

# The Critique of Proletarian Labor (Online Article)

## Historical Note

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## Content

### The Critique of Proletarian Labor

Leaving aside the broad sweep of the dialectical materialist understanding of the history of human civilization, I will now focus on the dialectical materialist critique of bourgeois society specifically, as it materialized in the form of Marx's critique of political economy. I focus on his early critique of proletarian labor.

The Marxist critique of bourgeois society took the form of the critique of the political economy of that society. This happened for two reasons. The first is easy to deduce from what I said up to now: given that Marx came to identify productive activity or labor as the basis of human existence, it follows that he also came to identify labor as the locus of any problems in said existence. Any immanently dialectical critique of bourgeois society would therefore have to tackle the sphere of labor and production if it wanted to go to "the root of the matter". The domain of inquiry concerning labor and production was political economy. Naturally then, Marx reverted his focus from religion and philosophy to political economy.

The second reason Marx focused on the critique of political economy was the prominence of economic demands in the socialist movement of his time. As Marx says in the Preface to his *Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy*, he first came in contact with French socialist and communist ideas during his editorship of the *Rheinische Zeitung* in 1842-3. (3)[1] At that time, Proudhon was already a prominent critic of political economy, and the Chartism movement in England was at its peak. Discussions of economic questions were thus commonplace in radical circles, and Marx felt compelled to study political economy in order to participate in these discussions. (3-4) It was during these initial studies that Marx came to the conclusion of the primacy of material production for human social existence.

The importance of the development of the proletariat as a class and of the rising proletarian movement for socialism in determining Marx's thought is hard to overstate. I believe it is unlikely that Marx would have focused on the critique of political economy without such a movement rising to prominence, and he would not have derived the same conclusions if the proletariat was not gradually becoming the dominant class of laborers. Most importantly, the proletariat is crucial for Marxism because Marxism is "a revolutionary dialectic" for which "the central problem is to change reality" (Lukacs 2-3). Marx recognized early on that to *change reality*, a theory must become "a material force" as a mass politics, and he searched for the social group or class that was most likely to become that force. He found that class in the proletariat. His critique of bourgeois society is accordingly a

critique from the standpoint of the proletariat.

## 1. The Practical Orientation of Marxism

Marx did not abandon his early conviction, expressed in the letter to Ruge, that dialectical critique should embrace all social spheres. However, as can be seen from his Introduction to a Contribution to the *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, Marx prioritized the spheres that most acutely expressed the potential for social transformation. In that work Marx argues that a critique of Hegelian philosophy is necessary in Germany because in Germany it is philosophy that happens to express most acutely the crisis of bourgeois society that points beyond itself. (58-9)[2] On the other hand, he proclaims the German political state of affairs as beneath criticism and worthy only of contempt, implying that not everything can be grasped dialectically. (59-60) Most importantly, in that work Marx first identifies the proletariat as the potential revolutionary subject. The discussion leading to this identification is a prime example of the practical-revolutionary orientation of Marxism.

In that discussion Marx identifies the requirements for a relationship of theory and practice to obtain. He points out that theory is only realized when it becomes "a material force" by seizing the people, and it seizes the people only when it expresses their practical needs. Therefore, if a radical theory is to be realized through a radical revolution, people need to have radical needs necessitating the realization of the theory. The meaning of Marx's famous dictum "It is not enough that thought should seek to realize itself; reality must also strive towards thought" is here made clear: it is not enough for theorists (thought) to want to realize their thought in practice, but the people (reality) must be in a situation that makes them need the utilization of the theory. (60-1) If a far-reaching general emancipation of society is the objective, as is for Marxism, then there must be a social class of people who needs such emancipation, "forced to it by its *immediate* situation, by *material* necessity and by *its fetters themselves*." (64) As Lukacs puts it, the unity of (Marxist) revolutionary theory with practice, i.e. the transformation of revolutionary theory into revolutionary practice, requires a historical situation in which a class has to acquire the holistic social consciousness the revolutionary theory offers as a step towards its emancipation. (2-3)

For a social class to need a general emancipation of the whole society, this class must have nothing to look forward to within that society as it is. It must be a class which is oppressed and suffers due to the very nature or essence of society, so that it can emancipate itself and achieve well-being only by transforming and hence emancipating society as a whole. (64) Given that for Marxism the defining feature or essence of a society is its mode of production, the class in question must be a class which is oppressed and suffers due to the mode of production of society, and which can emancipate itself only by overcoming said mode. In bourgeois society characterized by the capitalist mode of production, this class for Marx is the proletariat. Only the proletariat can realize revolutionary theory, and it can do so only by abolishing itself: "Philosophy can only be realized by the abolition of the proletariat, and the proletariat can only be abolished by the realization of philosophy." (65) To see why Marx believes the proletariat is the one class that needs and ought to overcome the capitalist mode of production, we must examine his understanding of the condition of the proletariat in bourgeois society.

## 2. Estranged Labor

Marx's immanent dialectical critique of political economy and proletarian labor was first set out at length in the Manuscripts of 1843-4. In subsequent years this critique was enriched and refined, e.g. in *Capital*. However, the fundamentals are already there in the Manuscripts, albeit in general terms. True to the dialectical method, Marx does not invent his own categories and system but instead proceeds from the categories of classical political economy. He criticizes political economy for taking capitalist reality and its categories for granted instead of explaining them. Political economy takes the

existence of private property, exchange, competition, the need for profit etc. for eternal facts instead of historical products requiring explanation. It is descriptive instead of analytic, let alone critical. It describes the economic process rather than explaining it, i.e. explaining how it arose and why it has the form it has. This description is given via abstract formulae which are then reified into eternal laws, e.g. the law of exchange, or of the division between labour and capital etc. Ultimately, the 'laws' and categories of political economy appear as fortuitous primordial facts. (70-1)

Marx does not take the categories of political economy for granted, but instead analyzes them critically in search of their actual interrelations and historical roots. In the most famous section of the Manuscripts, he analyzes the category of estranged labor. Estranged labor is Marx's critical rendition of the category of wage labor, which expresses capitalist reality's economic fact of the separation of workers from the means of production and their products. The separation of workers from their products, which belong instead to the capitalist and for whom workers receive a wage, is taken for granted in political economy: "We took our departure from a fact of political economy – the estrangement of the worker and his production. We have formulated the concept of this fact – estranged, alienated labour. We have analyzed this concept – hence analyzing merely a fact of political economy." (77)

According to Marx, estranged labor is a self-contradictory condition. It is self-contradictory in the sense that it embodies two contradictory tendencies that depend upon each other. (81) Estranged labor increases productivity, wealth and the potential general well-being of society by increasing the poverty and misery of workers. Or vice versa, it increases the poverty and misery of workers by increasing the productivity, wealth and potential well-being of society. The more productive labor becomes, the more wretched its condition. (70-1) This contradiction is a refined version of the basic contradiction of society expressed in the letter to Ruge. Society's alienation from the humanity that constitutes it in the service of something inhuman is specified as the workers' alienation from their labor and its product in the service of capital, while society's need and capacity for being structured to serve humanity is specified as the increasing capacity of society to produce wealth guaranteeing the well-being of all its members, and the increasing need of the proletariat for such a society.

Marx's conception of proletarian labor as alienated proceeds from his conception of labor as the vocation of man, as what makes us human. As we said earlier, Marx follows Hegel in viewing production as the externalization of human nature and its capacities: "The whole character of a species [...] is contained in the character of its life-activity". (76) Our creations are our actualization, affirming and confirming who we are, in the same way a flower's growth confirms and affirms the sun's power of giving birth to life. (115-6) If we do not objectify ourselves, these selves remain unrealized potentialities, in a sense unreal. This becomes more obvious if we consider it in relation to recognition: human beings have the need to be recognized by others, and to be recognized they need to express themselves, in word but especially in deed. The production of civilization also seems to define humanity, again attesting to the correctness of Marx's conception of productive activity as our vocation. This activity needs to be conscious and free to be fulfilling and fully human – we should produce because we want to produce as a means of self-expression and self-realization. (76)

Proletarian labor is alienated because it is neither voluntary nor a case of self-expression and self-realization. Its alienation is fourfold. Firstly, workers are alienated from the products they make. They produce the world around them, gradually turning more and more of nature into capital and means of production, but capital and the means of production do not belong to them but to the capitalists. The more they work, the more the world is populated by items not belonging to them, i.e. the more alien the world becomes. They receive compensation for their work in the form of wages, which they then use to buy some of the products they made, but they cannot own most of them and thus view them

as alien objects. They are also forced to work in order to survive and acquire some of these objects, so that the objects in a sense have power over them. (72-3) Secondly, workers are alienated from their productive activity itself. This is because they do not work voluntarily and in order to express and affirm themselves, but are forced to make products not of their own choosing and in degrading conditions solely for survival. (74) The worker's productive activity is a commodity belonging to the capitalist: it is the capitalist who decides the nature of the activity and benefits from it. Thirdly, given that for Marx this productive activity is what defines people's humanity, it follows that for him workers are also alienated from their humanity, what Marx terms their "species being". The sole purpose of the life of workers under capital is individual survival, the purpose of animals. Productive activity is degraded to a means instead of an end in itself. (74) A corollary is that workers also view each other as mere means, thus being estranged from each other. This is the fourth aspect of their alienation. (77)

The workers' alienated products are the private property of the capitalists. Private property is thus the result of alienated proletarian labor, or, alienated labor is the precondition of private property: "Private property is thus the product, the result, the necessary consequence, of alienated labour". (79) Only if workers alienate themselves from production can the private property of the capitalists appear: private property is the objectification of alienation. This is the conclusion of Marx's analysis of alienated labor, a conclusion that in *Capital* he elaborated upon and presented as the process of primitive accumulation. While political economy derived the concept of alienated labor from that of private property and considered the latter as primary and the basis of society, Marx's analysis of the former showed its explanatory and historical primacy over the latter. (79) Estranged labor, qua the basis of private property, is thus actually the basis of bourgeois society itself, and a case in support of Marx's view that the nature of productive activity is the basis of society. This conclusion is an example of how the immanent dialectical method of working through given and reified forms of appearance by identifying their internal self-contradictions – in this case, the self-contradictory nature of estranged labor – can go beyond these appearances to establish their historical roots and actual relations.

It is also a conclusion with radical implications. True to his method, Marx derives social and political tasks from the advanced consciousness of society that his immanent dialectical critique of political economy affords him. From his analysis of wage labor as necessarily leading to the progressive immiseration and oppression of the workers, Marx shows that the proletariat has to overcome wage labor if it is to ever achieve well-being and freedom. The equality of wages and redistribution of wealth preached by socialists like Proudhon is insufficient. (79-80) Given that this alienated wage labor has been shown to be the precondition of private property and hence, of bourgeois society, it follows that any attempt at overcoming it is an attempt at overcoming bourgeois society itself. (85) This overcoming is social emancipation in the sense of being the emancipation of society from its self-contradictory, alienated, irrational bourgeois form. The proletariat is therefore the potential revolutionary subject tasked with realizing the objective of Marxism, i.e. the emancipation of society. It remains to consider what this society is supposed to look like.

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From the collection of articles "[What is Marxism?](#)"

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[1] All page numbers for Marx and Engels refer to: Tucker, Robert C., editor. *The Marx-Engels Reader*. Norton, 1978. All page numbers for Lukacs refer to: Lukacs, Georg. *History and Class Consciousness*. Translated by Rodney Livingstone, MIT Press, 1971.

[2] Of course, even in Germany philosophy soon ceased to be sphere most acutely pointing beyond

the present, and Marx limited his engagement with philosophy for the rest of his life.

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