

DUPRÉ ON MARX'S CONCEPT OF CULTURE AS HISTORICAL PROCESS

Eddie R. Babor, LL.B., Ph.D.

There are numerous ways of defining culture. Edward Burnett Tylor, a British anthropologist, first coined culture's early definition in 1871. Tylor says that culture is "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society."¹ From the standpoint of sociology, culture is understood as the "shared system of values and behaviour."² In this light, culture refers to the entire way of life or lifestyle of a particular group of people at a particular period through which this people lived in their beliefs, behavior, and language. Thus, in this definition, culture includes traditions, customs, ceremonies, works of art, technology, and inventions.

In view of the above discussion, this paper attempts to present Marx's concept of culture. In this vein, it discusses the following topics: Marx's Concept of Culture and Nature; and Marx's Concept of Culture as historical process with the following sub-topics: The New Meaning of Progress; the Rationality of Praxis; the Historical Reason Behind Culture; the Base and Superstructure; and Prehistory and the End of History.

Concept of Culture and Nature

Despite Marx's rigorous stress on matter, it is a misinterpretation if Marx's concept of matter is understood in relation to mind and body. Instead, "Marx's materialism as a theory [should be] oriented towards history and society."³ Considered this way, Marx's historico-societal concept of matter cannot be dissociated from the way he looks at the meaning of culture in

relation to nature. This is why Marx, as Dupre observes, "firmly reject[s] the . . . materialist view of nature."⁴

The historical and societal nuances of matter play a vital role in the way Marx sees culture. This is proved in Marx's conviction that everything in the human person, or everything in culture, is determined (not conditioned) by the material conditions of man's life.⁵ He believes the mode of production is the molder of human consciousness. But in the thought-construct, what can human consciousness be conscious of? Here, Marx accepts the existence of the objective extra-mental world. He believes that this world is the product of a "creator." However, to Marx, "the creator of the objective world is the socio-historical life-process of human beings."⁶

Marx admits that there is nature. But "nature is both an element of human practice and the totality of everything that exists."⁷ To Marx, since the objective world is a product of man's creation, nature, likewise, is nothing else but a result of human activity. In this light, labor plays an active role in the formation of society—with the respective classes of people who have their own corresponding culture.

Undeniably, labor always presupposes change.⁸ And in the ambit of change, Marx explains his concept of nature, history, society, and culture. But change per se is ostensibly a mere syncategorematic term for Marx. To spark meaning in it, he introduced the term *dialectic* which he borrowed from Hegel. To Marx, "Historical development follows a dialectical course."⁹ And in this, "the transition from one stage (of development) to another occurs clearly through dialectical, that is, self-generated, oppositions."¹⁰

Dialectic is an all-pervading principle of change. It has opposition, conflict, and antagonism—all the intrinsic ingredients of dialectic. In it are vital principles like thesis, antithesis, and synthesis as they propel the movement of change brought about by their intimate antagonism. Through the dialectic process, change becomes comprehensible. Applied to man, dialectic is ever alive in man's unilateral relation with nature.

According to Marx, there are inherent contradictions in everything. Because of these contradictions, change is beyond



control. In this light, Marx explains that the dialectic has three moments, namely, (1) *Thesis*; (2) *Anti-thesis*; and (3) *Synthesis*. *Thesis* refers to an affirmation of reality, say for example, "being." *Anti-thesis* refers to the negation of the affirmation or the negation of the thesis. Thus, the anti-thesis of being is "non-being" or "nothing." *Synthesis* neither identifies itself with the anti-thesis nor with the thesis. The synthesis of being and nothing, then, would be "becoming." Through these inherent contradictions in reality, the dialectic or change becomes a never-ending process.

Dialectical Materialism. Marx's theory of dialectic paves the way to his two other theories: dialectical materialism and historical materialism. Dialectical materialism is distinctively his way of applying the law of dialectic to matter. However, it must be underscored that our intention in discussing dialectic is geared towards a broader understanding of human nature. In this case, if dialectical materialism is the application of dialectic to matter then we have to know, first of all, how Marx understands matter.

For Marx, matter is the stuff of nature. If nature means the totality of human activity, it follows that nature is man's own activity. Applied to man, man makes his own nature. Dialectical materialism, therefore, necessitates man's participation in the actual change of matter. This gives labor an indispensable place in understanding Marx's dialectical materialism.

As cited earlier, Marx takes nature as both a product of human practice (labor) and the totality of everything that exists.¹¹ For him, "nature is what man leaves forever the home to which he can never return. In fact, that home has ceased to exist, for the whole process of culture consists in transforming it."¹² He contends "man is more (of) a producer of nature than a product of nature."¹³ But how can man produce nature? The answer lies in Marx's concept of dialectic. Through dialectic, man transforms the external world (nature) in the context of labor.

Dialectical materialism needs man as the agent of change. Marx contends only through labor can nature or world be changed. Thus, man should be productive. Marx goes with his polemics on labor as the essence of man, so that if man ceases to be productive, he ceases to be man. In effect, labor is the life of man. In labor, man

makes his nature conducive to his essence. But because everything which man does is always social in nature, then labor is always communistic. To understand the indissoluble social character of labor, Marx comes to grips with the issue of historical materialism.

Through labor, man becomes productive. His capability to produce, however, is determined by the kind of society he is in. In any kind of society—except in primitive society—Marx identifies classes. Each class in a given society is characterized by a certain class culture. For example, in a society where private property dominates the life of its members, the class consciousness of private ownership is undeniably present. So, if we are going to take the class of the bourgeois, “the disappearance of class property is the disappearance of production itself, so the disappearance of class culture is to him identical with the disappearance of all culture.”¹⁴

In the foregoing quotation, Marx understands culture as deeply embedded in society determined by the mode of production. Thus, culture definitely transforms the nature of man's beings and environment. Through labor, man transforms his environment, including the world, as he transforms the metaphysics of his being—from being formerly nature dependent to nature manufacturer and producer.

Culture as Historical Process

Following the outline sketched by Louis Dupre in his *Marx's Social Critique of Culture*, this part presents the following sub-topics: 1) The New Meaning of Progress; 2) The Rationality of Praxis; 3) Historical Reason; 4) Base and Superstructure; and 5) Prehistory and the End of History.

Marx believes in progress, change, and development. In his time, the spirit of Capitalism devoured the helpless and oppressed majority, the poor, the laborers. In this setting, Marx displayed his optimism that such a human degeneration will be put to an end, i.e. if the proper time for reform will surface. But when will it be? Marx's answer lies in his colossal campaign to change the world. Indeed, Marx criticizes those philosophers who ended up just analyzing and understanding the world and man's role in it is. He did not assume

the same position. On the contrary, he made his own ways of treating the world.

As far as Marx is concerned, the world need not be interpreted but must be changed. Thus in *Communist Manifesto*, he (together with Engels) invited all workers of the world to unite in order to change the world.

In his call for a global change, Marx divulges his utopian vision. Capitalism should be shattered to give room for Socialism. In this new setup, society will be centralized. Thus, all means of production will be owned by society. Private property will be abrogated. All properties, including schools, lands, factories, communications, hospitals, transport, etc., shall be nationalized. Working hours shall be shortened so that the people can spend leisure time. As a whole, Marx's vision for reform, in the scope of materialism, is meant to remove hunger and misery from the world. Through this, he wins the hearts of many men accounting to one third of the world's population to become his followers.¹⁵

The New Meaning of Progress

Like Hegel, Marx envisions to resume the "dynamic conception of culture as a progressive attempt to humanize an ever-yielding yet very-resistant nature."¹⁶ Indeed, he sees a "real struggle (dialectic) between culture and nature (which) took place not in the theoretical consciousness but in practice."¹⁷ This struggle necessitates the import of dialectic so that the relation between culture and nature shall be reduced to an opposition, the effect of which is man's victory to humanize nature. Such humanization of nature requires man to work and eventually declare himself as nature's producer, rather than being produced by nature. This is what Marx meant when he argues that culture transforms not only man's surroundings but also man's own being.¹⁸

So, what man must transform in society to prove that through culture he transforms nature and, in the end, he conceives a new meaning of progress? Here, Marx attacks the orthodox view of natural society and of human nature.

Marx complains that the terms "natural division of labor' and 'natural society' are intrinsically connected, because a natural society

is based upon a division of labor according to the predisposition of nature rather than upon the human needs of the laborer."¹⁹ Thus, he asserts that "such a society is product-oriented rather than man-oriented: from the product's point of view it is profitable to exploit the worker's 'natural' dispositions, even though such an exploitation runs counter to his human needs."²⁰

But if man should humanize nature, then the status quo, i.e. product-oriented system, should be transformed to 'man-oriented' one to emphasize human needs rather than production needs. This is Marx's novel way of asserting his ideas, of giving way to progress.

In addition, Marx introduces his radical view on the meaning of human nature. He believes that man has no fixed nature. Here, Dupré remarks: "The same aversion for a fixed, given 'nature' renders Marx very suspicious of any kind of human 'essence'."²¹ For Marx, "the true essence of man has nothing to do with 'nature'—it is the ensemble of the social relations."²² Thus he contends that "human essence can be understood only as 'species,' as an inner mute general character which unites the many individuals in a natural way."²³

As man transforms nature, he makes history. History plays a vital role in Marx's understanding of culture or his critique of society. For Marx, "the truth of history (is) not already made but as yet to be made."²⁴ The truth in history "is not a contemplative truth that reveals itself to the background glance of the spectator of history, but the active truth-in-process that gradually develops under the impact of the forward-marching praxis."²⁵

Since truth in history is attained not through contemplation but through praxis, then praxis should not be relegated to the past. Orthodox historians customarily assign history purely to the auspices of the past. This kind of interpretation of history cannot readily yield to a sure emergence of progress. In Marx's line of thinking, progress only happens if man learns to construct a meaning of history in another plane; if the future shall be duly accommodated in one's conception of history. Thus, the "concept of praxis, then, uniting the past with the future guarantees progress toward ever greater rationality."²⁶

It is not enough, however, that man strives hard to rationalize his struggle to transform nature in order to effect progress. Here, Marx aggressively asserts that a radical political reform should be alongside the praxis in history. But he thinks that such political reform is deeply rooted in the understanding of human nature.

During the time of Marx, there were two prominent views that propounded the meaning of human nature, namely: (1) Encyclopedic; and (2) Economic.

Generally, the encyclopedic view is represented by Dennis Diderot and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Both Diderot and Rousseau espoused the idea "that nature (human nature) was originally good: reform consisted primarily in liberating it from the accretions of an enslaving culture."²⁷ Because the duo (Diderot and Rousseau) showed repugnance to contain man in his utter native simplicity, Edmund Burke vehemently refuted their stance. To Burke, the

society, which alone dresses man's 'naked, shivering nature,' develops not by the rigid rule of abstract reason but by the gentle impulse of organic growth. To disturb the fragile harmony of the social organism is to remand the human race to its original chaos.²⁸

On the other hand, Adam Smith, a renowned thinker, represents the economic view. Smith securely advertised the idea that the very nature of man is to be happy. However, the gauge of happiness is material affluence. Smith and his adherents contend that

wealth was even more universally available, since its one and only source was human labor. Material happiness was clearly within reach, provided man allowed 'nature' (in this case, economic nature!) to follow its course and removed the obstacles placed in its way by misguided interventions. The capitalist system of production, more than any other factor, held the highest hopes for future happiness.²⁹

But Smith's noble ideas did not echo into the limbo of uncritical minds. His views were attacked vigorously by several critics. Thomas Malthus, an English economist, was one of Smith's

attackers. Malthus gladly forwarded his warning shots to Smith "about the disproportion between the geometrical rate of population increase and the arithmetic development of wealth."³⁰ Another arrow is shot to the camp of Smith sponsored by Claude Henri Saint-Simon and Owen (both are, according to Dupré, social utopians). These thinkers assert that "the road to economic equality, however long, must come to an end somewhere. Once that end had been reached, no more genuine 'progress' was possible."³¹

In Dupré's analysis:

The difference between the encyclopedic and the economic point of view led to two distinct types of social progress: the former allows infinite development and has inspired political revolutions; the latter remains subject to the conditions of a finite closed system and has regulated economic planning.³²

Dupré observes that "Marx consistently borrowed from both traditions."³³ However, Dupré opines that: "No single belief dominated his thought more than that man can and will improve his lot, and that he will do so by changing his political institutions."³⁴

Dupré continues:

Indeed, Marx withdraws the concept of economic development from human interference altogether...Early in life, Marx had acquired the conviction that we cannot interfere with economic developments as long as we allow a particular system to continue existing. Man has no choice but to let it run its course or, if possible, to overthrow it altogether.³⁵

So, what then has Marx upheld in his view of progress? Dupré remarks that rather than becoming optimistic relative to the result of the current development like the economist, Marx accuses the economists' view of progress as "responsible for all social evil and predicted that it would continue to generate misery at an ever-increasing rate."³⁶ Here, Marx lays down his card that predicts the downfall of the Capitalists society. And for Dupré, what supports Marx in his prediction is not empirical or economic evidence, "but a

philosophical conviction about the nature of the historical process."³⁷ And the master key that could open the door leading to the collapse of Capitalism is Marx's theory of dialectic which he used as a method in gradually smashing into pieces the sturdy foundations of Capitalism.

The Rationality of Praxis

Marx is convinced that the only possible way to transform the political system is through revolution. Once this is attained, changes in the structure of economic development will follow. Being a resolute atheist, Marx cannot anchor his vision to change the world on a belief in a God since according to his profound analysis, God is only a creation of man. Marx rather settles with his preference to the rational capability of the *anthropos*, man. Here, Dupré writes:

Since Marx consistently rejected any transcendent rule of history, I find no other support for his historical optimism but that of an unshakable faith in man's ability and determination to remake the world in the image of reason.... [T]he Marxist vision of history rests upon the inner logic of the rational will.³⁸

Marx justifies his conviction to overthrow the Capitalist society as the most rational thing to do. To him, reason dictates a need to vindicate the rationality of the world process.³⁹ This act of vindication "cannot be completed unless a fundamental change occurs. Such change is necessary mainly because reason demands it."⁴⁰

Now, the burden on Marx's shoulders is where and in what way can reason be diametrically given its full force and power to become the ultimate foundation of change. To solve this predicament, Marx follows the lead of Hegel, de Savigny, Edward Gans, August von Cieszkowski, and Bruno Bauer, among others, although he made ample modifications of these thinkers' views on the validity of reason as the driving force for change.⁴¹

In the end, "Marx continues to agree with his former mentors that reason must be embodied into concrete social structures and,

since these structures do not exist at present, into revolutionary movements."⁴²

However, rather than praising his mentors for their hard-to-brush-aside arguments, Marx chastises them and denounces their conceited and elitist advances, i.e., that they, as philosophers, are "the primary agents of history and the masses as the passive, spiritless, a-historical, material element of history."⁴³ To him, it is not the theorists, the thinkers, or the philosophers who should be the *conditio sine qua non* for historical change. He upholds the "primacy of a proletarian class which embodies in its very existence the necessity for historical change."⁴⁴ For him, "The struggle for survival will leave the proletariat no choice but to overthrow the system which has produced it."⁴⁵ He is convinced that "revolution is not a matter of philosophical speculation but of social necessity."⁴⁶ And he is so sure and trustful to the fate and role of the working class in the projected revolution.

Marx is not a man of idealism but a man of praxis. His feet, not suspended in thin air, are infallibly grounded on solid earth. He does not devour hook, line, and sinker the appealing forces of the idealisms and convictions of both his colleagues and mentors. He rather believes that "the dialectic of history is the dialectic of a reality striving toward rationality, not the dialectic of an idea opposed to a reality."⁴⁷

Beyond any shred of doubt, Marx avers his indelible stand that the proletariat is the class constituted of persons who are tasked to effect revolution. "Social change can be expected only from existing conditions that leave no alternative but revolutionary action. Only the class that incarnates those conditions is able to convert the idea into action."⁴⁸ To him, the "proletariat...represents the negation of philosophy *qua* philosophy....It demonstrates the priority of practice over theory in the development of history."⁴⁹

Marx argues that "the dialectical character of the proletarian class remains the main agent of history."⁵⁰ In this vein, a dialectical consciousness shall be evoked into the members of this class. Marx is aware that the proletariat "can become dialectically conscious only when its entire existence stands in dialectical opposition to the society

which gave rise to it."⁵¹ Thus, in the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx (with Engels) writes:

The Communists disdain to conceal their views and aims. They openly declare that their ends can be attained only by the forcible overthrow of all existing social conditions. Let the ruling classes tremble at a communist revolution. The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win. Working men of all countries, unite!⁵²

In order to attain dialectical consciousness, the proletarians must be united as a class. This is why in the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx, together with Engels, invites all workers of the world to unite—to achieve their universal identity as members of the proletarian class.

Historical Reason

Other than the rationality of praxis—or the rationality of revolution—Marx identifies history as a factor that explains the justification of revolution. He understands that reason alone does not propel him to campaign for revolution. History also has a lot to tell about the changes of the social conditions. Thus, Marx speaks of the five different epochs that represent a definite kind of society.

Marx, together with Engels, argues:

The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles. Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and the oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes. In the earlier epochs of history, we find almost everywhere a complicated arrangement of society into various orders, a manifold gradation of social rank. In ancient Rome, we have Patricians, Knights, plebeians, slaves; in the middle ages,



feudal lords, vassals, guild-masters.... The modern bourgeois society that has sprouted from the ruins of feudal society has not done away with class antagonisms. It has but established new classes, new conditions of oppression, new forms of struggle in place of the old ones.⁵³

In the above quotation, Marx maintains that history per se is a living proof of the presence of antagonism, of contradiction, or of dialectic in society. This gives birth to the theory called Historical Materialism in Marxism.

Marx weaves the threads of his thoughts on historical materialism with his view on man. He rejects Feuerbach's view of human nature as permanent and universal.⁵⁴ For him, "only man's historical character discloses his essence: The universal provides no information about man's specific nature. What concerned Marx was not the question why men think and act...but why they think differently and nurture different ideas and ideals at different times."⁵⁵ In this light, Marx maintains that the essence of man is his historical being.⁵⁶

Marx's understanding of man from history paves the way to his argument on history. He contends: "Our conception of history relies on expounding the real process of production, starting from the material production of life, and to comprehend the form of intercourse connected with this and created by this... as the basis of all history."⁵⁷

Although Marx traces the movement of history in the context of property or processes of production, he jettisons the idea of a universal principle that governs material production, because material production means different things in different societies. To import the relative application of material production, it is clear that in the different epochs or societies of history, namely, primitive, ancient, feudal, capitalistic, and socialistic, material production varies. In the sphere of the relative application of the meaning of material production, Marx earns the conviction that the dialectic in history is brought about by the forces from within and without society. Thus, he argues that changes in society come from both forces. There are



no universal schemes that apply in the changes in society. "Internal as well as external factors determine the course of history."⁵⁸

Marx speaks of changes from the "within" (intrinsic) and the "without" (extrinsic) perspectives in society. Here he asserts, "the transition from one stage to another occurs clearly through dialectical, that is, self-generated, oppositions"—although in Dupre's observation, these oppositions are contingent in a particular historical circumstance.⁵⁹ In his way of looking at the dialectic in history, Marx introduces the idea that a change in the forces of production is a product of time. This is why in Marx's analysis:

The feudal society replaced the ancient one, not merely because the ancient had disintegrated but because tribes of an entirely different social system had moved in and destroyed the old forces of production. The ancient and the feudal systems presented social alternatives linked only by the fact that the latter destroyed the former.⁶⁰

In addition, Marx notes: "The towns were able to develop because serfs fled the country, and commerce grew partly out of an active desire on the part of the towns to unite against the feudal lords."⁶¹ The quotations bluntly confess that even an extrinsic force, that is, enticement or provocation for revolution, history shows an intrinsic force that manifests dialectic. To this, Marx contends: "Historical development follows a dialectical course (this is Historical Materialism): it moves by opposition rather than by continuous progress."⁶²

To complete the movement of the intrinsic historical development from ancient society to feudalistic society, then to the rise of Capitalism, Marx asserts that "the rise of the manufacturers result directly from the growth of the city population and the adopted principle of division of labor."⁶³

What is worth noting in Dupre's analysis is that he believes that: "From the very beginning, Marx had opposed in substituting historical – materialist theory for the empirical study of history."⁶⁴ If one's study of developments of society is based on the empirical undertaking of history the effect is to take history as mere non-sense. Marx is not interested in the mere happenings in history. He is rather

interested in the rational underpinnings of the progress in society, because as "a society progress[es], it becomes more rational."⁶⁵ Thus, he believes that a "purely 'economic' view of history would be absurd as one in which history is no more than a succession of battles fought to satisfy (Kingly or) princely ambitions."⁶⁶

It must be clearly understood that "Marx's reading of history is hermeneutical. He interprets the past on the basis of a comparison with the present."⁶⁷ Also, he affirms that "there are two principal agents of social change, namely: (1) the forces of production; and (2) the social relations through which a society appropriates them."⁶⁸

Marx is so convinced that a society founded on reason is determined to pursue its existence and development. He "assumes that over a sufficient period of time... a society as a whole will respond rationally to its historical challenges and thereby increase its potential to survive."⁶⁹

Base and Superstructure (of Society)

Dupré enormously praises Marx for the latter's crafting of a different and a remarkable concept of history. To Dupré, Marx's history surpasses far beyond the depths and bounds of Ciezkowski's and Hess's views. "What uniquely distinguishes Marx's contribution is the synthesis of those ideas with a concept of society that directly relates all cultural achievements to man's life-sustaining activity."⁷⁰

Without any speck of hesitation, Marx declares: "The mode of production is the principal agent of history."⁷¹ In order to give a full-blown explanation of his radical inference, he formulates the primacy of the socio-economic principle. In Dupré's indepth study of Marx, he posits that the social-economic principle espoused by Marx is engendered in two versions, namely: (1) Positive and (2) Negative. The positive version is expressed thus: "Men are the producers of their conceptions, ideas, etc.—real, active men, as they are conditioned by a definite development of their productive forces and of the intercourse corresponding to these, up to its furthest forms."⁷² And the negative principle states: "Negatively, pure consciousness is denied the role of primary agent of history. Consciousness is determined by language, and language derives from social relations, which themselves are determined by the mode of production."⁷³

Caution should be made that the bottom line of both formulations of Marx's social-economic principle is the same: the mode of production is the principal agent of history.

In his radical view of history, Marx pounds the idea of consciousness. In the end, his view of history ostensibly and relentlessly castigates any other conception of consciousness especially that of Freud's. Whereas Freud argues that the original contents of the human mind are instincts whose state is unconscious, Marx contends that

consciousness ... (have) has a natural origin, but once it has emerged, it places itself in opposition to its 'natural' context, including the particular social-economic context in which it originated. Dependence here means anything but identity. The specific mode of dependence of consciousness is precisely that it stands in opposition to that on which it depends. Hence, it is a true claim that the social relations depend on consciousness as that consciousness depends on social relations.⁷⁴

Whereas, Freud asserts that consciousness is the result of the unconscious phase and an anatomy of the individual personality of man, Marx maintains that consciousness originates from the social-economic dimension of human existence and conditions social relations. For Marx, "consciousness can never be anything else that conscious being, and the being of men is their actual life-process."⁷⁵ Besides, he posits that "consciousness is ... from the very beginning a social product, and remains so as long as men exist at all."⁷⁶ This has led him to theorize that it is not true that man is the maker of society; rather, society is the maker of man.⁷⁷

In the light of his view of consciousness, Marx says that "reflection and foresight are most essential in the process of production."⁷⁸ Here, man must be conscious of the material powers of production because they determine the relations of production.⁷⁹ These material powers pertain to "social environment...or the developing consciousness ... (which) originated in the more basic dialectic between man and nature."⁸⁰



So, what now is the role of consciousness in Marxian thought? For Marx, there is "the active relation of consciousness to nature."⁸¹ He understands nature as product of human practice or human activity and the totality of everything that exist.

Now, in the context of consciousness and social relations, how is Marx's theory of the base (structure) and superstructure understood? To our deep regret Dupré notes: "Marx and Engels pay little attention to the base-superstructure model. Instead, they view social life in its totality as a complex web of relations in which all factors remain interconnected."⁸²

At any rate, little is Marx's (with Engels) attention to base-superstructure model of social relations or society may be, some vestiges of Marx's thoughts are still available. But we have to heed first Dupre's cautious remark: "The term superstructure ... remains ... controversial, with its implied assertion of the more fundamental nature of the mode of production."⁸³ Based on Dupre's contention, the superstructure needs an architectural scheme authored by a master planner who should oversee the plan of the whole structure in society.⁸⁴ But according to Dupre, Marx vehemently refuses "to reduce social science to the science of nature."⁸⁵ Thus:

Societies, for Marx, are systems of relations which gradually acquire enough autonomy to maintain themselves throughout internal changes and external pressures. Each system has its own internal dynamics, its own ability to innovate or lack of flexibility to respond to new challenges.⁸⁶

Marx argues that structure and superstructure have dynamic relation.⁸⁷ But such dynamic relation between the two requires a room of independence from each other. "Unless the superstructure has an impact of its own, there can be no dialectical conflict and, consequently, no genuine historical development."⁸⁸ In the context of the dynamic relation between structure and superstructure, Marx admits that the "superstructure also affects the structure."⁸⁹ In fact, he says that "the interaction between structure and superstructure is also noticeable on the level of everyday living. The value we attach to leisure and aesthetic plays a leading role in our contemporary economy."⁹⁰

Marx, as we made an earlier remark, is not an idealist. In giving a critique of history, he opines that history should not be anchored on theoretical observations or remarks but on actual historical writings.⁹¹ What is clear in Marx's view of structure is that: "structure (and development) of a society reflect[s] the production relations of that particular society, and [they] are intelligible only in the light of that society's own origins and aspirations."⁹²

In Marx's analysis, the structure in society corresponds to property or to economy while the superstructure pertains to laws and ideologies that regulate and reinforce social relations.⁹³ Here, the question to be asked is: What has dialectic to do with the dynamic relation between structure and superstructure?

Most often, human nature dictates that the oppressed stand in the contradictory pole against the oppressor. Normally, the workers, whose lives are damn cast in the lower echelon of the society (they belong to the base—the structure), would wrestle against the capitalist. But Marx humbly admits that "only at a few decisive moments in history does the structure simply break the superstructure"⁹⁴ However, despite this realization, he does not tire himself from enticing, provoking, and exhorting the proletariat to engage in a continuous revolution. Says Marx:

But it would be a continuous one (revolution) until the final victory, with the proletariat gaining more power at each new uprising.... After the victory of a particular party, the more radical wing of that party would turn against the more moderate one and, while pretending to safeguard the original victory, would in fact initiate a new stage of revolution.⁹⁵

Prehistory and the End of History

Marx maintains that the material production is the ultimate determining factor of history.⁹⁶ Despite this assertion, he acknowledges: "Economic production remains the basic agent of history, but that agent itself has emerged from a prehistory."⁹⁷ Here, he talks of the modes of production, or specifically, the principles of production used by the primitive people, or those who lived in "primitive" or so-called prehistorical societies.⁹⁸ Marx clarifies that



the family system which prehistorical "societies" had "plays a more important role than production relations in the early development of social institutions."⁹⁹

To Marx, as labor reaches a certain level of productivity and complexity, social structures also begin to be determined by production relations.¹⁰⁰ The effect of this is the foundation of society. In his keen analysis, he theorizes that as soon as society exists, the family system gets dominated by the property system.¹⁰¹ Once property system creeps into the lifeworld, class struggles and class antagonisms ensue.¹⁰² Here, Marx shows his distaste in property system. To him, the introduction of property ownership or private property is the original sin committed by man. Private property spawns havoc, division, and chaos to the human species.¹⁰³

Strictly construed, however, Marx has "reluctance to draw any significant distinctions between history and prehistory."¹⁰⁴ This does not make Marx's theory weak. To Dupre, what is important is that Marx brings home the point that "once property relations themselves were shown to be derived from family structures, his theory gained a great deal of credibility."¹⁰⁵

Needless to say, the material production employed in any society plays so vital a role in the subsistence of that society. The "mode in which it (material production) satisfies human needs has substantially contributed to the cultural shape of every epoch in history."¹⁰⁶ In effect, culture is conditioned by a particular mode of production that satisfies the basic needs of man.

Society, being a product of reason, has a life of its own. It sets "its own ideals, defines itself in particular concepts, sets itself its specific goals."¹⁰⁷ In this light, society itself has "the fear of being absorbed by a different society powerful enough to draw others into its own ambit and thereby powerful enough to deny them the possibility of structuring their world according to their own needs."¹⁰⁸

So, how does dialectic influence history? With its power to effect change in society, does it have the power to terminate the flow of history? Marx asserts that: "There is dialectic in history, the dynamic pattern of social change, leading from contradiction to resolution. But there is no dialectic in history leading to a final resolution of all conflicts."¹⁰⁹ The life of dialectic, therefore, is

destined to be a continuum. Its end is the beginning of a new struggle, a new antagonism. Thus, "a new mode of production leads to a new social system with a different political structure, and in the end, to a new stage of cultural development."¹⁰

In sum, Marx's theory of dialectic plays a vital role in understanding his concept of culture. And as the title of this paper suggests, Marx interprets culture through his understanding of history.

Conclusion

Based on the foregoing presentation, we draw the following conclusions:

- (1) Marx teaches that nature is a product of both human activity or practice, and the totality of everything that exist;
- (2) Man's relation to nature is social and cultural from the start;
- (3) Progress requires an act of translating reason (theory, or thought, or principle) to praxis;
- (4) Praxis should be founded on reason;
- (5) The material production, or the mode of production, is the ultimate determining factor of history;
- (6) Whatever man does reflects his cultural image;
- (7) The social – economic base (substructure/structure) is the ultimate determining factor of all cultural, moral, and political expressions of society. However, in a stricter advertence, the economic production and commerce are co-mingled with the other aspects of culture, e.g. religion; and
- (8) Culture is conditioned by the mode of production inasmuch as the mode of production or material production is the principal agent of history.

ENDNOTES

¹ Microsoft, Encarta Encyclopedia, 2002. s.v. "Culture."

² Ibid.

³ Alfred Schmidt, *The Concept of Nature in Marx* (Germany: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1971), 19.



⁴ Louis Dupré, *Marx's Social Critique of Culture* (London: Yale University Press, 1983), 59.

⁵ Ibid., 95.

⁶ Ibid., 28.

⁷ Ibid., 27.

⁸ Here, Marx calls all philosophers to change the world rather than contemplate on its meaning.

⁹ Dupré, *Marx's Social Critique*, 76.

¹⁰ Ibid., 77.

¹¹ Schmidt, *Concept of Nature*, 19,

¹² Dupré, *Marx's Social Critique*, 59.

¹³ Ibid., 77.

¹⁴ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* in Harold J. Laski, *An Introduction to the Communist Manifesto* (New York: Random House, 1982), 152.

¹⁵ See Eddie R. Babor, *The Human Person: Not Real, But Existing* (Manila: C & E Publishing, 2001), 98.

¹⁶ Dupré, *Marx's Social Critique*, 58.

¹⁷ Ibid. 58-59.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., 60.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., 61.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Dupré, *Marx's Social Critique*, 61.

²⁸ Ibid., 62.

²⁹ Ibid., 63.

³⁰ Ibid., 64. Malthus has a well-received theory called Malthusian theory. See *The New Bantam English Dictionary*, 2001, revised edition, 548.

³¹ Ibid., 64.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., 64-65.

³⁷ Ibid., 65.

³⁸ Dupré, *Marx's Social Critique*, 65-66.

³⁹ Ibid., 67.

⁴⁰ Ibid.