

PHL499 Senior Study

**Free Will vis-à-vis Economic  
Determinism: Against Reductionism  
and Revisionism in Defense of Marxism**

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The base-superstructure metaphor stands as a central hypothesis in Marxism: the economy determines ideology. Economic reductionists misinterpret the base-superstructure theory as a unilateral relation of absolute causation (economic conditions absolutely determine ideological conditions): leaving no room for free will or even any autonomous action. Revisionists, to preserve free will, refute this theory and thus refute the precedence of the economy over ideology in determining the development of society. In this paper, I will be arguing against both. I will argue that ideology determines the economy but not as much as the economy determines ideology. The relation between the base and the superstructure is bilateral but asymmetrical in favor of the economy. Individuals' ideas, and by extension actions, are determined by the economic conditions however the economy doesn't absolutely determine human ideas, and by extension actions; humans enjoy a margin of autonomy for free actions. Both reductionists and revisionists conceive of economic determinism as a unilateral relation of absolute determinism. The former verifies this as true while the latter refutes it as false. I will argue that economic determinism is more nuanced. Economic conditions are the chief determining factor of the development of human society. They don't determine everything, but they do determine most things.

The arguments of the Reductionists and Revisionists arise from a seeming inconsistency in Marxist theory between Marxist analysis (the descriptive component of Marxism) and the directives of Marxism (the normative component of Marxism). The normative component refers to the directives promoted by Marxists (such as unionization, political education, party organization, armed struggle, etc.). The normative component presumes that individuals enjoy a level of autonomy to execute the promoted directives. The descriptive component refers to the analysis of material society which is adopted by Marxists (such as dialectical materialism, historical materialism, labour theory of value, base-superstructure theory, etc.).

This misconceived inconsistency is an unspoken premise to both the Revisionist's and Reductionist's arguments. Both believe that the descriptive component and normative component of Marxism are inconsistent. The Reductionist prioritizes the descriptive component and undermines the normative component: doing away with human autonomy. The Revisionist prioritizes the normative component and undermines the descriptive component: doing away with the precedence of the economy in social analysis (i.e. doing away with the base superstructure theory).

This inconsistency between the normative component and the descriptive component manifests itself as a form of the problem of Free-will: such that it studies the question of human agency. In the literature, this inconsistency is referred to as the problem of Economic Determinism: it studies human agency in relation to economic conditions. Both Reductionists and Revisionists address this problem in light of the problem of Free-will. Both argue that the base-superstructure theory is incompatible with human autonomy. Reductionists do away with autonomy in favor of the base-superstructure theory. Revisionists do away with the base-

superstructure theory in favor of autonomy. I will argue that human autonomy is compatible with the base-superstructure theory.

First, I will lay out the descriptive component of Marxism (central to which is the base superstructure theory) then I will lay out the normative component of Marxism (which presumes human autonomy), to show that they're consistent with one another. Then I will formulate the arguments of the Reductionists and the Revisionists, to later on debunk them. I will cite two Marxist scholars which have addressed this problem, and finally I will offer a formal analysis to show how autonomy and economic determinism are compatible.

**Keywords: economic determinism, reductionists, revisionists, base, superstructure, ideological conditions, economic conditions, forces of production, relations of production**

Marxism offers both a science of the development of societies throughout history and a general plan of action to develop human society based on that science. It combines two inextricable components: the descriptive and the normative.

## **Descriptive Component of Marxism: A Science of the Development of Society Throughout History**

### **Dialectical Materialism**

Marx established his theory of socialism as a scientific theory of society. Marxism, like other theories of socialism, serves as a critique of capitalism and promotes the progress of society into socialism. However, what distinguishes Marxism as scientific socialism (in distinction to utopian socialism) is dialectical materialism which serves as the theoretical foundation of Marx's critique of capitalism (Socialism: Utopian and Scientific, Engels, 1880, p:82-83). Marx was specifically inspired by Hegel's dialectical method, but as opposed to Hegel's idealist outlook, Marx coupled dialectics with materialism (Engels, 1880, p:87).

### **Materialism**

Marx adopts a materialist outlook of the world; reality is fundamentally made up of mind-independent physical stuff (i.e., entities and phenomena) rather than mind-dependent mental stuff (i.e., entities and phenomena). While mental stuff exists, they can be traced back to physical stuff. The existence of mental stuff is grounded in physical stuff. The mind is seated in a body which is embedded in society: all mental entities and phenomena develop out of physical stuff, be it physical stuff in which one is embodied (like neural firings or hormones, etc.) or physical stuff in which one is embedded (like social milieu or income, etc.).

Taking this materialist worldview as a premise, Marx developed a theoretical framework based on Hegel's dialectics that is capable of studying reality as it actually is without the added jargon of religion and moral idealism. He essentially developed a materialist theoretical framework that serves as a heuristic suitable for studying the dynamic nature of reality.

## **Dialectics and Metaphysics**

As opposed to theories of metaphysical materialism which study natural phenomena in separation from their worldly context and in isolation from the continuum of history, the dialectical outlook of the world is one that describes the world as in constant flux.

Metaphysics studies worldly objects in abstraction (by assuming fixation, individuation, separation, etc), while dialectics studies the world as it actually is. In "Elementary Principles of Philosophy", Georges Politzer defines the metaphysical method as having 4 characteristics (1976):

- the principle of identity,
- the isolation of things,
- eternal and impassable divisions; and
- mutual exclusivity of opposites.

## **The Laws of Dialectical Materialism**

Politzer then contrasts the metaphysical approach to Marx's laws of dialectical materialism (1976).

(I) the first law is the law of change which entails that objects are constantly developing and changing,

(II) the second law is the law of the sequence of processes which entails that objects cannot be studied as if fixated in a slice of time but rather as set in a stage of a temporal continuum (having a history and a future),

(III) the third law is the law of contradiction which entails that objects in nature hold within them their opposite; while they manifest as affirming one thing, the latent contradiction in them drives them to change in due time to manifest themselves as the negation (of that which they were affirming prior) and then as the negation of this negation and so on and so forth (affirmation, negation, negation of the negation); and

(IV) the fourth law is the law of quantity into quality which entails that the gradual quantitative change of an object will eventually reach a threshold whereby the object would change qualitatively (Politzer, *Elementary Principles of Philosophy*, 1976)

## **Historical Materialism: The Application of Dialectical Materialism to Human Society**

Furthermore, Marx's studies of the material world were specifically geared towards studying human society: change in society (I), the history of society (II), the social contradictions which drive change in society (III), and the change in leaps which developed society qualitatively following gradual quantitative change (IV) (i.e., changing from primitive communalism to slavery then feudalism to finally reach capitalism).

Following his materialist outlook, Marx identified the precedence of material conditions in society over ideological conditions. He explains that ideological conditions are only a reflection of material conditions, and thus change in material conditions entails a change in ideas.

*"...we do not set out from what men say, imagine, conceive... in order to arrive at men in the flesh. We set out from real, active men, and on the basis of their real life-process we demonstrate the development of the ideological reflexes and echoes of this life-process. The phantoms formed in the human brain are also, necessarily, sublimates of their material life-process, which is empirically verifiable and bound to material premises. Morality, religion, metaphysics, all the rest of ideology and their corresponding forms of consciousness, thus no longer retain the semblance of independence..."* (Marx, 1846, p:8)

He singles out the economy among all other material conditions to have a unique significance to the study of change in society.

*"the multitude of productive forces accessible to men determines the nature of society, hence, that the history of humanity must always be studied and treated in relation to the history of industry and exchange... there exists a materialistic connection of men with one another, which is determined by their needs and their mode of production"* (Marx, 1846, p:10)

In "Dialectical and Historical Materialism", Joseph Stalin structures out Marx's theoretical framework. The late Soviet leader identifies population and geography as other material conditions of society which influence its development; however, he explains that the economy is especially significant because it is the chief determining force of change in society (Stalin, 1950, p: 25). In Marxism, the economic conditions (i.e., the forces of production and the relations of production which organize them) are at the foundations of society and the chief determining forces of change in it.

*"By producing their means of subsistence men are indirectly producing their actual material life."* (Marx, 1846, p:4)

The economic conditions determine all the ideological spheres of society such as politics, law, religion, culture, etc, and thus condition the change in these spheres. The economy drives history i.e., it drives the development of society throughout time.

## **The Premises for the Development of Human Society**

In the German Ideology (1846), Marx lays out the fundamental premises which initiate the development of human society according to historical materialism (i.e., driven primarily by economic conditions). He postulates three fundamental premises which dynamize the relation of humans towards nature to create history (Marx, 1846, p:9-10):

- (1) the natural human drive is to satisfy one's needs,
- (2) in satisfying one's first needs more needs are created; and
- (3) in satisfying one's needs, the individual influences other humans' needs (by interaction, competition, and cooperation with other humans or by creating other humans with needs i.e., reproduction).

These premises describe the initial conditions propagating of humankind and by extension developing societies and by implication the progress of history.

*“Thus, it is quite obvious from the start that there exists a materialistic connection of men with one another, which is determined by their needs and their mode of production, and which is as old as men themselves. This connection is ever taking on new forms, and thus presents a history”* (Marx, 1846, p:10)

## **The Economy: the Main Driving Force of The Development of Human Society**

Marx's philosophical endeavour was to consolidate a science of society that would create an adequate heuristic for studying the world without dismissing its dynamism and without the added jargon of idealism.

Dialectical materialism was consolidated as the final product, an adequate heuristic device for studying the world as it is: material and dynamic. Dialectical materialism was then geared toward studying the development of human society. The application of Dialectical Materialism to human society was Historical Materialism: which plays out following a set of premises on the needy nature of humans in society. Marx then identifies the economy as a unique factor -among other material conditions- to account for when studying the development of society (such that the economy is the sophisticated structuring of human needs). The economy was identified as the chief force of development by Stalin (1950) and as the motor force of history by Politzer (1976).

The special significance of the economy to the study of society wasn't unjustifiably stipulated. It was deduced by a comprehensive scientific analysis of human society: how it started, how it developed, and what drove its development throughout history. To put it in Politzer's words “Dialectics is a way of studying well and making good observations, by looking for the beginning and end of things, where they come from and where they are going” (1976).

The aforementioned fundamental premises of the human-nature relationship (1) (2) and (3) make an empirical assessment of what fundamentally motivates humans to go about their lives. Humans are prompted towards labour (the appropriation of nature's goods) by their needs, mainly their need to sustain themselves and propagate the continuity of their race. Needs come in gradations, and they have developed to be more sophisticated over the years (the need to satisfy the bare minimum, the need to live an enjoyable life, the need for self-realization, etc.).

Interaction between individuals in society further complicates their needs. The dynamics of human needs (how they are fulfilled if they are fulfilled and who/what stifles them etc.) are rationalized in terms of forces of production (those who work) and relations of production (how those who work are organized). Forces of production and the relations of production constitute the economic conditions (Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy, Marx, 1859).

While there are other material conditions that shape the development of human society, economic conditions are chief among them such that the needs which motivate humans to become active actors are mainly captured by economic conditions. The status of humans' needs (to what extent are they fulfilled, how quickly fulfilled, if equally fulfilled etc.), is expressed by the form in which labour (the means for satisfying needs) is organized. The economy boils down to human needs and the dynamics of human needs ultimately developed the economic conditions.

### **Base-Superstructure Metaphor: Economic Base Conditions the Ideological Superstructure**

The base-superstructure metaphor is the most useful tool for Marxist analysis; Marx contends, based on historical materialism, that all ideological structures are conditioned by the economic base (Marx, 1859). The base-superstructure metaphor rationalizes the progress of human society by explaining ideology as a reflection of the economic conditions. The metaphor entails that the economic conditions are the basis for all the other spheres of society i.e., the ideological spheres of society such as politics, ethics, religion, art, law, etc. Economic conditions determine the ideas which humans have. The base-superstructure is the fruit of the descriptive component of Marxism.

### **The Relevance of the Base-Superstructure Metaphor to the Problem of Economic Determinism**

The ideological superstructure is the framework of conscious human action. Conscious human action is the action that an individual takes which follows from a will to do such an action which in its turn follows from an idea one has to will themselves to do such an action.

“it is will which determines the action, and it is our thoughts and our feelings which determine our will. We would then have the following sequence: *idea—will—action*. In order to explain the action, we must revert back to find the determining idea-cause.” (Poltzer, 1976, p:121).

Thus, according to Marxism, (P1) if the ideological superstructure is conditioned by the economic base and (P2) the ideological superstructure is the framework for human actions (C) then human action is determined by the economic base.

(P1) economy  $\Rightarrow$  ideology

(P2) idea $\Rightarrow$ will $\Rightarrow$ action

(C) economy  $\Rightarrow$  human actions

## **Normative Component of Marxism: a guide for Revolution and the Transition into Socialism**

“Philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways. The point however is to change it” (Karl Marx, Thesis on Feuerbach, 1848, p:65). Description and assessment don’t suffice to instantiate change in society. Most philosophies despite being ingenious became largely inconsequential because of lacking a plan for action. Marxism transcends the descriptive boundaries of positive sciences and descriptive philosophies by having a normative component. It delineates a rough plan for action. Marxist literature, most significantly “The Communist Manifesto,” abounds with prescriptive directives which incite workers towards political action and revolution: most popularly “Workers of the World, Unite!” (Marx, 1848, p:56).

Marxism, as opposed to passive philosophies, is very much active and has implications to the way individuals behave and act in society. It is comparable to religious and moral ideologies which preach a set of commandments or maxims that individuals adopt and then start acting according to. “Material force must be overthrown by material force, but theory also becomes a material force as soon as it has gripped the masses.” (*A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, Marx, 1843, p.286). Political action is at the essence of Marxism as a revolutionary material science of society. It is inextricable from the descriptive component and a direct corollary of it. The directives which Marx promotes follow directly from his theory of critiquing capitalism. An inconsequential critique of capitalism that doesn’t incite workers towards revolution is by definition not Marxist such that it lacks the normative component of Marxism.

### **The Prescriptive Directives of Marxism**

Marx tailors his directives according to empirical assessments of the capitalist mode of production. He unpacks the contradiction between the forces of production (the workers)



and the relations of production (appropriation of the surplus<sup>1</sup> value of the workers' labour by the bourgeois). Marxist literature presents a variety of directives to resolve this contradiction in the economic base of capitalism in an effort to bring about socialism which would organize the relations of production differently to favor the interests of the workers. These Marxist directives include but are not restricted to:

- Political education,
- Unionization,
- Party organization; and
- Armed struggle.

The prescriptive directives (normative component) of Marxism seem to presume a degree of human agency. Some of these prescriptive directives are most famously included in the "Communist Manifesto" which wasn't a philosophical or economic treatise but rather a political program calling for action and inciting the workers to revolt.

*"The proletarians cannot become masters of the productive forces of society, except by abolishing their own previous mode of appropriation, and thereby also every other previous mode of appropriation."* (Marx, 1848, p:20)

*"The proletariat of each country must, of course, first of all settle matters with its own bourgeoisie."* (Marx, 1848, p:20)

*"The proletariat must, first of all, acquire political supremacy, must rise to be the leading class."* (Marx, 1848, p: 25)

*"Communists must unremittingly struggle against these bourgeois socialists because they work for the enemies of communists and protect the society which communists aim to overthrow."* (Marx, 1848, p: 53)

*"Therefore, the communists must continually support the radical liberal party, taking care to avoid the self-deceptions of the bourgeoisie"* (Marx, 1848, p:54)

And most famously *"Workers of the world, Unite!"* (Marx, 1848, p:56)

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<sup>1</sup> Theory of surplus value (Das Kapital, Marx, 1867) Marx unpacks the foundations of capitalism as a mode of production: coalescing classes into two primary classes the proletariat (those who do most of the work) and the bourgeoisie (those who own the means of production and don't do any work but enjoy fortunes off of the work which the proletariat does). Marx defines the proletarians as the working class employed in industries. This category is often stretched out to refer to other working classes like farmers, teachers, cleaners, nurses, drivers, craftsmen etc. The theory of surplus value applies to any worker who is employed by a privately owned institution (owned by the bourgeoisie) where they get a wage or a salary in return for their work. The product of the workers' labor, be it a product or a service, has exchange value which it can be sold for in the market. The product or the service is sold for a quantifiable equivalent of its exchange value i.e. for a price of money (determined by the dynamics of supply and demand in the market). The worker is only given a minute fraction of this money. The bourgeois takes the bulk of it. The bourgeois accumulates fortunes by taking the surplus value of the labor of the numerous workers who he employs.

## **Material Conditions and Economic Conditions**

“Material conditions” and “economic conditions” are often used interchangeably in Marxist literature and discourse. They generally refer to the same thing, but they’re not identical. Economic conditions are a subset of Material conditions; all economic conditions are material conditions, but not all material conditions are economic conditions. As aforementioned, there exist in nature other material conditions which shape the progress of society throughout history like geographical environment, climate, weather, population density, population growth, etc. However, the economic conditions stand as the chief determining force of change in society throughout history (Stalin,1938). Thus, special emphasis is to be given to economic conditions given their primacy over all other material conditions and their role in determining ideological superstructures. The study of economic conditions is very abundant in Marxist literature compared to geography or population density, per se.

Material conditions refer to all the physical structures which condition human action and ultimately shape the progress of society throughout history. Economic conditions are material conditions. Specifically, economic conditions refer to the structure established by the relationship between the forces of production and the relations of production.

**Economic conditions  $\in$  Material conditions**

## **Physical Determinism v Economic Determinism**

This distinction between economic conditions and material conditions is of relevance to my research objective and the argument I am trying to make. The literature on the problem of Free Will is largely made in relation to the sum total of material conditions. Free will is studied in contrast to physical determinism i.e., all material structures are accounted for. Marxists are materialists; however, they are primarily interested in the development of human society. Thus, the primary object of their study is the economic conditions because they are the chief determining force of the development of society.

Marxists acknowledge that other material conditions shape the development of society as well; however, they identify the economy (forces of production and the relations of production) as the chief determining force of change in society. Consequently, they assess that the economy should be the focal point of social analysis. In Marxism, the economy should be given precedence over not only ideological conditions (which the economy shapes) but also other material conditions (which are relatively inconsequential to the development of society compared to the economy).

# The Problem of Economic Determinism

This problem is constituted by two seemingly incoherent propositions: “Humans must take action to change the economic conditions” (as entailed by the normative component of Marxism), and “human actions are determined by economic conditions” (as entailed by the descriptive component of Marxism).

Thus, the Problem of Economic Determinism is based on the following antimony:

- (1) According to Marxism, Humans have free will (in relation to economic conditions)
- (2) According to Marxism, Humans are determined (by economic conditions)

In this paper, free will is defined as an action independent from external conditions. I will be using free will interchangeably with autonomy. Within the materialist scope of my study, all external conditions are material conditions, and the chief sort of material conditions are economic conditions because they are most relevant for the development of society throughout history.

## The Economic Reductionist’s Preliminary Argument

**Reductio ad absurdum of “Humans have free will”: Marxism is reduced to a Utopian theory of socialism**

If all the actions of humans are exclusively the result of autonomous human agency (and not determined by material-economic conditions), then the scientific character which defines Marx’s theory of socialism becomes questionable. The economy no longer enjoys a special significance for analysing social phenomena; we can no longer study society using Historical Materialism as a heuristic. The laws of dialectics become useless for the study of the progress of society throughout history, and the premises of human need describing the primary drive for human action which put the progress of society into motion become irrelevant. Marxism becomes devoid of its scientific character.

Thus, if we were to adopt this account of Marxism (i.e., explaining human behaviour by reference to autonomous human agency), we’ll be compromising on the uniqueness of the descriptive component of Marxism (i.e., the scientific character of Marxism).

Explaining human actions by referring to the autonomous agency, factors out the Base-Superstructure metaphor and reduces Marxism into any classical theory of society where different spheres of society equally influence one another. It does away with the special significance of the economy which Marxists emphasize. If humans are autonomous (not determined by economic conditions), then the ideas of individuals can equally influence the economic conditions just as much as the economic conditions can influence the ideas of individuals.

The dialectical analysis of history and society (i.e., historical materialism) which precedes the critique of capitalism is what distinguishes Marxism from the theories of utopian socialism making it a theory of scientific socialism (Engels, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, 1880). Autonomy of human agency, prima facie at least, does away with the scientific character of Marxism. If human actions are simply the result of the autonomous decision-making processes of humans, then the progress of society is determined by the decisions of individuals and the consequent actions they take. Following this line of reasoning, different histories would've been possible and different futures are possible.

(P1) individuals in society have free will

(P2) if individuals have free-will then actions of individuals follow only from the ideas they have and nothing else beyond that (idea– will –action) because if they have free-will they're independent of external conditions

(P3) An individual's actions are based ultimately on their autonomously cognized ideas

(P4) The economy doesn't determine an individuals' actions then the base-superstructure metaphor doesn't hold

(P5) If the base superstructure metaphor doesn't hold, then Marxism isn't a scientific theory of socialism, which is not the case

(C) According to Marxism, humans don't have free will because Marxism is a scientific theory of socialism

## **The Revisionist's Preliminary Argument**

**Reductio ad absurdum of "humans are determined" in Marxism: Marxism is reduced to an inconsequential strictly descriptive theory of society**

If the conscious decision-making process and consequent actions of humans are absolutely determined by economic conditions, then it's pointless to promote directives for taking action. Whatever action a person takes is predetermined by economic conditions; human actions are not the result of unconditioned autonomous agency but rather the necessary result of a set of economic conditions in which a person is embedded. The economic conditions are latent with the potential of yielding human action; human actions are the manifestations of the unfolding of the economic conditions. Each human action is a direct consequence of a set of prior economic conditions that determine it.

Promoting directives seems like an unnecessary condition for human action; even if one were to make a conscious decision, the corresponding action would be traced back to initial economic causes because, according to this account, economic conditions are the necessary and sufficient determinants of human actions. This rationale leads us to think of Marxism as an exclusively descriptive science of society. Thus, it would be inconsistent with Marxism to promote the unionization of workers, organize them in parties, and incite them to revolt because all of these directives would be spontaneously realized had their economic antecedents been present. This account factors out the normative component of Marxist theory.

- (P'1) individuals in society are determined by economic conditions
- (P'2) According to the Base-Superstructure theory, the economic base determines the ideological superstructure
- (P'3) According to Politzer's sequence, ideas–will–action
- (P'4) Then, an individual's actions are absolutely determined by the economic conditions
- (P'5) If humans are absolutely determined by economic conditions, then promoting directives for taking initiative is useless
- (P'6) Thus Marxism is strictly a descriptive non-engaged theory of society, which is not true
- (C') According to Marxism, humans aren't absolutely economically determined because Marxism is an engaged theory which promotes social change

Thus arises the incoherence which constitutes the problem of Economic Determinism in Marxism: a problem that threatens the consistency of Marxism as a scientific but also engaged theory of society. The *reductio ad absurdum* preliminary arguments of the reductionists and revisionists adopt a slippery slope line of reasoning: whereby they take economic determinism and autonomous actions as being necessarily mutually exclusive to make different theses about Marxism. In the subsequent sections, I will aim to show that economic determinism is compatible with human autonomy, and thus that Marxism is consistent with its normative and descriptive components.

## Literature Review

Marx's emphasis on the economic conditions and anticipating the inevitable eventuation of socialism has often led to him being misinterpreted as an economic reductionist leaving no room for autonomous actions. In the Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy, Marx emphasizes the role which material conditions play in determining human agency (1859). In the preface, Marx describes the material conditions as being preordained rather than chosen: "In the social production of their life, men enter into definite *relations that are indispensable and independent of their will*" (Marx, 1859, p:4). Then he explains that "It is not the consciousness of men which determine their being, but on the contrary that *social being determines human consciousness*" (Marx, 1859, p:4). Furthermore, he writes "The mode of production of material life determines the social, political, and intellectual life process in general" (Marx, 1859, p:4): meaning that the milieu of external material conditions in which one is embedded determines their consciousness and, thus, the way they choose to act.

Moreover, in the German Ideology, he writes, "The production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men. Conceiving, thinking, and the mental intercourse of men, appear at this stage as the *direct efflux of their material behaviour*. The same applies to mental production as expressed in the language of politics, laws, morality, religion, metaphysics, etc., of a people. Men are the producers of their conceptions, ideas, etc. – real, active men, as they are conditioned by a definite development of their productive forces and of the intercourse corresponding to these." (Marx, 1846). Then he adds "the multitude of productive forces

accessible to men *determines* the nature of society, hence, that the ‘history of humanity must always be studied and treated in relation to the history of industry and exchange’ (Marx, 1846).

Drawing economic determinism (as a monocausal unilateral absolute relation between the economy and ideology) from the base-superstructure metaphor in Marxism has been widely critiqued by Marxists as a misinterpretation of Marx’s words. In the “Critique of the Misunderstanding Concerning Marx’s Base-Superstructure Spatial Metaphor”, Carlos Garrido explains that Vulgar Marxists (Economic Reductionists) misunderstood the spatial metaphor (the base-superstructure theory) by stipulating that the economy absolutely determines the ideological superstructure. Revisionists in reaction to the Reductionists, Garrido elaborates, rejected the prospect that the economic base influences the ideological superstructure any more than the ideological superstructure influences the economic base. He explains that this arises from a semantic ambiguity when reading Marx: such that Marx uses the term “conditions” to describe the base-superstructure which can mean anything from influence to absolutely determine. He argues that Marx’s base-superstructure simply entails that the economy determines ideology: it doesn’t entail that the economy absolutely determines the ideology nor does it exclude that the ideology can influence the economy. He argues that both Reductionists and Revisionists are partially correct “The economic foundation determines the superstructure, but the superstructure can also influence the economic foundation”. Citing Althusser, he explains that the ideological superstructure enjoys a “relative autonomy” which allows it to reciprocate action unto the economic base (Garrido, 2021).

In “The Myth of Economic Determinism”, Peter Stillman offers a study of Marxist literature analysis arguing that inferring absolute economic determinism from Marx’s texts is a weak interpretation built on a shaky basis (2005). In his paper, Stillman cites different excerpts from Marx’s writings from which absolute economic determinism might be inferred. After establishing the base-superstructure theory as abstracted from Marxist texts, he argues that economic determinists have misinterpreted this metaphor by making a stronger claim than that intended initially by Marx. He notes that giving weight and putting special emphasis on economic conditions in social analysis is far from stipulating a relationship of strong causality between the economic sphere and the non-economic spheres. Stillman posits rather that Marx conceives of humans as active creators and shapers however their scope for free action is limited. Furthermore, Stillman notes an interesting flaw in the line of reasoning of the argument for absolute economic determinism: namely “reifying” the economic conditions rather than acknowledging them as defined by Marx: being composed of 1) relations of production and 2) forces of production (Stillman, 2005).

This active but constrained capacity of human action, defined in juxtaposition to absolute economic determinism, is evidenced by some excerpts of Marx’s writings. In “A Contribution to the Critique of the Political Economy”, Marx writes “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 found given and transmitted from the past” (Marx, 1859). Also, he describes labour as being a process “in which an individual of their own accord starts, regulates, and controls the material reactions between themselves and

Nature. By thus acting on the external world and changing it, they at the same time change their own nature [sic]" (Marx, 1859).

### **The Antimony:**

- (1) According to Marxism, Humans have free will (because of the normative directives which are characteristic of Marxism)
- (2) According to Marxism, Humans are determined by economic conditions (because of the base-superstructure theory which is characteristic of Marxism)

## **The Economic Reductionist's Asserted Argument**

Proponents of Economic Reductionism argue that the base-superstructure theory leaves no room for autonomy. The economic base (relations of production, forces of production) absolutely determines the ideological superstructure (culture, ethics, religion, politics, law, art, etc) which in its part determines human actions: economy-idea-will-actions. They misinterpret the Base-Superstructure theory, as expressing a unilateral relation of absolute causality between the economic conditions and the ideological conditions. They misinterpret the economic conditions as being the absolute determinants of all ideas.

Economic reductionists end up prioritizing the descriptive component over the normative component. They resolve the antimony by refuting (1).

### **Economic Reductionists' argument:**

- (P1) Economic conditions determine the ideology
- (P2) Ideas – will– actions
- \* (P3) Then, Human actions are absolutely determined by economic conditions
- (C) therefore, humans don't have free will

Economic reductionists rationalize the development of society as a chain reaction of economic conditions: a set of economic conditions determines another set of economic conditions whereby ideological conditions are only epiphenomenal to the economic chain of causality. According to the Reductionists, the autonomous agency has no place in the development of society.

According to the economic reductionist, Economic conditions determine other economic conditions, and this relation describes the causal track of the continuum of the development of society throughout history.

## **The Revisionists' Asserted Argument**

Proponents of the revisionist trend do away with the base-superstructure metaphor altogether. There is no longer a clear structure of the relation between the base and the superstructure. For them, the economy is not necessarily the base (determinant) and ideology is no longer the superstructure (determined), which is why they're considered revisionists: They *revise* (meaning to distort a convention) the base-superstructure metaphor by factoring out the special significance of the economy which Marx emphasizes. These revisionists reduce Marxism to any classical social theory whereby the different spheres of society equally influence one another. They argue that both the economy and ideology mutually influence one another; the relation of determination is bilateral. For example, the economy influences culture just as much as culture influences the economy.

The Revisionists prioritize the normative component over the descriptive component. They resolve the antimony by refuting (2).

**Revisionists' argument:**

(P1) Humans have free will

\*(P2) Economy and ideology equally determine one another (bilateral symmetrical relation of interpenetration between economy and ideology)

(P3) Ideas – will– actions

(C) Economic conditions determine human actions and autonomous human actions determine economic conditions

## **Base-Superstructure: Bilateral Asymmetrical Determinism**

The Antimony:

(1) According to Marxism, Humans have free will to change the economic conditions

(2) According to Marxism, Humans are determined by the economic conditions

Reductionism: No free will + Base-superstructure (as a unilateral absolute relation of determinism)

Revisionism: Free will - Base-superstructure (as a unilateral absolute relation of determinism)

However,

Marxism: Free will + Base-superstructure (as a bilateral asymmetrical relation of determinism)

The objective of this paper is to resolve the aforementioned antimony by offering a solution that compromises on neither the descriptive component nor the normative component of Marxism. Whereby the base-superstructure metaphor is defended from revisionism and human agency is defended from reductionism. I will argue that autonomous action and the base-superstructure theory are compatible.



The base doesn't absolutely determine the superstructure however the base-superstructure theory still holds. The base and the superstructure mutually influence one another. It is a bilateral relationship, however, not a symmetrical relationship. Contrary to the reductionist's argument, the base determines the superstructure, but the superstructure also influences the base. Contrary to the revisionist's argument which puts the economy on par with ideology (whereby the two can equally determine one another), the relationship between the economy and ideology is asymmetrical: more weight is to be put on the economic base in social analysis.

**(A) my argument:**

(P0) Humans have free will

(P1.a) Predominantly, the economy determines the ideology

(P1.b) To a lesser extent, ideology influences the economy

(P2) Ideas – will– actions

(C) Predominantly in society economic conditions determine human actions, and to a lesser extent human actions influence economic conditions

Both Revisionists and Reductionists take economic determinism and free will to be incompatible. The revisionists opt to dismiss economic determinism (i.e., to disregard the base-superstructure metaphor) in order to preserve free will. The reductionists opt to dismiss free will to preserve the base-superstructure metaphor.

The base-superstructure metaphor does not express a unilateral formula of causation as do the natural sciences, but rather it is a heuristic for social analysis. The base-superstructure metaphor expressly means that most of the time, economic conditions determine the ideological conditions, and given that ideology is the framework for conscious decision-making, and idea-will-action, then most of the time (almost all the time), the basis for human actions can be traced back to the economic conditions.

Reductionists interpret the base-superstructure theory mechanistically. Taking a metaphysical overview, they separate the economic conditions from the ideological conditions and then mechanistically stipulate a relation between the two: a monocausal unilateral relationship of determination between the economic conditions and the ideological conditions. They then deduce that there's no room for autonomous agency.

The reductionist oversimplifies the complex interrelated nature of material reality. Projecting a subject-object paradigm on the relation of ideological conditions with economic conditions. They restrict the subjects to ideological conditions and reify economic conditions as objects. However, they overlook the fact that Economic conditions are constituted by both relations of production and forces of production: whereby the forces of production, who are the workers, constitute the objective conditions of the economy and are simultaneously autonomous conscious subjects.

## **Formal Analysis of the Dynamics between Ideological Conditions and Economic Conditions<sup>2</sup>**

- (1) An economic condition can determine another economic condition ( $E1 \rightarrow E2$ ),
- (2) An economic condition can determine an ideological condition ( $E1 \rightarrow I1$ ),
- (3) An ideological condition can determine another ideological condition ( $I1 \rightarrow I2$ ); but also
- (4) An ideological condition can determine an economic condition<sup>3</sup> ( $I1 \rightarrow E2$ )

Contrary to the arguments of Reductionists, who would refute (4), all these conditional statements are mutually inclusive: describing real social phenomena which unfold according to the four laws of dialectics.

The key prospect which is overlooked by the Reductionist is the complex nature of economic conditions. Marx defines economic conditions as the composite of both relations of production and forces of production (i.e., workers). Economic conditions aren't wholly objective such that the forces of production who themselves are subjects are a constituent part of the economic conditions. Ideology isn't a detached superstructure from economic conditions. Ideology drives the worker who moulds the economic conditions which then shape ideology.

## **Modified Formal Analysis<sup>4</sup>**

- (1)  $Fp1 \Leftrightarrow Rp1 \rightarrow Rp2 \Leftrightarrow Fp2$  ( $E1 \rightarrow E2$ ),
- (2)  $Rp1 \Leftrightarrow Fp1 \rightarrow I1$  ( $E1 \rightarrow I1$ ),
- (3)  $I1 \rightarrow I2$ ; and
- (4)  $I1 \rightarrow Fp1 \Leftrightarrow Rp1$  ( $I1 \rightarrow E1$ )

As per the base-superstructure metaphor, the economic conditions determine the ideological conditions, but the economic conditions themselves are synthesized by workers who are driven by ideological conditions. Every individual is autonomous to decide on things. The decision-making process happens within the framework of ideology, and the consequent action happens within the framework of the economy (and more generally, material reality).

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<sup>2</sup> "E" represents economic conditions, "I" represents ideological conditions: where 1 and 2 are arbitrary cases of either.

<sup>3</sup> These four conditional statements do not express a comprehensive representation of all social phenomena. There are material conditions other than the economic conditions which constitute other social phenomena and determine other ideological conditions.

<sup>4</sup> "Fp" represents forces of production, and "Rp" represent relations of production; Both of which are economic conditions that is represented as "E". While both Fps and Rps are economic conditions. The latter's significance is that it's conscious (the forces of production are workers). The node of connection between ideological conditions and economic conditions are the forces of production. They constitute the economic conditions as driven by ideology.

However, the ideological superstructure which is the framework for autonomous decision-making is shaped by the objective structure of relations of production.

Furthermore, contrary to the Revisionists' arguments, the interpenetration of the economy and ideology isn't symmetrical. The formally expressed conditional statements (1) (2) (3) and (4) which describe real social phenomena are not equally common and important to the development of society throughout history. (4) is the least common (3) is the most common, as per the base-superstructure theory. (1) and (4) are more consequential to the development of society throughout history because they synthesize economic conditions.

The development of ideas and relations of production are not separate or detached phenomena in real life. (1) (2) (3) and (4) do not occur separately, they occur in a branching-chain reaction type of dynamic.

Many ideas develop into other ideas but fail to manifest in the material world whereby they would be inconsequential  $I1 \rightarrow I2 \rightarrow I3 \rightarrow I4 \rightarrow I5$ . Or ideas would manifest materially but without having any significance to the economy whereby they would be effectively inconsequential to the general development of society  $I1 \rightarrow I2 \rightarrow I3 \rightarrow M1 \rightarrow M2$ .

The most consequential to the development of society is the syntheses that yield economic conditions i.e. (1) and (4). Social phenomena which synthesize ideological conditions are consequential to the development of society in so far as they have the potential to influence the economic conditions by extension; (2) and (3) are inconsequential to the development of society if the synthesized ideological condition does not itself synthesize into an economic condition ultimately i.e. (2) and (3) are consequential only if (4) succeeds them. If an idea does not mobilize an individual to change the relations of production, then it is inconsequential for the development of society.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, I have argued that human autonomy is compatible with the base-superstructure metaphor. An individual can be determined by economic conditions but also have the capacity for autonomous actions. Reductionists distort the Base-Superstructure metaphor. Revisionists strawman the Base-Superstructure metaphor by counterarguing the Reductionists' distorted conception of it. The normative and descriptive components of Marxism are consistent; the normative and descriptive components are one: they constitute a science of the development of society that anticipates the eventuation of socialism.

The node of the intersection of the development of ideas and the development of the relations of production is human beings, specifically humans who contribute to production and by extension the development of human society. A worker is both a force of production and a conscious individual. This is a metaphysical truth of human existence. The forces of production are also conscious decision-makers.

Economic conditions: relations of production + forces of production

Forces of production are conscious decision-makers who can will themselves to act according to an idea they have. The forces of production are the active conscious constituents of the economic conditions. This is evident in Marxist literature, the economic conditions which characterize the stage of development of society are defined by the status of both the relations of production and the economic conditions.

Some ideas have effective consequences for the development of society, as expressed by (4). Some ideas manifest as economically significant. This does not undermine the materialist conception of the Science of Socialism. “Material force must be overthrown by material force, but theory also becomes a material force as soon as it has gripped the masses.” (Marx, *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, 1843).

“As philosophy finds its material weapon in the proletariat, so the proletariat finds its spiritual weapon in philosophy. And once the lightning of thought has squarely struck this ingenious soil of the people, the emancipation of the people will be accomplished.” (Marx, 1843)

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