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## THE MATERIALISTIC CONCEPTION OF HISTORY

Joseph Zaw Goan\*

**Abstract:** Marx considers a relationship between products as the economic social structure. He saw the structure economic as the foundation of the society. Marx distinguishes between Base and superstructure. Base is refer to system economic and superstructure are refers to cultural system, politics, religion, ideology as well as arts. According to Marx; Superstructure, Historical development, society development are determined by economics' element.

**Keywords:** materialism, conception of history, scientific, socialism, material products, relations of production, basis, superstructure, social change.

### INTRODUCTION

Marx was, somehow, influenced by Hegel. If Hegel started from the “idea”, Marx, on the contrary, in all his philosophical, juridical, and political studies took his start from a strictly empirical principle. The Hegelian idea of “development” was completely “reversed” by Marx. He put in the place of the timeless development of the “idea” the real historical development of society on the basis of the development of its material mode of production. Marx’s materialistic conception of history would show us how Marx views life process of society, the development of history and the changes in the society.

The way how Marx discovered historical facts in the society and foundation of human history will be mainly discussed in this paper. This paper would focus on four sub-topics. The first one is scientific socialism, which would give us explanation and answer what made Marx’s socialism different from other and why Marx’s claims that his socialism is scientific. In the second sub-topic, we will see the basic principle of the materialistic conception of history and how the role of material condition and consciousness are. In the third part, we will discover the views or the understanding of Marx on the structure of society and what is the main foundation of that structure. Fourthly, we will see how Marx explains the mechanism of social changes in our society. The book, “*Pemikiran Karl Marx: dari Sosialisme Utopis ke Perselisihan Revisionisme*.” by Franz Magnis-Suseo is the main source of this paper.

“Marx confronted that old “*idealistic conception of history*” that knew nothing of the classes struggle based upon the material interest, in fact, no material interests at all, and dealt with such topics as production and all economic conditions only accessorially, as “subordinate elements of the history of culture”, with the new principle of the proletarian science and, incidentally, gave the Materialistic Conception of History” its later and universally accepted name. This name, by the way, was never applied to it by Marx himself who was quite content to describe it as a “materialistic and thus scientific method.”<sup>1</sup>

## SCIENTIFIC SOCIALISM

Marx claims that his socialism is scientific socialism because its theories are held to an empirical standard, observations are essential to its development, and these can result in changes of elements of theory. Different from the other earlier socialism, Marx started to find the very objective principles in development of the society. For example, in the book of “Socialism: Utopian and Scientific” F. Engels stated that Marx discovered that *surplus value* is the basis of capitalist production and the production of capital.<sup>2</sup> All the capitalists are depending on the working class and without working class, the capital would cease to continue. Marx was confident to show that the whole society was depending on the condition of economic system. According to Marx “what is produced, how it is produced and how the products are exchanged”<sup>3</sup> is the basis of all social structure. He scrupulously examined the facts, methodically arranged the results of his examination and drew the conclusion, which was and is the scientific explanation of the historical progress of humanity. Scientific socialism is “the term used by F. Engels” to describe that the theories of Marx are practical and realistic.

F. Magnis-Suseno stated that Marx’s claim that his socialism is scientific is quite important to understand the theory of Marx. “Socialism will not come just because of it is considered good or because of capitalism is considered bad, but because, and if, the objective pre-requisites elimination of private ownership of the means of production are met.”<sup>4</sup>

In *German Ideology*, Marx wrote: “Communism is for us not a state of affairs which is to be established, an *ideal* to which reality (will) have to adjust itself. We call communism the *real* movement which abolishes the present state of things. The conditions of this movement result from the premises now in existence.”<sup>5</sup>

The basic claim of this statement was that Marx was sure about that he has found the objective law of historical development. With that objective laws, Marx can explain why until there is private ownership of the means of production, how the power structures in society and what factors that determine changes.<sup>6</sup>

Friedrich Engels writes about Marx’s discovery of the law of development of human history as follow: “mankind must first of all eat, drink, have shelter and clothing, before it can pursue politics, science, art, religion, etc; that

therefore the production of the immediate material means, and consequently the degree of economic development attained by a given people or during a given epoch, form the foundation upon which the state institutions, the legal conceptions, art, and even the ideas on religion, of the people concerned have been evolved, and in the light of which they must, therefore, be explained, instead of vice versa, as had hitherto been the case.”<sup>7</sup>

This statement help us to see that, according to Marx, our basic needs, economic condition and the structure of economic system are the facts that drive our human history from the back. Marx simply tried to show us that his socialism is scientific by pointing out the empirical facts. At the same time we can interpret that, the method Marx found out to explain the development of history is not a speculative one but the materialistic one. FMS stated that Marx’s socialism is scientific because it is based on the knowledge about the objective laws of the development of the society that knowledge of the objective laws is called “the Materialistic Conception of History.”

## **BASIC PRINCIPLE: CONDITION AND CONSCIOUSNESS**

“It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness.”<sup>8</sup> In other word, we, the individual beings, are the persons who produce our consciousness. This is the basic principle of the materialistic conception of history.<sup>9</sup> It is to say that what we are or who we are, is to be determined by the material conditions and the products that we posses.

“In direct contrast to German philosophy which descends from heaven to earth, here we ascend from earth to heaven. That is to say, we do not set out from what men say, imagine, conceive, nor from men as narrated, thought of, imagined, conceived, in order to arrive at men in the flesh. We set out from real, active men, and on the basis of their real life-process we demonstrate the development of the ideological reflexes and echoes of this life-process.”<sup>10</sup> This statement is simply showing that Marx ignore the role of ideas, imaginations, philosophy, ideology but focus on the real human condition and life process. Marx seems to be saying that we would not be able to talk about the history of men without looking at the real existence of man’s condition. There are two statements in this Marx’s contention. The first is about the state of society and the second is that real conditions determine the consciousness of man and not in vice versa.<sup>11</sup>

Marx said: “As individuals express their life, so they are. What they are, therefore, coincides with their production, both with what they produce and with how they produce. Hence what individuals are depends upon the material conditions of their production.”<sup>12</sup>

Marx is saying that our life depends on the material products. This point of view can be applied also that our human history is determined by the material



products. F. Magnis-Suseno explains that Marx uses the word materialism not in terms of philosophical materialism, the belief that the essence of all reality is matter, but he wants to refer to the factors that determine history.<sup>13</sup> F. Magnis-Suseno went on to explain in his book that it is not our thinking or mind that determine our human history but our material condition. Material condition or circumstances, here, does not mean the elements such as race, climate, eating, and so forth, but the production of human material needs. The way people generate their basic needs to live is called the human condition. This human condition determines our consciousness. Then, it is obvious that the way we think, the way we view other human being and our attitude to life depend on the way we work and what kind of work we are doing.

In the theory of alienation, there is one statement that Marx tried to show the unique characteristic of human being. That is: "Men can be distinguished from animals by consciousness, by religion or anything else you like. They themselves begin to distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to produce their means of subsistence, a step which is conditioned by their physical organization. By producing their means of subsistence men are indirectly producing their actual material life."<sup>14</sup> Based on this statement, somehow, we can say that the actual material life we produce is to be the place where our consciousness comes from. The natural existence of individuals find the way to produce the material products that can fulfill their basic needs, in this way they are basically creating the material life.

Consciousness can never be anything else than conscious existence, and the existence of men is their actual life-process. It means that we are dominated by the material conditions of life, and these conditions will determine other aspects of our life, such as our culture, economic, politic, etc. Therefore, to understand the history and the direction of changes, we do not need to pay attention to what is thought by humans, but how he works and how he produces.<sup>15</sup>

"Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life. In the first method of approach, the starting-point is consciousness taken as the living individual; in the second method, which conforms to real life, it is the real living individuals themselves, and consciousness is considered solely as their consciousness."<sup>16</sup> This statement is also emphasizing the important role of the real existence of individuals.

Marx write about the workers: "It is not a question of what this or that proletarian, or even the whole proletariat, at the moment *regards* as its aim. It is a question of *what the proletariat is*, and what, in accordance with this *being*, it will historically be compelled to do. Its aim and historical action is visibly and irrevocably foreshadowed in its own life situation as well as in the whole organization of bourgeois society today."<sup>17</sup>

## BASE AND SUPERSTRUCTURE

The following statement, from the book of “*Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*,” would show us how Marx views the structure of our society. “In the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness.”<sup>18</sup> The main point of this text is that the changes in the economic foundation effect the transformation of the superstructure.

According to Marx there are two kinds of structures in our society: base and superstructure. “Base is the “production of material life,” while the superstructure is “the process of social, political, and spiritual.” The base determines the process of superstructure.”<sup>19</sup> The base is the whole of productive relationships, for example the capitalist and capital, the wagedworkers and capitalist, master and slave, etc. The superstructure, such as art, politics, economics, etc, changes and develops unequally in society’s different activities. Based on the action of the basis, the reaction of the superstructure is to be verified. It means that economic basis become primary factors and superstructure as a secondary one.

### a. Base

Two factors that determine base are the productive forces and the relations of production. These two concepts are crucial in the theory of historical materialism. “Productive forces, such as the instruments of labor, skills of individual, and experiences in production, are the power used by the society to work on and change the nature” (Grundlagen 288).<sup>20</sup>

Marx used the term ‘relations of production’ to refer to the social relations specific to a particular mode of production, and reserved division of labor (these days the ‘technical division of labor’) for the concrete, structural composition and organization of production relations.<sup>21</sup> The relations of production are relations of cooperation or division of labor between men who engaged in the production process. This is not about the relations of the individuals who are in work, but it is about organizing the structure of social production. The relations of production are about the relationships of classes in the society, for example, the

relationship between the owners of capital and the labors. The conflict between the upper classes and lower classes is the significant characteristic of base. What are the factors that cause the society in classes? The system of property rights and the relations of production are the factors that divide the society into classes.

“In the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces.”<sup>22</sup> The important thing for Marx is that the level of development of productive forces determine the relations of production. The development of productive forces and production efficiency modify the class structure of society. Bochenski explains the purpose of Marx as follows: “If, for instance, a group of people catch fish from a boat, with certain facilities, such as by nets, one person must give the command, the other holding the steering wheel and so on. If the pattern tool and the existing mode of production, specific the relations of production established with the inevitable and not depend on the willingness of people “(Bochenski 79).<sup>23</sup> Again, from this Bochenski’s explanation, we might conclude that productive forces determine the relations of production or the class structure of a society. It also shows that Marx asserts that those relationships do not depend on the willingness of people, but on the objective demands of production. Therefore, Marx was confident to analyze the development of society scientifically.

It is important to understand that the main function of the instruments of labor is to produce the production efficiently. The development of tools does not depend on human tyranny, but rather it follows an internal logic of the human instinct to defend himself. In a sense, the development of the instruments of labor and productive forces, in general, are absolute.<sup>24</sup>

## **b. Superstructure**

Superstructure consists of two elements: institutional orders and the collective consciousness of the order or, in the language of Marxism, “ideological superstructure.”<sup>25</sup> The definition of institutional orders is all sorts of institutions that regulate the common life of society, outside the field of production, so organizations of a market, education system, public health systems, traffic systems, and especially the legal system and the State. While the collective consciousness of the order includes all belief systems, norms and values that provide a framework of understanding, meaning, and spiritual orientation including the world-view, religion, philosophy, public morality, cultural values, art, and so forth to the human effort.<sup>26</sup>

The divisions of various fields such as production, institution and value system are reasonable in human society because each of those fields support human life. But, why only the field of production is considered as a decisive base, while two other fields, institutions and beliefs and values are considered the superstructure? Marx departed from the assumption that the institutions, religion, mo-



rality, and so forth are determined by the class structure in society. According to Marx the State always supports the upper classes, and religious and other value systems provide legitimacy to the upper classes.

To understand what is meant by Marx, we should note that the relations of production in the base is always in the form of structures of power, precisely the economic power structure. Production relations characterized by the fact that the production is controlled by the owners. Theories about political power and ideological relations are determined by the structure of property rights, as well as by the structure of power in the economic field. That is the core of Marx's conception of the base and superstructure. We have seen the meaning of this connection. Which controls the economy, in general, the owners, also control the State, that the power of the State always supports their interests. Similarly, beliefs and value systems function to give legitimacy to the power of the upper classes. In this sense the spiritual and political power structures in society always reflects the power structure of the upper classes against the lower classes in the economic field.

## MECHANISM OF SOCIAL CHANGE

Marx explains the change or development of society through the following statement. "At a certain stage of their development, the material productive forces of society come in conflict with the existing relations of production, or what is but a legal expression for the same thing-with the property relations within which they have been at work hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an epoch of social revolution. With the change of the economic foundation the entire immense superstructure is more or less rapidly transformed."<sup>27</sup> Then for Marx, it is clear that the superstructure would change according to the development of the productive forces and the change of economic foundation.

The changes are happening in the society because of the dynamic changes in the base. It, somehow, means also that the changes in the society are not depending on the changes in superstructure. The agent of changes in the society is to be the system of economy but not the country. According to Marx, the role of the state has much less capacity to change the society, if compared with the influence of economy. Therefore, it is useless to expect a change of society from new developments in philosophy or theology or political consciousness.<sup>28</sup>

Marx emphasized: "In considering such transformations a distinction should always be made between the material transformations of economic conditions of production, which can be determined with the precision of natural science, and the legal, political, religious, aesthetic or philosophic-in short, ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out."<sup>29</sup> (P.137-138) (Magnis:148) I think, what Marx means in this statement is that the ideology which informs the lower classes that they need revolution is also based on the changes of economic conditions of production.

Marx argued that any social changes must be revolutionary because naturally the upper classes tend to stick on the interest to maintain their position by opposing any changes. Only when the lower classes are strong enough to defeat the upper classes, there will be new changes or revolution. To break down the power of the upper classes, the lower classes require long-term stamina. With this long run fighting spirit, the lower classes can become getting bigger until they can beat the upper classes. The winner would determine the structure of society. Therefore, Marx argued that class struggle is the motor of progress in history.<sup>30</sup> It is interesting to consider the following questions: “Why the lower classes can win? Why they are just constantly be oppressed? Can we say with certainty that there will be revolution? What is the basic idea of Marx that every power structure will eventually be uncovered by the struggle of the lower classes? Actually, where is the factor that is making for change?”<sup>31</sup> These questions simply come out because on the one hand we see that the upper classes are powerful enough to defend the lower classes. Then it means that class conflict is not the factor that is making for change.

According to Marx, the factor that shows us, with certainty, that there will be revolutionary changes is the productive forces, which include instruments of labors, the skills of workers and technology.<sup>32</sup> The productive forces are a dynamic factor in society since it based on the internal logic of the production process that must continue to grow. The owners continually seek to improve the efficiency of productive forces to increase profits. Economic interest and the effort to seek greater profits are a strong urge to expand, improve, rationalize production methods continually. The capitalists keep continued to make the tools more efficient, so that the skills of their workers continue to be improved. The productive forces have never stopped growing (and in modern times even encouraged scientifically).<sup>33</sup>

F. Magnis-Suseno explains that under this unstable situations the productive forces continue to evolve into more sophisticated, but the economic power structure did not develop at all. If the original economic power structures, patterns of property rights, supports the advancement of the economy, so now the old power structures discourage it. Power structures increasingly irrational. In the language of Marx, “From forms of development of productive forces these relations are now turned into fetters.” Ownership structure eventually no longer appropriate to the dynamics of the economy. For example, in the 18th century, the ancient feudal power structure in France is no longer fit the demands of an ancient capitalism economy is growing, so the French Revolution inevitable. Monopoly power of feudal classes and the bourgeoisie objectively broken power structures long been the basis of why the change, finally able to defeat the upper classes.

## Commentary:

In short, we can conclude that according to Marx the actual factor that really cause the development of history or that make changes happen in the society is the productive forces. Based on the development of productive forces the superstructure such as politics, religions, constitutions, state laws, ideology, etc, are to be changed progressively. Marx also argued that history is determined by economic factors. Marx emphasized strongly the role of economic factors as a crucial foundation to change the society and in the development of human history. Here are some questions raised by F. Magnis-Suseno: "Is the economic the only sector that determines? Is not the political interests and ideals are also having an impact on the economy? Do not the huge political and economic changes experienced by the Arab after the arrival of Islam religion prove that religion can also influence politically and economically? Based on what Marx said that, primarily, economic interests determine political and ideological interests and not vice versa?"<sup>34</sup> F. Magnis-Suseno went on to say that Marx did not answer those questions and that is precisely the problem in his theory. According to F. Magnis-Suseno the problem is not that Marx asserts economic power influence over political power and on the way society think, but that Marx did not notice that the state sector is also having an impact on the economy and the ideological and that the human way of thinking, religion, what is judged as good and bad, also influence the political field and even how humans do their economy.

I think what F. Magnis-Suseno said the above is clear enough that actually the economic system, politic, religion, ideology, culture values, etc, all these sectors have reciprocal relations. By looking at the recent economic situations in my country, Myanmar, I am convinced that there is a reciprocal relation between economics and politics. In Myanmar, the military government has the absolute authority that it controls all the important sectors in the country such as economic, religion, education, and so on and so forth. The economic sector is not the only sector that determines the structure of society. Then, Marx's argument that the state is not an agent of change can be questioned. F. Magnis-Suseno says that almost in all the society, politic has the important role.

If we consider carefully the questions, in the previous paragraph, raised by F. Magnis-Suseno we will find that there appear many contradiction in Marx's theory in historical materialism. For example, Marx was not well aware of the role of ideology, religion and value systems. Meanwhile, those aspects do have important role in history. Furthermore, F. Magnis-Suseno points out that Marx did not realize the fact that the upper classes actually could keep their position by compromising with the lower classes. Therefore, it is not true that the social justice can be reached only through the revolution. However, it is right that the lower class need to pressure from below in order to create social justice. I think, all the commentaries that F. Magnis-Suseno gave on Marx's theory of the materialistic conception of history covered many aspects that Marx himself did not aware in his time.

## Endnote

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<sup>1</sup>Karl Korsch, "Karl Marx part 3-History" in <http://www.marxsite.com/Korsch-Marx-History.pdf> (downloaded in November 2010, 25<sup>th</sup>)

<sup>2</sup> T. Borodulina (comp.), *Karl Marx, Engels, and Lenin: On Historical Materialism* (Moscow: Progress Publisher, 1972), 179.

<sup>3</sup> T. Borodulina (comp.), *Karl Marx, Engels, and Lenin...*,181.

<sup>4</sup> Franz Magnis-Suseno, *Pemikiran Karl Marx: Dari Sosialisme Utopis ke Perselisihan Revisionisme* (Jakarta: PT Gramedia Pustaka Utama, 1999), 137.

<sup>5</sup> T. Borodulina (comp.), *Karl Marx, Engels, and Lenin: On Historical Materialism*,35.

<sup>6</sup> T. Borodulina (comp.), *Karl Marx, Engels, and Lenin...*,137.

<sup>7</sup> —, "Materialist Conception of History" in <http://www.deleonism.org/materialist-conception-of-history.htm> (downloaded: November 2010, 25<sup>th</sup>)

<sup>8</sup> T. Borodulina (comp.), *Karl Marx, Engels, and Lenin: On Historical Materialism*, 137.

<sup>9</sup> Franz Magnis-Suseno, *Pemikiran Karl Marx*, 138.

<sup>10</sup> T. Borodulina (comp.), *Karl Marx, Engels, and Lenin: On Historical Materialism*, 23.

<sup>11</sup> Franz Magnis-Suseno, *Pemikiran Karl Marx...*, 139.

<sup>12</sup> M.C. Lemon, *Philosophy of History* (New York: Routledge), 256.

<sup>13</sup> Franz Magnis-Suseno *Pemikiran Karl Marx...*,139.

<sup>14</sup> T. Borodulina (comp.), *Karl Marx, Engels, and Lenin: On Historical Materialism*, 18.

<sup>15</sup> Franz Magnis-Suseno, *Pemikiran Karl Marx...*,140.

<sup>16</sup> T. Borodulina (comp.), *Karl Marx, Engels, and Lenin: On Historical Materialism*, 23.

<sup>17</sup> It can be accessed in <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/holy-family/ch04.htm>

<sup>18</sup> T. Borodulina (comp.), *Karl Marx, Engels, and Lenin: On Historical Materialism*,137.

<sup>19</sup> Franz Magnis-Suseno, *Pemikiran Karl Marx...*, 143.

<sup>20</sup> Franz Magnis-Suseno, *Pemikiran Karl Marx...*, 143.

<sup>21</sup> It can be accessed in <http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1O88-relationsofproduction.html>.

<sup>22</sup> T. Borodulina (comp.), *Karl Marx, Engels, and Lenin: On Historical Materialism*, 137.

<sup>23</sup> Franz Magnis-Suseno, *Pemikiran Karl Marx...*,144.

<sup>24</sup> Franz Magnis-Suseno, *Pemikiran Karl Marx...*, 145.

<sup>25</sup> Franz Magnis-Suseno, *Pemikiran Karl Marx...*,145.

<sup>26</sup> Franz Magnis-Suseno, *Pemikiran Karl Marx...*, 145.

<sup>27</sup> T. Borodulina (comp.), *Karl Marx, Engels, and Lenin: On Historical Materialism*,137-138.

<sup>28</sup> Franz Magnis-Suseno, *Pemikiran Karl Marx*,148.

<sup>29</sup> Franz Magnis-Suseno, *Pemikiran Karl Marx...*,148.

<sup>30</sup> Franz Magnis-Suseno, *Pemikiran Karl Marx...*, 149.

<sup>31</sup> Franz Magnis-Suseno, *Pemikiran Karl Marx...*, 150.

<sup>32</sup> Franz Magnis-Suseno, *Pemikiran Karl Marx...*, 150.

<sup>33</sup> Franz Magnis-Suseno, *Pemikiran Karl Marx...*,150.

<sup>34</sup> Franz Magnis-Suseno, *Pemikiran Karl Marx...*, 153.

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