Property, Labour, and Theft

Lecture 5: Marx

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Introduction

Outline of the lecture…

1. Introduction: where does Marx fit into the story?
2. The theft of labour objection
3. The exploitation objection
4. Is Marx a realist or a moralist?
5. The alienation objection
6. Conclusion
Introduction


‘Hegel remarks somewhere that all facts and personages of great importance in world history occur, as it were, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second as farce.’

*(The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte, p.329)*
Introduction

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 who draw 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.
Introduction

‘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.’


‘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)
The theft of labour objection

What is the Marxist objection against capitalism?

One possibility is that it is 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.
The theft of labour objection

Why accept the second conjunct of P3?

Why isn’t it a voluntary exchange between the capitalists and the workers?

After all, the workers are receiving a wage in return for their labour…

The workers are forced to exchange more of their labour for a given wage than they would otherwise.

The capitalists threaten not to give the workers anything if they don’t exchange this much labour, and if the capitalists don’t give the workers anything, then the workers, but not the capitalists, will perish.
The theft of labour objection

Why is it true that if the capitalists don’t give the workers anything, then the workers, but not the capitalists, will perish?

To produce the means of survival requires both capital and labour.

The capitalists own capital – that is what makes them capitalists – and they own labour independently of any exchanges that they make with the workers. Like the workers, they own their own labour. So they own everything they need to produce the means of their own survival.

The workers own their own labour, but they don’t own any capital. So they can’t produce the means of their own survival. They can only acquire the means of their own survival from the capitalists.
The theft of labour objection

Is it really a case of theft, or stealing?

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?

What is exploitation?

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

This is the sense in which we exploit the natural resources of the planet.

‘He/she’s just exploiting you!’

In this sense, the workers exploit the capitalists as much as they are exploited by them.
The exploitation objection

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.

In the lifeboat example, I have exploited you, but I have not robbed you. The case is not the same as one in which I hold a gun to your head.
The exploitation objection

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 false belief.

But surely we can say that people are being exploited without suggesting that they have relevant false beliefs? Think of zero-hours contracts.
The exploitation objection

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.

So the lack of reciprocal benefit is at most a necessary condition of exploitation, not a sufficient condition.

What about the lifeboat example? Isn’t this a case of reciprocally beneficial exploitation?
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.

Hillel Steiner subscribes to the principle that...

X exploits Y if and only if X makes use of Y for X’s benefit, Y receives less than equal benefit, and this is made possible by past injustice.
The exploitation objection

Think again about the lifeboat case...

If you are only drowning in the sea because a pirate has thrown you overboard, then the condition is satisfied.

Suppose that you are drowning in the sea purely by accident.

It might be suggested that you are only drowning in the sea because I am failing to comply with my moral obligation to help a person in dire need.

On this view, what matters in thinking about exploitation is not whether the exchange is voluntary, or mutually beneficial, but whether it would be mutually beneficial if everybody complied with their moral obligations.
The exploitation objection

**P1** The workers own their labour.

(This is why they own the product of 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.
Is Marx a realist or a moralist?

‘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)

‘...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)
Is Marx a realist or a moralist?

Here is a passage that appears to support the realist interpretation…

‘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 Program, p.615)
Is Marx a realist or a moralist?

Marx regards talk of ‘fair distribution’ of the ‘undiminished proceeds of labour’ as ‘obsolete verbal rubbish’. He rejects ‘ideological nonsense about right’.

So how can he base his objection to capitalism on considerations of justice – in particular, the right of workers to the ‘undiminished proceeds of labour’?

But perhaps Marx simply means that this kind of talk will become ‘obsolete verbal rubbish’ in post-capitalist society.
‘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)

Mark thinks the answer is that ‘legal relations arise from economic ones’. The legal relations and property rights in a society are part of the ideological ‘superstructure’ that emerges to sanction the economic relations.

We can ask whether a particular exchange is unjust, or violates property rights, according to the legal system of feudal society, or the legal system of bourgeois society, or the legal system of communist society. But we cannot step outside of any legal system and ask whether the exchange is unjust, or violates property rights.
Is Marx a realist or a moralist?

‘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)

Marx denies that the exchange of wages for labour is ‘an injury to the seller’, i.e. violates the rights of the workers.

He just thinks it is ‘good luck’ for the capitalists that they can get such a sweet deal...
Is Marx a realist or a moralist?

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

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

(Grundrisse, p.416)

‘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)
Is Marx a realist or a moralist?

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:

‘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)*

Marx’s objection to capitalism is one that cannot be so easily avoided.
The alienation objection

Like Aristotle, Marx has a conception of human flourishing, where this involves the exercise of a human being’s essential capacities.

Aristotle’s account of human flourishing places a lot of weight on contemplation – on our capacity to understand the world around us.

By contrast, Marx’s conception of human flourishing places much more weight on production – on our capacity to shape the world around us.
The alienation objection

‘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)*
The alienation objection

P1 The good life for a human being is one in which he/she shapes the world in accordance with his/her purposes.

P2 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.)

C 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.
The alienation objection

On this interpretation, the objection to capitalism does have to do with labour, but it doesn’t have to do with property, or theft.

The point isn’t that the workers own their labour, and that this labour is stolen by the capitalists…. Nor is the point that the exchange between the workers and the capitalists is exploitative.

The point is that when the workers labour for the capitalists, there isn’t the right sort of connection between the workers’ labour and their purposes.

So there isn’t the right sort of connection between the workers’ labour and their selves.
Conclusion

Back to the toy flute…

P2 If the toy flute is the product of Carla’s labour, then it is her property.

The suggestion was that P2 – or, rather, the principle upon which P2 is based – is a premise of an objection that the Marxists want to press against capitalism.

But we haven’t found a compelling objection against capitalism based on this principle.