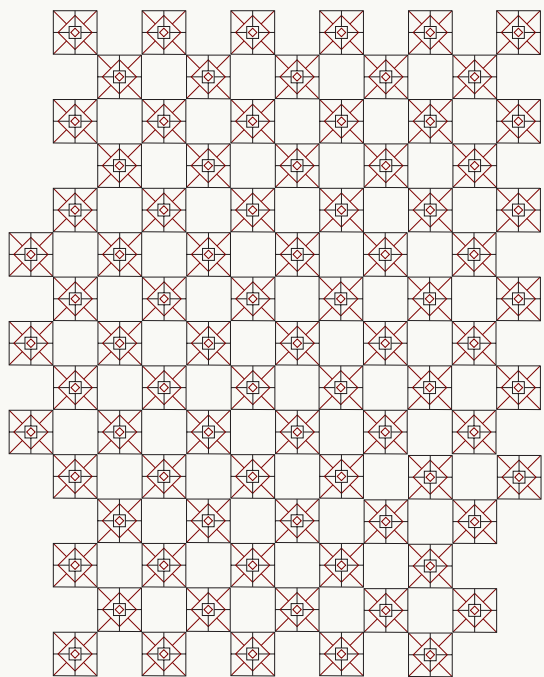


# Retro **SPEKTIVE**

*Znanstvena revija za  
zgodovinske in  
sorodna področja*

**VIII/2-3**



# Retro **SPEKTIVE**

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# Historical Materialism and Progress

**Historični materializem in napredek**

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Robin Dolar

57

## **ABSTRACT**

The paper addresses the concept of progress through an examination of different paradigms in the natural and social sciences. By considering how progress relates to various theoretical frameworks, it analyzes the distinction between teleology and evolution; scientific attempts to reconstruct a theory of history; definitions of capitalism that imply continuous and discontinuous conceptions of historical development; and different perspectives on premodern and modern institutions. The discussion concludes by outlining the implications these concepts hold for understanding modernity and progress. In doing so, the paper seeks to provide a nuanced account of how progress is portrayed in contemporary academic literature.

### **Keywords**

progress, modernity, capitalism, historical materialism, New Institutional Economics

## **IZVLEČEK**

Članek obravnava pojem napredka v okvirih analize različnih paradig v naravoslovju in družboslovju. Preučevanje odnosa med napredkom in različnimi teoretskimi okviri izpostavi razliko med teleologijo in evolucijo; znanstvene poskuse rekonstruiranja teorije zgodovine; definicije kapitalizma s kontinuiranimi in diskontinuiranimi razvojnimi zasnovami; ter raznolika razumevanja predmodernih in modernih institucij. Razprava sklene z orisom implikacij, ki jih ti koncepti vnašajo v razumevanje modernosti in napredka. S tem prispevek pomaga oblikovati večplastno sliko napredka, kot se ta pojavlja v sodobni znanstveni literaturi.

### **Ključne besede**

napredek, modernost, kapitalizem, historični materializem, nova institucionalna ekonomija

## **INTRODUCTION: A THEORY OF PROGRESS?**

The study of human societies is deeply entangled with the concept of progress. History, sociology, political science, and philosophy all shape – and are shaped by – assumptions about how societies change, what counts as improvement or decline, and whether human development follows any discernible direction. Even when scholars in these fields do not overtly frame their analyses in these terms, their work often carries clear implications for how progress is interpreted.

Moreover, a survey of intellectual history reveals that many influential thinkers have explicitly positioned themselves either in favor of progress or in opposition to it. Reflections on the possibility and meaning of improving the human condition have been part of intellectual debate since antiquity, even if they were framed differently from how we understand progress in modernity.<sup>1</sup> The salience of these issues has persisted into the 21st century, with several scholars becoming associated with renewed defenses of progress and its contemporary significance. In addition to emphasizing the achievements of modernity, these authors also criticize what they describe as “progressophobia” among other intellectuals.<sup>2</sup> Progress, therefore, remains a recurring theme in academic discourse.

However, these historical and contemporary uses of the notion of progress do not amount to a scientific theory in any strict sense. They do not form a coherent framework with clearly defined concepts or methodological commitments that would distinguish them from other approaches. In this respect, there is no such thing as a “theory of progress.”

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1 Nisbet, Robert. *History of the Idea of Progress*. New York: Basic Books, 1980.

2 Pinker, Steven. *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined*. New York: Viking, 2011; Pinker, Steven. *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism and Progress*. New York: Penguin Books, 2019; Ridley, Matt. *The Rational Optimist: How Prosperity Evolves*. New York: HarperCollins, 2011; Rosling, Hans, Ola Rosling, and Anna Rosling Rönnlund. *Factfulness: Ten Reasons We're Wrong about the World – and Why Things Are Better Than You Think*. New York: Flatiron Books, 2018.

The absence of such a theory complicates a systematic approach to issues surrounding progress. Accordingly, this paper approaches the concept of progress indirectly, by analyzing the assumptions embedded in frameworks with clear theoretical structures. The article thus draws on various paradigms in the natural and social sciences to compare their accounts of historical development and modernity. The purpose of these comparisons is to provide a clearer sense of what different perspectives imply for the meaning and viability of progress.

The frameworks that will be considered are classical historical materialism, Darwinian evolution, Analytical Marxism, Political Marxism, and New Institutional Economics. The discussion moves from addressing various aspects of long-term historical developments to examining different views of modern institutions. While the implications of these views for the nature of progress are suggested throughout, they are brought together more fully in the final part of the article. The conclusion thus attempts to provide an explicit assessment of progress and modernity.

## **THE MARXIST THEORY OF HISTORY**

A convenient starting point for examining the concept of progress as it relates to the social sciences is to consider Karl Marx's theory of history. Among the figures that sought to make sense of the economic and political transformations of the 19th century, Marx articulated arguably the most influential theory of how societies develop and transform over time.<sup>3</sup> In other words, he offered a general theory of history, one that links the dynamics of social reproduction to the mechanisms of historical change. The classical formulation of this theory is most clearly expressed in the Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, a short text that outlines the conceptual core of historical materialism.<sup>4</sup> It is useful to consider

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3 For a discussion of classical sociological authors, see: Giddens, Anthony. *Capitalism and Modern Social Theory: An Analysis of the Writings of Marx, Durkheim and Max Weber*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971.

4 Marx, Karl. "Preface" to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. Trans. Terrell Carver. In: *Marx: Later Political Writings*, ed. Terrell Carver, 158–162. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

a longer passage from this work, which will serve as the basis for the discussion that follows.

In the social production of their lives men enter into relations that are specific, necessary and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a specific stage of development of their material productive forces. The totality of these relations of production forms the economic structure of society, the real basis from which rises a legal and political superstructure, and to which correspond specific forms of social consciousness. [...] At a certain level of their development the material productive forces of society come into contradiction with the already existing relations of production, or in what is merely a legal expression for this, with the property relations within which they had previously functioned. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then an epoch of social revolution commences. [...] In broad outline Asiatic, ancient, feudal and modern bourgeois modes of production can be designated as progressive epochs in the economic development of society.<sup>5</sup>

This passage can be interpreted as containing a tripartite framework of analysis. The first element is the “forces of production,” which are the material means and technical capacities through which societies produce their livelihoods. These include the instruments of labor, such as tools, machinery, land, and technology, as well as the knowledge and skills required to use them. The second element is the “relations of production,” which are the social organization of that productive activity, that is, the relations between those who work and those who control the conditions of work. In feudalism, these relations took the form of lords and peasants; in capitalism, they take the form of capitalists and workers. Finally, the third element is the “superstructure,” which refers to the legal, political, and ideological institutions that arise on the basis of the underlying economic conditions. Simply put, while the forces and relations of production constitute the material

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5 *Ibid.*, 159–160.

base of society, the superstructure is an expression of this base in the form of ideas, norms, and institutions.<sup>6</sup>

The quoted passage also includes a theory of social and historical change. The reason is that the development of the forces of production constrains the possible relations of production that are connected to it. As long as social relations are conducive to the further advancement of productive technology, the system remains stable. But once the existing relations of production constrain rather than enable further growth of productive forces – once they become “fettters” on growth – a period of social revolution begins. When the contradiction between them becomes acute, it leads to the transformation of both the economic base and the superstructure built upon it. The result is the reconstitution of society’s fundamental structure.

It is not hard to see how the presented framework can be interpreted as a sequential or a “stagist” view of human history. Marx himself identifies several broad epochs in the quoted passage: the Asiatic, ancient, feudal, and modern bourgeois modes of production, which correspond to historical periods. This line of thought was later picked up by his successors and developed into the famous schema of historical stages: primitive communism, ancient slavery, feudalism, capitalism, and finally socialism and communism as the projected culmination.<sup>7</sup> This interpretation represents an all-encompassing theory of historical progression that sought not only to interpret the world, but also to guide political practice within it. Progress – in the sense of the development of the forces and relations of production – is ingrained in human history.

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6 For a comprehensive discussion of this framework, see: Cohen, G.A. *Karl Marx’s Theory of History: A Defence*. Exp. ed. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001.

7 *Ibid.*, 197–215.

## **TELEOLOGY AND EVOLUTION**

One important distinction that can be drawn from the discussed formulation is that between a teleological and an evolutionary account of change. As the charge of teleology is one of the most common objections to the notion of progress, it is important to address it directly.

A teleological conception presupposes that historical development moves toward a predetermined goal, or “telos.” History is not an arbitrary succession of events, but a purposeful sequence oriented toward an ultimate end. The Christian understanding of temporality represents an example of this conception: it follows a linear structure in which the decisive events are the creation of the world, the coming of Christ, and the final judgment. It is important to note that this view does not necessarily deny the significance of other developments, such as the rise and fall of empires, but these developments ultimately remain subordinate to God’s divine plan. Regardless of what is happening in the realm of human affairs, history is marching toward the Apocalypse.<sup>8</sup>

It should be clear that the Marxist theory of history can be read as teleological. If we draw the parallel with Christianity, we can say that the Christian sequence of sacred events is replaced by a sequence of social forms through which societies advance, with both frameworks projecting this logic into the future. The two conceptions are not the same, of course, as Marxism locates the agent of historical change in social actors rather than in divine will. However, according to this reading, both frameworks share a structural similarity in viewing development as directed toward an inevitable end. It can therefore be argued that while the substance of

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8 This is a simplified description of the Christian temporal framework. For a more comprehensive account, see: Koselleck, Reinhart. “Is there an Acceleration of History?” Trans. James Ingram. In: *High-Speed Society: Social Acceleration, Power, and Modernity*, eds. Hartmut Rosa and William E. Scheuerman, 113–134. Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009, 128–134; Pomian, Krzysztof. *Red časa*. Trans. Vera Troha. Ljubljana: Krtina, 2010, 55–60.

Christian eschatology and historical materialism may be significantly different, their formal logic remains comparable.<sup>9</sup>

The claim that a developmental sequence possesses structure and direction does not, however, necessarily entail a teleological interpretation. In addition to the birth of the social sciences, the 19th century also witnessed one of the most significant revolutions in the natural sciences, namely the theory of evolution. The broad impact of this theory can be seen in the fact that Marx admired Darwin's work and even sent him a copy of *Capital*, seeing in Darwin's theory a partial analogue to his own conception of historical development.<sup>10</sup>

The theory of evolution, in its basic structure, rests on two central components. The first is random genetic mutation, which refers to the spontaneous changes of genes that produce the diversity of species. It is important to note that this idea was misused to promote racist theories about human genetics which have, of course, been thoroughly discredited by contemporary science.<sup>11</sup> More relevant to the present discussion is the second component, natural selection. This concept refers to the process by which certain traits become more common in a population because they confer an advantage in survival and reproduction within a given environment. Giraffes have long necks not because of chance or destiny, but because that trait happened to be beneficial for their reproduction. In other words, the evolutionary process works as a mechanism of animal adaptation to environmental conditions, which shapes the development of species over long periods of time.<sup>12</sup>

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9 The teleological aspects of theories of history have been noted by many authors. For a comprehensive discussion of this issue, see: Löwith, Karl. *Meaning in History: The Theological Implications of the Philosophy of History*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957.

10 Cohen, Bernard J. *Revolution in Science*. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1985, 344–345.

11 Rutherford, Adam. *Control: The Dark History and Troubling Present of Eugenics*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2022; Rutherford, Adam. *How to Argue with a Racist: History, Science, Race and Reality*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2020.

12 Cohen, *Revolution in Science*, 291–294.

If we connect this description to our discussion, we can say that an evolutionary framework differs from a teleological one in multiple respects. First, the theory of evolution posits a general tendency in the evolution of animals, not a predetermined sequence with a clear goal. That is to say, while the process follows discernible patterns of adaptation, it remains open-ended rather than oriented toward any fixed or final goal. Second, the structure of development is explained through a functional mechanism: traits endure not because they were designed for a purpose, but because they represent advantages for survival and reproduction. The framework therefore includes an internal “motor” that accounts for the direction of development.<sup>13</sup>

In addition to its theoretical foundations, the empirical grounding of evolutionary theory should also be emphasized. It is worth noting that certain elements of this theory were put forward by thinkers before Darwin’s publication of his findings (in less systematic terms, of course). However, it is one thing to suggest certain ideas in a general sense, and another to provide sufficient evidence to make them plausible. What distinguished Darwin’s contribution was not only its conceptual rigor, but also the extensive body of evidence collected through decades of observation across South America. *The Origin of Species* stands apart because it united a coherent theoretical framework with empirical substance.<sup>14</sup>

The example of Darwinian evolution demonstrates that a theory of development can be scientifically grounded. Such a theory is going to be plausible if it proposes a general tendency of development rather than a clearly defined goal; it has to be explained by a causal mechanism; and it has to be supported by empirical evidence.

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13 For a discussion of the relevance of Darwinian evolution for theories of history, see: Wright, Erik Olin, Andrew Levine, and Elliott Sober. *Reconstructing Marxism: Essays on Explanation and the Theory of History*. London and New York: Verso, 1992, 47–60.

14 Cohen, *Revolution in Science*, 291–292.

## **A SCIENTIFIC THEORY OF HUMAN HISTORY?**

The significance of Darwinian theory was recognized not only by Marx himself, but also by later historical materialists. Within the Marxist tradition, the school of thought known as “Analytical Marxism” explicitly embraces a methodological outlook of the kind usually associated with the natural sciences. Drawing on the broader distinction between analytic and continental philosophy, the main idea of this paradigm is to articulate Marx’s premises with conceptual precision and to test whether its empirical claims stand up to the historical record. Simply put, historical materialism has to be tested in the same way as any other scientific theory.<sup>15</sup> While one may question whether this strand of Marxism represents a distinct epistemological orientation, its substantive propositions are relevant in the context of discussing the concept of progress.

The most influential representative of Analytical Marxism is G.A. Cohen, whose 1978 work *Karl Marx’s Theory of History: A Defense* aimed to reconstruct Marx’s classical formulation of historical materialism in systematic form.<sup>16</sup> This reconstruction consists of two central components. The first is the “development thesis,” which holds that history is characterized by a continual development of productive forces. The basic reason for this tendency is that humans seek to avoid strenuous work, which is why they are driven to create technologies that make work easier, which leads to cumulative technological improvement over time. The second component is the “primacy thesis,” which holds that relations of production are sustained only insofar as they facilitate the development of productive forces. As already discussed, the idea here is that social relations endure only if they support the expansion of productive capacity, and not if they represent “fetters” to that development. Taken together, these two theses suggest that human history sees a tendency toward the development of technology and a corresponding evolution of societies.<sup>17</sup>

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15 Wright, Erik Olin. *Interrogating Inequality: Essays on Class Analysis, Socialism, and Marxism*. London and New York: Verso Books, 1994, 178–198.

16 Cohen, *Karl Marx’s Theory of History*.

17 *Ibid.*, 28–62, 134–174; Wright, Levine, and Sober, *Reconstructing Marxism*, 13–46.

Cohen's defense of Marx opened up a wider research program that was at least partially influenced by evolutionary theory. It is worth noting that the presented reconstruction contains the idea of a historical tendency and (the aim of) a clear causal explanation, but it does not necessarily hold to the notion of an ultimate end to which history is destined to move. This framework is thus closer to an evolutionary rather than a teleological conception. It should not be surprising, then, that the debate following Cohen's publication primarily focused on adducing a mechanism by which the forces of production select the relations of production. Without this element, the theory lacked the "motor" that explains the direction of change. In other words, historical materialism required a mechanism for the development of social relations that functioned in a manner analogous to natural selection in the evolution of species.<sup>18</sup>

Alan Carling was one of the authors who responded to this challenge by proposing competition between societies, most importantly military conflict, as the missing selection mechanism. His core argument was that different types of societies consistently fight wars with one another, and those with more advanced productive forces and social relations tend to prevail. In parallel with how certain types of animals persist because of natural selection, certain types of societies endure due to geopolitical competition. The example Carling used was the spread of capitalism: capitalist societies are significantly more productive than pre-capitalist societies, which is why they have a structural advantage in military conflict, which is how capitalism spread around the world.<sup>19</sup> This solution makes canonical historical materialism an internally coherent theory.

However, Carling's proposal is also limited in a very significant way: it only works for the part of history in which capitalism exists. It is true that the economic productiveness of capitalist societies translates into a sustained advantage in geopolitical competition, as witnessed in the history of the

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18 Chibber, Vivek. "What Is Living and What Is Dead in the Marxist Theory of History." *Historical Materialism*, 19/2 (2011), 71–73.

19 Carling, Alan. "Analytical Marxism and Historical Materialism: The Debate on Social Evolution." *Science & Society*, 57/1 (1993), 44–56.

19th and 20th centuries. But the differences in the economic capabilities of pre-capitalist societies were not large enough to result in a consistent military advantage based on productivity. Wars in premodern times were largely decided by other factors, such as strategic capabilities, ideology, or contingency.<sup>20</sup> This is why different types of societies, such as hunter-gatherer societies, empires (of various kinds), feudal monarchies, etc., coexisted for most of human history. Simply put, there was no one dominant type of society in premodernity in the same sense as there is a dominant type of society in modernity.<sup>21</sup> While Carling's model captures an essential dynamic of the modern world, it thus does not extend to earlier epochs.

The debates surrounding canonical historical materialism included many other developments that will not be explored here. It is worth briefly noting, however, that the Marxist scholar Vivek Chibber's 2011 article "What Is Living and What Is Dead in the Marxist Theory of History" can be viewed as a kind of post-mortem on this debate. One important argument that Chibber highlights is that the correct way to think about technology in history is not as a tendency of constant development, but as a tendency toward non-regression. The latter is a much weaker claim, essentially conveying the notion that technological regressions are the exceptions in human history because social actors have the incentive to keep the level of technological development at least intact. This view is consistent with long periods of economic stagnation, which is in fact what characterizes human history. On the whole, Chibber concludes that the debate's outcome does not support the canonical interpretation of historical materialism.<sup>22</sup>

It is important to recognize the nuances of the arguments presented here. There is, in fact, an observable asymmetry in the history of technology. When one considers technological change from prehistoric tools to the 21st century, it is evident that regression is far less common than the maintenance or enhancement of existing levels of productive capacity. It

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20 Chibber, "What Is Living," 73–78.

21 Giddens, Anthony. *A Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism*. Vol. 1, *Power, Property, and the State*. Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1981, 168–169.

22 Chibber, "What Is Living," 80–90.

is also true that capitalism became the globally dominant type of society largely because of its advantages in military conflict. Both of these claims represent non-teleological, scientifically valid, and empirically grounded accounts of development. In certain important aspects, then, the reconstruction of canonical historical materialism was productive.

However, the point to emphasize is that these trends do not represent the main story for most of human history. The central fact of economic life for millennia was relative stagnation, not a tendency toward development. Sustained economic growth and the corresponding military advantage is specific only to the past few centuries and represents a *discontinuity* with previous historical eras. Progress – again, understood here in the sense of the development of the forces of production and the related changes in the relations of production – is a modern phenomenon. The explanation for these historical patterns should therefore be one that emphasizes the uniqueness of capitalism, not one that works for all societies and all eras of history.

## **MARKET OPPORTUNITIES AND MARKET IMPERATIVES**

The specificity of capitalism is precisely what other schools of historical sociology have emphasized. Roughly at the same time as Analytical Marxists were arguing over the theory of history, a school named “Political Marxism” emerged. This name comes from a critic of the paradigm, who complained that the typical Marxist focus on the forces of production was substantially revised or even abandoned. The criticism was then adopted by the social theorist Ellen Meiksins Wood with the argument that politics always plays a central role in social formations and the manner of surplus extraction. Hence the term Political Marxism took hold, even if many practitioners of the paradigm are skeptical of its use.<sup>23</sup>

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23 For general introductions to this paradigm, see: Lafrance, Xavier, and Charles Post. “Introduction.” In: *Case Studies in the Origins of Capitalism*, eds. Xavier Lafrance and Charles Post, 1–38. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019; Rutar, Tibor. *Od klasične sociologije k mednarodni historični sociologiji: izvori in narava modernosti*. Ljubljana: Znanstvena založba Filozofske fakultete, 2017, 53–77.

One of the main contributions of this strand of Marxism is in providing a precise definition of capitalism. Most traditional approaches to this question – such as those of Fernand Braudel and Immanuel Wallerstein – see a clear association between capitalism and certain types of market exchange.<sup>24</sup> The problem with this view is that various forms of commercial activity, often generating significant profits, have existed for millennia without producing the imperatives or the outcomes of modern markets. Political Marxists, on the other hand, understand capitalism as a distinct type of society which is historically recent and represents a qualitative break with previous social forms. Since this is the main paradigm this article seeks to defend, it is worth briefly outlining how it understands societal types and the role of markets.

The basic concept through which societies are understood is “social property relations.” These relations determine the access of social actors to land, tools, work, and the social product itself. Societies are essentially viewed as different ways of dividing property among social actors.<sup>25</sup> At the most general level of analysis, we can distinguish between three basic types of societies.

**Pre-class societies**, such as various kinds of hunter-gatherer communities, agrarian villages, as well as “chiefdoms,” are defined by the lack of structural inequality in the distribution of material resources. Apart from the fact that this category includes many different types of social relations, it is important to note that complex phenomena such as monumental architecture, trade, and even the creation of cities all existed in early human contexts. Traditional assumptions about the primitive nature of prehistoric societies are therefore misleading. What sets pre-class societies apart is

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24 Braudel, Fernand. *Dinamika kapitalizma*. Trans. Gregor Moder. Ljubljana: Sophia, 2010; Wallerstein, Immanuel. *World-Systems Analysis: An Introduction*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004.

25 Brenner, Robert. “Property and Progress: Where Adam Smith Went Wrong.” In: *Marxist History-Writing for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Chris Wickham, 49–111. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007, 57–59.

that they are not characterized by a structural asymmetry of power that stems from an unequal distribution of property.<sup>26</sup>

**Pre-capitalist societies** are defined by (1) the lower class having access to the means of subsistence, and (2) the upper class having direct control of the means of coercion.<sup>27</sup> These characteristics are most easily explained by considering feudal social relations, which are often used as a template to describe various kinds of pre-capitalist class societies. In feudal societies, peasants possess the material resources they need to survive and are therefore not dependent on the market. Most of what they produce is for use, not exchange. Medieval lords, on the other hand, possess the armed power they need to subordinate the peasants. This gives them the ability to extract surplus “extra-economically,” which is to say that they take part of what peasants have produced independently. Simply put, the basic structure of pre-capitalist societies is defined by the fact that military superiority enables lords to extract surplus from subsistence peasants.<sup>28</sup>

The market represents an important, but structurally limited part of these kinds of societies. Several distinct features should be emphasized here. First, pre-capitalist markets should primarily be viewed as opportunities that social actors can take advantage of, not as imperatives that they need to follow. Peasants, lords, and merchants generally use markets when it benefits them, not because they are forced to do so. Second, pre-capitalist markets are based on “privileges,” that is, political designations determining that only certain groups of social actors have the possibility of long-distance trade and manufacture production. Medieval merchants and manufacturers operate based on privileges given to them by political authority, which (crucially) shields them from economic competition. Third, the gains that are made on the market are generally not invested

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26 For characterizations of pre-class societies, see: Giddens, *A Contemporary Critique*, vol. 1, 160–162; Graeber, David, and David Wengrow. *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity*. London: Allen Lane, 2021; Mann, Michael. *The Sources of Social Power*. Vol. 1, *A History of Power from the Beginning to AD 1760*. New ed. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012, 34–72.

27 Brenner, “Property and Progress,” 63–66.

28 *Ibid.*, 61–66.

in the sphere of production. Lords and merchants mostly do not use their surplus to improve farming tools and techniques, but largely use it to buy military equipment and for luxury consumption (such as buying expensive food, clothing, etc.). Pre-capitalist markets, therefore, primarily represent opportunity; they are based on political privileges; and they do not inherently lead to systematic improvements in economic productivity.<sup>29</sup>

**Capitalist societies** are radically different from pre-capitalist societies in many central respects. They are defined by (1) the lower class not having access to the means of subsistence, and (2) the upper class not having direct control over the means of coercion.<sup>30</sup> Workers in capitalism do not possess the material resources they need to survive and are consequently dependent on the market. Capitalists do not have the ability to extract surplus by the direct use of force, since the state holds a monopoly on the means of violence. Importantly, this enables the capitalist state to protect private property, which represents a core tenet of capitalism. The extraction of surplus in these conditions occurs “economically,” as part of the production process itself. The basic idea here is that the wage that workers get paid is not a direct expression of the value they produce during working time. In other words, economic surplus extraction is essentially represented by the difference between the value that workers produce and the wage they get in return.<sup>31</sup>

The market is an all-encompassing part of capitalist societies with the following distinct features. First, since social actors in capitalism do not have the ability to sustain themselves by making the products and pro-

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29 For characterizations of the pre-capitalist market sphere, see: *ibid.*, 72–82; Wood, Ellen Meiksins. *The Origin of Capitalism: A Longer View*. London and New York: Verso, 2017, 73–94; Gerstenberger, Heide. *Impersonal Power: History and Theory of the Bourgeois State*. Trans. David Fernbach. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2007, 632–662.

30 Brenner, “Property and Progress,” 60–62.

31 It is important to note that explaining economic surplus extraction does not require commitment to the labor theory of value. For a brief overview of how this subject is understood in mainstream paradigms, see: Rutar, Tibor. *Capitalism for Realists: Virtues and Vices of the Modern Economy*. London: Routledge, 2023, 61–69. For a contemporary defense of the labor theory of value, see: Heinrich, Michael. *An Introduction to the Three Volumes of Karl Marx’s Capital*. Trans. Alexander Locascio. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2012, 39–98.

duce they need, they are dependent on the market to survive. Markets in capitalism should thus primarily be viewed not as an opportunity, but as an imperative or a compulsion. Second, capitalist markets are, in general terms, characterized by economic competition. While monopolies exist in capitalism, they are a result of the capitalist production process itself and therefore structurally different from pre-capitalist political monopolies. Finally, the fact that markets are competitive puts pressure on capitalists to economize on production or risk being driven out of the market. This is why capitalist firms constantly invest their profits in developing new technology that raises productivity in order to outcompete their rivals. Capitalist markets, therefore, primarily represent imperatives; they are competitive; and they incentivize constant investment in the sphere of production, leading to economic growth.<sup>32</sup>

The way that Political Marxists view capitalism is thus as a whole set of social property relations in which markets have a specific character. Traditional accounts of capitalism do not sufficiently recognize the differences between pre-capitalist and capitalist markets in what they represent to social actors, in the internal logic of how they operate, and in the outcomes they produce. If there is one simple phrase that captures the essence of capitalism, it is “market dependence.”

The account presented here also entails a reconceptualization of the transition from pre-capitalist to capitalist societies. If one associates capitalism with market exchange, then it can be assumed that the market only needed to spread over time or that premodern merchants brought about the transition to a commercial society.<sup>33</sup> But if one views capitalism as a distinct set of social institutions, then the question of how those institutions initially emerged poses a significant conceptual challenge. How did

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32 For characterizations of the economic sphere in capitalism, see: Chibber, Vivek. *Confronting Capitalism: How the World Works and How to Change It*. London and New York: Verso, 2022, 5–50; Heinrich, *An Introduction*, 99–129; Krašovec, Primož. *Tujost kapitala*. Ljubljana: Sophia, 2021, 20–40.

33 The latter interpretation is aligned with the classical conception of the “Bourgeois Revolution.” However, this framework has been thoroughly criticized by contemporary scholarship. See: Comminel, George C. *Rethinking the French Revolution: Marxism and the Revisionist Challenge*. London and New York: Verso, 1987, 5–52.

we get to the historically unprecedented situation in which most people are dependent on the market? The answer to this challenge is provided by the founder of Political Marxism, Robert Brenner. Without going into details here, the main point is that capitalism emerged as an *unintended* consequence of class struggle because of specific historical circumstances. This occurred in England in the wake of the Black Death, the result of which was that a significant number of social actors became dependent on the market and started to follow the capitalist logic of specialization, profit maximization, and the constant investment in new technologies. The emergence of capitalism, then, is essentially understood as a contingent event, a historical accident.<sup>34</sup>

If we put what has been discussed thus far together, we get a clear picture of human history. The predominant tendency throughout most of history is relative stagnation. Development did occur, of course, but it occurred at irregular intervals, which did not lead to economic take-off. The reason for this relative stagnation is that social actors in pre-capitalist societies were not incentivized to systematically improve technology that economizes labor. Subsistence peasants were largely trying to stay alive, while lords were buying military equipment and luxury objects.

Then, at a relatively late point in history (the late 14th and early 15th centuries), capitalism emerged as an unintended consequence of human action. Capitalism is inherently linked to economic dynamism because it pressures social actors to constantly improve productive forces or risk being forced out of the market. Due to this economic productivity, capitalism holds a structural military advantage against non-capitalist societies, which is the main reason why it prevailed and spread around the world. While the initial emergence of capitalism was contingent, its later spread can be explained by structural factors.

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34 This account has been the subject of substantial controversy. For a contemporary defense of the Brenner Thesis, see: Brenner, "Property and Progress"; Dimmock, Spencer. *The Origin of Capitalism in England, 1400–1600*. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2015; Rutar, *Capitalism for Realists*, 33–40; Wood, *The Origin of Capitalism*.

These conclusions are important for the purposes of this article because they represent a discontinuous interpretation of human history, and thus go against a view that would support long-term trends of progress. Two dimensions should be mentioned here. First, the Political Marxist account is discontinuous in the sense that it does not suppose an inherent tendency toward the development of the forces of production throughout history. The sustained advance of technology is explained by a distinctly modern phenomenon, that is, by capitalism in the sense of social property relations. Second, it is discontinuous in the sense that it does not project modern economic motivations to premodern social actors. Capitalist markets are not simply an expression of the inherent need of humans to truck, barter, and exchange, to use Adam Smith's famous phrase. Rather, social actors in capitalism act the way that they do because of the historically specific set of institutions they find themselves in. The presented approach, therefore, historicizes capitalism in a sense in which other interpretations do not.

## **CAPITALISM OR INCLUSIVE INSTITUTIONS?**

So far, this article has examined questions about progress by focusing on the conceptualization of long-term historical developments. This historical perspective is important because it shapes how modern institutions are understood.

How modern societies are framed will be illustrated by considering one final paradigm of social science, "New Institutional Economics." This approach originates in a strand of economic theory that highlights the role of institutional structures in shaping economic outcomes (as opposed to explanations that emphasize environmental, cultural, or demographic factors). One simple way to think about institutions is that they are the "rules of the game," the frameworks that determine the incentives of social action.<sup>35</sup> This tradition gained renewed prominence in the early 21st century. Its leading figures, Daron Acemoglu, Simon Johnson, and James A. Robinson,

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35 Koyama, Mark, and Jared Rubin. *How the World Became Rich: The Historical Origins of Economic Growth*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2022, 37–65.

were awarded the Nobel Prize in Economics in 2024.<sup>36</sup> Considering this perspective can therefore be understood as a way to address the findings of mainstream economic thought.

The most influential work in this paradigm is Acemoglu and Robinson's 2012 book *Why Nations Fail*.<sup>37</sup> Their central argument is that economic stagnation and economic development can be explained by distinguishing between "extractive" and "inclusive" institutions. I will, again, briefly outline these two concepts for the purposes of comparison.

**Extractive institutions** are systems in which political and economic power is concentrated in the hands of a narrow elite, which enables them to extract resources from the rest of society. Such institutions encompass a wide range of historical social formations, such as slaveholding societies, feudal societies, and colonial regimes. While they differ in many respects, all these types of societies involve a dominant group extracting surplus from a subordinate group, whether through slavery, serfdom, or coercive labor systems such as *encomiendas*. To put it more broadly, extractive institutions restrict political and economic participation, limit property rights, and often rely on coercion or monopolies. These institutions hinder economic development, because they reduce incentives for investment and innovation, concentrate opportunities in the hands of the elites, and suppress the process of creative destruction that is necessary for sustained growth.<sup>38</sup>

**Inclusive institutions**, by contrast, represent a more recent historical development. These are pluralistic institutional structures in which most members of society can participate (hence the term "inclusive"). More concretely, inclusive institutions refer to competitive and open markets, secure property rights, democratic political systems, and broadly accessi-

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36 Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences. "The Prize in Economic Sciences 2024 – Press Release." 14 October 2024. Available at: <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/economic-sciences/2024/press-release/> (access: September 2025).

37 Acemoglu, Daron, and James A. Robinson. *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity, and Poverty*. London: Profile Books, 2012.

38 *Ibid.*, 73–87.

ble healthcare and education systems. Simply put, they are the institutional forms that we typically associate with modernity. Inclusive institutions foster economic development because they draw on a broad pool of talent, encourage experimentation, and allow creative destruction to unfold. By creating incentives for a wide range of individuals to work, invest, and innovate, they generate sustained economic growth.<sup>39</sup>

It should be clear that the Political Marxist approach and the New Institutional Economics framework share a lot of similarities that warrant consideration (even if they are somewhat ideologically inconvenient for both paradigms). Most obviously, the Marxist distinction between pre-capitalist and capitalist societies resembles the Institutionalist distinction between extractive and inclusive institutions. To look at it from a general perspective: both paradigms emphasize that institutional structures shape incentives, which in turn shape economic outcomes; both view premodern societies as inherently stagnant and attempt to explain the historical uniqueness of modern institutions; both understand the economic and political spheres as inherently interconnected; and both make similar empirical claims. It should not be surprising, then, that Acemoglu and Robinson attribute part of their account of England's transition from extractive to inclusive institutions to Brenner's work: "[Brenner's] *analysis of how the initial distribution of political power affected the consequences of the plague has greatly influenced our thinking.*"<sup>40</sup>

Despite these parallels, the two paradigms differ significantly in their basic understanding of modern institutions. The main point to emphasize concerns how the continuity and discontinuity between premodern and modern societies are understood.

In the previous subsection, I discussed all the ways in which the Political Marxist approach emphasizes that capitalism marks a sharp break from earlier social formations. At the same time, however, this paradigm also

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39 *Ibid.*

40 *Ibid.*, 469.

stresses a very basic continuity: the persistence of the class structure. Pre-capitalist and capitalist societies differ in many respects, but both are understood as societies in which a dominant group, whether lords or capitalists, extracts surplus from a subordinate group, whether peasants or workers. The transition from pre-capitalist to capitalist societies represents a structural reconfiguration – the redistribution of property – rather than a linear progression. The most obvious expression of this point is in the emphasis on the dispossession of the lower class of society by which subsistence peasants become capitalist workers. To put it in simple terms, the transition to capitalism can be better described as a “give-and-take” rather than an “upgrade.”

New Institutional Economics, by contrast, minimizes the downsides of modernity. That is not to say that Acemoglu and Robinson deny the existence of unequal power relations within inclusive institutions, which they often acknowledge.<sup>41</sup> However, these inequalities are not viewed as fundamental features of capitalism in the same way that they are in the Marxist approach. The opposition between extractive and inclusive institutions makes this perfectly clear: the concept of “extraction” itself is reserved to denote the specificity of premodern institutions. The continuity of the class structure of societies, which entails the dispossession of the lower class in the process of transition, is de-emphasized. In other words, the framing of extractive and inclusive institutions does suggest an “upgrade.” New Institutional Economics, therefore, views premodern and modern institutions as essentially the opposite of each other, while Political Marxism, despite all elements of discontinuity, emphasizes the fundamental continuity of class relations.

The implications of the differences between the two frameworks can be elucidated by considering how a Marxist perspective might apply the notion of “inclusion” to capitalism. This consideration can be applied to both the economic and political spheres.

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41 Acemoglu, Daron, and James A. Robinson. *The Narrow Corridor: States, Societies, and the Fate of Liberty*. New York: Penguin Press, 2019.

Starting with the economic sphere, the Marxist perspective does suggest that capitalist markets are more inclusive than pre-capitalist ones in certain respects. Pre-capitalist markets fundamentally relied on political privileges that limit access to the market. Medieval guilds did, for instance, impose formal restrictions on the market sphere. At the same time, however, a capitalist market is also understood as exclusive in ways that pre-capitalist societies are not. The most important point to emphasize in this context is that workers in capitalism lack control over decisions concerning how production is organized, what is produced, and whether production continues at all. Economic decision-making is highly concentrated in the hands of the capitalist class. This is precisely why socialism is often described as “the democratization of the economic sphere.” Another way to make this point is by emphasizing that Marxists primarily view capitalist markets in terms of dependence, whereas New Institutional Economists view them primarily as opportunities (as implied in the term “inclusive”). Simply put, Marxists emphasize that workers in capitalism do not have the power to effectuate changes in the workplace, to which they are forced to go because they do not have the ability to sustain themselves outside of having a job. In all these aspects, then, the economic sphere in capitalism is more accurately described as “non-inclusive.” All these considerations flow from the unequal distribution of property in capitalist societies.<sup>42</sup>

A similar contrast can be seen in the political sphere. There is, again, a sense in which capitalism can be described as politically inclusive from a Marxist perspective. A democratic political system clearly represents a basic tenet of advanced capitalist societies (which is enabled by the fact that surplus extraction occurs in the private sphere).<sup>43</sup> However, this does not imply a pluralist interpretation of the capitalist state, as the New Institutionalist framing suggests. The Marxist point in this context is that the capitalist class holds a structural advantage in influencing the state. This advantage arises not only from the class’s superior material resources, but

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42 Chibber, *Confronting Capitalism*, 5–50; Heinrich, *An Introduction*, 99–129.

43 For a comprehensive discussion about the relation between capitalism and democracy, see: Wood, Ellen Meiksins. *Democracy Against Capitalism: Renewing Historical Materialism*. London and New York: Verso, 2016.

also from the state's structural dependence on capital. Since investment decisions rest with capitalists, and since the state's fiscal capacity depends on taxing the economy, governments have strong incentives to uphold conditions favorable to capital accumulation. If investment declines, the resulting economic downturns can undermine political stability and the position of governing parties. This is why the reforms that are pursued by the capitalist states are, in general, skewed toward the interests of capital. To put it in simple terms, business leaders have much more influence over political outcomes than ordinary workers because of the basic structure of capitalist societies. In this sense, the political sphere in capitalism can again be described as "non-inclusive." These conclusions are based on the unequal distribution of property in capitalism.<sup>44</sup>

Political Marxism and New Institutional Economics thus share several assumptions, but their basic frameworks imply different conceptualizations of modernity. The Institutionalist approach views modern institutions as fundamentally pluralistic and inclusive. The Marxist perspective, on the other hand, inherently implies that modern institutions represent a combination of inclusive and exclusive dimensions. This difference arises from whether the transition from premodern to modern societies is viewed as a linear progression or as a structural reconfiguration.

## **CONCLUSION: ASSESSING PROGRESS**

The discussions of Marx's theory of history, Darwinian evolution, Analytical Marxism, Political Marxism, and New Institutional Economics all carry certain implications for how we should understand the concept of progress. Although they have been alluded to throughout this article, I will conclude by considering these implications in a comprehensive manner.

Before proceeding, an epistemological comment is in order. The following discussion involves certain normative judgments, which is unusual

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44 For characterizations of the capitalist state, see: Chibber, *Confronting Capitalism*, 51–93; Heinrich, *An Introduction*, 199–213; Rutar, Tibor. *Sodobni zagovor historičnega materializma: sociologija, filozofija, zgodovina*. Ljubljana: Sophia, 2016, 183–194.

for an academic argument. I contend that this is justified for two reasons. First, the considerations about progress are grounded in the differences examined throughout the article. In this sense, they represent an extension of the contrasts between social-scientific paradigms, which are themselves not entirely neutral. Second, the concept of progress is intrinsically political in a way that most analytical categories are not. Any discussion that addresses this concept directly therefore necessarily carries normative weight.

The distinction between evolution and teleology, as outlined through the relevance of Darwinian theory for Analytical Marxism, serves primarily to underline the point that an account positing long-term developmental tendencies is not necessarily teleological. The charge of teleology is too often invoked whenever the term “progress” is used, even though most contemporary social scientific theories are not teleological in structure. To focus on a particular case: the global expansion of capitalism over the past few centuries can be explained by structural mechanisms, and there is no reason to assume these mechanisms will cease to operate in the near future. This view does not presuppose that history is oriented toward a predetermined end, but rests on empirically grounded and theoretically justified claims about historical dynamics.

The discontinuous interpretation of history, as outlined through Political Marxism’s criticism of both Analytical Marxism and the commercial model of capitalism, has several implications for understanding progress. First, it challenges the idea that modernity constitutes the culmination of long-term historical developments, which is how progress has traditionally been conceptualized. This interpretation is commonly associated with narratives of Western or European exceptionalism, and has often informed right-leaning accounts of history. According to this view, the West had already developed a more rational worldview and comparatively advanced institutions and technologies in antiquity, providing foundations that were built upon in later centuries. Setbacks occurred, of course, but they were merely inter-

ruptions within an overarching trajectory. In other words, the conditions for the later triumph of the West were already present millennia earlier.<sup>45</sup>

A discontinuous understanding of historical development is fundamentally inconsistent with classical claims of Western exceptionalism. According to the interpretations discussed above, modern institutions constitute a break from premodern ones rather than their final stage of development. Premodern institutions were primarily defined by their stability and stagnation: there was no transhistorical tendency toward the development of productive forces, and pre-capitalist markets did not inherently generate significant increases in productivity. This is why such institutions persisted for millennia with very limited economic growth. Modern institutions only became possible when pre-capitalist structures – most notably the system of political privileges – were dismantled. Accordingly, the view that Europe was marked by proto-modern developmental tendencies for millennia represents a misleading interpretation of history.

A further implication of emphasizing historical discontinuity is the denaturalization of certain aspects of social life, particularly the character of capitalist markets. This point can be made by considering the opposite perspective: if one emphasizes continuity between premodern and modern markets, one can argue that the contemporary world reflects an enduring feature of human nature. The notion that capitalist markets are a mere extension of the entire human past makes it plausible to claim that capitalism is simply the outgrowth of the natural propensity of humans to exchange goods. This view implies that capitalism represents the logical outcome of history.

On the other hand, if capitalism is understood as a radical break with earlier social structures, then it is very hard to argue that it represents an inherent part of human nature. This is why a precise conceptualization of

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45 For examples of such accounts, see: Nisbet, *History of the Idea of Progress*; Shapiro, Ben. *The Right Side of History: How Reason and Moral Purpose Made the West Great*. New York: Broadside Books, 2019; Stark, Rodney. *How the West Won: The Neglected Story of the Triumph of Modernity*. Wilmington: ISI Books, 2014.

the rise and spread of capitalism is important. As argued above, the Political Marxist account sees capitalism's emergence as a contingent process and its global diffusion as largely driven by military conflict. The centrality of military struggle in particular undermines any claim of a natural or inherent spread of the market. Simply put, capitalism represents a fundamental departure from most of human history, not a universal human condition.

These considerations also lead to the following basic, but important conclusion: if the current social context is not inherently natural, then it can be transformed. To historicize capitalism is therefore to open the space for thinking about alternatives.

A discontinuous view of history thus challenges narratives of long-term Western superiority and suggests that present social conditions can be transcended. However, this perspective does not itself offer a normative judgment of different social forms. That is to say, identifying the differences between premodern and modern institutions tells us little about their respective consequences for human well-being. Once we set aside teleological accounts, long-term historical trajectories, and restrictive conceptions about what is natural, we are left with a simpler question: How do the outcomes of pre-capitalist and capitalist institutions compare?

This question lies at the core of contemporary understandings of progress. The central component of this notion is that modern societies have generated widespread prosperity, leading to a historically unprecedented reduction in poverty. While modernity has introduced many new problems, these do not outweigh the significance of rising living standards.

As already suggested, historical materialism is inherently critical of capitalism. But the character of this criticism has to be considered carefully. In my view, the claim made by some authors that capitalism's role in reducing poverty should be denied or minimized is ill-advised, as it conflicts with the

broad consensus in economic history and the social sciences.<sup>46</sup> Apart from the fact that normative arguments have to be supported by empirical evidence, claims that disregard widely recognized findings are unlikely to be persuasive. Furthermore, downplaying the association of capitalism and modern prosperity goes against what historical materialism *itself predicts*. As discussed above, capitalist societies are exceptionally productive because they pressure actors to continuously develop the forces of production, which represents the *sine qua non* of rising living standards. And over the long term, this rise has, in fact, occurred.

Criticisms of capitalism, therefore, should not rest on minimizing the benefits of economic growth. However, this does not imply that capitalism should be equated with progress in a straightforward manner. Objections to capitalism stem from understanding the internal problems of the system through both a historical perspective and an imagination of future possibilities.

The significance of the historical perspective for understanding modern institutions is what the comparison between Political Marxism and New Institutional Economics sought to demonstrate. The main point of this comparison was to show that the Marxist understanding of the transition to modern institutions as a redistribution of property is why it is best positioned to grasp both the positive and negative dimensions of modernity at the same time. Historical materialism suggests that the transition to capitalism enabled sustained economic growth, a reduction of poverty, and a democratization of the political sphere – but also produced widespread market dependence, a loss of democratic control in the economic sphere,

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46 For a perspective that questions the connection between capitalism and poverty reduction, see: Sullivan, Dylan, and Jason Hickel. "Capitalism and Extreme Poverty: A Global Analysis of Real Wages, Human Height, and Mortality since the Long 16th Century." *World Development*, 161 (2023), 1–18. For a criticism of this view, see: Rutar, Tibor. "Re-Examining Extreme Poverty Before and After the Transition to Capitalism, 1300s–1900s: The Issue of Definition, Periodization, Measurement, and Causal Responsibility." *International Review of Sociology*, 34/2 (2024), 300–334. For general overviews of the main findings of economic history, see: Allen, Robert C. *Global Economic History: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011; Koyama and Rubin, *How the World Became Rich*; Rutar, *Capitalism for Realists*.

and a political system heavily shaped by the interests of capital. These outcomes follow from the fact that capitalism rests on a structural inequality in the distribution of property, which represents a central continuity with previous class societies. In other words, by conceptualizing the transition from pre-capitalist to capitalist societies as a structural reconfiguration rather than a linear development, historical materialism is uniquely positioned to capture the ambivalence of progress.

To put the main conclusion another way: the key for a historical materialist understanding of modernity is to see clearly in which dimensions capitalism represents a discontinuity with previous historical eras, which most importantly has to do with the unprecedented character of widespread market dependence, as well as in which dimensions it represents a continuity with those eras, which primarily has to do with the persistence of class structures.

The centrality of class relations underscores several of the standard arguments against progress. These arguments include the notion that the capitalist production process is marked by domination and exploitation, which can only be contested collectively; that broad-based prosperity has historically been achieved through struggles from below rather than the benevolence of capitalists; that capitalist incentives undermine a rational and timely response to contemporary crises, which can again only be countered by collective action; and so on. Political implications of this kind follow from a framework that emphasizes the continuity of the class structure of societies.<sup>47</sup>

The final point to be raised concerns a dimension of progress that has not yet been discussed, namely the relation between present conditions and what is possible. One way to think about politics is to consider the gap between the current reality and viable alternatives. That is to say, if the current conditions are interpreted as objectionable but the possibility of improvement is limited, then political possibilities are likewise constrained.

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47 I outlined the arguments that are typically made against progress in the editorial introduction to this issue.

The fact that there is little to be done means that it is hard to normatively condemn social actors in such situations. If, on the other hand, political possibilities for improvement are significant, that implies significant normative responsibility. The normative assessment of a system, therefore, depends not only on comparisons with the past, but also on judgments about what could exist instead.

This perspective has clear implications in the context of comparing pre-modern and modern institutions. It is undeniable that premodern social actors possessed relatively limited technological, organizational, and infrastructural capacities, which means that the possibilities of improvements were constrained. Feudal lords did not have the ability to make life substantially better for the majority of the population even if they had wanted to do so. Modern capitalist societies, by contrast, possess significantly greater capacities than any other society in history, but fail to fully realize them. In other words, contemporary societies hold ample potential for improvement, which has important normative implications. To put this point on a more general level: the fact that capitalism has produced the greatest advances in human history means that the gap between the society we have and the society we could have is larger than ever before. It follows that capitalism is – in this specific sense – the most objectionable social system in human history. A critical view of this system is therefore warranted.

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## **POVZETEK**

Članek obravnava pojem napredka skozi razpravo o različnih naravoslovnih in družboslovnih paradigmah. Raznovrstni pogledi na dolgotrajne družbene spremembe in modernost, ki jih ponujajo posamezni pristopi, razjasnijo pojem napredka z več vidikov.

Izhodišče članka je Marxovo pojmovanje historičnega materializma. Ta teorija je pomembna za razumevanje napredka, ker ne predstavlja zgolj obravnave posameznih družbenih formacij, temveč nudi tudi razlago, kako se družbe spreminjajo skozi čas. Prav zaradi tega se historičnemu materializmu pogosto očita teleološkost oziroma iskanje cilja zgodovinskega razvoja. Za obravnavo tega očitka je smiselna primerjava z Darwinovo teorijo evolucije, katere pomen je Marx prepoznal že v 19. stoletju. Evolucijska teorija pokaže, da je mogoče smer razvoja razumeti na znanstveno utemeljen način brez teleologije.

Tako razmišljanje v naravoslovju je najtesneje povezano z družboslovno paradigmo »analitičnega marksizma«, ki je skušala klasični historični materializem podpreti z znanstvenimi argumenti. Razprava, ki je sledila, je sicer uspela ubraniti in nadgraditi nekatere teze marksistične teorije zgodovine, vendar jih je ohranila v zelo spremenjeni in okrnjeni obliki. Razvojni vzorci obdobja, v katerem obstaja kapitalizem, so bistveno drugačni od razvojnih vzorcev prejšnjih zgodovinskih obdobj.

Paradigma »političnega marksizma« ponuja razumevanje kapitalizma, ki omogoči drugačen pogled na zgodovinski razvoj. Na osnovi kritike pristopov, ki prehitro enačijo kapitalizem z razširjeno tržno menjavo, politični marksizem zagovarja definicijo kapitalizma kot specifično obliko lastninskih odnosov. Ta perspektiva omogoča jasnejše razumevanje, v katerih pogledih lahko moderne institucije razumemo kot kontinuiteto in v katerih kot diskontinuiteto s predmodernimi oblikami družbenih odnosov.

Zadnja paradigma, ki jo članek obravnava, je »nova institucionalna ekonomija«. Ta pristop sodobno gospodarsko rast razlaga na podlagi razlike

med »ekstraktivnimi« in »inkluzivnimi« političnimi in ekonomskimi institucijami. Kljub pomembnim podobnostim s političnim marksizmom primerjava med tema pristopoma pokaže temeljno razliko v razumevanju modernosti. Ta razlika izhaja iz vprašanja, ali je prehod iz predmodernih v moderne institucije mogoče razumeti kot prestrukturiranje družbenih odnosov ali pa kot linearen proces.

Vse obravnavane značilnosti tvorijo podlago za razpravo o pojmu napredka v zaključku članka. Osrednja teza je, da je sodobni historični materializem tista paradigma, ki najbolje zajame ambivalentnost modernosti in napredka.

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