§1. Theft of labour

The story so far…

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.

An egalitarian could claim that this argument is not sound because P2 is false… But is this response available to Marxist egalitarians…? Don’t they want to rely on precisely this premise in their critique of 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)

P1 The workers owned their labour.
P2 If X owns Y, then X also owns the product of Y.
C1 The workers owned the product of their labour.
P3 The capitalists took possession of the product of the workers’ labour.
P4 If X owned Y, and Z took possession of Y, then either X gave Y to Z in a voluntary exchange or Z stole Y from X.
P5 The workers did not give the product of their labour to the capitalists in a voluntary exchange.
C2 The capitalists stole the product of the workers’ labour.
Why accept P5…? After all, the workers received a wage in return for their labour…

An exchange is voluntary only if neither party was forced into it. But the workers were forced to exchange more of their labour for a given wage than they would otherwise have exchanged…

The capitalists threatened not to give the workers anything if they didn’t exchange this much labour. But if the capitalists don’t give the workers anything, then the workers, but not the capitalists, will perish…

§2. Exploitation

X exploits Y if and only if X makes use of Y for their own benefit, or advantage…

In this sense, the workers exploit the capitalists as much as they are exploited by them…

X exploits Y if and only if X makes use of Y for their own benefit or advantage unfairly...

But what does this unfairness consist in…?

Perhaps 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…

Perhaps 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…

Perhaps 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 any relevant false beliefs…?

Perhaps 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…

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

P1 I benefit from the fact that you are unable to choose the option of surviving without giving me £100.

P2 You are unable to choose the option of surviving without giving me £100 because of my refusal to rescue you unless you do.

P3 I have a moral obligation to rescue you regardless of whether you give me £100.

P4 If X benefits from the fact that Y finds themselves in a particular situation, where Y only finds themselves in this situation because of someone’s failure to discharge their moral obligations towards Y, then X exploits Y.

C I exploit you.

So do the capitalists exploit the workers…?

Perhaps they lack the option of charging more for their labour because the capitalists have illegitimately appropriated all of the capital…

If this is right then the objection to capitalism turns on the workers’ property rights over natural resources…

§3. Does Marx believe in property rights?

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.’

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

T4 ‘The theft of others’ labour time upon which wealth depends today…’

(Grundrisse, p.416)

T5 ‘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… 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)
‘…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)

‘I have dealt more at length with the ‘undiminished proceeds of labour’… and with ‘equal right’ and ‘fair distribution’… in order to show what a crime it is to attempt… to force on our Party… ideas which in a certain period had some meaning but have now become obsolete verbal rubbish… perverting… the realistic outlook, which it cost so much effort to instil into the Party… 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)

If talk of the ‘fair distribution’ of the ‘undiminished proceeds of labour’ is ‘obsolete verbal rubbish’ then how can Marx object to capitalism on the grounds that it is unjust…?

‘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)

We can ask whether a particular exchange is unjust, or violates property rights, according to a given legal system, e.g. the legal system of feudal society, or bourgeois society, or communist society. But we cannot step outside a legal system and ask whether the exchange is objectively unjust, or violates property rights…

‘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)

Does Marx think everything would be fine if the capitalists paid the workers a fair price for their labour…?

‘An enforced raising of wages… 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)
§4. Alienation

Like Aristotle, Marx ties his conception of human flourishing to the activities that distinguish us from other animals… For Aristotle what matters is our capacity to understand the world around us… For Marx what matters more is our capacity to shape the world around us…

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…’

(Capital, p.493)

T12 ‘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 they shape the world in accordance with their purposes… and are therefore not alienated from the product of their labour.

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.

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

Can Marx make this objection if he doesn’t believe in rights and justice…? Perhaps he is still happy to make ethical claims…

This objection stresses the ethical importance labour… But it doesn’t claim that the workers own their labour… Or that they own any other part of the world…

References