

# 150 Years After Capital: Reading Marx as Life Grounded

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Theme: [Global Economy](#), [History](#), [Poverty & Social Inequality](#)

*“One basis for life and another basis for science is an a-priori lie” – Karl Marx, Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts, 1845.*

*Marx’s Base-Superstructure Theory (BST) has long been a major object of controversy. It is deeply embedded in a monumental corpus of system-challenging analysis while secondary interpretations are deeply conflicted and rarely reliable. In general, partial takes and opposed propagandas militate against primary-source understanding. Within the last 35 years, a sea-shift of global culture to anti-foundationalist relativism has uprooted the very idea of a common base or ground.*

## The Productive Base as the Ground of Society and History

Marx’s fundamental concept, the *productive base* of historical societies is more or less forgotten amidst ‘Marxism is dead’ pronouncements. Yet Marx’s principal idea remains intact – that the material conditions of historical societies – opposed to God or human concepts – determine human affairs. This principle is the first onto-axiological step of Marx’s base-superstructure theory (BST). It begins by repudiating the conceptual idealism of philosophy from Plato to Hegel which supposes that disembodied Ideas determine material reality, rather than the other way round. In his *German Ideology* (completed in 1846 at 28 years), Marx mercilessly satirizes neo-Hegelians flattering themselves that the “ideas in their heads” determine the real world, quipping that they think drowning occurs because the victim is “possessed by the idea of gravity”. This unpublished study is also where Marx introduces the foundational first principle of his base -superstructure theory (emphasis added as henceforth): “Men can be distinguished from animals by consciousness, religion, or anything else you like. They themselves begin to distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to *produce their means of subsistence*”. We see here the *primacy* for Marx of human reproduction evolving beyond Nature’s available provisions – a continuation of natural evolution into species self-construction increasingly “subjugating Nature to its sway”. Yet what is not examined is exactly *what* these forces of production are producing once the industrial revolution of capitalism occurs. Marx originally says “*means of life*” but these are not defined beyond a primitive list beginning “food, habitation, clothing, and so on”. Life necessities that productive forces must produce have no criterion. We return to this unexamined first principle of Marx’s base-superstructure theory in depth ahead.

Marx's work begins with the purpose "to stand philosophy on its feet again" by grounding critical thought where none had before, in "society's material mode of production". His then work takes on the revolutionary political edge for which he is most famous – the iconic *Manifesto of the Communist Party* written with Frederick Engels in 1848. Here Marx's philosophy of the material base of society and history moves to a sweeping 10-Point social program, much of it instituted within the next century – extension of existing *industrial development to state ownership, graduated income tax, free education for all children by public schools, and a national bank*. Marx's theory has been in this way largely proven in practice against the standard assumption to the contrary. Yet it is not until his 1859 Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy (CPE)* that Marx sets out an incisively principled account of his base-superstructure theory as "the guiding thread of my studies". Since this canonical statement carried through in *Das Kapital* is widely misunderstood as a mechanistic determinism in which all elements of society are uniquely determined by the ruling economic system, it requires our close inspection. "In the social production which men carry on", Marx begins his paradigm statement of the *BST*, "they enter into definite relations that are indispensable and *independent of their will*".

This is thought to be a statement of hard determinism against free will. But it is, more modestly, a statement of unacknowledged facts in the 'free society' capitalism is assumed to be. Wage or salary work must be done by the great majority to stay alive "independent of their will". Their "definite relations" are materially determined by the employer who must also follow market demand at the lowest costs with 'no choice in the matter'. Behind this "wage slavery", Marx emphasises in *Capital* lies the "great expropriation of the people from the soil, from the means of subsistence, and from the means of labour- – [by] violent and painful methods". They must sell their labour into oppressive servitude, or they do not survive. In the beginning, Marx explains in his *Capital* account, this servitude was enforced by mass hangings, floggings, pillories, and deprivation of children. Today social humiliation, loss of face and destitution as well as starvation again re-enforces this system in capitalist globalization and new 'freedoms for investors'.

Marx's 'economic determinism' is not, as often charged, a false metaphysics or reductionist mechanism,. His revolutionary objective of the "self-government of the direct producers" is the opposite. Yet Marx's *BST* militantly rejects any kind of voluntarism lor 'utopian socialism'. The mode of production that produces a society's means of life, he argues at the

most general level, must be developed to a stage where the direct producers are organised in a collective form to historically replace the ruling capitalist system. This is why he asserts in his definitive *CPE* “guiding thread of my studies” that production relations must “*correspond to a definite stage of development of men’s material powers*”. This is “the productive *base*” that prior philosophers overlooked or ignored on which slave-owning, feudal or capitalist social systems are raised and which ruling cultures assume as “everlasting” or “eternal”. Applied to our present condition, the argument remains forceful. Workers and employers alike are forced to compete to the lowest denominator of conditions, however life destructively in process and consequencee. This is why Marx generically summarizes in the next sentence of this central statement of the *BST* that the “the totality of these relations of production constitutes the *economic structure* of society [emphases added] – the *real foundation* [or base] on which the *legal and political superstructure* arises”.

Marx is *opposed* to this economic determinism, but organises the facts as they are against ‘ideological illusions’. His base-superstructure theory is the result. A *socially self-directing mode of production* is his ultimate objective. Most commentators ignore this complex argument and charge that Marx is denying the autonomy of individual consciousness, free choice, and democratic processes. Yet Marx’s master verb for superstructure determination by the economic base here is *entsprechen- to correspond to or comply with*. This underlying principle applies tas well to the state and legal institutions of a society. They must *comply with* the ruling ownership structure society’s forces of production, or be *selected out* as materially impossible, unviable, or inefficient. Marx’s *BST* is in this way a theory in unrecognised parallel with Darwin’s *Origin of the Species*, a work which Marx considered the scientific correlative in evolutionary biology of his account of the social struggle for survival in historical evolution , as he says in *Capital* seven years later). In both cases, determining factors of life adaptation do *not* determine specific outcomes in Marx’s or Darwin’s theory, but *set the range of material possibility within which life-organizations must develop or die*. One reason for the 150-year-old misunderstandings of Marx’s base-superstructure theory is that he does not clearly define this unifying principle or others in his towering and original investigation.

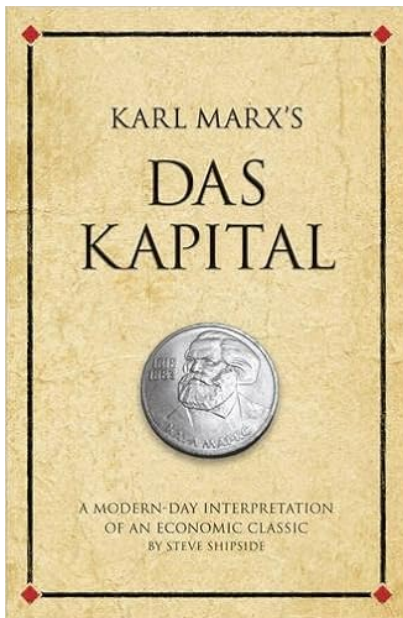
Marx requested Darwin to write a prefatory note for the publication of *Capital*, but Darwin declined. The anecdote is well known, but not that Darwin’s refusal occurs in neat accordance with Marx’s lead principle of economic determinism. In its terms, Darwin’s choice space is not denied, but affirmed by Marx’s invitation. Darwin chose not to accept in line with the strong social selective pressures against endorsing a work laying bare the capitalist class establishment within which Darwin moved and depended for his research. It is an implicit basic principle of Marx’s *BST* determinism that people normally retreat into the preconceptions of the ruling order and its “forms of social consciousness” in adaptation to their social environment. Here as well, Marx does not define these suggestive ‘forms of social consciousness’ (*gesellschaftlichen Bewußtseiformen*). He lets the concepts manage on their own in their contexts without criteria. Yet to attribute mechanical determinism or *hard behaviorism with no inner world* to Marx *BST* does not follow, as he makes clear in his Preface to *Capital* when he writes: “My standpoint”, he says, “can less than other make the individual responsible for relations for whose creature he socially remains, *however much he may subjectively raise himself above them*”. That is, individuals are not responsible for the social system of relations which they must function within (an idea that goes back to graduating year of secondary school). Yet Marx insists, as most philosophy does not, that *subjectivism* is incapable of understanding the real world or changing it. This is why he

ridicules Kant's moral will independent of consequences, Max Stirner's 'Omnipotent Ego', neo-Hegelianism, and all commentary which revolves within a materially impotent "consciousness in itself". His *Theses on Feuerbach* is the iconic expression of Marx's unprecedentedly *activist ontology and epistemology*. He says in these notes, Thesis II : "The dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking which is *isolated from practice* is a merely scholastic question".

Marx would be hard on most postmodernism, analytic theory, and academia in general today. Yet his base-superstructure theory is most easily de-mystified and undistorted when reading attends to its material model – a building foundation and a superstructure raised upon it. No superstructure can stand without a foundation, and this could be called an "inexorable law". But this does not mean the superstructure conforms to the base by ruling out all alternatives within its range of permission. Nor, conversely, does it mean that the base will change in virtue of those alternatives. Superstructural phenomena must, in Marx's *BST*, *comply with* the underlying mode of production, or face strong selective pressures against to typical extinction. This is why Marx argues the laws, policies and state in a society must correspond to survive, and why he mocks those who think a legal proclamation will change social reality *if there are not the material conditions to enable it to occur*. In logical terms, Marx's straightforward meaning may be summarized without militant mood : all legal, state and ideological phenomena must be consistent with the society's material reproduction at the established level of society's productive provision of means of existence, or they will not arise in the first place and normally perish if they do.

#### Social Being Determines Consciousness

Marx continues his *BST* 'guiding thread' to write that "*definite forms of social consciousness correspond* to a society's mode of production". This has led to many competing interpretations, dogmas and denunciations. Yet to test it, one may ask: Where is there *not* correspondence in global capitalism between 'ruling *forms* of social consciousness' and 'the *economic structure*'? More specifically, do we find in official society and mainstream media that the dominant meanings of "freedom", "responsibility", "productivity", "and "justice" are do *not comply with* the capitalist system? An easy refutation would be any published conception of these anchoring normative concepts which opposes, say, the rightness of private profit. Or rejects the assumption that citizens must sell their services to employers as their duty to society? As Marx's many examples show, *forms of social consciousness* regulate like a syntax beneath awareness of them.



Marx continues his explanation with perhaps the most controversial sentence of his work. "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their *social being determines their consciousness*". For this, Marx is held to be declaring a materialist reductionism, or the epiphenomenal nature of human thought, or denial of moral choice, or undialectical simplification, or a soulless doctrine. It is true that Marx repudiates the opposite of any theory which *excludes material foundations from its understanding*. Thus received philosophers and press commentary, for example, are ridiculed by Marx and more specifically, religio-moral certitudes reflecting capitalist rule. Yet since all words and languages are social constructions, Marx's claim is obviously true in a now accepted way. The most studied philosophers of the twentieth century, Martin Heidegger and Ludwig Wittgenstein, declare language as the "home of Being" and "the limit of thought" respectively, and contemporary etymology presupposes language's social and historical nature. Marx's most controversial claim that "social being determines consciousness" is hardly off-base except that Marx's *BST* argues that the social is primarily determined by the economic structure that must and will be overthrown. In *BST* terms, this line of thought is rejected as socially unacceptable. This is how, as Marx provocatively describes it in many different contexts, a realm of illusory cover stories and concepts which blinker out the capitalist system's oppressions and exploitations while purporting the highest moral motives of its lead agents and promoters. Consider Marx's most bitingly witty asides in this light: "The Church of England will more readily pardon an attack on its Thirty-Nine Articles than 1/39<sup>th</sup> of its income". This is the same Marx that in *The Holy Family* talks of religion as the "spirit of spiritless conditions, the heart of a heartless world" " - thus affirming the spirit and the heart that he is said to deny, but castigating the capitalist church investments, rents and hypocrisies grinding the unseen poor. Marx's insulting but revealing *BST* analysis also lays bare the institutionalised veils of doctrine masking the cupidity of the Conservative Party and its Lords: "The high Tory hymns the beauties of the British Constitution, the Crown and the Law until the day of danger snatches from him the confession that he is interested only in - Ground Rent."

Marx's base-superstructure method of laying bare private capital gain underneath the moral pomposity and robes of religion, the constitution, and the law still applies to, for example, US politicians' invocation of "God's blessing" and "our sacred Constitution". Yet establishment ideology is also structured, Marx implies, to vilify and justify elimination of any opposition to capitalist rule - as in anti-communism hated and persecuted as heresy

during and since Marx's work.

### Freedom in Marx's Base Superstructure Theory

Long the primary reason for repudiating Marx's base-superstructure theory has been its alleged denial of individual freedom. Yet his work from the beginning is devoted to freedom as of ultimate value, preferring Epicurus to Democritus in his doctoral thesis solely because the theory of Epicurus allowed freedom into an arbitrary "swerve" of atoms against the "far more scientific" Democritus who is the first mechanist in history. The mechanism Marx continues to oppose ever after is the mechanism of capitalism itself: which he argues, in a 40-year through-line of texts, systematically abolishes individuals' and societies' self-determination.

While 'conservative', 'liberal democratic', 'libertarian' and 'neo-liberal' trends dominant in the contemporary era speak of 'democratic capitalism'. Marx's *BST* contends that visibly competing parties, governments, theories of society, and moralities conform to the ruling economic structure and are disposed to eliminate whatever challenges it. Marx often uses the concept of a "reflex" mechanism here. In his focus on English capitalism as the central example of base-superstructure understanding, his scope is unprecedentedly global before its time – including not only Britain with its world empire and former colony, the United States, taken into empirical account, but West European countries behind in capitalist development, as well as adversary Russia and vast colony India and East Asia Company, not to mention his anthropological investigations into pre-historical social formations. Threading throughout his *BST* analysis, he discusses the determination of societies within the limits of their natural resources and mode of production. After many years of this cross-cultural study, Marx concludes that all societies will be compelled to adapt to the "pitiless laws" of the capitalist system because of its far superior "productive force development". 150 years of evidence since Marx's scientific claim generally confirms it despite wide repudiation for its determinism. Marx's acceptance of these laws, which are not laws of nature as he supposes (and economic science still does) is the deepest unfreedom of his doctrine.

Technological determinism is the ultimate regulator of Marx's base-superstructure theory. Few revolutionaries since seem to understand that this theoretical position rules out the success of state seizure for socialist revolution without a developed productive base – as history since Marx has significantly borne out as well as refuting his prediction of proletarian revolution in advanced capitalist societies. Yet Marx also predicts social transformation to a "many-sided" working class "ready and able to meet any change of production;" as well as technological replacement of labour to allow "free time "" from the "realm of necessity". These are unifying themes from Marx's early *EPM* to Volume III of *Capital* (organised and published posthumously). In spite of his main failed prediction, Marx is rather prescient in anticipating the material possibilities of freedom by technological and worker development, and how they are "fettered" by the capitalist economic structure within which all lower-cost benefits of technological advances (for example, labour-saving machinery) go to capitalists as the working day increases.

Marx's evolving productive base is also a form of social biology, but in the opposite mode of recent sociobiology's reduction to gene-set animal repertoires. It is grounded not in genes but in humanity's distinguishing feature as a natural species and the origin of human freedom: "the capacity to raise a project in the head before it is constructed in reality". (*Capital*, "On the Labour Process"). This distinguishing ground of historical materialism is brought into revealing alliance with Darwin's classical *Origin of the Species* when Marx

connects “nature’s technology” to human society’s “organs of technology” as the ultimate basis of historical development: “Darwin has interested us in the history of *Nature’s Technology* i.e., in the formation of the organs of plants and animals, which organs serve as instruments as of production for sustaining life. Does not the history of the productive organs of man, of organs that are the material basis of all social organization, deserve equal attention?” (*Capital*, “The Development of Machinery”). In this still under-theorized *evolutionary* advance Marx identifies: (1) the forces of selection are increasingly social, not natural; (2) organic instruments are evolved by creative cooperative production, not instinctual repertoires; and (3) Marx’s base-superstructure theory is the framework within which this historical as opposed to natural evolution is understood. Human freedom is enabled by and set within this distinctively human framework of understanding. This Marxian framework fits well to today’s world of electronically organised production and communication systems. It is in such ways that development of society’s ‘technology organs’ for Marx extends the limits of human free will by selecting for the most powerful productive forces to enable growing control of material necessity and the natural world. Yet Marx’s *Capital* is unaware, as lead philosophers and economists remain today, of the cumulatively increasing violation of life needs and necessity by exponentially multiplying technological powers. Ever expanding productive forces serving human wants without limiting criterion of life necessity is not recognised by Marx’s base-superstructure theory as an issue.

#### What Base-Superstructure Analysis Is and Is Not

Marx’s *BST* argument is ahead of his time in recognising the lead role of technological sciences in society’s reproduction, and claims individual action and social order must correspond to it or not survive – the essence of base-superstructure theory. Yet Marx often overreaches without criteria or mediating steps of argument – as in his fundamentalist *BST* aphorism in *The Poverty of Philosophy*: “The hand-mill gives you society with the feudal lord, the steam engine gives you society with the capitalist”. These are striking claims of correspondence between the basic variables of the *BST*, productive force development and the economic anatomy of society, which, Marx argues, determine the state, legal and ideological superstructures. Yet aphorisms can mislead in their acute simplicity, and so the eminent Marxologist G.A. Cohen deploys this arresting slogan into a functional model of the *BST* in his much referenced *Marx’s Theory of History-A Defence* (1978). Yet Marx’s *BST* is *not* one-to-one functional here or elsewhere, but as contexts usually indicate, *the determining factor sets a delimited range of possibility within which the determined phenomena fall*. For example, in capitalism there are many ideological phenomena which conflict with each other, and so can hardly be described as all functional for the economic structure determining them when they are mutually incompatible with each other. Many ideas and ideologies compete for belief and market share in capitalism, but the only feature in common among them is that they all conform to it with no required function. The relationship *within* the material mode of production between productive forces and relations has a similar logic of explanation. The relations of production comprising the economic structure have *different possibilities of consistency with the stage of productive development* for which they are the integument. Marx loathed capitalism because of its documented mass oppressions which are *beyond necessity* in his searing *Capital* account of its operations. The “Primitive Accumulation” he reports here shows how inhuman the origins of capitalist wealth have been. They cannot be so described if there is no choice space of their agents to a better alternative. Marx is clear that capitalist relations of production were imposed far necessity, “accomplished with merciless Vandalism and under the stimulus of

passions the most infamous, the most sordid, the pettiest, the most meanly odious”.

Consistent with these origins of capitalism, the facts have been concealed then and since without any disconfirmation of them. Far less heinous alternatives in developing modern production forces have since occurred in more rapid and efficient transitions from a hand-mill to a machine-run economy. In this sense, the functionalist account of capitalism succeeding feudalism is an unwitting white-wash. Certainly the full story of the malignantly violent and mendacious torture, murder and robbery of the poor and defenceless is told in painfully documented historical detail not only by Marx, but by the statesman William Cobbett writing before Marx in his *A History of the Protestant Reformation in England, Ireland and Wales* (1824-27). Against strip-down to known formula, Marx’s base-superstructure theory is in substance inspired by the passion to *stop* the shockingly vile impositions of capitalist rule, working indefatigably for life-protective state regulation by the Factory Acts and the Ten-Hour Working Day. Marx also recognised the wide range of material possibility beyond functional necessity in various forms of co-operative production in his day – for example, Proudhon’s co-operative banking system in France and Owenite co-operatives providing life security to workers. He scathingly dismissed them, but only in theory-bound certitude of the industrial proletariat’s revolution alone could work in the long run (although in fact Proudhon’s co-operative bank still flourishes in France and co-operative factories with life security for workers have emerged since across continents).

On the other hand, Marx recognises what dogmatic anti-capitalist advocates of revolution do not. In his Preface to *Capital* the peaceful possibility of instituted public regulations within even imperial capitalist relations of production is incisively advocated if there are devoted public servants “as competent, as free from partisanship and respect of persons as are the English factory inspectors, her medical reporters on *public health*, her *commissioners of inquiry into the exploitation of women and children, into housing and food*” (emphases again added unless indicated Marx’s). As these long-evolving public life protections since Marx are defunded today in totalizing commodification and privatization for profit, we can better see the critical moral choice-space of material possibility for Marx to make transformative life-and-death differences *within* capitalist society by documented truth and civil commons institutions.

“Dialectical materialism” is also a famed attribution to Marx, although he never used Engels’ term. More deeply, while Marx sought a rigorously scientific theory, dialectics is not disconfirmable by evidence. Certainly Marx emphasises what dominant positivist methods expel: ever-changing phenomena and interrelationships, driven by conflicting tendencies viewed in their totality, and issuing in qualitative transformations. Further, Marx is early on fascinated with the “strange music” of dialectics, and he acknowledges “coquetting” with dialectical expressions – as in “the negation of negation” at the end of *Capital*. But the brilliant autodidacts Engels and Lenin mistake an invaluable epistemological theory for a naturalist ontological metaphysics. Most relevantly telling here is that Marx’s base-superstructure theory is explicitly defined by permanent historical *primacy* of one factor, the productive base, while dialectics in principle excludes any such ultimate material base or primacy.

Marx’s base-superstructure theory is also *not* grounded in *class antagonism* as such in which solely anti-capitalist standpoints and political-economic class mechanics are favorite forms. In these and other cases of de-basing Marx, the stage of productive development is dropped from foundational status, although it is for Marx the ultimate driver of historical materialism and workers’ struggle towards a higher social order. Revealingly, the concept of *class* does

not occur in Marx's own "guiding thread to my studies": because it is *political* and so *superstructural* in his *BST* explanatory framework. Class antagonism as an effective factor of social change is certainly crucial in Marx's *BST*, but confined to periods of contradiction between productive force "organs" and economic-rule "anatomy". Thus Marx directly says in his Preface to *Capital* "It is *not* a question of the higher or lower degree of development of *class antagonism* that results from the laws of capitalist production. It is a question of these laws or tendencies themselves working with iron necessity towards inevitable crises [*Krisen*]". Always for Marx's *BST* the anticipated workers' revolution is by the agency of direct producers in common moving the counter-productive rich and their "ideological prize-fighters" out of office by the force of higher productive capacity of the "associated producers".

Today's most famous version of *Capital* is also worthy of mention here because it completes the erasure of Marx's base-superstructure theory, But in this case it is in the form of an equally thick volume as *Capital* with the same title (and bold update subtitle of *the twenty-first century*). Little noticed in the immense attention to it in Western culture, Thomas Picketty's now world-renowned *CAPITAL* (2012) has no productive development base and no economic determiner. All attention is on growing inequality of income distribution, with rising concern for inequality of income. Little known, Marx himself explained the equality craze in his first chapter of *Capital* as a capitalist concept derived from abstract labour and commodity payment which has "acquired the fixity of a popular prejudice . . . in which, consequently, the dominant relation between man and man, is that of owners of commodities." Yet Picketty's research does not fit the mould of "bad conscience and evil intent of apologetic in place of genuine scientific research" which Marx saw in the Political Economy of his day. Picketty demonstrates growing income inequality built into the system which post-Marx 'Economics' erases. Yet his *Capital* strips out every substantive category of the original while naming itself after it. No productive forces and relations or equivalent, no economic anatomy or structure, no class rule and subjugation of direct producers are to be found. 'CAPITAL in the twenty-first century' instead reports a multitude of marginal income differentials over time – a rising money-metered inequality which statistically confirms capital's ever more dominant share of wealth. In this exposure, Picketty's work is a valuable factual refutation of a long official claim of 'growing equality of opportunity in capitalist democracies', and a demonstration of what Marx predicted but was long ridiculed for doing so – the law-like trend of capitalist society to ever more wealth to the few and ever less relative wealth to society's direct producers.

Max Weber's canonical *The Protestant Ethic and the Rise of Capitalism* (1926 in English) is still more well-known (at least to scholars), and widely thought to have refuted Marx's economic determinism. Yet Weber's paradigm example of Benjamin Franklin rather confirms Marx's *BST* and its core General Law of Capital Accumulation,  $M-C-M^1$ . In fact the young Franklin expresses this self-maximizing value-calculus in translucent affirmation of Marx's formula and exponential money returns for self (emphases added): "Remember *time is money* – – Remember, that *money is of the prolific, generating nature*. Money can beget money, and its offspring can beget more – – He that murders a crown [by using it], destroys all that it might have produced, even scores of pounds" (pp. 48-9, emphases added). From the start of the private money-capital sequence, whatever does not conform to it is ruled out, including life itself. Weber sees this fanaticism in passing, and there can be little doubt that the money worship long ruling the world is here expressed in pure form. Yet Weber further equates this early testament of greed-is-good to Protestantism, although Franklin

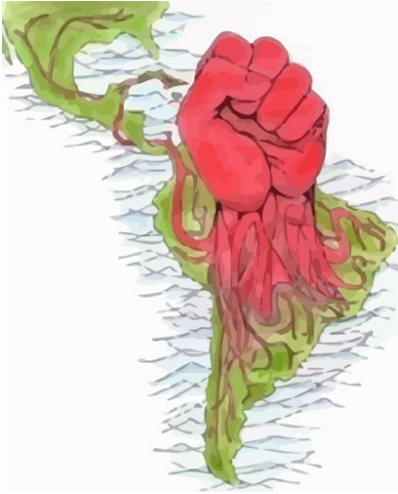
was like Adam Smith a Deist not strictly a Protestant. And to be fair to Franklin, this credo of avarice should be distinguished from his later refusal to patent his iconic Franklin Stove to keep it in the great civil commons of science he himself benefitted from. As for Franklin's testament to money-capital growth before life, it had already been instituted generations before by private joint-corporate-stock investor ships like the venerated 'Mayflower' seeking maximum profit in 'America' where corporate-charter rights were as quickly as possible turned into multiplying money fortunes for the overseas invaders behind eco-genocide of the first peoples. In contrast to Weber, Marx's *BST* argues that Protestant religion is a cover story for the opposite of Weber's hypothesis. It is not worship of a protestant God that is the origin of capitalism, but rather the capitalist system worships itself as God.

Closer to home, the Marx-descended movement of '*Critical Theory*' is true to Marx's giant intellect, but focuses on erudite ideological critique of capitalist culture. Marx's *productive base* more or less disappears into a new school of thought. The next generation of Critical theory led by Jürgen Habermas abandons class analysis altogether and – in line with capitalist ideology – defines the market system as a technical given and relocates action to what Marx called the 'legal superstructure'. Whereas the elder critical theorist Herbert Marcuse argues from a life base of Freudian Eros and capitalist-system suppression of life by the dead singularity of corporate-state positivism, Habermas strips the "life-world" itself (*Lebenswelt*) down to background assumptions of social belief which have no life coordinate to them. Base-superstructure theory is effectively erased to confirm it.

Continuing clarification and confirmation of Marx's *BST* in subsequent schools of thought, the more globalized "postmodern" movement adopts Marx's contesting posture, subaltern politics, and abuse of metaphysics, but obliterates all traces of Marx's productive base and universal message (as, for example, "totalitarian" or "terrorist"), garnering enormous publicity for its groundless alternative. Again we can see that Marx's *BST* core of economic determinism is proved to work in many ways so as to erase its explanatory framework itself. When John-Paul Sartre, world famous for his existentialist master works in philosophy, biography and drama, moves from his radically individualist choice space explorations to deepen Marx's theory by situating individual consciousness and action within a comprehensive social framework of social determinations of the existential predicament of "the monstrous construction with no author", as in his *Search for a Method*, his work effectively disappears from the academy with only his pre-war *Being and Nothingness* spoken of. In short, Sartre is written out of philosophy once he adopts base-superstructure theory to existentialize it.

Because Marx's base-superstructure theory continues to apply to post-Marx capitalist 'globalization', Stalinist mechanism becomes its inverting ideological caricature and 'Marxian' theory *itself* delinks from the productive base *BST* continues to be confirmed in principle as it is dismissed.

Economic Determinism, Darwinian Selection and Social Revolution



Most commentaries on Marx miss the permutations and combinations of base-superstructure theory. Few comprehend the underlying *modus tollens* logic that ruling systems are sustained by a dominant normality to eliminate whatever opposes them. In *BST* terms, legal, political and ideological forms conform to society's material mode of production, or they do not survive – a logic of explanation parallel to the survival/extinction laws of evolutionary biology. Marx's implicit principle of economic determination by selection out of what does fit the ruling property order can be understood in this sense as evolutionary biology at the historical level. As Marx says in his Preface to *Capital*, "the economic formation of society is viewed as a process of natural history". In fact, history is not a natural process insofar as its laws are made, not found in nature. Indeed Marx's own theory implicitly seeks and predicts the social supersession of natural process and its ultimate law of dominance by physical force. Yet both evolutionary and historical materialist theories recognise selection and extinction of life forms that adapt or not, survive, flourish or die, in the struggle for continued life. Marx, however, is the first to argue for the revolutionary necessity of surpassing the brutality of natural evolution by the unity of the industrial working class against the ruling class system of "hitherto existing society" which always "pumps out surplus labour from the direct producers" to enrich the masters, lords or capitalists" (*Capital III*, "Genesis of Capitalist Ground-Rent"). Marx's ultimate goal is liberation from the ruling capitalist class as the last with productive development the material base of doing so.

For Marx's *BST*, however, species liberation only becomes historically possible with industrial mass production to organise it. Human survival and extinction, class domination and overthrow are based on *technological* development which eventually outgrows the old form of control and appropriation of society's means of production to bring about a higher stage of society led by a new ruling class, the direct producers themselves – the core original idea of the base-superstructure theory. "Capitalism", he famously writes, "begets its own negation with the inexorability which governs the metamorphoses of nature". Darwin's field of study excludes this possibility a-priori, and so fits far better to capitalism. Neo-Darwinians, among others, think replacing natural scarcity and the social struggle for a higher form of life are unthinkable against human nature. They argue that only individual genetic modifications and greater numbers of offspring can explain any species' struggle for survival: which *BST* explains, in turn, as capitalist ideology positing Nature as the justification of the dominance of the few and their non-productive servant classes.

Marx so repeatedly scorns the 'human nature' form of justification of capitalism that many wrongly conclude that Marx has no concept of human nature at all: there is only human

plasticity and operant conditioning. In fact, Marx oppositely emphasizes humanity's ultimate nature as creative, the capacity "to raise a project in the head (*der Kopf*) before erecting it in reality" (typically translated as "imagination"). This is the distinctive human nature which lies behind the historically rising progression of materialist powers of production that Marx grounds in as the determining base of any society or epoch. This productive ground rather than Euro-racism, as some think, drives Marx's theory.

Marx's revolutionary theory is the most controversial element of base-superstructure model, but can be deconstructed into an underlying regulating sequence across history: 1. a social revolution in a society's law, politics and ideology is propelled by 2. ever more open class struggle to 3. fit to a higher stage of development of the productive base of society 4. than the prior ruling-class economic structure can manage 5. without forfeit of society's stage of material production.

In the rare periods of successful social revolution, Marx offers an original causal explanation: Only when productive force development goes beyond the fetters of the established ruling-class relations of production can a social revolution occur. Marx's guiding framework is concisely stated by his 'guiding thread' as follows (with *application to contemporary society* in square brackets: "At a certain stage of their development, the material forces of production [*think of the Internet*] come into conflict with the existing relations of production – or – what is but a legal expression for them – with the property relations within which they had been at work before [*private -profit copyright, patent and control over published meanings*]. From forms of development of productive forces, these relations [*of corporate ownership profit*] turn into their chains. Then occurs a period of social revolution [*the creators of knowledge deciding on commons publication and open access in cumulative transition from the for-profit 'information economy' to the 'knowledge commons'*].

The knowledge revolution has already largely occurred with internet commons capacities increasingly surpassing private corporations in expertise and originality. In *BST* terms, it has "burst the fetters" of corporate copyright, patent and censorship. The corporate media are ever less able to compete in agile, immediate, video-record reporting of events and depth analysis of them not subjugated to capitalist-media selection against non-conforming facts and understandings. On the other hand, *BST* analysis can also recognise that the media of public record are still profit-run capitalist commodities, surveillance and interference in communications are widespread, the internet is itself permeated by mindless commercials and trivializing social media chatter, and undercover agents harass lead exposers of the appropriating classes and their war criminal states. Both sides of this revolutionary-versus-capitalist struggle can be laid bare by advanced *BST* method. There is systematic selection against whatever does not conform to the established order, but new technology and knowledge creators outgrow the fetters. This contemporary application of Marx's *BST* is returned to ahead in contrasting 'knowledge creators and workers' today to 'the physical input class' of the proletariat in *The Productive Agency of Social Transformation 150 Years after Capital*.

At the macro level of interface with evolutionary biology, Marx's *BST* suggests new technologies as evolutionary organs of human society outgrowing the economic anatomy in transformation of the social body into new form. To the question of whether a revolutionary process is by *cumulative transition* or by *radical disjuncture*, Marx's implicit answer is that both processes are involved. Society is an "organism always changing" while the "birth-pangs of revolution" presuppose a long process in "the natural laws of its movement" which "can neither clear by bold leaps, nor remove by legal enactments the obstacles involved – –

but can shorten the and lessen the birth-pangs". The underlying common ground of both disjunctive and cumulative-transition understandings of social transformation is that any uprising organisation of material forces must be more efficient and productive than the established system's mode of production to enable historical success. This is why Marx asserts in his definitive *BST* explanation: "No social order ever disappears before all the productive forces for which there is room in it have been developed, and new higher relations of production never appear before the material conditions have matured in the womb of the old society."

While Marx's theory of revolution is disconfirmed in the necessity of proletarian revolution in industrialized societies, it is plausibly confirmed by the capitalist revolution against the feudal system, the paradigm case of his base-superstructure theory. The bourgeoisie overthrows the king-lord control of the social order in compliance with the new capitalist system of dispossessed labour, mass production and private profit in place of feudal landlords fees and ties of loyalty and labour-military service. In all cases feudal or capitalist, one historical 'law' of *BST* holds: Increasing contradiction between productive forces (determiner) and ruling-class control of them (determined) within the productive base itself, restructures the legal, political and ideological establishments into correspondence with the demands of the higher productive stage advancing beneath these superstructural phenomena "in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out".

Considered in this light, the question arises: does the *BST* apply to *post-Marx* attempts at revolutionary socialism in China, Russia, Indonesia, Vietnam and much of Latin America? It does not apply, *unless* we focus on the productive force development of these societies *after* their state revolutions against the tyrannical and productively stunted regimes they overthrow: most clearly in their advancing the educated well-being of the working class and rapid technological development. It is a negative confirmation of Marx's theory that these revolutions are warred upon continuously by lead capitalist states to undermine their rising productive development, in particular of workers' collective health, education, welfare and security. These converse confirmations of Marx's *BST* principle of social revolution, although nowhere stated, fit with its implicit general law of history that no society ever forfeits its stage of development of productive forces if it is to survive. The converse is: *despoil any society's rising stage of development and the society will be unable to survive.*

This has been inner logic of the last century of history, and applies well to elimination of socialist ideas *within* the US and allied industrial societies since Marx. Majority-world societies seeking social liberation from inhuman exploitation and oppression invariably suffer multi-levelled assault by dominant capitalist forces of media, finance and sponsored armed attack – frequently more mass-murderous than the Prussia-France immolation of the radically democratic Paris Commune which Marx rivetingly analyses in his *Civil War in France 1871*. Although Prussia and France were at war, their leaders combined together to bloodily annihilate the Paris Commune as Marx documents, showing how *even in wars against each another*, modern states are "the executive committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie" (as the *Communist Manifesto* incisively expresses this *BST* norm). Class war of the capitalist class against the working class is nowhere better proved. The dots are rarely connected, but the *BST converse law of counter-revolution* can be usefully applied to France- US invasions of 'communist' Vietnam, US-led Chile social destruction the same year as the US was defeated in Vietnam, continuous war-criminal occupation of Palestine destroying even their age-old productive olive groves, to the Iraq eco-genocide from 1991 on followed by Syria and Libya, the US-led death squads and

financial wars on social reform governments and movements for the poor through most of Latin America over 50 years to today, and so on in demonstration of Marx's reasons for reviling this epochal system. Of deep theoretical note, all these cases confirm the converse law of counter-revolution creatively deducible from base-superstructure principles.

### Self-Maximizing Growth and Marx's Aporia of Productive Object

Marx's base-superstructure theory implicitly recognises that the ultimate value base and driver of capitalism is the "fully developed shape [of] *the money form*" in terms of which all decisions of what commodities to produce and how they are produced are made solely to maximize revenue returns to private capital owners in cycles of increasing accumulation: in general formula *Money-Commodity-More Money* or  $M-C-M^1$ . As Marx also argues, capitalist investors are "personifications of economic categories, embodiments of particular class relations and class interests", and so are a-priori indifferent to what life is degraded, exploited and destroyed in multiplying private money profits with no cumulative limit (Marx's Preface, Chapter I, and Chapter XXV of *Capital*).

This is the meta program of Marx's *BST* to which productive forces are subjugated until their capitalist fetters are outgrown by a higher stage of productive-technological development. Until this predicted "period of social revolution", every moment of production is competitively forced into lock-step sequences of the meta program. While Marx's *BST* is confirmed by capitalist history up to "social revolution", a deep-structural issue emerges. How can Marx or his followers believe that the results of this totalizing system of life oppression, immiserization and life capital rundown must inevitably result in a completely opposite outcome of "social revolution", "dictatorship of the proletariat", and "from each according to his ability, to each according to his need"? How can life-coherent thinking go from an ever more life-despoiling capitalist system with its life-blind program built into its globally multiplying growth to a certain revolt of its system slaves against everything its history has constructed to inevitably triumphant social revolution to final rule of the direct producers to successful ordering of the forces of production to citizens' life needs and capacities?

There is no clear criterion of any step of this inspiring vision. For a long time, the revolutionary theory was hitched to a Hegelian master-slave dialectic ending in complete reversal, or made a mechanistic science of revolution in which iron political rule decided how all must be determined, or – in a word – to some version or other in which life value itself and its measure are assumed away as an issue (as in all received economic science), and nowhere spelled out to govern decisions over forces of production and their growth (as in Marx's theory). The *BST* does not offer a solution to this problem, nor 'scientific socialism'. Economic science today even less has an answer to the basic question: *what is the criterion of a life need that production is for?*

Marx focuses rather on the socialist logic he sees built into the competing large scales of capitalist production – "an ever-expanding scale, the co-operative form of the labour process, the conscious technical application of science, the methodical cultivation of the soil, the transformation of the instruments of labour in instruments of labour only usable in common, the economising of all means of production by their use as means of production of combined socialised labour, the entanglement of all peoples in the net of the world-market, and with all this the international nature of the capitalistic regime" (Chapter XXXII *Capital*). Marx's analysis is breathtaking in scope, but what remains absent is the underlying *life*

*base and laws* of ever more productive-force development. That this development must be consistent with the universal needs and capacities of humanity, its natural biosphere and fellow creatures does not enter Marx's (or other) theory is as an issue. The ultimate requirement of human species evolution in any form is, as elsewhere, presupposed away in confidence of productive and technological development as an ultimate base of society's future, a secular Providence.

In *Capital*, Marx restricts the parameters to be considered to the technology used and the collective wage labour as historical agency that does it. "The *wealth* of those societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails", he writes in his first sentence of *Capital* presents itself as "an immense accumulation of commodities". The commodities of which all wealth consists in capitalist society, Marx observes, are always produced in accordance with the master organising principle of their production and profit,  $M-C-M^1$ . They are the *values* of the system in whatever form they take, and are defined in the same first page of *Capital* as material use-values for *wants* – – – whether they spring from the stomach or fancy *makes no difference*". Marx underlines this criterion of commodities by his approving footnote citing Nicholas Barbou's radically subjectivist principle: "want is the appetite of the mind and as natural as hunger to the body". It is these commodities which are the productive force object for Marx, the materializations of all wealth of capitalist society, and constitute all the technology and productive forces making them to be inherited by socialism.

It does not occur to Marx as a profound problem that these very technologies and productive forces are driven solely by the compulsion to sell anything to moneyed desires for the lowest inputs costs and highest profits over generations – even if their processes and products are in principle indifferent to all depredatory effects on organic and ecological life systems. That this system is held to be the material ground of productive forces by which revolution against capitalism is necessitated and socialism/communism inevitably follows is Marx's core theory of social normality and change. What is not evidently noticed by anyone – because it is also still assumed elsewhere – is that Marx's *Capital* definitions have opened the floodgates for *life-destructive* forces and commodities to presumptively count as "productive forces", "goods", and "use-values" in ever more immensity of "commodities", "growth" and "development" as necessary, productive and good in the long term.

With no life standard or criterion to distinguish life-destructive from life-enabling productive forces and products, how can the cumulative looting and polluting of humanity's and other species' life support systems by capitalism which Marx first recognises as systematic, be possibly prevented over generational time? How can ever more life-blind technologies, commodities and consumptions driven by insatiable profit and commodity demand at the same time be regulated, steered and stopped from cumulative life-world destruction masked for centuries as "development" and "growth"?

This is the great aporia of Marx's base-superstructure theory. He thinks that productive workers' democracy in control of the vast wealth of capitalist technologies and commodities can solve these capitalist-made problems. His principles of democracy coming from the Paris Commune and enshrined in his *Civil War in France* as well as his *Gotha Program*, both after *Capital*, are impeccably democratic against the standard descriptions of Marx's determinism. But democracy in itself cannot solve the ultimate problem that is not seen. Marx base-superstructure theory uniquely recognises and seeks to overcome the money-powered construction sapping the world with its vampire grip, and he scientifically proposes a towering Promethean vision of government by the direct producers in its stead. Yet we are

still left with the fatal flaw of the epoch – *no regulating principles of production to select for human and natural life carrying capacities* rather than for their unintended cumulative despoliation by industrial technologies and commodity growth. As this system increasingly threatens human and planetary life organisation, there remains still no life-capital metric to steer ‘economic growth –not even human life necessities – with which productive forces and technology must be consistent for evolved life and society to survive or flourish.

The dominant model of ‘the economy’ from Adam Smith on is life-blind in its categories, but Marx’s revolutionary theory does not solve the problem. *Life* necessities, organisation and parameters of better and worse have been, and continue to be, excluded at every step of ‘productivity’ and ‘growth’. Marx’s base-superstructure theory sees deeply into the problem of the dehumanisation of labour, but not of the planetary life host being run down in its collective life capital bases with most extracted masses, energies and commodities made wastes in weeks. Under ‘free trade’ (which Marx supported to hasten revolution), commodities of every kind must be transported with increasing loads and distances of carbon miles on habitat-destroying routes through land and sea through to consumers’ bodies widely addicting and disabling them by non-communicable diseases and toxic throwaways into the soil, water and atmosphere as industrial sinks. Most of these problems of industrial technology and multiplying material powers also existed in earlier form in Marx’s day, but the concepts of ‘increased productivity’, ‘growth’, and ‘development’ were not challenged.

Marx envisions in his *Grundrisse* notebooks to *Capital* a future state in which “once the narrow bourgeois form is peeled away”, there can be “the evolution of all human powers as such unmeasured by any previously established yardstick”. But what if the ‘bourgeois form’ cannot be peeled away because it built into the productive forces themselves? The *life-base* ‘yardsticks’ to prevent loss of universal life necessities on earth in their mutual interdependence, or even to ensure commodities satisfy needs without reducing life capacities of their consumers, do not exist. As in the capitalist system to be overthrown, there is no defining measure of the requirements of the ‘means of subsistence’ that production is for. (Meanwhile evolutionary biology assumes the opposite of an answer – the more a species population multiplies, the more successful it is as a life form.) Marx sees the problem of unlimited growth in the competitive capitalist frenzy to grow private money stocks – “Accumulate! Accumulate! This is Moses and all the prophets” – but the accompanying limitless multiplication of technological forces and commodities is not conceived as the problem, but rather the solution.

Marx’s labour theory of value engages ‘means of subsistence’ in the reproduction of wage-labour, but allows for their unlimited growth in conflation of wants and needs. In *Capital* Volume II, Marx is poignantly unaware of the problem (emphases added): “Regardless of whether such a product as tobacco is really a consumer *necessity from the physiological point of view, it suffices that it is habitually such*”. We see here how the relativization of life necessity to habitual wants can, in Marx’s conception of the base of society, drive productive forces through the human organism and the biosphere with no *BST* limit. It is noteworthy that tobacco products continue to be mass produced with even the Chinese Communist Party government – still teaching Marxism in its schools – investing in mass cigarette production as it cements over the fields and rivers and replaces bicycles with fossil-fuel motors to ‘grow productive forces’, ‘satisfy people’s wants’ and ‘takes its place on the world stage’. There is no theoretical resource to disqualify such commodities, productive technologies and their continuous growth in Marx or Marxism in general.

As with Marx's sustained yards-of-cloth example in *Capital*, what ultimately counts is *the living labour and value* that goes into the production of the commodity price and capitalist profit, as well as the illusions that conceal the source of surplus labour and value. But no precautionary measure exists in Marx's productive force development to prevent or select against the long historical trend to systemic and cumulative life system destruction. Marx's *Grundrisse*, which is masterfully informed on technological and social development, even strikingly observes: "War developed earlier than peace: the way in which certain economic relations such as wage labour, machinery, etc develop earlier - - - - - The money system completely developed there only in the army [of the Roman Empire]". In *Notebook 4*, (italics added) Marx also observes that in the "commune stage" of human evolution, "the difficulties commune encounters can only rise from other communes, which have either previously occupied the land and soil, or which disturb the commune in its own occupation. *War is therefore great comprehensive task, the great communal labour* - - ". How poignant these italicised words are after a century and a half of productive forces and commodities multiplied to ever new organs and heights of human species power. To sharpen the point of no life ground or criterion in Marx's *BST* to select against the ancient interlock of productive and destructive forces, the lead capitalist society's production system invests \$2,000,000,000 of public money per day in war preparations, labour and ongoing wars with nothing in base-superstructure theory to prioritize life support systems. Capitalist colonialism in Marx's era ruled as well by superior kill-and-destroy technological development and slave-labour commodities with no questioning of its 'productive force development'. The ultimate life-and-death contradiction *within* capitalist 'productive forces' is not recognised.

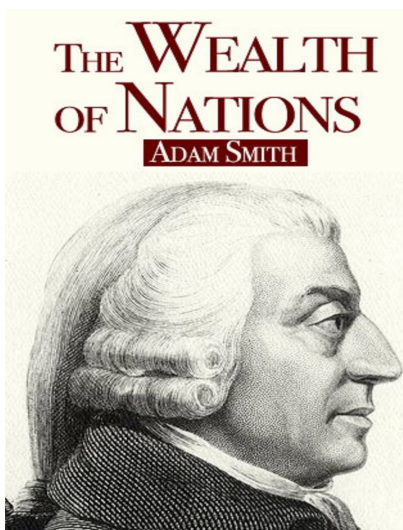
#### Re-Setting Base-Superstructure Theory to the Life Ground

Marx's base-superstructure theory begins with humanity distinguishing itself from other animals by production of the means of life. Yet 'means of life' disappears as a category after 1847 in Marx's corpus, and is replaced on the first page of *Capital* by commodities serving desires not needs. Marx enters capitalist economic understanding in order to rout it, but shares its first premise of market desires as the driver of production. What happens out of view is that commodities and the productive forces making them are structured only to satisfy subjective desires backed by money demand. The inner drama of *Capital* featuring "material use-values" versus "the money form" loses its life footings on page 1 beneath notice. Productive forces mass manufacture commodities which are increasingly disabling and addictive in their consumption. Marx sees them as *values* because they embody labour hours. Yet if we take into account the life and life capital effects of industrial commodities from extraction through processing to product through consumer bodies to wastes through the biosphere - all in motion in Marx's day - a darker picture than unprecedented 'productive force development' and "immense wealth of commodities" to ground socialist revolution emerges.

This unseen problem does not disappear if we drop Marx's labour theory of value - long a controversy in which Marx is predictably dismissed although the theory originated in Smith and Ricardo and is replaced by a purely subjective theory of willingness-to-pay. *Nowhere* does any measure of life capital or life value enter into theory or measure. True productive value measured by the yardstick of life capacity gained is not yet conceived (although implicit in medical and ecological sciences). Commodities are use-values or goods even if they degrade and disease their life hosts through their consumption and wastes. No generic metric of life capacity gains or losses can be found. A momentous entailment

follows. If 'productive forces' or 'technological progress' are defined as that which produce material use-values in ever higher quantities for acquired wants by lower labour input into their products, then however life and life-carrying capacities are systemically depredated by their processes and products of production, they are still productive forces, development and growth. They may be harmful by replacing life necessities in their production and consumption with junk-foods, weapons, built-in pollutants, eco-degrading machines screened out as disvalues, and life capacity gains and losses nowhere entering into even the Marxian bottom line. This is the ultimate contradiction of the epoch that Marx's theory does not provide the resources to resolve.

Re-setting base-superstructure theory to the life-ground is required, and Marx began his historic work in promise of this. In the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, he exalts "human needs" as enabling motivators and extenders of human "species being" into and forming the natural environment with the life activity of consciousness in realising capacities in a world humanity which "beholds itself in a world it has created". Productive work "is the objectification of man's species being", he writes in the *EPM* and "the history of industry – is the open book of man's essential powers". Humanity is realised, he writes in *Theses on Feuerbach*, against commodity consumerism, "only when the object becomes for him a human object". Production, he continues in *The German Ideology* one year later in 1846, is "a definite form of expressing their life", as "what they are – both with *what* they produce and *how* they produce" (Marx's emphases). The beginnings of Marx's base-superstructure theory are in these ways focused on production as driven by universal human life needs and capacities transforming the world in creative action – a "conscious self-transcending of coming to be".



Yet once inside the ruling method of modern science where redundant and externally observable sequences alone count as scientific, Marx's *BST* is bound by its chains even as he seeks to transcend them. It is worth citing here the earlier philosopher and founder of modern Economics, Adam Smith, to get a sense of the theoretical origins of the ghoulish rationality into which Marx submerges himself to master the dismal science. In his monumental *Wealth of Nations*, the founding text of the "moral science", Professor Adam Smith argues for his time and the epoch that "among the inferior ranks of people the scantiness of means of subsistence can set limits to the further multiplication of the human species; and it can so in no other way than by destroying a great part of the children which their fruitful marriages produce" (Book I, Chapter 3, "Wages of labour").

Social Darwinism before Darwin is the deep structure of this thought system in which

sacrifice of the least reverses Christianity in its name. Yet once inside this grim grip of method, Marx the scientist leaves behind Marx the philosopher of human liberation. The unique human capacity of “species being” and “free conscious activity that adopts the species as its object” is dropped from his work after 1846. “Means of life” as what productive forces produce silently disappears after *Wage Labour and Capital* in 1847. As Marx’s study becomes research-submerged in seeking the theory-suppressed origin of profit and the inner logic of the capitalist system he abhors, the ennobling categories of the early and unpublished manuscripts disappear. In ironic reduction by the economic determinism he is the first to identify, Marx’s early first principle in the *EPM* is forgotten: “One basis for life and another basis for science is an a-priori lie”.

By the time of *Capital*, Marx’s productive forces have no life-value framing left to distinguish them from life-destructive forces. They are no longer that which produce *means of life* without which life capacities wane and die, but manufactured commodities, including ever larger-scaled cannon and machine powers devastating the natural world across cultures and destroying pre-industrial peoples at the same time. Marx like the epoch does not shrink from conceiving the life-annihilating powers. For the *BST*, no life sacrifice is too great for the inevitable future communism it projects. We see here the epochal pattern of technological, mass and economic powers fastened to great visions that even humanist to the core cannot find the life-ground on which every moment depends.

What Marx studies in unprecedented depth is the money-value process of brutally competitive production of commodities to maximize outputs, lower costs and private profits, and he stands throughout for the “*living labour*” of the industrial productive forces, the humanity of its bearers, their development of life capacities, the surplus labour-value extracted from them with no payment. He documents in words of fire the most extreme system oppressions and torments on record. This is why Marx’s work is so uniquely resonant across peoples over 150 years. Yet his *productive base* remains without any life-carrying capacity criteria to steer against the inhuman mass-productivism of Stalinism, Taylorism or China or towards ecological sustainability by full recycling. At the same time, on the level of collective agency, the *BST* notion of productive class cannot in principle enlist the great and creative life forces of first peoples, subsistence farmers, household labour, student masses, identification with fellow species, and green consciousness to ground a life-based transformation beyond the money-ghoul disorder. Productivism across opposing classes escalates volumes of material outputs as ‘more goods’.

Marx’s *Capital* is not a “theoretical anti-humanism” (as Louis Althusser argues) because his theory is driven by a Promethean humanism so insurgent that it is certain of a proletarian dictatorship bringing in the final emancipation of humanity. On the other hand, when human life capacity gain or loss do not figure into the value calculus of productive forces or the commodities they produce, we can see the disastrous outcomes in the long run with no life capital base recognised. As in natural evolution, unavoidable tragedy is built into the struggle for survival – the *mors immortalis* of all species and societies dying into new forms. For Marx’s historical materialism, the redeeming certitude is that the industrial productive powers ‘surpassing all prior societies put together’ will finally enable an overthrow of the capitalist still stamped with the beast: which he finds in unspoken poetic justice, ‘digs its own grave’ by the joint cooperative labour powers and machines it builds to overthrow it. Yet the theoretical problems of Marx’s *BST* come back to one buried meta issue. If technological *development* is the ultimate measure of a society’s historical advance, what is the *life* standard or principle whereby society can know the difference, in either capitalism

or socialism, between this assumed material progress and, in historical fact, long-term life-commons ruin? The “precision of natural science” that Marx attributes to “the material mode of production” lacks any criteria benchmarks to satisfy the ultimate question.

The question of ‘the illusion of progress’ has been posted in many quarters, but nowhere are the dots joined of the lost life-ground of Marx’s base-superstructure theory as well as the epoch.

### The Missing Life Capital Base of Marx’s Base-Superstructure Theory

Re-set of Marx’s productive base to principled consistency with human and natural laws of life and life support systems is the missing foundation of historical materialism as well as the capitalist system from the start. Yet in all cases and at all levels, the *measure of life necessity* that is blocked out is undeniable once defined: *any material need or necessity is that without which life capacities of any kind are reduced or die* – from oceans to songbirds to human brains. While Marx does not penetrate to this unifying principle or its implications for system transformation, it is implicitly presupposed in both his attacks on the capitalist system and his revolutionary alternative to it. This underpinning value code may be tested by any case of denunciation or affirmation in Marx’s analysis which does not conform to the italicised principle. It is measurable and applicable to all productive plans and practises, with organic medical practises and public health programs implicitly guided by it. This *life-value base and metric* also defines the universal life necessities which constitute the “realm of necessity” Marx recognises as that which all societies’ modes of production must provide for – and, in value logic entailment, are *better or worse* in accordance with how well they do so.

Can Marx’s *BST* be re-set to include this missing *collective life capital base*? There seems only way do so, and that is comprehension of the following three moments of any life-coherent value system across generations: all *enduring life value* is that which (i) *produces more life value* (ii) *without loss* and (iii) *with cumulative gain*. The sole concept in any language which comprehends these three moments of lasting values in terrestrial time is *life capital* whose collective form includes every social asset through time from the sciences and arts to stable hydrological cycles to a public healthcare system to pollution-abating and recycling technologies to regional biodiversity and arable lands, and food seed banks, to local, national global aquifers, rivers, sewers and filter systems. The “*collective*” modifier is in fidelity to Marx’s methodological collectivism which understands social systems in terms of social entities rather than as atomic aggregates to which the dominant economic, medical and biological sciences are still bound.

Yet the concept of ‘capital’ itself has been so narrowed down to money demand appropriating profit in limitless accumulation that anti- or pro-Marx ideologues cannot think past the dominant meaning. This is a quintessential paradigm block.

We can test the unifying principle of collective life capital in Marx’s base-superstructure theory by seeking any value affirmation or negation which conflicts with it. In onto-axiological terms not found in economic or political theory, every value is a life capital value if it reproduces and gains in yield *consistently with other life capital*: as in any good way of life and as in Marx’s implicit life-value code of “from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs”. This missing *life-coherence principle* fits to Marx’s base-superstructure theory in all that it states or implies as social objective. For example, all sound public infrastructures and services as well as natural resources can be defined, evaluated, tracked in gains and losses of life-carrying capacities and needs, and made

consistent with one another in sustainable flourishing in accordance with this underlying life capital method and measure: the very definition of Marx's otherwise undefined and misunderstood 'communist society', as can also be tested in his texts from the *EPM* to the *Gotha Program*. The principal problem of the *BST* as well as the capitalist epoch is lack of principle to comprehend these common life capital bases and the life-coherent knowledge to sustain consistency among them. Conversely, the ultimate problem of capitalism is that it is *life-capital blind* in  $M-C-M^{1-n}$  principle, and is cumulatively life-destructive by the powers of its technologies disaggregating all that exists for private profit as the overriding end of 'growth'. Marx's entire corpus and *BST* method is an encyclopedically learned testimony to this underlying disorder without naming it, or preventing its productivist-led recurrence in societies self-described as 'communist'.

While Marx leaves capitalist misrule to the 'inevitable proletarian revolution' to resolve, capitalist centuries have so built systemic life destruction into 'development' and 'growth' that it requires this ultimate re-set to life capital parameters that Marx does not provide. The *appearance* of capitalism's incomparably great productive powers masks even to Marx what is, in fact, cumulatively depredating technological forces, methods and commodifications despoiling the very life carrying systems of human and natural evolution on the planet. A century and a half after *Capital*, the macro economy remains without a collective capital base or equivalent on which all depends and interdepends. Neo-liberal state policies dictate defunding, privatizing and de-regulation of whatever social life-support systems and life-protective regulatory control have evolved over a century, including those advocated by Marx – work-time limits to a shorter working day (now growing); public banks (now privatized in even currency issue); nationalized industries (privatized for profit almost everywhere); and a graduated income tax (increasingly pushed into reverse).

At the same time, the productive force development of capitalism hardly provides the production forces for primary life necessities themselves. Even assuming a future 'government of associated producers', it must re-set production itself to life capital terms, criteria and investment. The basic need of a *place to live* is now everywhere controlled by private rentiers and banks producing for profit not homes with a housing-production system not structured for peoples' needs. The ultimate life capital necessity of *clean water to drink* is so ignored by existing productive force development that two-thirds of the world now runs short of it. Where publicly owned and managed clean water supply exists – the life foundation of any society or production system – it is privatized into throwaway plastic bottles charging more than the price of oil while public water sources are run down by industrial farming and vehicle pollutions across the globe. *Nourishing foods*, the universal life necessity that launched the capitalist revolution by large-scale farming and international trade now mass produces nutrient-deficient and disease-causing substances leading non-infectious epidemics of disease, suffering and death.

Together these degenerate trends –all called '*more productivity*' pose the greatest threat to human and fellow life in history and perhaps the species time on earth, most deeply of the planet's life carrying capacities themselves. Only by the recognition and metric of a collective life capital base, quantifiable by the money investment required to sustain each of its domains in proportion to the life capacities destroyed without it, is the problem built into the productive forces themselves soluble in principle. If the common life asset is already depleted and polluted beyond recovery, it is at least known with a defined category to measure the life-carrying capacities lost, and required henceforth for social transformation to be consistent with the universal life necessities now being deprived and despoiled without

recognition of it.

Marx's *BST*, including in particular its theory of social revolution, does not have the resources to resolve this ultimate problem nor even recognise it. Without the collective life capital base and measure to ground base-superstructure theory, the cumulative capitalist forces of life-system destruction remain built into the revolutionary productive forces themselves.

### The Productive Agency of Social Transformation 150 Years after Capital



Marx believed that industrial workers (the [proletariat](#)) would rise up around the world  
(Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#))

At the heart of Marx's base-superstructure theory, *Capital* contends that the industrial working class or proletariat is "*disciplined, united, organised by the very mechanism of the process of capitalist production itself*" to revolt against it – a signature contention which has been widely followed. Yet a logical slippage occurs in Marx's argument which is not recognised. For *within* "this very mechanism of capitalist production", no other purpose is allowed but to serve the M-C-M<sup>1</sup> "law of motion of modern society" which, by Marx's own description, operates solely to lower money costs for capitalists to pump out maximum profit. In particular, there is no freedom of time, motion or speech in assembly-line production progressively analysed into constituent phases and programmed to extract maximum life energy from workers to maximize profit. What has gone unnoticed is a fallacy of equivocation between the production process of workers bound to serve total capitalist command within the industrial workplace *and* workers joining together *outside this workplace* on the basis of their collective interests which are systematically expelled from it. As Marx himself says elsewhere in *Wage Labour and Capital*, "life only begins for the labourer where his bought labour ceases".

Marx also claims in this most revolutionary passage of *Capital* that the industrial proletariat is "growing in revolt" and "always increasing in numbers". Here the error is not logical, but factual. The industrial proletariat since Marx's *Capital* – perhaps due in part to it – has been progressively replaced by automated systems which in the last half century have multiplied industrial job reduction, separation of work functions into globally scaled assembly-lines, and systematic deprivation of collective worker leverages of strike, union association, local market demand, and job security. Here again Marx's base-superstructure theory of social

transformation needs to be re-set to remain applicable. In fact, the class most superseding and displacing the industrial proletariat has been *knowledge* creators and workers who emerge everywhere that *symbolic capabilities and activities replace physical inputs in production* – the greatest revolution in productive development since Marx. While the physical-input class has been effectively terminated in capacities to organise or lead social transformation, knowledge creators and workers are bound by exact learning and the sciences within at and at the top of material production systems across cultures as well as outside them. Yet what they still lack, like Marx's *BST* itself, is comprehension and action in accordance with the *collective life capital bases* (as defined in the prior section) on which all depend in the clean water they can drink, the nourishing food they can eat, the life security they can move or sleep in, and so on through all the life carrying capacities of social reproduction each must have accessible to live and live well as individuals as well as societies.

On the other hand, knowledge creators and workers and their are already organising, unifying and disciplining investigations and mass resistance to capitalist life destructions and degradations of life systems and links on a *case-by-case* basis. These include campaigns against and for species extinctions and conservation, rainforests and animal habitats of every kind, human water sources across the planet, atmosphere and ocean carbonization, toxic and diseases-causing foods and working conditions, political corruption and tax evasions, children's rights and gender liberation, environmental degradations and pesticides or herbicides, trade treaties depriving workers of jobs and life security of citizens, US-led war criminal policies and actions, exposure of secret and mendacious political dealings against the common interest, public electricity infrastructures, dirty oil extractions and transportations crossing planet in pollution of means of life on every level – – – the domains of battle for life and life support systems against capitalist invasions for private profit *are* increasing in numbers and revolt. What still lies ahead for this emergent agency of global social transformation is connective knowledge and action *across* common life capital bases now still isolated from each other in conception and execution towards cross-cultural public policy formation in comprehensively life-coherent definition leading societies on every front out of the degenerative trends deepening within material production itself as well as the ownership structure and political and ideological planes laid bare by base-superstructure theory. This requires 'disciplined, organised and united' understanding within and outside workplaces at a level only adumbrated by Marx's *BST*. As he knew it is not just a question of 'ideas seizing the masses as a material force', but of public authority investigation, action and law consistent with objective and scientific knowledge across public spheres of life protection and enablement.

Marx's Preface to *Capital* is far-seeing in defining the leading lines of the knowledge vocation and its search for truth, objective understanding of the facts, and social defence of universal life necessities for those deprived of them across domains:

where there are *plenary powers to get at the truth* (Marx's emphasis): if it was possible to find for this purpose men as competent, as free from partisanship and respect of persons as are [emphases added] the English Factory inspectors, her medical reporters on *public health*, her commissioners of inquiry into *the exploitation of women and children*, into *housing and food*."

Observe how encompassing these life capital bases are and the 'plenary powers to get at the truth'. Observe how Marx supports the knowledge-creation capacities of the most developed capitalist society to seek the truth across the most basic domains of life

production and reproduction. Consider then this logic of knowledge evolution as the ultimate species, survival and development advantage of humanity through historical and natural time increasingly connecting and leading the rest. This is *the collective life capital knowledge base* which advances in the deepest contradiction with the private money-command system of capitalism, and what alone outgrows its vampire grip – 150 years after Capital.

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Source

*Karl Marx and Frederick Engels. 1975-2004. Collected Works. Lawrence and Wishart Ltd./Progress Publishers: New York/Moscow.*

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