

Marx

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Marx's philosophy of history stands on three pillars: a critique of Hegel, a critique of orthodox or so-called bourgeois political economy, and an alternative theory of modern industrial society or capitalism (Rockmore 2002). Since Marx did not describe his philosophy of history in detail, it has to be reconstructed from his texts. It has been the practice over many years to read Marx through Marxism, often in substituting texts by Engels or other Marxists for Marx's own writings. On the contrary, Marx will be read here in terms of his own texts and against the historical background in which his position emerged.

On the Marxist Reading of Marx's Philosophy of History

Like Hegel, Marx is a deeply historical thinker, who understands ideas, concepts and theories in the historical context. It seems, to be consistent, that we should read Marx in the historical context out of which he emerged and to which he reacted. This "contextualist" approach is denied by Marxism, which is "officially" "anti-contextualist." Since it was invented by Engels, a long line of Marxists have always argued for what Althusser has called an epistemological break (*coupure épistémologique*) between Marx and his social and intellectual surroundings (Althusser 1970): everything happens as if Marx arises in, but is independent of, hence unaffected by, his historical moment.

Engels' Marxist approach to Marx reflects a widespread belief that Marx, like Hegel before him, was the last philosopher. Generations of Marxists have repeated variations on this theme. It can be exemplified by Lukács, who is arguably the ablest of the Marxist philosophers. Lukács reformulates Engels' view. Hegel's mythological view of the historical subject is inadequate to grasp real social problems, which cannot be solved on the basis of classical German philosophy. Marx shows us the way to solve the problems of philosophy through his discovery of the proletariat as the real historical subject. Lukács illustrates his faith in Marx in claiming that at this point in history there is no problem that cannot be solved on the basis of the analysis of commodities (Lukacs 1971).

Marx, who was trained as a philosopher is arguably best understood as a philosopher working within the wider framework of German idealism. Marxists, who deny this

point, tend to distinguish rigorously between science and philosophy in considering Marx's position as a form of science, Marxism as itself science, and by implication science as the sole source of knowledge. Engels, who was interested in the science of his day, is close to what today would be called positivism. Like the positivists of the Vienna Circle, he thought that knowledge of all kinds can and must be formulated as scientific laws. He recommends substituting science, which yields truth, for philosophy, which yields only mythological and finally mistaken views. In this way, he anticipates scientism, for instance in W. Sellars' distinction between folk views and science (Sellars 1991: 1–41). Engels, who compares Marx as a scientific figure to Darwin, claims that Marx discovered the laws of history (Engels 1978: 681). This approach later influenced generations of Marxists, who have continued to read Marx through Engels' eyes.

Engels describes Marx's view as historical materialism. In the 1892 introduction to *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, Engels writes that historical materialism "designate[s] that view of the course of history which seeks the ultimate cause and the great moving power of all important historic events in the economic development of society, in the changes in the modes of production and exchange, in the consequent division of society into distinct classes, and in the struggle of these classes against one another" (Engels 1984: 386–7). Gerald Cohen reformulates a form of this view in sophisticated analytic fashion. Like Engels, Cohen mainly disregards the Hegelian context in which Marx's position arose in depicting it as a social science. Cohen influentially depicts Marx's philosophy of history as a form of functionalist explanation, based on a model in wide use in biology, in which the concept of function plays a causal role (Cohen 2001).

This approach to Marx's theory of history is influential, but controversial. It has been countered by Jon Elster, who calls functional explanation into question in raising questions about appealing to "purposes" in history that are not the purposes of anyone" (Elster 1985). Another problem is that it turns away from Marx's philosophical anthropology in substituting science for philosophy. Like Fichte, Marx understands human beings as basically active and human society as the result of human activity. Like Vico, he suggests that we can only know human history since we in some sense construct it. A final difficulty is that this approach disregards the way in which, like other philosophers, Marx reacts to, evaluates, criticizes, reformulates, and carries forward themes in the then contemporary debate, including the discussion of history.

Marx's Philosophy of History

Marx's position encompasses philosophy, political economy, as well as such allied disciplines as history and political science. Marx's overall position is based on his theory of finite human beings. This theory depends on a series of basic distinctions encompassing the difference between work or labor (*Arbeit*) and what I will be calling free human activity, a form of activity that can only occur beyond constraints imposed by the economic process; capitalism or communism; history and human history; reproductive needs and species needs; alienation and fulfillment.

Activity, not work, is Marx's basic interpretive category. His overall position can be sketched in terms of his "Fichtean" theory of human activity. Like Fichte and Aristotle, Marx approaches human being through human activity. As early as the *Paris*

Manuscripts, he asks, “For what is life but activity?” and he answers his rhetorical question: “My *own existence* is a social activity” (Marx 1964: 158).

Marx distinguishes between two types of activity linked to the developmental stages of society. Work or labor (*Arbeit*) is the form of activity manifested by a person within the productive process characteristic of modern industrial capitalism. It requires the use of preexisting material, which is acted upon and transformed as part of the process. Work is productive, as opposed to creative, quasi-physical as opposed to mental, and basically active as opposed to passive.

Work is epoch-specific to capitalism, which is only the latest in a series of phases of the development of the means of production and, as consequence, of social relations. If and when capitalism is replaced by communism, work in the traditional sense will cease to exist. Marx occasionally stresses this point, as in the following passage from the *German Ideology*. “In all revolutions up till now the mode of activity always remained . . . whilst the communist revolution [which] is directed against the preceding *mode* of activity, does away with *labor*” (Marx and Engels 1970: 94). It follows that in communism there will be a different form of activity. But, unfortunately, just as Marx is rarely explicit in reference to communism, he only occasionally refers to this second form of activity, in a sense the goal of human history as Marx understands it, though its real possibility is everywhere presupposed as the perspective from which to criticize capitalism.

Marx’s Fichtean approach to human beings as basically active is the basis of his theory of finite human beings who construct or produce objects, themselves, the surrounding social world, and finally human history. In working out his analysis of modern industrial society, Marx applies a specifically Hegelian analysis of objectification through productive activity in an economic setting. In the *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel describes the self-objectification of workers in and through the economic process, in the course of a wider account of the basic concepts of political economy.

In his analysis of capitalism, Marx builds on Hegel’s own account of basic economic categories. Hegel provides the basis for Marx’s theory of alienation in his description of an economic process in which products and individuals are alienated (Hegel 2005: 97–8). Marx brings together Hegel’s analyses of objectification through work of all kinds and modern industrial capitalism in a general model of modern industrial society.

According to Marx, finite human beings have needs, which can be divided into two main types. Reproductive needs typically include food, clothing, shelter, and other necessities of life. There are also human needs, which must be satisfied in order to develop as an individual human being. According to Marx, in capitalism, which is typified by private ownership of the means of production, most human beings do no more than meet their reproductive needs, but cannot develop in ways necessary to meet their human needs.

Human beings meet reproductive needs through work, which is accordingly the master interpretive category for the capitalistic stage of human development. Humans produce a series of “products” including at least commodities, social relations, society, themselves, and human history. A commodity is a product destined for sale in the market place. Human beings, who work within the economic process, produce relations between individuals and, more generally, the entire social context. “By social relations we understand the cooperation of several individuals, no matter under what

conditions, in what manner and to what end" (Marx and Engels 1970: 50). Social relations include at a minimum, relations between people and things and among people. Society as a whole is merely the ensemble of different social relations of which it is constituted. A given person has a distinct role within the social world as identified by a given economic function, or form of work, such as a bricklayer, head of the household, university professor, or capitalist. Human history is a further "product" composed of the actions of human beings within the social context over time.

One of the most interesting aspects of Marx's position is his emphasis on historical change, unlike philosophies of history that do not explain historical. Recent examples include Heidegger's view that human history emerged out of an earlier turn away from being, Foucault's positivistic account of history as composed of disconnected epistemes, and Lyotard's idea that postmodernism differs from modernism in the rejection of overarching explanations. Marx's philosophy of history is based on economic development. He assumes a fundamental distinction between superstructure and base. The base refers to the economic organization of the means of production, and the superstructure refers to all other, non-economic, "cultural," phenomena, including philosophy, law, and so on. The well-known relation of superstructure and base has two interpretations: One is as a unilateral relation, in which the base is said to determine the superstructure. The other is as an interaction in which each determines the other. In both cases, Marx holds that changes in the economic base lead eventually to changes in its superstructure. Marx also assumed that economic development leads to social conflicts and crises, which transform society and, as a direct result, human history.

By the term "conflict" Marx, following Hegel, endeavors to think social contradictions. According to Marx, social conflicts arise when the development of productive forces comes into conflict with the existing relations of production, leading to social revolution. By "revolution," Marx means adaptive social change, which stops short of deeper social transformation, for instance in the transition from capitalism to communism. Marx is realistic in suggesting that a social order, which is based on a particular constellation of social forces, never disappears before all its productive forces have developed. Additionally, periodic crises may result from underconsumption. Marx sometimes "romantically" suggests that capitalism will finally founder on such a crisis. One cannot rule it out, but there seems no particular reason to support such an inference.

Marx's theory of capitalism, the driving force of the modern world, is in effect a theory of the modern world. It would be a mistake either simply to accept or to reject Marx's theory of capitalism without criticism. There are numerous questionable points in Marx's theory of capitalism. One, which has attracted much attention, is his theory of surplus value and his general theory of value (Böhm-Bawerk 1949). Another is his theory of economic crisis.

Marx on History and Freedom

Marx's view of the historical realization of freedom does not differ from Hegel's in the belief that real human freedom depends on economic factors, nor even in dismay at

the results of the industrial revolution (Lukács 1975). It is different in the explanatory priority accorded to economic factors over all others, as well as in a more critical attitude toward political economy.

Hegel, who partly measures freedom in terms of recognition, accords more weight than Marx to legal recognition. Marx subordinates legality and everything else to economics. Like Hegel, Marx is concerned with progress, hence with social freedom. Marx, more than Hegel, interprets freedom as a function of the development of the economy. He sees the need to liberate individuals from the economic yoke of modern industrial society, in a word to bring about a post-economic realm of freedom, in order to develop their capacities in ways unconnected with economics. His attitude toward capitalism is always balanced, never unbalanced, mixing praise with blame, criticism with acknowledgment of positive features. The persistently negative aspect of his discussion of modern industrial society derives from his clear view, which remains up to date, of how capitalism functions in practice. The private ownership of the means of production leads to individuals being forced into undesirable roles which neither they nor anyone would freely assume. The pressure to accumulate capital, which is built into capitalism, often carries with it a horrendous social cost. Yet he also points out that suffering in modern industrial society is balanced through the development of the means of production. And he holds out the prospect that the supposed intrinsic instability of capitalism will lead to a post-capitalist society in which the means of production will no longer be privately owned, hence eliminating or at least reducing economic pressure to accumulate capital.

Marx's binary model is most clearly visible in such early writings as the *Paris Manuscripts* and *The German Ideology*. It is less visible in later writings, where the emphasis increasingly falls on understanding the functioning of modern industrial society.

Marx's model presupposes a distinction in kind between forms of society, correlated with two broad historical periods. Prehistory is the series of social formations ending in capitalism, the stage in which economic imperatives subordinate everything else, including any realistic perspective of meeting human needs surpassing mere existence needs – which are often euphemistically referred to as food, clothing, and shelter – to the accumulation of capital. Marx further envisages a post-capitalist society, or human history, which, in early writings, he calls communism, a term with no more than a purely linguistic relation, or the word in common, to forms of “official” Marxism. In this future stage, human beings will supposedly retake control of the economic sector of society, which from that time on will be subordinated to the needs of all people everywhere. In the Marxian scheme, capitalism is justified, despite its social cost, as the only way to bring about the development of the means of production required for the transition from capitalism to communism in which, as the slogan goes, all contribute according to their capacities and receive according to their needs.

In Marx's position, human freedom requires the prior development of the means of production. It also requires human beings to acquire control of the economic process as a result of which they will be freed, or at least made relatively freer, from the economic yoke of modern industrial society. Marx is not making the utopian claim that when the capitalists lose power, we can forget about economics. Basic human needs will still need to be met. But when they have been met, time will be available for other, non-basic needs, such as poetry and so on.

What kind of freedom can we expect in a post-capitalist society? Marx cautiously entertains various ideas in his writings. In the early *Paris Manuscripts*, he argues for the “reconciliation” of human beings with nature, which is described, romantically enough, as man’s other body. Marx’s suggestion is that when people are freed from the constraints of earning a living the various senses will develop in new and different ways, all of which will lead to bringing out the individuality of each of us. His central idea seems to be that capacities, which are not necessarily economically useful, and which, on grounds of division of labor are not developed in capitalism, could be developed in a post-capitalist society. Slightly later in the *German Ideology*, in an equally romantic passage, he takes up the idea of the many-sided individual (implicit in the *Paris Manuscripts*) in a future society in which there would be no division of labor. In such a society, Marx imagines that each person could do whatever one wanted at different times without regard to competence or training. Still another suggestion from his later period emerges late in the third volume of *Capital*, which appeared after his death, in an important passage worth evoking here.

Those inclined to doubt, as well as those who assert, continuity in Marx’s position need only glance at chapter 48, “The Trinity Formula.” Like the *Paris Manuscripts*, which many years earlier began with consideration of the wages of labor, the profit of capital and the rent of land, this chapter starts with the three categories of capital, profit, and land, or ground-rent, from which it takes its name. According to Marx, freedom, which only begins where forced labor ceases, consists in establishing control over the economic process in conditions favorable to human beings. Although real needs must still, and will always need to be, met through the economic process, that is, within the realm of necessity, beyond it lies what Marx now calls the realm of freedom. In suggesting that its prerequisite lies in shortening the working day, he implies that as the goal of history real freedom lies in free time. Freedom no longer lies in a break with a previous stage of society through revolution. It rather lies in a basic improvement in the conditions of life, or in reform. Marxism has traditionally been hostile to mere reform (cf. Bernstein 1961). Yet Marx seems to hold out hope that modern industrial society and real human freedom are in principle compatible if and only if human beings can reestablish control over the economic process, which is the real master in capitalist society. In denying that human ends can be identified with the accumulation of capital, Marx suggests that people must be freed for development beyond the economic process.

Marx’s Historical Approach to Cognition

Marx’s view of history leads to a historical approach to cognition. Marx defended a form of the identity theory of knowledge, espoused by idealist thinkers from Kant through Hegel. The single most useful passage in Marx’s writings for his approach to knowledge occurs in the Introduction to the *Grundrisse*, a connected series of texts outlining an enormous project only partially realized in *Capital*.

Marx formulates his approach to knowledge by commenting on Hegel’s complex approach to knowledge. Marx claims, very much like Hegel, that we cannot grasp economic (or indeed other) phenomena directly. We can, on the contrary, only grasp

them indirectly through the economic categories utilized in modern political economy, in a word against the background of a conceptual framework, which changes as the social world changes. On this basis, Marx rejects abstract identities, as well as ordinary empiricism, for which he substitutes categories, which mediate the relation to experience. Categories, which depend on, and serve to grasp the historical context, are not fixed, but change in history. Complex categories refer to simpler categories, and the simplest categories, which appear as relations, imply a concrete substratum.

Though it seems best to begin from population, since this is the real and concrete prerequisite of political economy, this is, according to Marx, a mistake. Population, which is an abstraction, depends on classes, which in turn depend on exchange, division of labor, and so on. To begin with population is to begin with a general idea of the whole, or a merely imaginary concrete, which is analyzable into simpler ideas. The correct approach is illustrated by recent political economists, starting with Smith, who began from simple conceptions such as labor, demand, exchange value, and so on, before concluding with state, international exchange, and world market. The category of labor, which was only discovered by modern political economy, implies the existence of highly developed forms of concrete labor, independent of the individual, hence in need of explanation. According to Marx, Smith made a great advance in defining labor in general as the source of wealth. This simple abstraction, which is used by modern political economy as its starting point, is truly realized in the most modern society.

This categorial approach leads in two directions, toward the critique of Hegel and toward a theory of knowledge very similar to idealist constructivism. Marx typically objects to what he regards as Hegel's tendency to substitute abstract analysis for the concrete social world. This objection can be compared to the difference between Hegel's *Logic*, which discusses the movement of categories within thought, and the *Phenomenology* in which he considers different, alternative conceptual frameworks. In the latter, he argues that there can be no immediate knowledge, or sense certainty. What we comprehend (now using the words "abstract" and "concrete" in ways opposite to normal usage, in which thought is abstract and direct experience of the world is concrete) is "concrete" since it is mediated through the conceptual process. In rejecting the view he identifies with Hegel, Marx in fact only rejects his view of Hegel's *Logic* in favor of his view of Hegel's *Phenomenology* (Lukács 1978).

According to Marx, the approach leading from the abstract to the concrete, or the same approach described by Hegel in the *Phenomenology*, is the way thought, in fact, unfolds. But since the conceptual process does not generate the concrete object, Hegel supposedly conflates what happens within a person's mind, mere thought, with what happens in the mind-independent, external world. Marx, who observes it is a mistake to take the movement of categories for the real act of production, apparently mistakenly attributes this confusion to Hegel. Yet Marx follows Hegel in claiming that what we know when we know, is the product of the mind, which reconstructs what its cognitive object as a condition of knowing it. Marx desires to cognize the social world we in fact experience, as he says "what is given in the head as well as in reality" (Marx 1973: 106).

Marx takes up the same problem, in almost the same words, in the famous Afterword to the second German edition of *Capital*. He stresses the need to describe social development, not in terms of the historical sequence of economic categories, but

rather in terms of the relation among categories in modern bourgeois society. One seeks to describe the subject matter as if it followed from an a priori construction (Marx 1967: 19). Marx, like Fichte, treats the a priori and the a posteriori as two perspectives on the same object. Yet in equating reality with what we experience, he overlooks the distinction, basic to all the German idealists, between the mind-independent external world and phenomena, i.e., the basic difference between what is in itself and what we in fact experience. Marx simply conflates one with the other in failing to note there is no way reliably to know we know the world, or even the social world, as it is. To think otherwise is to think, as Kant is sometimes read, that the observer constructs a representation of the mind-independent world as it is (cf. Hanna 2001: 22). For a representationalist approach, in which there is no other access to reality, there is no way reliably to know that representations correctly represent. In reacting to Kant, Hegel, the phenomenologist, stresses this point in his description of knowledge as a process of trial and error. Marx, who overlooks the difference between his project and Hegel's, is doubly incorrect. First, he incorrectly accuses Hegel of transforming the real world into an idea. Second, he incorrectly contrasts our conception of the world with the material world, which, through a categorial framework, he seeks to "translate" into, or again to grasp through, thought. Yet if the world as we experience it depends on our categorial framework, then categories and cognitive objects are interdependent and a clear distinction between them cannot be drawn.

This problem is reflected in Marx's epistemology. Attention is sometimes drawn to the anthropological element in Marx's position. In writing that "in all the universe man cannot find a well so deep that, leaning over it, he not does discover at the bottom his own face" (Kolakowski 1968: 66). Kolakowski suggests that for Marx we inevitably sense, perceive and know from a human point of view. It follows that the Kantian project of isolating the transcendental logical conditions of knowledge from its psychological conditions simply fails.

In *Capital* (vol. 1, 372, n. 3), Marx refers in passing to Vico's conviction that human history differs from nature in that we have made the former but not the latter. Marx, like Vico, thinks that human beings literally "make" history. He further thinks like Vico that we can only know what we make, according to Marx by reconstructing it on the level of mind. If there is no prior object to be known, then it cannot be reconstructed, and construction is not a priori. Rather, it takes place on the a posteriori and social planes, in the context of an interaction between human beings and between human beings and nature.

Marx's specific form of this claim is problematic. If the social context were in fact wholly "transparent" to mind, then we could indeed reliably claim not only to construct it through the actions of men and women in the social context, but also to reconstruct it reliably within the cognitive process on the level of mind, hence in fact to know it as it is. Marx unquestionably provides a powerful conceptual model of modern industrial society. Yet even on a charitable interpretation, Marx cannot reliably claim to grasp the social world as it is for at least two reasons. First, at most he grasps no more than what at any given time appears to us in experience. Second, Marx proposes one among a series of possible reconstructions of the social world. At least implicitly, there is always a distinction, which cannot be measured or otherwise evaluated, between what we experience and the social world as it is. Since we cannot

reliably claim to encounter the social world as it is in itself, we also cannot reliably claim to reconstruct it. To think otherwise would be to conflate the subjective and the objective, what we seek to know with what is. At the limit it may sometimes appear as if the subject matter we seek to know were ideally reflected as in a mirror, as if it were only a mere a priori construction. But, since we cannot reliably claim to know the world as it is, we cannot reliably claim to know this is the case.

Marx's social epistemology is very different from the Marxist approach. Marxism, which claims to speak in Marx's name, advances a so-called reflection theory. Cognition, according to Engels, consists in a correct reflection of independent reality. In his study of Feuerbach, Engels asks rhetorically if we can produce "a correct reflection of reality" and answers that in philosophy, this question is called the "question of the identity of thought and being." Dialectical philosophy, he maintains, is the reflection on the level of mind of the transitory processes of successive historical systems. For Engels and for Marxism in general, to know requires a reliable reflection of mind-independent reality on the level of mind.

The reflection theory of knowledge has remained popular over many years. It was adopted as early as Bacon, was restated in a different form by Wittgenstein, and recently criticized by Rorty. The basic difficulty of the reflection theory of knowledge lies in the inability to demonstrate a reliable reflection of mind-independent reality.

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