider some of the main objections that have been made against the primacy thesis.

Jon Elster (1985) agrees that Marx's abstract statements clearly appear to support the primacy thesis, but he notes that some of Marx's most important historical analyses deviate sharply from the abstract theory. Elster asserts that Marx's analyses of the dynamics of precapitalist societies do not assert the development of the productive forces to be the engine of change, but rather concentrate on the role of population growth. Elster also suggests that Marx's analysis of the transition from feudalism to capitalism at the end of Capital-I departs markedly from the abstract theory. Elster appears to conclude that historical materialism as formulated and practiced by Marx is a terribly vague and often markedly inconsistent doctrine.

The philosopher Richard Miller (1981) does not reach the dramatic conclusion that Marx was vague and inconsistent, nor does he believe that there is a fundamental rift between his abstract statements and his concrete analyses of historical transformations, at least when those

abstract statements are properly understood. But he does suggest that even modest attention to Marx's practices as a social historian will serve to bring Cohen's interpretation strongly into question. Like Elster, Miller pays close attention to Marx's famous analysis of the transition from feudalism to capitalism. Miller believes that in this analysis Marx gives clear priority to economic and political processes, not to technology. Miller says that in Marx's discussion (1981:99-100)

the old nobility is "devoured by the great feudal wars," and replaced by a new nobility of mercantile supporters of the competing dynasties . . . . With this new nobility taking the lead, large landowners respond to Continental demand for wool by expropriating their tenants, converting peasant holdings to sheep pastures . . . . This change does not occur because it makes farming more efficient. Quite traditional methods of sheep-herding have simply become more lucrative for landowners. . . . Rich merchants use their new financial resources to set up manufacturing enterprises, often employing desperate refugees from the rise of capitalism in the countryside. Their large financial resources are crucial to the rise of manufacturing, for non-technological reasons. . . .

. . . The rise of capitalism eventually includes substantial increases in productivity, . . . but the crucial shifts in productive forces are not autonomous. In explaining this paradigmatic change in the level of productive forces, commercial and political processes are as important as the general desire to overcome material scarcity through technological improvement. . . .

. . . Marx's one extensive discussion of technological change in a relatively narrow sense of "technological" is his account of the new reliance on machinery in the Industrial Revolution. There Marx gives approximately equal emphasis to the greater efficiency of machine production and to its social advantage to the capitalist, as a means of reducing wages, extending the work day, and instilling labor discipline by destroying bargaining advantages of skilled craftsmen . . . .

Miller also shows that there is a strong clash between Cohen's interpretation and Marx's analyses of slavery and feudalism. In Marx's analyses of these modes of production he emphasizes that the relations of production characteristic of them prevailed because of the social power of an economically dominant class, not because such relations promoted technological development. Indeed, Marx points to the strongly fettering role of the relations of production during the stable phases of slavery and

feudalism. In short, Marx's analyses of these earlier modes of production are in one sense the very opposite of what Cohen is suggesting.

#### ·WAS MARX A DEVELOPMENTALIST?

The evidence against Cohen's primacy thesis is strong, and the general weight of scholarly opinion has indeed appeared to be very solidly against it. The objections of Elster and Miller are merely representative of views held by many of Cohen's readers. Therefore the claim that Marx was a technological determinist must be rejected as strongly contradicted by important Marxian texts. And if Marx was not a technological determinist, then he could not have been a developmentalist in the sense that Cohen paints him. If Marx gives numerous arguments against the notion that technological change has been the principal cause of historical changes in the relations of production, then he could hardly have thought that there is a transcendent human tendency to advance the forces of production, a tendency that actually impels the movement of history toward some goal. It is still possible, however, that Marx could have been a developmentalist in some more general sense.

One of the most vigorous contemporary defenders of such a Marx is Jon Elster (1985), himself, as just noted, a strong opponent of the primacy thesis. Elster has "little doubt that Marx was indeed guided by a teleological view of history" (1985:107). He claims that Marx actually had two fundamentally different ways of accounting for historical change: a speculative teleological philosophy of history in which history unfolds in a largely predetermined manner toward socialism, and an empirical theory of history that attempted to explain the transition from one mode of production to another in terms of the operation of particular causal processes. Elster is essentially suggesting that Marx mixed together a

developmentalist explanatory model and an explanatory model based on causal laws. He goes on to argue that this presented no problem for Marx, for "it is part and parcel of the teleological tradition that all events can be explained twice over, causally as well as teleologically" (1985:115).

Elster acknowledges that in some of his writings Marx appears to take a strong stand against teleology, but he declares nonetheless that the bulk of Marx's writings reveal its presence. The key passage in a quotation Elster takes from one of Marx's articles for the New York Daily Tribune ("The British Rule in India") declares (quoted by Elster, 1985:111):

The question is, can mankind fulfil its destiny without a fundamental revolution in the social state of Asia? If not, whatever may have been the crimes of England she was the unconscious tool of history in bringing about that revolution.

Elster also finds passages in the 1861-63 Critique and the Grundrisse that he believes are clear indications of a firm commitment to teleology. To concentrate only on the most salient statements that Elster doubtless has in mind, we may list the following:

But obviously this process of inversion is a merely historical necessity, a necessity for the development of the forces of production solely from a specific historic point of departure, or basis, but in no way an absolute necessity of production; rather, a vanishing one, and the result and the inherent purpose of this process is to suspend this basis itself, together with the form of the process (quoted in Elster, 1985:112).

This surplus labour is, on the one hand, the basis of a society's free time, and, on the other, it provides the material basis for the entire development of society and of culture in general. By forcing the great mass of society to carry out this work which goes beyond its immediate needs, the coercive power of capital creates culture: it fulfils an historical and social function (quoted in Elster, 1985:114-15).

The higher development of the individual is thus only achieved by a historical process during which individuals are sacrificed, for the interests of the species, as in the animal and plant kingdoms, always assert themselves at the cost of the interests of individuals (quoted in Elster, 1985:115).

It is not at all obvious how these are clear indications of a teleological attitude on Marx's part. All of these statements can admittedly be interpreted in a teleological vein, but it seems more likely that Marx was identifying certain necessary conditions and causal relationships, often with a rather dramatic linguistic flair (for which he had, of course, a well-known penchant). For example, when, in the first passage above, Marx speaks of mankind fulfilling its destiny and of England as the unconscious tool of history, I think it extremely unlikely that he meant such statements in a literal teleological sense. These are just dramatic ways of stating likely outcomes of certain processes. This interpretation seems highly preferable to Elster's when we recognize the very explicit statements that Marx does make against teleology in various of his writings, a matter to be explored more carefully in a moment.

Mandelbaum (1971) reaches conclusions on this matter that are sharply at variance with Elster's. He freely admits that many of Marx's statements appear strongly to endorse a developmentalist conception of historical change. He believes, though, that the appearance of developmentalism in Marx is highly illusory, and that Marx actually followed the explanatory logic of causal laws. Mandelbaum believes that Marx's analysis of the transition to capitalism found in the latter chapters of Capital cannot be rendered sensible unless it is viewed in this light. As he notes, one can find in Marx (1971:72)

statements which lend plausibility to the view that Marx and Engels actually believed in ultimate and irreducible laws of directional development in human history. On the other hand, when one poses the question of how the analyses of economic processes in Capital were thought by Marx and by Engels to be directly relevant to historical materialism, the only tenable answer would seem to be that it was through the operation of these processes at each successive point in time that the directional trends of history were shaped. If this is true, directional laws would not be irreducible laws, but would be derivative from the non-directional laws of economic relationships; and this I take to have been the position actually adopted by Marx.



I have already indicated my skepticism of Elster's imputation of teleology to Marx, and so it is obvious that I think that Mandelbaum's conclusion is more sensible. Apart from the highly equivocal nature of the quotations on which Elster relies, there are some excellent additional reasons for thinking that Marx's view of history was not a developmentalist and teleological one. One piece of evidence not to be taken lightly concerns Marx's opinion of Darwin. It is well known that Marx was a fervent admirer of Darwin, but it is perhaps less well understood that one of the major reasons for this admiration was Darwin's anti-teleological conception of nature. Shortly after Origin of Species first appeared, Marx wrote to Lassalle about his reaction to it. In his letter he said (Letter to Lassalle, Jan. 16, 1860; quoted in Heyer, 1982:15):

Darwin's book is very important and serves me as a basis in natural science for the class struggle in history. One has to put up with the crude English method of development of course. Despite all deficiencies not only is the death blow dealt here for the first time to 'teleology' in the natural sciences but their rational meaning is empirically explained.

Of course, Marx was precisely correct: Darwin did develop a theory that abolished teleology from nature and explained bioevolutionary transformations in terms of the operation of simple causal mechanisms. And it seems almost inconceivable that, if Marx was himself so antagonistic to teleological explanations in nature, he could have endorsed them (let alone constructed them himself) for society and history. Note also Marx's reference to "class struggle" in his letter to Lassalle, and how he believed this paralleled Darwin's usage of the notion of struggle in nature. This also strongly suggests that specific causal mechanisms are the proper basis for explaining historical change. That is hardly an endorsement of an irreducible directional law as the basis of explanation.

Consider also the following famous passage from The German Ideology

(1964[1845-46]:59; cited in Elster, 1985:110; emphasis added):

History is nothing but the succession of the separate generations, each of which uses the materials, the capital funds, the productive forces handed down to it by all the preceding generations, and thus, on the one hand, continues the traditional activity in completely changed circumstances, and, on the other, modifies the old circumstances with a completely changed activity. This can be speculatively distorted so that later history is made the goal of earlier history, i.e. the goal ascribed to the discovery of America is to further the eruption of the French Revolution.

This is an extraordinarily explicit statement against a teleological conception of history and a strong endorsement of explaining the flow of history in terms of the operation of specific causal forces at particular times. "History does nothing," Marx says. That can only mean that history is no abstraction with a goal and a purpose beyond the concrete goals and purposes of men and women struggling with and against one another for the fulfillment of their basic aims and desires. Ironically, the very passage above is quoted by Elster but dismissed in the most cavalier manner as starkly in contrast to Marx's other writings and as inexplicable except perhaps for some particular influence of Engels. In regard to such a dismissal, it must be noted that the contrast is not nearly as stark as Elster seems to think, since there are numerous other instances in which Marx rather explicitly rejects a teleological attitude. Moreover, it seems more than just a little odd that Elster relies on very ambiguous and highly equivocal statements and ignores a passage that is a model of clarity.

A third piece of evidence involves a particular commentary that Engels makes on Marx's theory of history that needs to be properly understood and appreciated. At one point in Anti-Duhring Engels is concerned to defend Marxian dialectics against the attack of Herr Duhring. To do this, and to explain their concrete meaning, Engels cites a long passage from Capital-I in which Marx is discussing certain changes within the capitalist system

that relate to the concentration and centralization of capital, the growing polarization of capitalists and workers, and the increasing unity and organization of the working class. Then Engels makes the following statement (1939[1894]:146-47; emphasis added):

And now I ask the reader: where are the dialectical frills and mazes and intellectual arabasques; where the mixed and misconceived ideas as a result of which everything is all one in the end; where the dialectical miracles for his faithful followers; where the mysterious dialectical rubbish and the contortions based on the Hegelian Logos doctrine . . . . Marx merely shows from history . . . that just as the former petty industry necessarily, through its own development, created the conditions of its annihilation, i.e., of the expropriation of the small proprietors, so now the capitalist mode of production has likewise itself created the material conditions which will annihilate it. The process is a historical one, and if it is at the same time a dialectical process, this is not Marx's fault, however annoying it may be for Herr Duhring. . . .

. . . . In characterising the process as the negation of the negation, therefore, Marx does not dream of attempting to prove by this that the process was historically necessary. On the contrary: after he has proved from history that in fact the process has already occurred, and partially must occur in the future, he then also characterises it as a process which develops in accordance with a definite dialectical law. That is all. It is therefore once again a pure distortion of the facts by Herr Duhring, when he declares that the negation of the negation has to serve as the midwife to deliver the future from the womb of the past.

I have italicized what appear to be the crucial elements of this long passage. Although there can be no certainty as to what Engels means, I interpret him to be saying that Marx has made a concrete study of history, identified certain trends from this study, and projected these trends into the future in terms of likely outcomes. Moreover, Engels suggests, it also happens to be the case that when these concrete processes and trends are closely examined it will be seen that they can be described as corresponding to a dialectical law known as the Law of the Negation of the Negation. Engels says that this historical process develops in accordance with a dialectical law. He does not say that there is an abstract law that actually determines or guides the process. I believe that the same rejection of a developmentalism is also apparent in Engels's statement that

it is a distortion to view a dialectical law operating as a midwife.

None of the pieces of evidence I have submitted amount to anything like a definitive proof that Marx was a causal theorist who rejected all developmentalist and teleological modes of reasoning. Yet I do believe that they make a persuasive case. But even if the precise nature of Marx's theory of history must remain in some doubt, I still think that certain firm conclusions can be drawn. In the first place, even if we were to fall back on a position such as Elster's--that Marx had a speculative philosophy of history in addition to an empirical theory of history--I do not believe, as Elster seems to that this developmentalist philosophy of history dominates (or at least is highly consequential for) his empirical theory of history. Nor do I believe that Marx could ever be characterized epistemologically in the way that the classical evolutionists, especially Spencer and Morgan, can be (cf. Sanderson, 1988). In the writings of these thinkers, developmentalist and causal theories are both present, but the developmentalist aspects seem to swamp the causal ones. This is patently not the case for Marx. Even if we would grant that those statements of Marx's that sound developmentalist could be taken at face value, the ratio of causal analyses to developmentalist statements is very high, whereas for Spencer and Morgan the reverse is the case. Marx was an evolutionist, but his evolutionism is distinctly different from that of Spencer, Morgan, and Tylor. Of that there can be no serious doubt.

It should not be overlooked that, like the classical evolutionists and other nineteenth-century thinkers, Marx did have a belief in historical progress. Slavery constitutes an improvement over primitive communism at least in the sense that it helps humankind to overcome the limitations of its meager technological apparatus. Capitalism, moreover, is progressive

in numerous ways over feudalism: it abolishes the "idiocy" of rural life; it introduces democratic forms of government that, despite their substantial limitations, are preferable to absolutism; and, most importantly, it establishes certain conditions that help to pave the way for socialism. Socialism, of course, is superior to capitalism on many economic, political, and social counts. But none of this belief in progress necessarily reduces to a belief that there is some transcendental historical process that moves itself along toward some preordained end. One can see certain improvements resulting from major historical transformations without explaining those transformations as occurring in order to generate such improvements.

#### AN ALTERNATIVE CONCEPTION OF MARX'S THEORY OF HISTORY

If Marx was neither a technological determinist nor any sort of developmentalist, then what was his theory of history? One of the most powerful answers to this question has been given by Richard Miller (1981, 1984), whose objections to technological determinism have already been discussed. Miller not only implicitly rejects a developmentalist Marx but, in contrast to Elster and a number of other Marxian exegetes, he refuses to believe that Marx was being fundamentally inconsistent, contradictory, or sloppy. He does believe, though, that Marx had essentially two historical theories. One of these was his explicit general theory, and this was the theory that guided him in his more abstract pronouncements. The other theory was a broader and more flexible version of the general theory, and this was the one that he usually depended on when he engaged in specific historical analyses.

Miller presents what he calls a mode of production interpretation of historical materialism (hereafter called MPI). Marx's problem in

historical materialism was, as we all know, to account for both social stability and major social transformations. Cohen's interpretation is that Marx explained stability as resulting from the ability of a set of productive relations to promote technological development. Miller's MPI, of course, rejects this argument and instead claims that Marx explained social stability as resulting from the social power of an economically dominant class. A given set of productive relations prevails because it is in the interest of the dominant class that they continue and because that class has the power to make them continue, not because that dominant class has some particular capacity for promoting technological development at that point in history. Indeed, it may well be the case that such a class impedes technological progress, as in the historical cases of ancient slavery and feudalism.

With respect to social transformation, the MPI claims that Marx meant what he said when he referred in many of his abstract pronouncements to the fettering of the productive forces by the productive relations, and thus when he made the productive forces basic to explaining social change. But Miller argues that where Cohen goes wrong is in adopting much too narrow a reading of the productive forces, one which makes them essentially equivalent to technology. Miller argues that Marx had a much broader meaning in mind, and that he included among the productive forces not only technology but such things as modes of social cooperation and work relations. The advance of productive forces in this broader sense, and the emergence of constraints on these by the existing relations of production, create possibilities for generating numerous forms of internal change that can ultimately radically transform a mode of production. For example, "it may be that the new productive forces would be so much more productive in a new economic structure that a class that would dominate the

new structure can organize successful revolution against the ruling class, based on a widespread hope for greater well-being" (Miller, 1984:207). Miller believes that it is just this kind of process that Marx emphasizes in his account of the rise of the bourgeoisie from feudalism. Or it might be that new productive forces in the form of new work relations would be so constituted that they provide opportunities for a subordinate class to organize against the dominant class. An illustration of this process would be Marx's prediction about how the spread of advanced capitalist work relations would provide greater opportunities for workers to organize themselves into highly disciplined movements in order to oppose capitalists.

Miller believes that the MPI fits Marx's abstract theoretical statements and many of his concrete historical analyses, but that there are some historical analyses that remain outside the scope of such a theory. He therefore suggests that Marx adopted in practice an even broader view of history, one positing that contradictions within an economic structure itself (and not just between the forces and relations of production) may also be crucial in generating major social transformations. Miller believes that this emphasis on internal economic contradictions can be found in various of Marx's writings, for example in The Communist Manifesto in which Marx "traces the rise of capitalism to ultimately self-destructive conflicts inherent in the feudal economic structure" (Miller, 1981:114); in the Grundrisse in which he emphasizes the transformative importance of class divisions in ancient Rome; and in Capital-I in which he emphasizes how chronic warfare among feudal nobles was a major factor contributing to the dissolution of feudalism.

Miller concludes that there was always a fundamental tension between

the narrower and broader versions of the MPI in Marx's writings, and that Marx himself was never really able to resolve this tension. Yet while the narrower MPI was the theory he followed when he made most of his explicit abstract statements, Miller believes that the broader version of the MPI was the theory he more commonly adopted as a practicing historian. This conclusion dovetails well with the arguments of Marxists and Marxian exegetes who oppose technological determinism that Marx made class struggle central to his theory of history. But at the same time it is clear that Miller's interpretation of Marx is a more precise and painstaking one, for it attempts to come to grips with the real meaning (or meanings) of Marx's most abstract theoretical pronouncements and unite them with as much of his historical practice as possible. This is why I suggested earlier that Miller's exegetical contribution has a very special importance. None of this is to say that Miller is correct, and it must be admitted that there is indeed a certain opaqueness to his presentation of the narrower version of the MPI. It therefore clearly requires more careful scrutiny before a genuine decision can be made about it.

#### ENGELS'S EVOLUTIONISM

It is very well known that Frederick Engels made major contributions of his own to an evolutionary theory of society. In 1878 he published the famous Anti-Duhring, a work that contains Engels's most explicit abstract theoretical statements. In 1884 he published The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State, a work that rehashes and extends Morgan's Ancient Society.

It has always been recognized that Engels's evolutionary formulations have had a distinctiveness about them, and no one has ever suggested that they could simply be assimilated to Marx's. Yet there has remained much



controversy over whether or not Engels's ideas constituted a marked departure from Marx's thinking. In recent decades the predominant tendency in Western scholarship has been to suggest that they did in fact constitute such a departure, and to the detriment of Engels. Indeed, the belittling of Engels has become something of a favorite sport. It is far beyond the scope of the present book to attempt anything approaching a full-scale exegetical settling of this matter, but I would like to suggest some reasons why the attempt radically to separate the evolutionary thinking of Marx and Engels is misplaced.

To my mind the most pressing question concerning the evolutionisms of Marx and Engels concerns whether or not Engels's evolutionism qualifies as a form of developmentalism. Mandelbaum's view on this issue is a common one. Although he has exempted Marx from adherence to this doctrine, he claims that Engels was actually very closely associated with it. Mandelbaum believes that Engels's development of a general dialectical conception of nature and of history is a classic instance of explanation in terms of a directional law. To assess Mandelbaum's argument, let us examine Engels's most abstract theoretical formulations with a special eye to those that Mandelbaum relies on most heavily in his interpretation.

In Anti-Duhring (1939[1894]) Engels develops an extremely abstract conception of all of nature and of human history and social life. This conception is based on the formulation of two dialectical laws, which Engels calls the Law of the Transformation of Quantity into Quality, and the Law of the Negation of the Negation. It is the second of these laws that Engels identifies as most fundamental to his dialectical philosophy, and it is developed in terms highly reminiscent of Spencer's Law of Evolution. According to Engels, this law is the guiding law of all change everywhere in the universe. He applies it to such diverse phenomena as the

sprouting of barley seeds, the development of rock formations, mathematical formulations, and human history. To get a proper feel for how Engels applies this Law of the Negation of the Negation, I quote from him in extenso (1939[1894]:148-52):

Let us take a grain of barley. Millions of such grains of barley are milled, boiled and brewed and then consumed. But if such a grain of barley meets with conditions which for it are normal, if it falls on suitable soil, then under the influence of heat and moisture a specific change takes place, it germinates; the grain as such ceases to exist, it is negated, and in its place appears the plant which has arisen from it, the negation of the grain. But what is the normal life-process of this plant? It grows, flowers, is fertilised and finally once more produces grains of barley, and as soon as these have ripened the stalk dies, is in its turn negated. As a result of this negation of the negation we have once again the original grain of barley, but not as a single unit, but ten, twenty or thirty fold. . . .

. . . [T]he whole of geology is a series of negated negations, a series arising from the successive shattering of old and the depositing of new rock formations. . . . In the course of millions of centuries, ever new strata are formed and in turn are for the most part destroyed, ever anew serving as material for the formation of new strata. But the result of this process has been a very positive one: the creation, out of the most varied chemical elements, of a mixed and mechanically pulverised soil which makes possible the most abundant and diverse vegetation.

It is the same in mathematics. Let us take any algebraic magnitude whatever: for example,  $a$ . If this is negated, we get  $-a$  (minus  $a$ ). If we negate that negation, by multiplying  $-a$  by  $-a$ , we get  $+a^2$ , i.e., the original positive magnitude, but at a higher degree, raised to its second power. . . .

It is the same, too, in history. All civilised peoples begin with the common ownership of land. With all peoples who have passed a certain primitive stage, in the course of the development of agriculture this common ownership becomes a fetter on production. It is abolished, negated, and after a long or shorter series of intermediate stages is transformed into private property. But at a higher stage of agricultural development, brought about by private property in land itself, private property in turn becomes a fetter on production as is the case today, both with small and large landownership. The demand that it also should be negated, that it should once again be transformed into common property, necessarily arises. But this demand does not mean the restoration of the old original common ownership, but the institution of a far higher and more developed form of possession in common which, far from being a hindrance to production, on the contrary for the first time frees production from all fetters and gives it the possibility of making full use of modern chemical discoveries and mechanical inventions.

It can readily be seen that, so applied, the Law of the Negation of the Negation is just as vacuous a theoretical device as Spencer's Law of Evolution. With respect to human history, if Engels really means that invoking such a law can actually serve to explain historical change, then there is little reason to take such an argument seriously. But does Engels really mean this, or is this an illusion that masks another mode of explanation that is actually at work?

Mandelbaum obviously believes that Engels must be taken literally. He puts in evidence numerous statements of Engels that indisputably have a developmentalist ring to them, among them Engels's famous eulogy of Marx at his funeral which declared that "Just as Darwin discovered the law of development of organic nature, so Marx discovered the law of development of human history," as well as the following (1935[1888]:22; cited in Mandelbaum, 1971:76):

All successive historical situations are only transitory stages in the endless course of development of human society from the lower to the higher. Each stage is necessary, and therefore justified for the time and conditions to which it owes its origin. But in the newer and higher conditions which gradually develop in its own bosom, each loses its validity and justification.

There are also several passages in Anti-Duhring that have a strong developmentalist flavor, as when Engels makes ancient slavery necessary to the development of modern socialism, or when he makes class divisions essential for the development of the productive forces (cf. in particular Engels, 1939[1894]:199-201).

Still, I think a good case can be made that, even though Engels clearly seemed to fall back on developmentalist modes of presentation, he was not really a developmentalist at heart and that his explanations depended more on a scientifically causal conception of historical change, much as Marx's did. Consider first of all a statement quoted earlier that

Engels had made about Marx. In polemicizing against Herr Duhring, Engels is at pains to show that there is nothing at all intellectually mysterious about dialectics, and he does so by quoting a long passage from near the end of Capital-I in which Marx is clearly describing changes within capitalism in terms of ordinary causal connections. Engels then goes on to say that Marx is merely characterizing this process as one which develops in accordance with a dialectical law. Engels also vigorously denies that Marx was speaking of any sort of historical necessity, and asserts that he was not giving the negation of the negation the role of "historical midwife." Now this passage can certainly be given different interpretations but, as I noted in the earlier discussion, I think the simplest interpretation is that Engels is suggesting (explicitly for Marx, but undoubtedly for himself as well) that the actual mode of explanation Marxism follows is one based upon causal reconstructions of historical connections. Perhaps the crucial clue in this passage is Engels's phrase "in accordance with." It would seem that Engels uses such a phrase in order to deny any claim that Marx or he might be making to the effect that the Law of the Negation of the Negation actually guides or determines historical changes. On the contrary, Engels is asserting that the causal connections revealed by history add up in the end to characterization in terms of the Law of the Negation of the Negation. If this interpretation is correct, then Engels does not believe in transcendent directional laws that somehow operate apart from the possibilities embodied in particular historical circumstances.

As a second piece of evidence in support of this interpretation I offer The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State (1970[1884]). As noted earlier, this work is largely a rehash of Morgan's Ancient Society (1974[1877]) based on Marx's notes and Engels's own reading

of Morgan, although Engels does extend some of Morgan's ideas and add a few of his own. Two things about Origin are especially relevant to the issue currently at hand. For one thing, it is clear that Engels engages in a good deal of scientific causal explanation. For example, he traces the major historical decline in the status of women to the growth of private property and social stratification. In addition, we find a famous causal analysis of the origin of the state in which this form of political society is seen as arising as a mechanism for protecting a society's ruling class against the threats to its position from subordinate classes.

In addition, despite the tremendous extent to which Origin relies on Ancient Society, the degree to which the developmentalism of Morgan has not been directly taken over by Engels is extremely noteworthy. One is very hard pressed, for instance, to find Engels retaining Morgan's constant references to the "germs" contained in early social forms that are said to be the basis for the development of later social forms. Engels was a tremendous admirer of Morgan, and Origin takes over many of his ideas unchanged. It would seem that if Engels had really been philosophically committed to a developmentalist doctrine, then he would have taken that over from Morgan too, although perhaps in modified form. Thus the absence of developmentalist statements in Origin, Engels's major application of his evolutionary theories, seems to suggest much.

What I am really arguing is that Engels, like Marx, should be judged more by his practice of historical explanation than by his abstract theoretical statements in regard to history. It is true that Engels's abstract statements sound more blatantly developmentalist than Marx's, and the possibility remains that Engels may indeed have had one foot in this philosophical camp. But certainly there is a major difference between

Engels and, say, Hegel, for whom there really was an abstract historical process that dragged concrete history along with it. There also seems to be a major difference between Engels and classical evolutionists like Spencer and Morgan. Although Engels's Law of the Negation of the Negation<sup>4</sup> closely resembles in structure Spencer's Law of Evolution, I think the similarity is more apparent than real. Spencer's law is intended more literally and its application is less counterbalanced by other<sup>5</sup> considerations than is the case with Engels's.

#### CONCLUSIONS

Marx and Engels were evolutionary theorists in that they envisaged certain basic directional trends to human history and attempted to develop some general theoretical principles to explain them. Careful reexamination of their major writings suggests, however, that they were not, as they have often been made out to be, teleological and developmentalist thinkers who attempted to explain directional trends in history as the unfolding of a predetermined historical plan toward some ultimate goal. Although Marx sometimes uttered statements that lend themselves to a developmentalist reading, and although Engels frequently did so, such a reading seems to be mistaken. These thinkers concentrated on explaining evolutionary changes in social life as the result of particular sets of conditions operating at particular times and places, not on invoking transcendent laws that guided historical changes.

One of the great bugaboos in modern social theory is a conflation of developmentalist and evolutionary theories. It is often assumed by social theorists that all or most theories that suggest the existence of broad directional trends in history rely upon a developmentalist mode of explaining those trends. Although this was largely true of such

nineteenth-century evolutionary theorists as Spencer and Morgan, this paper has tried to show that it certainly was not the case for Marx and Engels. Future exegetical work needs to be directed to the contemporary evolutionary theories developed by both sociologists and anthropologists: those produced by such thinkers as Leslie White, Julian Steward, Talcott Parsons, Marvin Harris, Gerhard Lenski, Elman Service, and of certain contemporary Marxian thinkers like Emmanuel Terray and Maurice Godelier. Thinkers like Mandelbaum and Nisbet have tarred contemporary evolutionism with the developmentalist brush, but such a characterization would seem to be markedly unfair for many of the evolutionary theories in question. Evolutionary theories are still poorly understood by most social scientists, and the epistemological premises on which such theories rest is one of their aspects that especially badly needs much more systematic analysis.

## NOTES

1. Mandelbaum's use of "functional" here is generally equivalent to "causal" and is unrelated to the use it has in the sociological school of thought known as functionalism.
2. I have elsewhere (Sanderson, 1988) assessed in detail Mandelbaum's claim about Spencer, Tylor, and Morgan
3. Miller's analysis, especially his narrower version of the MPI, is not only carried out at an extremely abstract level of analysis but is positively confusing on at least one major point. Miller insists that the narrower MPI is consistent with Marx's abstract theoretical pronouncements in that "changes in productive forces initiate social change" (1984:210). One of his principal examples of this notion, as I have already noted, has to do with Marx's discussion of the role of workplace changes in capitalism that give workers opportunities to organize themselves against capitalists. But how is this truly an example of the priority of the productive forces? The very next question would concern why these productive forces themselves changed, and Marx's answer in this instance seems clearly to be that such changes derive from the economic interests of capitalists, and thus from the nature of the relations of production. Miller may well recognize all this, because at another point he does say that the MPI permits a "zigzag dialectic . . . between changes in productive forces and nonderivative social processes [that] is required by all of Marx's concrete discussions of major transformations of the productive forces" (1984:209). Moreover, in the very same paragraph he apparently suggests that MPI does not give explanatory primacy to the productive forces, even in the broader sense of those forces, and then slightly later he goes on to say that "if the mode of production interpretation is right, structures do select forces quite as much as forces select structures" (1984:212). If Miller is arguing that Marx perceived a complex causal interdependence between the forces and relations of production in explaining major social transformations, then that is a sensible interpretation. But he should say so more explicitly and thus explain more carefully what he means when he repeatedly asserts that the MPI claims that social change is initiated by changes in the productive forces. (Possibly he means that changes in the productive forces are only proximate causes that are often linked to deeper ultimate causes, but again the whole issue is left in doubt.)
4. This "law" was stated by Spencer as the tendency for all phenomena to change from a state of incoherent homogeneity to a state of coherent heterogeneity (cf. Spencer, 1972(1857)). It was conceived as a universal principle applying not only to human societies, but to all other types of phenomena. It was thus a kind of great cosmological principle in which the evolution of social life was seen as simply one expression of a process inherent in the very nature of things. As I have argued elsewhere, this evolutionary doctrine seems certainly to represent a vigorous sort of developmentalism (cf. Sanderson, 1988).
5. Another major reason for rejecting a developmentalist interpretation of Engels has to do with his relationship with Marx. As an extremely close friend and associate of Marx's for forty years, Engels had to be profoundly aware of Marx's hostility toward teleological arguments in regard to nature



(and, as I have argued, by extension in regard to society and history). If Engels really had disagreed with Marx on this matter, it would surely have come out during all that time. Engels was fiercely loyal to Marx and would not have set forth a view of his own that he knew to be opposed to Marx's on an item of major concern without calling attention to the fact and excluding Marx from any association with such a view. It is well known that Engels read the manuscript of Anti-Duhring to Marx and that Marx raised no particular objection. Marxists antagonistic to Engels have tried to explain this away by saying, for instance, that Marx was too busy with other things really to concern himself with Engels's writings, and that he didn't especially care what went out under Engels's name. This interpretation is extremely improbable. Marx knew that his name and Engels's were strongly associated in the minds of their readers and interpreters, and that what Engels said would definitely reflect upon him. Thus there is every reason to think that Marx did not object to Anti-Duhring because, in principle, he found it unobjectionable.

In short, I think we have to proceed as if Marx and Engels were in basic accord with respect to developmentalist and teleological interpretations of history. If we are not going to tar Marx with the brush of developmentalism, then Engels should be excluded as well. The strong personal tie between Marx and Engels therefore provides yet another line of evidence useful in rendering a nonliteral reading of Engels's superficially developmentalist statements. No such countervailing evidence exists in the cases of Spencer and Morgan, and their statements must be taken more literally.

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