Property, Labour, and Theft

Lecture 5: Marx

§1. Introduction: where does Marx fit into the story?

P1 The toy flute is the product of Carla’s labour.
P2 If the toy flute is the product of Carla’s labour, then it is her property.
C1 The toy flute is Carla’s property.
P3 If the toy flute is Carla’s property, and we take the toy flute away from Carla and give it to Bob instead, then we are stealing from Carla.
P4 Egalitarianism requires us take the toy flute away from Carla and give it to Bob instead.
C2 Egalitarianism requires us to steal from Carla.

One way for egalitarians to respond to this objection is to reject P2. It has been suggested that this response is unavailable to egalitarians drawing their inspiration from the work of Karl Marx, since P2 – or, rather, the principle upon which it is based – is a premise of an objection that they themselves want to press against capitalism.

T1 ‘The idea of the right to the fruit of one’s labour can unite right-wing libertarians and left-wing Marxists (no matter how uncomfortable each might be in the company of the other.’

(Amartya Sen, Idea of Justice, p.14)

T2 ‘To secure for the workers by hand or by brain the full fruits of their industry and the most equitable distribution thereof that may be possible…’

(The old Clause IV)

§2. The theft of labour objection

P1 The workers own their labour.
   (This is why they own the product of their labour)
C The capitalists are stealing from the workers.
P2 If X owns Y, and Z appropriates Y, then either this is a voluntary exchange, or Z is stealing from X.
P3 The capitalists appropriate the workers’ labour, and this is not a voluntary exchange.

Why accept the second conjunct of P3?

Is it really a case of theft? Compare the following cases…
Thief  I hold a gun to your head and threaten to shoot you unless you give me one hundred pounds. You agree.

Lifeboat  You are drowning in the sea and I happen to be passing in my boat. I offer to save you if you give me one hundred pounds. You agree.

Isn’t the moral problem in the lifeboat case that you are the victim of exploitation?

§3. The exploitation objection

In one sense, X exploits Y if and only if X makes use of Y for his/her own benefit, or advantage.

In another sense, X exploits Y if and only if X makes use of Y for his/her own benefit, or advantage, unfairly. But what does this unfairness consist in?

Proposal 1…

The unfairness consists in the fact that X makes use of Y for X’s benefit, and X does this by forcing Y to do something.

But this assimilates exploitation to theft.

Proposal 2…

The unfairness consists in the fact that X makes use of Y for X’s benefit, and X does this by getting Y to believe something false.

This assimilates exploitation to fraud.

Proposal 3…

The unfairness consists in the fact that X makes use of Y for X’s benefit, and X does this by omitting to disabuse Y of a relevant false belief.

But surely we can say that people are being exploited without suggesting that they have relevant false beliefs?

Proposal 4…

The unfairness consists in the fact that X makes use of Y for X’s benefit, but Y doesn’t get any benefit in return (or gets a less than equivalent benefit).

If a friend asks me to look over a piece of work, and I get nothing in return, it doesn’t follow that I have been exploited.

Proposal 5…
The unfairness consists in the fact that X makes use of Y for X’s benefit, and this is only made possible by the fact that Y’s rights have been violated/Y has been wronged.

P1 The workers own their labour.
P2 If X owns Y, and Z gets X to give him/her Y, and this is only made possible by somebody’s failure to comply with his/her moral obligations to X, then Z is exploiting X.
P3 The capitalists get the workers to give the capitalists their labour, and this is only made possible by somebody’s failure to comply with their moral obligations to the workers.
C The capitalists are exploiting the workers.

§4. Is Marxist a realist or a moralist?

T3 ‘Marxists say that capitalists steal labour time from working people. But you can steal from someone only that which properly belongs to him. The Marxist critique of capitalist injustice therefore implies that the worker is the proper owner of his own labour time.’

(Jerry Cohen, Self-Ownership, Freedom, and Equality, p.146)

T4 ‘…although capitalist exploitation alienates, dehumanizes and degrades wage laborers, it does not violate any of their rights, and there is nothing about it which is wrongful or unjust.’

(Allen Wood, Karl Marx, p.43)

T5 ‘I have dealt more at length with the ‘undiminished proceeds of labour’, on the one hand, and with ‘equal right’ and ‘fair distribution’, on the other, in order to show what a crime it is to attempt, on the one hand, to force on our Party again, as dogmas, ideas which in a certain period had some meaning but have now become obsolete verbal rubbish, while again perverting, on the other, the realistic outlook, which it cost so much effort to instil into the Party but which has now taken root in it, by means of ideological nonsense about right and other trash so common among the democrats and French Socialists.’

(Critique of the Gotha Programme, p.615)

T6 ‘Are economic relations regulated by legal conceptions or do not, on the contrary, legal relations arise from economic ones?’

(Critique of the Gotha Programme, p.612)

T7 ‘The circumstance that on the one hand the daily sustenance of labour power costs only half a day’s labour, while on the other hand the very same labour power can work during a whole day, that consequently the value which its use during one day creates, is double what he pays for that use, this circumstance is, without doubt, a piece of good luck for the buyer, but by no means an
injury to the seller… Our capitalist foresaw this state of things, and that was the cause of his laughter.’

(Capital, p.505)

But Marx does refer to the theft and robbery of the workers’ labour by the capitalists…

T8 ‘The theft of others’ labour time upon which wealth depends today…’

(Grundrisse, p.416)

T9 ‘Wages are part of the tribute annually exacted from the working class by the capitalist class. Though the latter with a portion of the tribute purchases the additional labor power – even at its full price, so that equivalent is exchanged for equivalent, yet the transaction is for all that only the old dodge of every conqueror who buys commodities from the conquered with the money he has robbed them of.’

(Capital, p.326-327 in the Oxford World’s Classics edition)

The capitalists could easily avoid the theft of labour objection by agreeing to pay the workers a fair price for their labour. But Marx doesn’t think that this is a good response to his objection against capitalism:

T10 ‘An enforced raising of wages (quite apart from other difficulties, apart from the fact that, being an anomaly, it could only be maintained by force) would only mean a better payment of slaves and would not give this human meaning and worth either to the worker or to his labour.’

(Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts, p.93)

§5. The alienation objection

T11 ‘A spider conducts operations that resemble those of a weaver, and a bee puts to shame many an architect in the construction of her cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality. At the end of every labour process, we get a result that already existed in the imagination of the labourer at its commencement. He not only effects a change of form in the material on which he works, but he also realizes a purpose of his own that gives the law to his modus operandi, and to which he must subordinate his will.’

(Capital, p.493)

P1 The good life for a human being is one in which he/she shapes the world in accordance with his/her purposes.
Under capitalism, the workers shape the world not in accordance with their own purposes, but rather in accordance with the purposes of the capitalists. (That is to say, the workers are alienated from their labour.)

Under capitalism, the workers do not enjoy the good life for a human being.

Can Marx make this objection if he is a realist...? It depends on how much we pack into the concept of morality.

**Bibliography**