

# Introduction to Elementary Concepts of Historical Materialism

By Marta Harnecker

Philosophers have only interpreted the world in different ways, the point, however, is to change it.

Marx: 11th Thesis on Feuerbach

What is the significance of this change from the interpretation of the world to its transformation, announced by Marx in the 11th Thesis on Feuerbach? The necessity of abandoning theory in order to pass over into action; in other words, the necessity of abandoning the library and its books in order to commit oneself exclusively to revolutionary political action?

Many young Latin Americans, tired of the revolutionary rhetoric which has never succeeded in producing a single political act that has really transformed the conditions of misery and exploitation of the great masses of Latin American workers, have fallen into the tendency to interpret this sentence as advocating a change from theory to action, as if all theory were only the interpretation of the world, and as if all action implies a transformation of it.

If this were so, consequently Marx would have had to abandon his books and his study to dedicate himself exclusively to political work. Nevertheless, to the very end of his life, intellectual work occupied a great part of his time, although he did not abandon immediate political work.

Marx's life therefore poses a dilemma: either Marx was not consistent with his affirmation of the necessity of passing from the interpretation to the transformation of the world, or he considered that there could not be a transformation of it without preliminary knowledge of the reality which he wanted to transform, without a preliminary knowledge of how it is organized, what its rules of functioning and development are, what social forces exist to realize the change, in short, without a scientific knowledge of it.

There can be no doubt that the latter was Marx's position.

The 11th Thesis on Feuerbach did not announce the death of all theory, but a break with the theories of man, society and history, which until that moment were philosophical theories which were limited to contemplating and interpreting the world, being incapable of transforming it because they did not understand the functioning mechanisms of societies.

What existed until that moment, in relation to society and its history, were: either philosophical theories about history - philosophies of history, or historical narrations and sociological analyses which were limited to *describing* events which occurred in distinct societies. What *did not exist* was *scientific knowledge* of societies and their history.

The 11th Thesis on Feuerbach indicates, therefore, a *break* with all the philosophical theories of man and of history which only interpreted the world and announces the beginning of a new scientific theory, the scientific theory of history or historical materialism, which founded a new scientific field: the *science of history*, in the same manner that the scientific theory of Galileo founded a new scientific field, the science of physics.

Let us step back for a moment and analyze the significance of this word "theory" as it is used in scientific language.

In the same manner that the process of material production attempts to transform a definite primary material (for example, copper) into a definite product (for example, pipes, electrical cables, etc.) through the utilization on the part of the workers of specialized means of labor (machines and tools, etc.); the process of the production of knowledge attempts to transform a definite primary material (a superficial, deformed perception of reality) into a definite product (a rigorous, scientific knowledge of it). Intellectual workers realize this transformation utilizing definite instruments of intellectual labor, fundamentally: the scientific *theory* and *method*. The body of more or less systematic concepts of a science is called theory (for example: the theory of gravity, the theory of relativity, the Freudian theory of the unconscious, etc.). The form in which these concepts are utilized is called method.

All *scientific theory*, therefore, has the character of an *instrument of knowledge*; it does not give us knowledge of a concrete reality, but it gives us the means or instruments of intellectual labor which permit us to arrive at a rigorous scientific knowledge of it. The theory of gravity, for example, does not give us an immediate knowledge of the velocity at which a stone falls from a definite altitude, but it gives us the means with which we can make this concrete calculation.

When we speak then of the Marxist theory of history, we are speaking of the body of abstract concepts which serve intellectual workers as an *instrument* to analyze, in a scientific manner, different societies and their laws of functioning and development.

This body of concepts of historical materialism includes the following concepts: the production process, productive forces, technical relations of production, social relations of production, relations of production, infrastructure, superstructure, ideological structure, juridico-political structure, mode of production, social formation, political conjuncture, determination in the last instance by the economy, relative autonomy of the other levels, social classes and the class struggle, transition, revolution, etc.

The fundamental beginnings of this body of concepts, although still very fragile, is found in *The German Ideology* (1845-46). This work can be considered as marking a true theoretical revolution in the thought of its authors. With it Marx and Engels inaugurated a new science where before had reigned the philosophies of history, where there had existed only philosophies of history and narrations of empirical historical events.

What is the breadth of this scientific discovery?

To explain this we will use an image employed by Louis Althusser. If we consider the great scientific discoveries of human history, we can imagine the different sciences as regional formations of great theoretical "continents." We can affirm that before Marx only two great continents had been discovered: the continent of Mathematics by the Greeks (Tales, or whomever the myth of this man designates) and the continent of Physics by Galileo and his successors. A science like chemistry founded by Lavoisier is a regional science of the continent Physics. A science like biology by integrating itself with molecular chemistry is also entered in this same continent. Logic in its modern form is entered in the continent Mathematics. On the other hand, it is very possible that Freud discovered a new scientific continent.<sup>1</sup>

If this metaphor is useful, we can affirm that Marx opened to scientific knowledge a new continent: the continent of History.

This new science founded by Marx is a "materialist" science, like all the sciences and, therefore, its general theory has the name historical materialism. The word materialism simply indicates the strict attitude of the scientist before the reality of his object, which permits him/her to grasp, as Engels said, "nature, without any addition from without." But the expression "historical materialism" is, nonetheless, somewhat strange, since the other sciences do not employ the word "materialism" to define themselves. We do not speak for example of chemical materialism, or of physical materialism. The term *materialism*, used by Marx to designate the new science of history, has as its object to establish a line of demarcation between the previous idealist conceptions and the new materialist, that is scientific, conception of history.<sup>2</sup>

Until now we have spoken of historical materialism and of the great theoretical revolution which its appearance provoked. Now we must ask ourselves: is Marxist theory reducible to historical materialism, in short, to a scientific theory?

No, Marxist theory is composed of a scientific theory: historical materialism, and a philosophy: dialectical materialism.

Althusser shows us that "a correlation exists between the great scientific revolutions and the great philosophical revolutions. It is enough to compare the major events in the history of the sciences on the one hand, and major events in the history of philosophy on the other. The great philosophical revolutions always follow the great scientific revolutions. From Greek mathematics followed the philosophy of Plato, from the constitution of the Physics of Galileo, Cartesian philosophy, from Newtonian physics, Kantian philosophy, from mathematical logic, the philosophy of Husserl, from the science founded by Marx, a new philosophy: dialectical materialism."<sup>3</sup>

Consequently, for philosophy to arise and develop itself, it is necessary that the sciences exist. Perhaps, due to this fact, there did not exist philosophy before Plato.

The transformation which the birth of a new science produces in the theoretical field, is not felt immediately in the field of philosophy, a certain

time is required for philosophy to be transformed. This necessary lag of philosophy with respect to science has been felt for a long time in Marxist philosophy or dialectical materialism. "The thirty year desert between the *Theses on Feuerbach* and *Anti-Duhring* is evidence of this, as are certain long periods of deadlock later, periods in which we and many others are still marking time."

On the other hand, owing to the intimate relationship which exists between scientific discoveries and philosophical transformations, it is in the most advanced scientific analysis of Marx and Engels, especially in *Capital*, where we can find the most developed theoretical elements from which to elaborate Marxist philosophy. Lenin said, quite correctly, that we ought to look in *Capital* for dialectical materialism, that is, Marxist philosophy.

Marxist theory is formed, therefore, by a scientific theory of history, or historical materialism, and by a philosophical theory which corresponds to this revolution in the field of the sciences: dialectical materialism.

In the lines above, we have noted the weak state of elaboration of dialectical materialism, a situation which is explained by the necessary lag of philosophy with respect to new scientific discoveries.

Let us now examine the level of elaboration which exists in the body of concepts which constitutes the general theory of historical materialism.

This body of concepts was never developed in a systematic form by Marx and Engels. It was, nevertheless, employed with great success by these authors, to analyse the system of capitalist production, permitting them to obtain a profound knowledge of it. Through *Capital* the international proletariat can know the reasons for its misery and the means to end it in a revolutionary manner. The prodigious discoveries of Marx and Engels give the working masses a correct orientation for their struggles. The capitalist system has been laid bare. The conditions of its birth, its development and its destruction has been analysed. The objective conditions of revolution have been pointed out. The epoch of utopias has come to an end.

This body of concepts which was not developed in a systematic form by its creators, has been unevenly elaborated by their successors. The concepts pertaining to the infrastructure, for example, have been better elaborated than those pertaining to the superstructure. This is not the result of an accident, but of the fact that they are the concepts used most frequently by Marx in the analysis of the economic structure of the capitalist mode of production. Studying the form in which Marx uses them in *Capital*, has led to a more systematic elaboration of them, although one still insufficient in many respects. The major part of the other concepts remain, on the contrary, in a state of "practical concepts" (but which produce a knowledge indicating the general lines which ought to guide an investigation).

The actual state of the theory of historical materialism is, therefore,

more or less the following:

- a scientific theory of the economic aspect of the pre-monopoly stage of the capitalist mode of production and some elements with which to understand the stage of monopoly capitalism;
- the absence of a developed scientific theory of the ideological and juridico-political structures of the capitalist mode of production;
- the absence of a scientific study of other modes of production (slave, feudal, etc.);
- some elements of a general theory of the transition from one mode of production to another. Above all, elements to understand the transition from the capitalist to the socialist mode of production (dictatorship of the proletariat, non-correspondence between property relations and real appropriation, etc.);
- the first elements for a scientific theory of social classes, above all of the social classes under the capitalist system of production;
- some elements for an analysis of the political conjuncture (theory of the weakest link in Lenin, Mao's system of contradiction).

Now, the undeveloped state of many aspects of Marxist theory ought not to discourage us, but on the contrary, should encourage us to a profound and critical study of all which now exists and to an elaboration of the general concepts which are urgently needed for the analysis of our societies. Moreover, we should not forget that the Russian, Chinese, Vietnamese and Cuban revolutionaries did not wait until Marxist theory had been completely developed to commit themselves to revolutionary struggle. And finally, what has been learned in the struggle itself has helped to develop theory.

Neither should we forget that Marxist theory is only one of the aspects of the theoretical formation of a revolutionary militant.

If we were asked to describe the broad outlines of this kind of formation, we would say:

The *first aspect* of the formation of a revolutionary militant is the study of Marxist theory. History shows us that the union of Marxist theory and the workers movement gives to the people of our time the possibility of "transforming the world", of "making revolution".

But, although Marxist theory is fundamental for the constitution of a serious revolutionary movement, which passes from revolutionary romanticism and voluntarism to a stage of realism and of the effective preparation for action, by itself it is not enough.

To remain at this stage is as Mao said, "to contemplate an arrow without ever launching it", or to "repeat a record", forgetting that our duty is to "learn the new", to "create the new".

The *second aspect* which we must not forget in the formation of a revolutionary militant is the creative application of Marxist theory to the concrete reality of his/her country.



Revolutions *in general* do not exist, only particular revolutions, adapted to the situation in each country.

It is necessary to struggle against the type of study which frequently arises in Marxism, a study which is not a function of the practical necessities of the revolution, but simply to acquire new knowledge. It is necessary to link the universal truth of Marxism-Leninism to the concrete practice of our revolutionary movements.

It is necessary to study the history of our countries, to know the specific characteristics of our social formations. To study what defines our economic structure, the form in which the different relations of production are combined, which relation dominates, what are the strong and the weak points of this structure. To study the ideological structure, the dominant ideas among the masses. To study the structure of power, the internal contradictions of this power, etc.

This study of our concrete social formations must be realized through the gathering of the greatest amount of data concerning this reality, critically analysed in the light of the general principles of Marxism-Leninism in order to obtain correct conclusions.

The *third aspect* of the formation of a revolutionary militant is the study of the political conjuncture of a country and at the world level. It is not enough to know the history of a country, to know its present state of development, it is necessary to pass to a more concrete level, to the study of the "present moment" of the class struggle in that country and at the world level, that is to say, to the study of the political conjuncture. It is fundamental to determine who are the friends and the enemies of the revolution at each stage of its development. To be able to determine the economic, political, military and cultural power of each of the groups which confront each other, etc.

To avoid ineffective theoreticism and senseless practicicism, it is necessary that every revolutionary militant strive to form himself/herself in a more or less profound manner, in all three of these aspects.

Now, the *Objective of this book* is to help to understand Marxist-Leninist theory. The study of the concrete reality of each country is the proper task of each revolutionary movement.

Our work is limited, therefore, to presenting in a pedagogical, yet at the same time rigorous form, the principal concepts of the general theory of historical materialism. These concepts were enunciated by Marx, Engels and Lenin and used by them in the study of concrete realities, but nevertheless, they never developed these concepts in a systematic way.

This book seeks to examine these concepts by making a critical study of them, in other words, seeking behind the words into the profound thought of their authors, which will permit us to avoid dogmatism and enable us to creatively apply these concepts in the analysis of our concrete realities.

This critical study of the principal concepts of historical materialism attempts to incorporate the most recent investigations of them, which distinguishes the content of this book from the other manuals on Marxism which we have previously known.

To carry out our objective we have been obliged to begin with the more developed concepts. We have begun with the concept of production which is the basic concept of Marxist theory: it is the production of material goods which serves as the basis for explaining the other aspects of society. Next we will study the concepts of relations of production, productive forces, economic structure, infrastructure and superstructure, ideological structure, juridico-political structure, mode of production social formation, political conjuncture, transition. All these concepts which are fundamental to the scientific study of the *social structure* are studied in the *first part* of this book. The *second part* studies the effects of the social structure on the individuals who live in it and the action which they can exercise on this structure: the social changes and the class struggle. Finally the *third part* refers to the Marxist theory of history and gives us a general idea of Marx and Engel's contribution on this issue. Apparently the "normal" thing to do would have been to start with this general idea, as the other manuals do; nonetheless, to formulate this general rule in a scientific and comprehensive form for the reader, it is necessary to return to the arduous road of the systematic and rigorous study of all the previous concepts.

Here we recommend what Marx wrote to Lachatre on March 18, 1872:

Dear Citizen,

I applaud your idea of publishing the translation of *Das Kapital* as a serial. In this form the book will be more accessible to the working class, a consideration which to me outweighs everything else.

That is the good side of your suggestion, but here is the reverse of the medal: the method of analysis which I have employed and which had not previously been applied to economic subjects, makes the reading of the first chapters rather arduous, and it is to be feared that the French public, always impatient to come to a conclusion, eager to know the connection between general principles and the immediate questions that have aroused their passions, may be disheartened because they be unable to move on at once.

That is a disadvantage I am powerless to overcome, unless it be by forewarning and forearming those readers who zealously seek the truth. There is no royal road to science, and only those who do not dread the fatiguing climb of its steep paths have a chance of gaining its luminous summits.

Believe me,

dear citizen,

Your devoted,

Karl Marx

Now then, the uneven development already noted of the concepts of historical materialism is reflected in the content of the diverse chapters. Some manage a fairly rigorous and scientific presentation of the concepts; others are limited almost to merely the posing of problems. Our intention has been to show to the reader this situation of uneven development.

To accomplish this goal we have used the method of theoretical work and critical reading which we learned studying the *Works of Louis Althusser*, in the main, and those of his collaborators. Each time that we have found sufficiently clear texts of these authors we have used them in a textual or semi-textual form, showing whence they came so that the reader might be able to return to the original.

The questions and the summary which appear at the end of the chapters have a pedagogical purpose, as much for those who study on their own as for those who use the content of this book in courses of formation for workers and students.

The themes for reflection which follow the questions cannot be answered on the basis of the content of the chapter alone. Their objective is two-fold: on the one hand to show the theoretical problems which can be posed in the study of determinant concepts; on the other, to indicate the possible applications of the theoretical concepts in the analysis of our Latin American reality.

The general bibliography which is presented at the end of the book sets forth the principal texts which ought to be read in the first stage of formation. Each text is accompanied by a critical commentary to orient the reader. At the end of this bibliography, in which the texts of each author are presented in chronological order, concrete suggestions are made as to the manner in which they can be organized for a more effective reading.

The content of this work should not be taken as dogma but as an effort at the pedagogical investigation and exposition of a certain number of instruments of theoretical labor. If any of these instruments, instead of facilitating the production of knowledge of a concrete social reality, make it more difficult, there is no doubt that it should be modified, perfected or in an extreme case, abandoned.

The bibliography at the end of each chapter attempts to facilitate the critical study of its contents.

We recommend that our readers study the works of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Mao tse tung, inasmuch as they, even though not elaborating systematically many of the concepts of historical materialism, have narrated and analysed their own revolutionary practice from which we have much to learn.

But to read them, to study them, to assimilate them, does not mean simply reciting what we read in these texts. Famous quotes are not enough,

what is needed is the creative application of Marxist theory. Lenin harshly criticised those politicians who limited themselves to quoting from books without ever making the effort to confront reality in a creative manner.

They...pick out passages from books like a scholar whose head is a card index box filled with quotations from books, which he picks out as he needs them; but if a new situation arises which is not described in any book, he becomes confused and grabs the wrong quotation from the box.

Finally, we want to especially thank our professor and friend, Louis Althusser and all those who, in one way or another, have made possible the realization of this work which is the fruit of a true collective labor and to warn our readers that it will be *absolutely sterile* if it is limited solely to augmenting the scope of our knowledge of Marxist theory. Let us remember that Marx's ultimate objective was *to transform the world*.

Santiago, Chile January 1971

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## News for Boston Area Readers

A number of people close to the *Theoretical Review* and who see theoretical work as important to party building, are forming a study group in Boston. The group will focus on an introduction to Marxist-Leninist theory and methods of analysis, with an emphasis on modern theoreticians such as Althusser, Bettelheim, Gramsci, Poulantzas and others.

Comrades interested in joining please write immediately to:

*Theoretical Review*  
P.O. Box 464  
Brookline Village, Massachusetts 02147.

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### Errata for *Theoretical Review* #6

Page 1, paragraph 6, first sentence should read:

But even further, Althusser's critique, which draws on his substantial theoretical knowledge, provides us with some of the theoretical and political tools with which to critique, not only our own movement, but also to begin to *rectify* it.

Page 30, paragraph 2, line 11 to the end of the paragraph should read:

handful of monopolists who exploit you: *become conscious* and act on the consequences!" There is no reason to doubt our success, or do you doubt the total power of ideas on consciousness? What a vulgar Marxist you are!