Introduction

Whatever attitude we take towards the kind of historical materialism defended by G.A. Cohen, and towards the analytical techniques that he used to defend it, the publication of Karl Marx’s Theory of History represented a watershed in discussion of historical materialism.¹ Cohen propounded a strong, though not unqualified, historical materialism, in which societies undergo a series of changes in form, from pre-class society to precapitalist class society to capitalist society. These changes are (functionally) explained by the propensity of these successive social forms to enhance productive power, given the level of productive power already in existence.²

The consensus that emerged during the debates that followed the book’s publication, however, was that such an ambitious doctrine could not be sustained. Perhaps under the barrage of criticism that the book received, Cohen himself subsequently developed doubts and reservations about the book’s central claims.³ Levine’s and Sober’s ‘What’s Historical

¹ Cohen 1978.
³ Cohen 1988, pp. 109–79.
About Historical Materialism?’ was, it seemed to me, part of this process of reducing the explanatory ambitions of historical materialism.4

Levine and Sober argued that both natural selection and historical materialism are directional theories in that each asserts a ‘temporal asymmetry’ in which a given quantity (reproductive success for natural selection, productive power for historical materialism) tends to rise over time. Nevertheless, there are important differences between the two theories. One of these is that, in natural selection, change is exogenously driven by factors external to the theory, whereas, in historical materialism, change is endogenously driven by factors internal to the theory.

Because it is an exogenously driven process, natural selection is (and effectively must be) a micro-theory. Micro-theories explain changes within their units of analysis, and the unit of analysis of natural selection is the population or species. Natural selection, therefore, provides micro-evolutionary explanations of small-scale changes within populations or species, explanations that are, consequently, fine-grained. Because it emphasises endogenously driven processes, historical materialism (can be and) is a macro-theory. Macro-theories explain changes among their units of analysis, and the unit of analysis of historical materialism is the society. Historical materialism, therefore, provides macro-historical explanations of large-scale transitions between societies, explanations that are, consequently, coarse-grained.5

Levine and Sober went on to propose a ‘weak’ historical materialism, in which the social changes required for productive improvement may not occur if the social groups interested in the changes lack the capacities necessary for implementing them.6 They concluded by linking this ‘weak’ historical materialism with Cohen’s suggestion of a ‘restricted’ historical materialism, in which historical materialism can only (functionally) explain those phenomena that have an effect on productive power.7 Wright, Levine and Sober later endorsed these notions of a weak and restricted historical materialism.8

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4 Levine and Sober 1985.
5 Levine and Sober seem to think that this way of relating the two distinctions is my invention. In fact, they were the ones who connected the distinctions in this way (1985, pp. 315, 319). Moreover, the asserted connection reappears both in Wright, Levine and Sober (1992, pp. 54 and 78), and in Levine and Sober supra.
7 Levine and Sober 1985, p. 325.