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SCHOOL OF SOCIOLOGY AND SOCIAL POLICY  
PLAGIARISM FORM

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Module code SLSP2730

Module title Central Problems In Sociology

Question number and title **Q7) “Marx’s analysis of the mechanism of capitalist production... remains the necessary core of any attempt to come to terms with the massive transformations that have swept through the world since the eighteenth century. But there is much in Marx that is mistaken, ambiguous or inconsistent; and in many respects Marx’s writings exemplify features of nineteenth-century thought that are plainly defective...” (Anthony Giddens, *A Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism*, 1981, p.1). Discuss.**

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**Q7) “Marx’s analysis of the mechanism of capitalist production... remains the necessary core of any attempt to come to terms with the massive transformations that have swept through the world since the eighteenth century. But there is much in Marx that is mistaken, ambiguous or inconsistent; and in many respects Marx’s writings exemplify features of nineteenth-century thought that are plainly defective...” (Anthony Giddens, *A Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism*, 1981, p.1). Discuss.**

Whilst the essay will argue that Karl Marx’s dialectical conception of historical materialism is valuable when understanding capitalism, problems such as Marx’s inconsistency and nineteenth century ideology will illustrate the inadequacy of the theory, without removing the evolutionary aspect, when understanding long-term historical development. Engels will be referred to throughout the essay, as he collaborated with Marx to produce many of the texts discussed. Firstly, the essay will provide an outline of the quote mentioned in the question. There will then be an extensive discussion of Marx (and Engels’) famous conception of historical materialism, that of progressive epochs forming due to the dialectical relationship between the forces and relations of production. Whilst there will be a discussion when outlining this dominant view of historical materialism of how there are areas of Marx’s work that are mistaken and reflect the era it was produced in; there will be a more extensive debate around key areas of contestation further in the essay. For example, debates will include: whether Marx really was a social evolutionist who believed that history progressed due to dialectics in a unilinear form; the often forgotten importance of human *praxis* in Marx’s work (which, it will be argued, shows that Marx should not be represented as a crude materialist); and, Marx’s disregard of women. Finally, an analysis of Marx’s view of the so-called ‘start of history’ (aka no class struggle) will be provided, with a consideration of the tensions and different interpretations of two Marxist politicians - Kautsky and Lenin – thus, illustrating how the inconsistency in Marx’s work has resulted in different interpretations in political attempts to achieve Marx’s socialist/communist dream.

The quote included in the question relates to how Giddens (1981b) believes that historical materialism is only of use when it is being utilised to create a theory of human *praxis* (referring to how thinking and acting is bound together – through this, people make history). Marx’s theory of historical materialism, for Giddens, is redundant when looking at the progression of the forces of production, the history of class struggles, and understanding the evolution of societies. These important issues will be explored in the essay, where it will be argued that Giddens and other authors raise valid points around these weaknesses of Marx’s work. Thus, the essay will support Giddens’ conception that Marx’s dialectical conception of

the forces and relations of production, whilst being redundant for understanding societies before capitalism, is important when considering the capitalist mode of production and society.

Marx deplored the then hitherto views of idealism and materialism, thus, in the *Theses on Feuerbach* (see Marx/Engels Internet Archive 2002) Marx developed his own conception of materialism. Marx was influenced by Hegel's idealism, especially his conception of dialectics of reason, referring to how initially, we see things as what they are not and as the thesis conflicts with the antithesis we see things for what they really are, thus the synthesis (reason) occurs (Zeitlin 2001). However, Marx mainly focused on materialism dialectics; thus, in *Theses on Feuerbach* he criticised the materialistic conceptions of theorists such as Feuerbach for not looking at human activity and therefore allowing idealistic theorists such as Hegel to construct an abstract view of activity. Thus, Marx focused on human *praxis* and was against seeing society as something above the individual (Zeitlin 2001).

Marx's ideas around materialism and idealism were developed in *The German Ideology* (1845) where he set about explaining his theory of historical materialism. Whilst this dialectical nature of historical progression will be criticised, it is important to understand this view of historical materialism, as it is what most people associate Marx with. The starting point for Marx was:

...real individuals, their activity and the material conditions under which they live, both those they find already existing and those produced by their activity (p.42).

The quote illustrates how the materialism vs. idealism debates influenced Marx's view of historical materialism, as it shows how he believed that whilst individuals change history they also have social relations imposed onto them.

*The Communist Manifesto* (1848) further develops this version of historical materialism. Class struggle is central to this conception of historical materialism, as most of history is defined by the conflict between the oppressors and the oppressed – so in capitalism the bourgeoisies and the proletariats, respectively (Aron 1965). Marx and Engels (2004) impressively predict globalisation, as they refer to how capitalism has influenced the growth of the market, and every economic crisis threatens the market (this is extremely relevant today when considering the contemporary economic crisis). Their view of the markets relates to the power of the productive forces in comparison to the relations of production, as whilst

they argued all ruling groups in history have developed the forces of production, the bourgeoisies have developed it more significantly (Aron 1965). Thus, this supports the argument that Marx's capitalist mode of production is important when understanding capitalist development.

The relationship of the forces of production (techniques of production) to the relations of production (ownership of property) is central to this conception of historical materialism and thus will be explained using Marx's preface of his famous book, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1970a). He refers to how the forces and the relations of production constitute the infrastructure, which is the economic base of society. This infrastructure influences the superstructure, which refers to politics and ideology amongst other things. This view of historical change relates to Hegel's dialectics, as Marx and Engels (1970a) state the relations allow the forces of production to grow however, revolutions and thus new historical epochs occur when the forces outgrow the relations. They argue that the seeds of the new epoch originate in the previous epoch, and that these very seeds lead to the epoch's destruction. Only when capitalism's destruction occurs will we see the end of the dialectical relationship of the forces and relations of production.

The forces and relations of production constitute the modes of production and each epoch has a specific mode of production that parallels the development of the division of labour. Similar to Durkheim, Marx and Engels (2004) refer to the importance of the division of labour, with them all seeing the increased specialisation in society as a positive development. However, contra to Durkheim's (1984) belief that the division of labour helps hold society together (through organic solidarity); Marx and Engels (2004) believed that it would produce sophisticated forces of production that will not only lead to capitalism's demise but also to a socialist/communist society that can utilise the forces of production to create a fair social and economic structure.

*The German Ideology* (1970) has a detailed outline of the different modes of production. The first mode of production is tribal, where there is little division of labour and thus no class. Whilst this is not documented in *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels believed that the tribal societies could form into either the ancient or the Asiatic mode of production. The ancient mode of production is discussed in *The German Ideology*, and refers to when private property starts to develop. Whereas, Giddens (1981b) says the Asiatic mode of production (which is discussed in *Grundrisse* 1971) refers to the mode of production in agrarian

societies, where the state prevents classes from emerging. However, this is the most contested and ambiguous mode of production. For example, Giddens states that Marx did not explain how the state could exist without class, as Marx seemed to argue that states only exist to organise classes. Furthermore, Giddens criticises Marx and Engels for seeing the Asiatic forces of production as static and for not recognising the existence of private property. However, the fact that they saw the Asiatic mode of production as static illustrates the lack of consistency in their evolutionary historical materialistic view.

Returning to the development of the modes of production, Marx and Engels (2004) refer to how the feudal mode of production follows the ancient. This relates to the country and spread of agriculture due to using land the ancient society won. However, interestingly, contra to their apparent evolutionary view of history, they concede that many of the productive forces were destroyed by the Roman Empire – this is hardly in tune with their dialectical conception of the forces and relations of production driving history on.

The capitalist mode of production follows the feudal mode. Marx's capitalist specific alienation concept further illustrates the uniqueness and importance of the capitalist mode of production for understanding capitalism. Alienation refers to how the worker is estranged from the product, productive process, themselves and other humans and how due to the class system, the proletariat will feel alienation more (Giddens 1971). Alienation relates to how labour has become a commodity in capitalism, attaining an exchange value and thus becoming the source of profit, only with a revolution will alienation end (Giddens 1971).

The essay has so far provided a detailed explanation of the dominant theory of historical materialism produced by Marx and Engels. Whilst there have been brief discussions around the areas of their theory that are inconsistent, mistaken and ambiguous the essay will now look at this in more detail with a related focus on how the nineteenth century period Marx was writing in reflects the problems.

Marx's conception of class is an example of how his ideas can often be mistaken. Part of this ambiguity is due to Marx's death resulting in him never extensively discussing class in isolation. However, we can gather from his writings that class to him was due to the development of the division of labour, which lead to private property (Giddens 1981a). Giddens (1981a) refers to how there are three main problems when defining Marx's view of class. Firstly, his use of terminology, as he used several words to refer to class (for example, stratum). Secondly, Marx frequently switched between his 'pure' model of class (oppressors

vs. oppressed) and his complex view of class (such as 'transitional classes'). Thirdly, Marx does not properly consider how the expansion of the market influences class in capitalism in comparison to feudalism due to his focus on the transition from capitalism to socialism.

To expand off the central argument of the essay, that Marx's dialectical conception of historical materialism is only of use when looking at the capitalist mode of production, it is important to further consider the debates around whether Marx can be viewed as a social evolutionist. This relates to the nineteenth century period Marx was writing in, as social evolutionary theories were ripe (such as Charles Darwin). Giddens (1981b) argues that Marx's views are similar to functionalists who are closely related to evolutionary theories, as Marx, similarly to functionalists, believed that the capitalist system has 'needs'. For example, Marx said capitalism 'needs' a reserve army of labour, but why? Giddens rightly argues that 'needs' is an inadequate explanation.

However, despite theorists such as Aron (1965) still supporting the social evolutionary view of Marx, Giddens and other theorists rightly show how Marx's evolutionary historical materialism can be criticised by Marx himself. This is most evident in *Grundrisse* (1971) in the section *Forms Which Precede Capitalist Production*. Giddens (1981b) says here Marx believes that instead of history developing due to the increase in private property and the dialectical nature of the mode of production, the progressive epochs form due to individuals' relation to the community. Giddens says that if you accept this view then productive forces cannot be seen as progressing as society advances, thus, this relates back to previous discussion around the Asiatic society and the Roman Empire. Giddens rightly concludes that the dialectic relationship between the forces and relations of production is only relevant to capitalism and so we should instead develop the non-evolutionary view of Marx's ideas.

Zeitlin (2001) also believes that Marx should not be seen as a social evolutionist, and instead blames Marx and Engels for encouraging the view that they are (such as their constant reference to Darwin) and the resulting economic and technological deterministic associations levelled at them. Both Zeitlin (2001) and Giddens (1981b) argue that Marx stressed the importance of external factors such as war to help explain the development of society.

Marx's failure to consider women reflects the nineteenth century ideology he was writing in, which has resulted in feminist adaptations of Marxist theory. For example, Simone de Beauvoir (1953) referred to historical materialism's inability to consider women, as she

argues Marx and Engels concentrate on economic productive forces and neglect consciousness and reproduction as important factors that have resulted in women becoming seen as the 'Other'. However, she does argue that there are positive aspects of the theory, such as how women are seen as important for historical action. Contemporary feminists have further discussed the ambiguity relating to Marx's theory, such as O'Brien (1979 cited in, Nicholson 1997) refers to the narrowness of Marx's production concept, and believes the solution is to add reproduction to it.

The essay will now consider Marx's view of the 'start of history' (aka socialism/communism) and the ambiguity this has caused in political debate and practice. Marx believed a proletariat revolution would lead to class, ideology and the state becoming redundant. Marx (1970b) criticised Hegel's positive view of the state resembling the progression of reason and having authority over civil society and the family. Marx argued that instead of the state regulating the civil society, civil society is the infrastructure that shapes the superstructure (so the state). However, Weber criticises Marx's view that bureaucracy will become the expression of class domination, which will disappear when class struggles end, as Weber believes that even with a revolution, due to the 'Iron Cage' of rationality, bureaucracy will not go, thus, the state will still exist (Giddens 1981a). Indirectly relating, Aron (1965) argues sociologically the state cannot wither away, as society is too complex to have no administration. Nevertheless, it is important to consider the argument that Engels, not Marx, is the one who should be associated with the view of the state withering away (Lichtheim 1964).

Marx's views of socialism and communism have been interpreted differently amongst the political community, illustrating the inconsistent and ambiguous nature of many of Marx's ideas and theories. For example, Kautsky's 'Erfurt Programme', whilst analysing the problems of capitalism from Marx's perspective, set out 'reformist' solutions, as he did not believe a communist system as set out by Marx in the *Communist Manifesto* was possible; and, instead wanted a political revolution enabling democracy and socialism (Lichtheim 1964). Lenin on the other hand disagreed with Kautsky, as he believed communism was possible and utilised Trotsky's 'permanent revolution' concept to refer to how society can become socialist then communist without going through capitalism (Lichtheim 1964). Both Kautsky and Lenin highlight how in practice the evolutionary view of historical materialism has not been implemented politically.

In conclusion, the essay has provided a comprehensive explanation of the dominant interpretation of Marx's historical materialism, that of dialectical evolutionary progression. However, the essay has agreed with Giddens (1981b) and other theorists' views that Marx can be used against himself to criticise this dialectical evolutionary nature of historical materialism. However, at the same time, Marx's theory of the dialectical relationship between the forces and relations of production are important, as is his conception of alienation, when attempting to understand developments within capitalism since the eighteenth century. Marx's other relating conceptions of capitalism are also relevant when trying to understand contemporary society, such as his views around the expansion of the market and labour becoming a commodity. Thus, the essay has shown, many areas of Marx's theories are easily mistaken, ambiguous or inconsistent. It is not surprising that Marx is often seen as having focused solely on structure and neglecting human agency when considering his belief that the superstructure influences the infrastructure. However, the essay has argued that consciousness is central to Marx's ideas and theories, and that he should not be seen as a crude materialist. Marx developed from the idealists and materialists before him a rounded conception of the individual vs. society relationship. There are many areas of Marx's work that do fall defective to nineteenth century ideology, such as his neglect of women, and his sometimes evolutionary view of history. However, whilst there are differences in interpretations, with reformation by theorists such as Giddens and feminists, Marx's analysis of human history can provide a useful resource for understanding capitalism, and if the non evolutionary view of historical materialism is developed, it can be useful for understanding long term historical change.

**Word count (excluding the question) – 2,745**

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