

Chapter 6

Habermas' Reconceptualization of Historical Materialism as a Social Evolutionary Learning Theory

Michael Welton
Athabasca University, Canada

ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the authors examine how Habermas recasts Marx's historical materialism as a social evolutionary learning theory. The argument closely examines how Habermas transforms Marx's key ideas into a new way of understanding human evolution as a learning process.

MARX AND HABERMAS

Historical materialism—the phrase is a stand-in for Marx's theoretical orientation to the world and history. The enlightenment of the eighteenth century had unseated metaphysics and religious authority from its throne. Kant's famous question of 1784—What is enlightenment?—signalled the coming-of-age of man's ability to emancipate “himself from the guardianship of classical learning and Church theology, learning instead to understand himself and his environment” (Dunthorne, 1991, p. 7). For Kant (and later, Marx), reason meant the “scientific method”—the “deductive reasons of the mathematical sciences and the inductive, empirical reasoning of the science of nature” (ibid.).

One of the most striking intellectual developments of the Enlightenment was the articulation of a materialist view of the world. The French encyclopedists, like La Mettrie (*The natural history of the soul* [1745] and *Man a machine* [1748]) and de Condillac (*An essay on the origin of human knowledge* [1756]), in Robert Anchor's (1969) judgment, “expanded Locke's theory into a full-blown materialistic doctrine of psychology, according to which forces entirely independent of man determines his whole character and destiny” (p. 72). This “mechanistic materialism” rejected the idea of non-material or meta-

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physical prime causes. Consciousness was not, somehow, an independent force acting outside nature. Marx expressed his critique of Idealism in a letter to Kugelmann on July 11, 1868.

Since the process of thought itself grows out of the situation, itself is a process of nature, truly conceptual thought is in the same position, and can only differentiate itself gradually, in accordance with the level of development, including that of the organ of thought. (as cited in Schmidt, 1971, p. 31).

Marx's developmentalist approach to human history separates him from the mechanistic materialists of the eighteenth century. Human cognition unfolds through time and space. Humankind is a dynamic, active force in the world. Marx said:

The same spirit that builds philosophical systems in the brain of the philosopher builds railways with the hands of the workmen. Philosophy does not stand outside the world any more than man's brain is outside him because it is not in his stomach; but, of course, philosophy is in the world with its brain before it stands on the earth with its feet, whereas many another sphere of human activity has long been rooted in the earth by its feet and plucks the world's fruits with its hands before it has any idea that the 'head' too belongs to the world, or that this world is the world of the head. (as cited in Schmidt, 1971, pp. 31-32).

Marx and Engels recognize both the priority of nature (it pre-exists humans) and the transformative action of human beings on the natural world (the sensuous material of nature is mediated by the human subject's activity). Humankind makes itself—the famous Marxian axiom. Schmidt (1971) observes that Marxian materialism is not a meta-physics.

It is rather an attempt to direct man's attention to the ghostly internal logic of their own conditions, towards the pseudo-physis that makes them commodities and at the same time provides the ideology according to which they already in control of their own destinies. (p. 41).

Here, Schmidt speaks of the emancipatory logic impelling Marxian: to uncover the pseudo-laws enslaving humankind.

This project must, then, find a way of understanding how it is that human beings, who make themselves in their activity through time, can become aware of these pseudo-laws damaging their lives and potential. Put a bit differently, how, if we identify a belief system as “mere criticism” or “ideology” (that is, as a “mere reflection of more basic forces”), can we avoid the criticism that our own position is ideological itself? Ameriks (2000) comments: “The ‘educator himself must be educated’—but who, especially in the current alienated world, can point the way to a non-question-begging education?” (p. 270). Marx thinks that one must begin with “real premises”—and, ironically, this leads him back to “hard science” (Welton, 2014).

John Foster (2000) has provided important insights pertaining to Marx and Engels' critique of Malthus' notions of population and poverty that illustrate their opposition to any form of materialism that assumed that human poverty and exploitation had natural causes and, therefore, could not be alleviated. Engels thought that it was a “crazy assertion” to believe ‘that the earth lacks the power to feed men’ (as cited in Foster, 2000, p. 107). Even worse, Malthus had asserted that the “population principle” was inexorably applicable to all times and places. They both despised this form of mechanistic materialism, or any world-view that fostered fatalism and passivity. Further, Marx accentuated his unhappiness with

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