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Karl Marx's broad theoretical and political agenda is based upon a conception of human history that is fundamentally different from those of the social, and especially the philosophical, thinkers who came before him. Most importantly, Marx develops his agenda by drawing on and altering Hegel's conception of the dialectical nature of the human experience. As Marx describes in his essay, "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*," and again in the "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844," Hegel did little to base his ideas in the "real" history of man.¹ Instead, Hegel's theory of the nature of man is a "mystical" one. Hegel sees history as a story of man's alienation from himself. The spirit (*Geist*, God), is the "true" nature of man, and man must bring the spirit (God) back into himself through the powers of thought (most specifically, philosophy).

Drawing on this idea, and also on Feuerbach (see *The German Ideology*), Marx constructs his conception of history by "standing Hegel on his head." Unlike Hegel, Marx regards God or spirit as the *projection* of man's "true" self. To understand the true self of man, Marx argues, one must understand his "real," social, material conditions. He states: "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness" (4). From this idea, Marx proposes to understand the alienated state of man through an understanding of what he terms "historical materialism." By understanding the material conditions of man through history, Marx argues, man can come to understand his social and political conditions. As he states, "The sum total of these [material] relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on

¹The word 'man' is used here as a generic term to refer to both men and women.

which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness” (4).

Likewise, Marx understands Hegel to “mystify” the relationship of the state to man. He criticizes Hegel for giving the state an “independent existence” from the people who create the state, “as if the actual state were not the people” (18). He goes on, instead, to advocate the idea that the state must be understood as “an abstraction.” As he writes, “the people alone is what is concrete” (18).

To understand how man became alienated from his “true” self, Marx argues, man must be understood at his essence. He writes that man in his natural state, as a “species being,” is an individual who *consciously* engages in life-activity. For man, conscious life-activity goes beyond merely maintaining one’s physical state. As Marx asserts, “Man produces even when he is free from physical need...[H]e duplicates himself not only, as in consciousness, intellectually, but also actively, in reality, and therefore he contemplates himself in a world that he has created” (76). He goes on to argue that estranging man from this free productivity essentially alienates him from his true form.

Thus, Marx turns his attention from the spiritual sites of analysis that his philosophical predecessors focused upon, and turns to the question of how man became estranged from his “species being” state of free production. He accomplishes this, in the “Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844” (1844 Manuscripts), by presenting a macro or societal viewpoint and showing the negative consequences that capitalism engendered in men, whereby they no longer felt connected to themselves, their social and familial relations, and society as a whole (74-75).

Marx writes that in past, non-capitalistic economic systems— for example, feudal society— a man worked for himself and produced and made what he needed for himself and his family, while trading on a small scale to purchase from small businessmen his other necessities. From these activities he received senses of identity and self worth, and he had the power to develop mentally and physically in whatever area he desired. In the capitalistic system of Marx’s time, however, a man did not work to produce all that he needed, but instead worked for another man in order to obtain a wage to purchase from other men all his needs. Separation from the activities that gave him pleasure, satisfaction and purpose in life caused him to feel detached from himself and all things around him, and he felt a loss of purpose. The worker was now in a situation whereby he did not produce an entire item, had no control over what he produced, and was now in competition with other men for his livelihood (77).

Capitalism, and the competition it entailed, forced the members of society into two groups: workers (the proletariat) and capitalists (the bourgeoisie). Previously, there had existed a third group between these polarities, which Marx termed the petty bourgeoisie. Within capitalism, this third group became marginalized, or even extinct, as its members lost status and were forced to join the lower class of society, the workers. The worker himself, valuable merely for his ability to earn wages, Marx writes, now sank “to the level of a commodity” (70). Finally, under this new system, “the distinction between capitalist and land-rentier, like that between the tiller of the soil and the factory-worker, disappears and that the whole of society must fall into two classes – the property-*owners* and the propertyless *workers*” (70).

Every relationship for the worker was then reduced to an economic exchange as the capitalist did not pay him to live a full life but rather just enough to work for him and produce his commodities. The worker became alienated from the labor that had once given him worth. He

became alienated from his friends and social relations, who became his competitors for jobs and wages, and his life lost its meaning and enjoyment because he now lived to work, rather than working to live. Marx writes that “the more the worker produces, the less he has to consume; the more values he creates, the more valueless, the more unworthy he becomes...[T]he less you are, the less you express your own life, the greater is your alienated life” (95-96). Society, then, was thrust into a state of alienation, with all of its members themselves estranged from one another.

Marx states that the political system reinforces such economic conditions, as the capitalists have the means to control government and construct power systems that favor this economic system. “Political economy,” Marx writes, “proceeds from the fact of private property, but... It expresses in general, abstract formulae the *material* process through which private property actually passes, and these formulae it then takes for *laws*” (pp. 70).

Marx believed that, in order to overturn such inextricably woven economic and political systems within a capitalist society, revolution is not only justified, but inevitable. If we understand that a major thrust of Marx's theoretical agenda is to demonstrate the essentially social nature of man (86), and to reveal our unnatural estrangement from ourselves and from one another, it is essential to understand that his conclusions contain a solution to our alienation, a political endpoint. While Marx's political theory is critically descriptive, and while his agenda is to ground theory in material reality, to inform philosophy with history, the momentum of his ideas is meant to bring us into the future. Consciousness of the material realities of the present is intended to move us toward *communism*, which he describes as the riddle of history solved.

The emancipation of the working class requires not merely the elimination, or negation, of private property, but rather the real appropriation of the human essence by and for man (84). Marx explains, first, that the mere transformation of private property into its opposite, common

property, while a crude form of communism, will not lead to the positive appropriation of our humanity, because in transferring ownership from one to all, the same alienating relationship between labor and property becomes reenacted. True communism requires political emancipation, elimination of the state, and a conscious emancipation of man, realized in a return to himself as a social being. Therefore, communism requires the transcendence of private property, not simply its elimination. Furthermore, the transcendence of private property is not the goal, but the means of our emancipation, our appropriation of our own humanity, our natural state.

It is important to note that the revolution Marx espouses here is multidimensional. In addition to urging the proletariat to cast off the shackles of constrictive, capitalist economic and political conditions, for instance, Marx also urges men to unfetter themselves from contemporary manifestations of religion. He states that modern man is trapped; society must bridge the divide between man as an individualistic figure and man as a dehumanized figure in the state (26). In “On the Jewish Question,” he notes that modern religion (specifically Judaism) perpetuates this division by injecting an essentially egoistic, religious mentality into civil life; this egoism leads to further estrangement among men. Noting that religion has become “the spirit of *civil society*, of the sphere of egoism...,” he adds, “[i]t has become what it was at the *beginning*, an expression of the fact that man is *separated* from the *community*, from himself as other men. It is now only the abstract avowal of an individual folly, a private whim or caprice” (35). Thus when, in the introduction to his “Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*,” Marx calls for a “radical revolution” (61) in Germany, this revolution necessarily entails a correction of the evils of modern religion, this, “*opium* of the people” (54).

In Marx's description of our emancipation through communism, he reveals a predominating concern for the retrieval of our humanity, which he appears to place beyond the transformation of society through a revolution in the mode of production. The economy and relationship of labor to the mode of production order our world and beget our existence (92), and Marx's communist vision requires a revolution in that order. But the scope of his vision with regard to the opportunities created through our emancipation is far broader. The liberation of everything it means to be human, all of human knowledge, our comprehension of science, appreciation of art, relationship to nature, and experience of the senses are all realized in the realization of true communism. In this respect, through his description of communism, Marx seems willing to allow his theory to transcend its own materialism. It appears that the grounding of his political theory in historical materialism is meant not to avoid those metaphysical questions raised by religion and strains of philosophy he so stridently critiques, but rather to recast them not as metaphysical questions, but as concrete questions about reality that we will answer when we finally transcend our own estrangement from that reality.

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