

Questions about Historical Materialism, Set #1.

Abbreviations: HM for historical materialism, FP for forces of production, SRP for social relations of production

1. Work Relations: Where do work relations -- relations among workers in the workplace -- fit into HM theory? An example is an assembly line process in manufacturing, which involves a particular kind of relation among the workers who work on that line. Should work relations be considered part of the forces of production or part of the social relations of production? Or do they not fit into either category?

2. Social Relations of Production and Property Relations: Property relations are supposed to be "a legal expression of" the social relations of production. How are the SRP different from legal, or property (or ownership), relations? For example, the SRP of a slave system are often defined as ownership of the producers by the master class. Such a definition appears to make the SRP of a slave system part of the superstructure (the political aspect of society) rather than the economic base, since ownership is a legal relation. If the SRP are defined as property relations (which are part of the political aspect of society), then how can HM claim that the economic aspect of society (including the SRP) determines the political aspect of society, without being guilty of a circular argument?

3. Functional Explanation: Cohen argues that, in the theory of HM, the causal relations between FP and SRP, and between economic base and superstructure, can only be understood as functional explanation. That is, the character of one thing (SRP or superstructure) is explained by the beneficial effect it has on something else (the FP or economic base).

A) Is such "functional explanation" a defensible type of explanation or causation?

B) What mechanisms, or "elaborations" of a functional explanation, can show that a functional explanation actually prevails in a particular situation?

4. Development Thesis, or Progress: HM argues that the FP have a tendency to develop, not just in capitalist society, but in human society in general. This has been called the "development thesis." What arguments can be given in favor or, and against, the existence of such a tendency for the forces of production to develop in human society? Such arguments can be either conceptual (reasons for the existence, or non-existence, of such a tendency) or empirical (evidence for or against the existence of such a tendency).

5. Materialism: HM claims that the economic aspect of society (dialectically) determines the character of the political and ideological aspects of society, and that a similar relation holds between the FP and SRP. (Cohen calls the determination of the SRP by the FP the "primacy thesis".) What arguments can be given for, and against, the validity of this view of the relation between the economic base and the political and ideological superstructure? What arguments can be given for, and against, the validity of the HM claim about the relation between the FP and the SRP? Such arguments can be either conceptual (reasons for the existence, or non-existence, of such a relation) or empirical (evidence for or against the existence of such a relation).