

A LETTER TO HANS STARKENBURG [1*]

Dear Sir:

HERE are the answers to your questions [4]: 1. By economic relations, which we regard as the determining basis of the history of society, we understand the way in which human beings in a definite society produce their necessities of life and exchange the products among themselves (in so far as division of labor exists). Consequently the *whole technique* of production and transportation is therein included. According to our conception, this technique determines the character and method of exchange, further, the distribution of the products and therewith, after the dissolution of gentile society, the division into classes, therewith, the relationships of master and slave, therewith, the state, politics, law, etc. Under economic relations are included further, the geographical foundations upon which they develop and actually inherited remains of earlier economic stages of development which have, persisted, often through tradition only or *vis inertia*, and also, naturally, the external milieu surrounding this social form.

If the technique, as you properly say, is for the most part dependent upon the state of science, then so much the more is science dependent upon the *state* and *needs* of technique. If society has a technical need, it serves as a greater spur to the progress of science than do ten universities. The whole of hydrostatics (Torricelli, etc.) was produced by the need of controlling the mountain streams in Italy in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. We only acquired some intelligible knowledge about electricity when its technical applicability was discovered. Unfortunately, in Germany, people have been accustomed to write the history of the sciences as if the sciences had fallen from the sky.

2. We regard the economic conditions as conditioning, in the last instance, historical development. But race is itself an economic factor. But there are two points here which must not be overlooked.

(a) The political, legal, philosophical, religious, literary, artistic, etc., development rest upon the economic. But they all react upon one another and upon the economic base. It is not the case that the economic situation is the *cause, alone active*, and everything else only a passive effect. Rather there is a reciprocal interaction with a fundamental economic necessity which *in the last instance* always asserts itself. The state, e.g., exerts its influence through tariffs, free trade, good or bad taxation. Even that deadly supineness and impotence of the German philistine which arose out of the miserable economic situation of Germany from 1648 to 1830 and which expressed itself first in pietism, then in sentimentalism and crawling servility before prince and noble, were not without their economic effects. They constituted one of the greatest hindrances to an upward movement and were only cleared out of the way by the revolutionary and Napoleonic wars which made the chronic misery acute. Hence, it is not true, as some people here and there conveniently imagine, that economic conditions have an automatic effect. Men make their own history, but in a given, conditioning milieu, upon the basis of actual relations already extant, among which, the economic relations, no matter how much they are influenced by relations of a political and ideological order, are ultimately decisive, constituting a red thread which runs through all the other relations and enabling us to understand them.

(b) Men make their own history but until now not with collective will according to a collective plan. Not even in a definitely limited given society. Their strivings are at cross purposes with each other, and in all such societies there therefore reigns a *necessity*, which is supplemented by and manifests itself in the form of *contingency*. The necessity which here asserts itself through all those contingencies is ultimately, again, economic. Here we must treat of the so-called great man. That a certain particular man and no other emerges at a definite time in a given country is naturally pure chance. But even if we eliminate him, there is always a need for a substitute, and the substitute is found *tant bien que mal*; in the long run he is sure to be found. That Napoleon – this particular Corsican – should have been the military dictator made necessary by the exhausting wars of the French Republics that was a matter of chance. But that in default of a Napoleon, another would have filled his place, that is established by the fact that whenever a man was necessary he has always been found: Caesar, Augustus, Cromwell, etc. Marx, to be sure, discovered the materialistic conception of history – but the examples of Thierry, Mignet,

Guizot, the whole school of English historians up to 1850 show they were working towards it; and the discovery of the same conception by Morgan serves as proof that the time was ripe for it, and that it *had* to be discovered.

So with all other accidents and apparent accidents in history. The further removed the field we happen to be investigating is from the economic, and the closer it comes to the domain of pure, abstract ideology, the more we will find that it reveals accidents in its development, the more does the course of its curve run in zig-zag fashion. But fit a trend to the curve and you will find that the longer the period taken, the more inclusive the field treated, the more closely will this trend run parallel to the trend of economic development.

The greatest obstacle to the correct understanding of the theory in Germany is the irresponsible neglect of the literature of economic history. It is hard not only to get rid of historical conceptions which have been drummed into one's head at school but even more so to gather together the material necessary to do it. Who has even read, e.g., old G. v. Gülich, whose dry accumulation of material nonetheless contains so much stuff which explains innumerable political facts?

In addition I believe that the fine example which Marx himself gives in his **Eighteenth Brumaire** ought to give you considerable information on your questions just because it is a practical illustration. I also believe that in the **Anti-Dühring**, ch.I, 9-11, and II, 2-4, as well as III, 1, or the introduction, and then in the final section of **Feuerbach**, I have already treated most of the points.

I beg of you not to weigh gingerly each separate word of the above by itself but to take the connections into account. I am sorry that I have not the time to work things out and write you with the same exact detail that I would have to do for publication.

Please pay my respects to Mr. ... and thank him for me for sending along the ..., which cheered me up greatly.

F. Engels