What are productive forces?

Michael Proebsting explains what Marxists mean by the term 'productive forces'

How can there be a tendency to stagnation of humanity's productive forces at the same time as economic growth? This question - which bourgeois economists regard as a crushing refutation of Marxism - is based on a simple but important misunderstanding. Bourgeois economic theory equates the very concept of productive forces with production of commodities or accumulation of fixed capital. So when GDP rises by say 2 per cent, or capital stock by 1.5 per cent, these theorists are unable to discern any tendency to stagnation of the productive forces.

In the Marxist theory, however, productive forces include labour and materials, both the material means and results of production. Productive forces are both means of production (such as machines), etc, goods and raw materials, and workers who operate the means of production and enter the social division of labour.

It is self-evident that the means of production and the worker are mutually dependent and, from the capitalist viewpoint, the purpose of applying the worker to the means of production lies in producing commodities which contain surplus value. Productive forces are not, then, simply a collection of material objects, but include also and above all people, their living conditions and nature, which is the object of labour.

Marx argues that social change comes about when the forces of production outstrip the relations of production (how society is organised for the production of surplus). Both he and Engels looked at how pre-capitalist modes of production had grown up and ultimately and been overthrown by capitalism, and because of this they understood that the forces of production should not be equated solely with the specific forms they take under capitalism, such as fixed or variable capital. Labour and nature are key components of the forces of production, not just buildings, technology and outputs as expressed in their growth in GDP figures.

Capital is a social relation, that is a relationship between groups of people (classes). Marx wrote:

"Capital consists not only of means of subsistence, instruments of labour, and raw materials, not only as material products; it consists just as much of exchange values. All products of which it consists are commodities. Capital, consequently, is not only a sum of material products, it is a sum of commodities, of exchange values, of social magnitudes."

In other words: capital and commodities are a relation of exchange values, which manifests itself in the form of use values. It is a dialectical relation between form and content, appearance and essence. Friedrich Engels summarised these ideas as follows:

"Economics is not concerned with things but with relations between persons, and in the final analysis between classes; these relations however are always bound to things and appear as things."

In another passage, Engels points out the contradictory unity of the concept productive forces, comprehensively defined, as well as its broad and full meaning:

"On the one hand, perfecting of machinery... complemented by a constantly growing displacement of labourers. Industrial reserve-army. On the other hand, unlimited extension of production?for every manufacturer. On both sides, unheard-of development of productive forces, excess of supply over demand, over-production here of means of
production and products? excess there, of labourers, without employment and without means of existence. But these
two levers of production and of social well-being are unable to work together, because the capitalist form of production
prevents the productive forces from working and the products from circulating, unless they are first turned into capital?
which their very superabundance prevents. The contradiction has grown into an absurdity. The mode of production
rises in rebellion against the form of exchange. [The bourgeoisie is shown to be incapable of further developing its own
social productive forces.]

Marx also stressed the central position of the proletariat in the productive forces:
?Of all the instruments of production, the greatest productive power is the revolutionary class itself. The organisation of
the revolutionary elements as a class supposes the existence of all the productive forces which could be engendered in
the bosom of the old society.?

Bukharin (and Lenin with him) also emphasised the importance of human labour power for an understanding of the
productive forces in their totality:
?The total labour power of society, in a pure capitalist society the proletariat, is on the one hand one of the two
components of the concept productive forces (since the productive forces are nothing other than the sum total of the
available means of production and the labour power); at the same time labour power is (?) the most important
productive force.?

Trotsky too called the labour movement ?the most important productive force in modern society?.

In the revolutionary Marxist tradition, therefore, capitalism?s development is not assessed exclusively in terms of the
ups and downs of material output. For sure, this is a meaningful indicator, because the law of value and its evolution
expresses itself in the long-term in the production dynamic of exchange values manifested as use values. But the
development of the productive forces also expresses itself in the development of the commodity labour power and its
conditions of reproduction ? in other words, in the social living conditions of the working class. This is not just
productivity of variable capital as the vulgar economists would have us believe but concerns the actual wellbeing of
human beings: their existence and reproduction. This is an extremely important factor, not only for the workers
concerned, but also for the whole future development of society.

The transformation of productive forces into destructive forces
Finally on the issue of productive forces, we come to yet another characteristic of capitalism: their growing
transformation into destructive forces.

Marx explained how ?These productive forces received under the system of private property a one-sided development
only, and became for the majority destructive forces; moreover, a great multitude of such forces could find no
application at all within this system.?

?We have shown that at the present time individuals must abolish private property, because the productive forces and
forms of intercourse have developed so far that, under the domination of private property, they have become destructive
forces, and because the contradiction between the classes has reached its extreme limit.?

The productive forces have already developed so far that capitalist property relations have not only become a fetter on
the complete, free development of the productive forces, but this very development brings in its wake ever more
destructive forces. Of course, destructive forces existed before, but only in the epoch of imperialism have they taken on
a world-encompassing character, where they have the potential to cast back the whole of humanity countless
generations in its level of development, or even destroy it completely.

The dramatic danger to mankind of environmental destruction driven by the goal of profit (global warming,
deforestation, exhaustion of natural resources), the danger of nuclear wars with millions dead, show the extent to which
under capitalism the development of productive forces is accompanied by the development of destructive forces. This
includes the destructive impact of exploitation and the capitalist labour process on the worker. As Marx warned:
Capitalist production, therefore, develops technology, and the combining together of various processes into a social whole, only by sapping the original sources of all wealth - the soil and the labourer.

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