



Call for contributions

Antecedents of Historical Materialism in the Century of the Enlightenment

International conference

New Europe College-Institute for Advanced Study, Bucharest, Romania

21-22 November 2014

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Marxist thought used to regard 17th and 18th century French and English materialism (from Bacon to Holbach) as constitutionally unable to think history, apprehending “matter” only as physical nature, organized according to eternal laws of motion and composition, and never as praxis – the capacity that human beings may have to produce their own history under certain material conditions. The new (social and historical) materialism that Marxism intended to develop would then be dialectically opposed to this mechanistic materialism. The aim of the present conference is to question this Marxist thesis of a radical split between the two materialisms, not by actually turning it on its head, but by drawing attention to other textual sources from the Enlightenment – theories of history, works of political philosophy or political economy, etc. – in order to identify some of the elements that indirectly fed what we now call ‘historical materialism’.

Private vices, public virtues: Mandeville’s maxim, which replaces the individual quest for redemption with a collective interest little concerned with virtue, announces an 18th century innovation which would have no less impact on ethical models than on the categories of political thought. What can be traced from here is the emergence of a new image of collective being, namely society. And it’s mainly because of one form or another of thinking about economy that, in the second half of the century, particularly in France and Scotland, a notion of society would develop, construing it as an autonomous, immanent entity, governed by its own principles and regularities, irreducible to the interventions of providence and transcending the actions of individuals. What we broadly call today economy would then function as a privileged medium in which society would develop and reveal itself as a new synthesis.

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Consequently, as manifested in both the rather static models typical for French economic theories and the dynamic Scottish historical outlines, the 18th century develops an early version of what, starting from the 19th century, will be called 'economism' – an explanation of social forms which roots them in labour, exchange, production techniques and the specific mechanisms of the reproduction of biological and social being. Nevertheless, this 'economism' seems closer to Montesquieu's theory of mores and manners (as vague as the latter appeared to Althusser to be) than to the technological determinism so cherished by Engels's descendants; its core is usually psychological and moral, and it is built on a theory of passions.

The inquiry will then focus on the possible unintended consequences of this theoretical mutation. The purpose of the discussion is to establish in what sense we can talk about 18th century French and Scottish political, philosophical and economical thought as having anticipated that intellectual current – born in the 19th century in the midst of the Marxist theoretical movement – known as historical materialism. Or, even better, to establish whether we can relate economism to this 18th century political philosophy of unprecedented scope, to these new philosophies of history, supposed to account for long-term processes of transformation, or to this political economy founded on virtues and vices and impulses such as interest. How should this 'materialism' work as an explanation of social structures and developments, in order to deserve being called materialism, and on which level of the explanation must this 'materiality' be located? What is the relation between these anthropological (moral and psychological) traits and the historical dynamics of societies?

The conference will encourage an interdisciplinary approach, enlisting contributions from philosophers, historians, political scientists and political economists, so that historical materialism and 18th century theories of history and society illuminate each other. Avoiding any suggestion of teleology, we are endeavoring to explore how certain doctrines – sometimes very remote from socialism in their political principles – could have created some of the theoretical conditions for the emergence of this way of accounting for historical movements, known as historical materialism.

Languages of the conference: English or French.

Terms of submission: Proposals for papers should not exceed one page.

They should be prepared for peer review and sent before **June 30** to the following address: veronica.lazar@yahoo.com

Answers will be sent by 15 July at the latest.

Contributions should not exceed 35-40 minutes.