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Q2(b)

What is historical materialism? Examine its relevance in understanding contemporary societies

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2023 · Sociology GS 1 · 20 marks · Sociological Thinkers: Karl Marx

Sociological Thinkers: Karl Marx - Historical materialism, mode of production, alienation, class struggle; Emile Durkheim - Division of labour, social fact, suicide, religion and society; Max Weber - Social action, ideal types, authority, bureaucracy, protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism; Talcott Parsons - Social system, pattern variables; Robert K. Merton - Latent and manifest functions, conformity and deviance, reference groups; Mead - Self and identity.

Core demand of the question

- What is historical materialism? Examine its relevance in understanding contemporary societies
- Keep the examination within a 20-mark length

Revision summary

Historical materialism reads law, state, and ideas with the forces and relations of production.

Class is a relation to surplus. Contradiction between forces and relations drives change.

It remains relevant to global chains, informal and platform work, unpaid care, and climate.

Caste, nation, and religion are not exhausted by class and must be added.

Use it as a method of questions about ownership and surplus, not as a calendar of revolution.

Introduction

Historical materialism is **Karl Marx's** method for explaining social order and change from the way people produce their means of life. It is not a denial of ideas. It is a claim that ideas, law, and the state must be read with the forces and relations of production of a given epoch.

Body

What the method is

- **Marx** and Engels, in **The German Ideology** and later in the **1859 Preface**, argued that the economic structure is the real foundation on which a legal and political superstructure rises.
- Forces of production are tools, skills, science, and labour power. Relations of production are property and control over surplus.
- When forces grow inside old relations, class conflict intensifies and a new **mode of production** becomes possible.
- Modes such as ancient, feudal, and capitalist are historical types, not moral labels.
- Class is a relation to surplus, not a lifestyle. Ideology is the form in which people become conscious of this conflict.

What it is not

- It is not a claim that every event is caused by a wage rate. Engels warned against reducing the superstructure to a simple reflex.
- It is not identical with **Hegel's** dialectic of Spirit. **Marx** inverted that dialectic onto labour and property.
- It is not a prediction timetable. Relevance is a test of explanation, not of calendar.

Relevance today

- Global value chains, platform work, and the informalisation of labour in India are readable as new forms of surplus extraction, which Guy Standing later named as a precariat without using **Marx's** full system.
- Andre Gunder Frank's development of underdevelopment used a materialist geography of core and periphery, which still frames export-processing and raw-material dependence.
- Gendered unpaid care, which Marxist feminists recovered, shows that reproduction of labour power is part of the base, not a private extra.
- Climate crisis is a contradiction between endless accumulation and finite nature, which ecological Marxists now write as a second contradiction of capitalism.
- Digital surveillance at work is still control of labour time, which Harry **Braverman** had already analysed as the degradation of work.

Limits

- **Weber's** status and party, and caste in India, are not exhausted by class, though class organises a large part of their effects.
- Nationalism, religion, and caste blocs can mobilise against the grain of economic interest, which **Marx** under-specified.
- State welfare, public sector, and caste reservation modify pure market coercion without ending class.

How to use it now

- Use it to ask who owns, who works, and who takes surplus in a factory, a farm, a platform, or a household.
- Combine it with **Weber** and feminist standpoint when status and gender organise the same surplus.

Flow diagram

Forces of production -> Relations of production
Relations of production -> Class conflict
Class conflict -> State law ideology
Relations of production -> Contemporary surplus
Contemporary surplus -> Platform informal care climate

Conclusion

Historical materialism explains epochs from production, class, and contradiction. It remains relevant to global chains, informal labour, care, and climate as forms of surplus and crisis. It is not a complete map of caste, nation, and faith. Used as a method of questions, not as a closed script, it still organises the study of contemporary societies.

Facts & figures

1859 Preface

Marx's compact statement that the economic structure is the foundation of the legal and political superstructure.

The German Ideology

Marx and Engels's early statement that production of life is the first historical act.

Mode of production

A historically specific combination of forces and relations of production.

Braverman

Analysed the capitalist labour process as degradation and control of skill, still usable for digital work.

Informal labour in India

A majority of workers outside secure contracts, a contemporary form of surplus extraction.

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