

Phil 114, April 25, 2012

Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, selections from Tucker, pp. 159–60, 190–193

Marx, *Grundrisse*, selections from Tucker, pp. 252–54, 260–61, 278–81

Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 3, Ch. 48

Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Program*,

Part I (response to proposition 3), Part IV (response to proposition A)

What's wrong with capitalism?

- Are these problems with capitalism in particular?
- Or are these problems with “prehistory” in general: with productive forces insufficiently developed to provide abundance with minimal labor? Are slavery and feudalism objectionable in the same way? Is there any way to solve the problem short of abundance?

1. *The surplus is distributed unjustly, proletarians are exploited.*

But *in what way is it unjust?* Two general answers:

A. It is unjust that the laborer *does not get the surplus value that his labor exclusively creates.*

Questions:

- i. Does one's labor *exclusively* create surplus value? Recall doubts about the labor theory of value. Why not say that the means of production also create surplus value? Why then is capitalism “theft”?
 - ii. The labor theory of value says that *exchange-value* is proportional to labor time. If it is use-value that *really* matters, then why should it matter who gets exchange-value?
 - iii. Is one morally entitled to whatever one's labor exclusively creates?
- B. It is unjust that the capitalist (and the rentier, appearing in the Trinity Formula passage, who skims a little from the capitalist to use his land) gets the *entire surplus simply because he controls the means of production. Merely disproportionately controlling the means of production does not* entitle you to a disproportionate share of the surplus (whether or not the surplus is measured in terms of exchange-value or use-value, whether or not all value comes from labor)—just as controlling a gun pointed at someone's head does not entitle you to his wallet.

Alternative moral theories that might underlie B:

Left-libertarianism: A person is entitled to whatever he or she produces with equal access to the means of production. This is because

- while each person has an exclusive moral right of “self-ownership” in his own labor,
- no one has an exclusive moral right of “world-ownership” in the means of production. To that, all have equal claims.

The problem with capitalism is that the capitalists (and rentiers) do not respect the proletariat's world-ownership, their equal claim to the means of production.

Questions:

Left-libertarianism can avoid questions i and ii above. It does not rest on the labor theory of value; it can grant that other means of production create value.

But it still needs to answer iii. Again, why does *creating* something entitle you to *keeping* it?

- a. What if you are just born lucky enough to be able to produce more than other people? (This is actually true of you, after all.)
- b. What if you are too young, old, infirm, etc. to work?
- c. What if you have greater needs?
- d. What if your work is less strenuous, unpleasant, etc. than others' work?

Egalitarianism: Labor should be structured and the surplus distributed so as to achieve an equal level of resources, or welfare/needs, or opportunity for resources, or opportunity for welfare, for each.

Indeed, in the *Critique of the Gotha Program*, Marx seems to criticize earlier socialist views on grounds like those that we have just brought against left-libertarianism. And he seems to advocate something much more like egalitarianism: "From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs." However, he suggests that this egalitarianism will be possible only with material abundance.

In a higher phase of communist society, after the enslaving subordination of the individual to the division of labor, and therewith also the antithesis between mental and physical labor, has vanished; after labor has become not only a means of life but life's prime want; after the productive forces have also increased with the all-around development of the individual, and all the springs of co-operative wealth flow more abundantly -- only then can the narrow horizon of bourgeois right be crossed in its entirety and society inscribe on its banners: From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs!

A textual tension: We are supposing that Marx in some sense criticized capitalism as unjust, as he often seems, with great rhetorical fervor, to do. But at times he seems to deny, or to dismiss the complaints of others, that capitalism is unjust. Why? What might Marx have in mind?

- a. *According to the legal* (contrast: moral) *conceptions of justice in capitalist societies*, capitalism does not involve injustice.—But according to a *moral* conception, capitalism is unjust.
- b. Moral criticism is *pointless and ineffective*. In order to change consciousness, you need to change material conditions.—But the moral criticism might still be true.
- c. A *narrow* focus on distribution, *without attention to production*, overlooks the *root cause* of the problem: namely, that the capitalist controls the means of production.—But what might be wrong with such control is precisely its distributive consequences.

- d. *Some particular views* about the injustice of capitalism (e.g., that distribution should match labor contribution) are flawed.—But another view might be correct.
 - e. *A society of abundance will be one where people will no longer be concerned with justice.* People are concerned with justice only where there is conflict over scarce resources, and a society of abundance will be one where resources are no longer scarce.—But this is compatible with its being the case that capitalism is unjust and communism will be just. The point is that *no one will have to be concerned with justice* under conditions of material abundance. Justice in the distribution of resources will take care of itself; without anyone lifting a finger to bring it about, it will come about that no one has any legitimate, unmet claim to resources.
2. *Proletarians are unfree.*
- Laborers are forced *by circumstance to labor and to labor in particular ways*; they have little choice about how to spend their lives.
 - This might also be true of hunter-gatherers, however.
 - One might reply that the difference is that, in capitalism, laborers are forced to labor and to labor in particular ways *even though the productive forces are sufficiently developed to permit an alternative society in which people would not be so forced.* But it is not clear that this *is* true of capitalism either.
 - Laborers are forced to work *for a capitalist*; they are *subordinated to others*, subject to *the wills of other people*.
 - This wasn't necessarily true of hunter-gatherers, although it was also true of slaves and serfs.
 - Laborers are *dominated in their work*. The capitalist must keep tight discipline in order to ensure that his purchase of labor power is put to fullest use.
 - Perhaps this problem is especially acute in capitalism. Serfs, at least, got to work on their own lands a lot of the time.
3. *Alienation: Proletarians do not see themselves in their work, its products, or their value.*
- Labor (as opposed to labor power), its products, and their value *belong to* the capitalist, not the worker.
 - Labor, its products, and their value, *seem to arise from capital, or somehow from the commodity itself*, rather than from the worker.
 - The laborer does not control, direct, or even understand the labor process.
4. *Labor is stultifying and dehumanizing.* Proletarians do not develop and exercise their talents; they do not realize themselves in their work; they do not engage in “self-activity”; whatever powers they do have wither away.
- However, this may be due to the *division of labor*, especially in industrial production, rather than to capitalism itself. Worker-owned factories, given existing technology, might not solve the problem either. Perhaps only abundance would solve this problem (for everyone, not simply the idle capitalists).

From *The German Ideology*:

For as soon as the distribution of labor comes into being, each man has a particular, exclusive sphere of activity, which is forced upon him and from which he cannot escape.

He is a hunter, a fisherman, a shepherd, or a critical critic, and must remain so if he does not want to lose his means of livelihood; while in communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, shepherd, or critic.

5. *Living and working conditions for proletarians are wretched, unpleasant, and dangerous.*
6. *All people—not only proletarians—are not only ignorant of, but also have positively false beliefs (ideology) about, themselves and their social world.*
7. *All people—not only proletarians—do not consciously control their social world.*
8. *Society is torn by antagonism and conflict (largely as a result of many of the aforementioned phenomena).*

Review Questions:

1. For *each* of the criticisms 1–8 discussed above, find a (short) passage in Marx where he can be read as expressing that criticism. Briefly explain each passage. (Hint: Capital III, Ch. 48, Sect. III, second paragraph can be mined for passages illustrating at least 1, 2, 4, 6, 7, and 8.)