

Situating Marx

evaluations and departures

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Comment on Paul Walton's Paper

It seems to me quite right, in particular, to focus attention throughout on the importance of the category labour, in Marx's work, to note as you do in reference to Lukács, that any omission of this category is bound to lead to gross misreadings, and to note, finally, that this is in a sense the unity of Marx's whole life's work from 1844 on, perhaps earlier. This is the case even if it may not be the case that this constitutes for Marx an 'ontology' in the classic philosophical sense, for, firstly, labour always produces a specific object, never an object *in general* or as such, and hence issues directly into the realm of determinate being, and properly speaking, history, rather than into that of being as such, or absolute being, which (although I am not trained in philosophy and may be misreading it) I take to be the restricted domain of ontology; and secondly, because Marx was quite willing to recognize the existence of objects not produced by or touched by labour, e.g. nature in the original sense, and the existence of this latter is in a way the presupposition of labour itself; and the basis of his ontology must therefore have been this presupposition, not its derivative, and is probably *matter*; but never mind. Be this as it may, it is undoubtedly true that most of the debate, as you point out, has overlooked the centrality of the concept of labour. It is further right, and a refreshing change from so many metaphysical approaches, that the development of Marx's thought is to be marked in the increasing specificity he gives to this concept, e.g. in the distinction between labour in its capitalist and its pre-capitalist and post-capitalist modes, and, further, in the increasing differentiation internally, fullness, which the concept obtains, e.g. with the use value/exchange value distinction. Along the road, however, I find some passages in your paper whose meaning is not clear to me, and which, in one possible interpretation, I find erroneous. Perhaps, being unfamiliar with the work of Berger, Pullberg and Luckmann, in regard to whom you develop the topic, I ought to refrain from comment, but since you make the usage your own, I feel

I must. The whole complex of notions which figure in your paper as 'objectivation, objectification, reification and alienation' strikes me as obscure in the extreme, in the sense used there. Firstly, I do not know of any thread in Marx's thinking which would lead him to distinguish between 'objectivation' and objectification. They both together, and I think the latter the better variant, refer simply to the process by which a human will is transferred by human activity (and with the help of whatever mediation, means, implement, etc., may be required) on to a material, resulting in an object which embodies that will and activity. That is all. Whether this human will is voluntary or constrained, whether the activity was joyful or painful, whether the resulting object enters exchange or is consumed by its maker on the spot, etc., is all beside the point, and extrinsic. Neanderthal man who chips at a rock to make a flint tool, I who write this comment, and the worker who assembles cars or TV sets, it is all objectification. Object-making, objectification, is inherent in the concept of labour, and operates through all ages and forms of society. Something quite different is, of course, alienation. This refers to the specific mode of objectification in which the wage-worker operates, i.e. within capitalist society, and capitalist society only. Now, this alienation proceeds whether or not 'man establishes distance from the producing and the product to make it an object of consciousness', whether or not 'man sees his own creations as external things, as alien creatures'. Indeed, alienation (the alienated mode of objectification) operates historically most smoothly and adequately to itself when 'man' does *not* 'establish distance' in his mind, when he does not see his objectifying activity as alienating at all, indeed, when 'he' does not recognize at all that it is *his*; in short, when the alienator is quite unconscious of himself and his doings. So much is this the case that when 'he' does come to the awareness, as Marx says plainly in the *Grundrisse*, then this specific mode of objectification is virtually doomed and ready to give way to a higher. The term 'alienation' in Marx's usage must not be psychologized, subjectified, given a merely reflective, mental existence, or else it is turned into its opposite and falsified, as, e.g. in a Berkeley sociologist's study of industrial workers, which found that white textile workers in a Southern US town were the 'least alienated' because they least frequently checked the boxes marked 'I am not very happy with my work' on the questionnaire. The quite objective usage of Marx represents, in my opinion, somewhat of a restoration of its original meaning in history, at least during the feudal period, when it meant 'sale of church lands

and properties', i.e. the sale of things not previously considered on the market, i.e. inalienable. The basic meaning, then, and for Marx as well, is not a state or condition of mind (e.g. 'being alienated') but rather a relation of property, and an action relative to that property, namely its surrender in exchange for something else. (So likewise with the parallel terms *Äusserung* on the one hand, and *Ver-* or *Ent-äusserung* on the other; the former meaning simply expression or, awkwardly, externalization in the sense of objectification; the latter two meaning, in Marx as in the dictionary, the surrender or sale of property, i.e. again other ways of saying alienation. (When Marx wrote in the *Manifesto* that Communists must always raise to the fore the property question, he surely did not exempt his own central concepts from the programme.))

Now, you are quite right in pointing out that in pre-capitalist modes of objectification, the product also becomes the property of the non-producers, also becomes property of an exploiting class, and that this has been a common feature of all hitherto existing societies (after the primitive communal). In this sense one can say, all labour has been alienating or alienated labour. But only, in a sense, with a grain of salt; namely, only in the psychological sense that the serfs may have hated the church they were forced to build, or the lord they were forced to supply, or in the crude-empirical sense that church, lord, castle, roads, provisions, etc. were in fact used to oppress them brutally. But this loose, broad usage of 'alienation', on which you propose to found an 'aetiology' of 'different kinds of alienation' overlooks precisely the property question—the objective basis of alienation—namely property in labour power. Serfs and slaves, the two broadest categories of pre-capitalist producers, were not legal persons, but chattel, implements; they themselves *were* property, were means of production, and hence could not *have* property, least of all in their own labour-power. Consequently, to speak of a slave or serf being engaged in alienated production—i.e. of conditionally surrendering his property over his own labour power in exchange for subsistence—is meaningless, nonsense; this robs the term alienation of all grip, all determinateness, and muddies over again the distinction between the feudal and the capitalist epochs which you quite properly credit Marx with having sharply bared in his work, and, incidentally, leaves no logical ground why one should not attempt to assimilate Marx and Freud's views in this respect, as Marcuse attempted. Marx did not to my knowledge attempt to find a specific term for the mode of objectification in feudal, etc., society other than the various specific terms for the various social formations in

which it took place, and was quite right not to, since in none of them was production so developed that it held either mystery or promise apart from its mere material existence. This lack of the producers' property in their own labour power in precapitalist societies, their literal inability to alienate it even if they tried (they were punished severely, perhaps flogged to death), is the core difference between these and capitalist societies, and not any possible (and to my mind dubious) elbow-room for being philanthropic in the appropriation of the surplus product—you will find a wide range of such 'philanthropy' within capitalist society as well.

'Reification' as I understand it (the German *Verdinglichung*) fits into a quite different realm of discourse, namely that of logic. When the properties of an object, which it has only by virtue of its role in a constantly moving, social process, are incorrectly imputed to the physical thing itself, so that the movement is frozen and the historical, social qualities turned into seemingly physical qualities, that is reification. (When this mental construct is then made into an object of worshipful mystery, that of course is the famous fetishization.) To confuse alienation and objectification, for example, i.e. to abstract from alienation and impute to objectification its specific, transitory historical qualities, is an example of reifying thinking, a reification.

Now to the question of 'Value and Political Economy' in your paper. It seems to me quite right in a sense for you to note that the 'break' involved in 1857-58 was not an 'ontological' one; correct, namely, in that this development was not the result of any sort of contemplative exercise or conversion experience or *coupure épistémologique*, which are usually implied when one speaks of someone acquiring a new ontological view. Rather, what occurred is that the 'development' of all the categories of economics out of the twin concepts 'private property' and 'alienated labour' of which Marx speaks in 1844 (even then he sees quite clearly that without one there is not the other), that this development was not and could not be a mere 'unfolding' or (as I crudely put it, and I wince to see it quoted) 'squeezing', but had to proceed via a tremendous absorption of empirical and theoretical material. This tremendous input, which Marx began from the beginning again when he moved to London, and of which the published writings give only the tip of the iceberg of the idea, is clearly the substratum of his discoveries, the *sine qua non* of the leap made in the *Grundrisse*, and in that sense indeed the 'break' there (in so far as that word applies at all) was, as you write, 'empirical'. It is useful and important to point this

out again and again, to remind people that scientific thinking is hard work, research, study, investigation, and not merely the abstract, speculative unfolding of conceptual onions. *But*, and this is equally important, none of this empirical intake would have got Marx more than a boil on his backside if it had not been undertaken with a *method* capable not only of absorbing, but of penetrating and transforming this material; and, in particular, the method of splitting entities mentally into their essential, contradictory aspects, which is how he came, among other things, to the discovery of the distinction between the use value and the exchange value of labour, the corresponding change in terminology to 'labour-power', and to the splitting of the rate of surplus value from the rate of profit. And thus, empirical break is not quite the adequate term either, because it leaves this question of method out of account. If the unity of material and method is science, then it becomes clearer why those are correct who say that in this winter of '57-58 Marx accomplished neither an ontological nor an empirical break, but a scientific breakthrough.

Now there is one other matter on which I must speak, concerning partly an old paper of mine which you exhumed to quote from, and partly the proper use of certain far-seeing passages in the text of the *Grundrisse*. First the old article. The more or less unarticulated purpose of it was to try to raise somehow to a higher level a then ongoing debate in the pages of that magazine, of which we thought highly at the time. Look here, the article said to the disputants, you both swat at each other as if working class or ruling class were the only relevant characters in the Marxian drama, but it isn't so; Marx also pointed to a whole class of intermediary parasites, which you in your polemic are forgetting about. Well, of course, neither I nor the original antagonists had enough perspective to place all this in its context and draw the necessary political lessons from it, so that instead of raising the debate to a higher level, my intervention succeeded in stopping it cold, which was in its own way also a higher level (and shortly thereafter, the magazine folded). Well, now I could list a number of errors in that article—e.g. the assumption that the corporate-profits situation in 1965-66 would be the corporate-profits picture for all history (a gross reification!) or the schoolboyish attempt to formulate a 'general law of the surplus class' without formulating any countertendencies whatever, and without even a reference to Lenin's *Imperialism*, etc., etc.—but one of the things I cannot be accused of is having advanced this 'servant class' as a *substitute revolutionary force* in place of the

proletariat! This should have been plain enough, I think, from the way I treated the class, and from the glee with which I quoted Marx's equation of them with prostitutes, etc. The conclusion of the article cannot by any stretch of the imagination be taken as panegyric to this pack of retainers, but implies, rather a sort of dull Weberian pessimism that draws from the all-pervading polar darkness at least the 'satisfaction' that we have a sound scientific illumination of why exactly nothing can be done. It is therefore *anything but* 'a new cra for Marxism' (God forbid!) precisely because it does *not* provide a way of 'analysing developments in the dialectics of labour which will be able to intervene practically'—at least, I do not see them, and when I acted, it was usually in disregard of that article, and despite it, and so learned better.

Now, I mention this because I get the feeling that something like a hope for the 'surplus class' may underly the ending of your paper. For, when you say that 'there is no empirical prediction of proletarian revolution which can be drawn from the theory' you are saying either that political economy is not all there is to revolution and its prediction and practice (quite right, as even H. Grossman maintained), or else that the revolution with which the system is pregnant will not be a proletarian one; if not a proletarian one, then what, pray tell? In this respect, I find the passages with which your paper concludes, more than enigmatic. True, the quotation from Marx is topical; it bespeaks the extension of the capitalist system throughout wide stretches of the world, the recruitment of ever-growing numbers of people to the working class, together with an even more rapidly growing extent of the means of production and the contradiction inherent in that misproportion. Quite right, that has occurred, is topical, but is it a prophecy of the *demise* of proletarian revolution? It seems to me to bear quite the opposite burden. You write, 'at present there is no "just exchange" for labour'—was there ever? But does this mean that labour-power is not paid, plus/minus the political-historical factor, at the costs of the labourer's reproduction? The same with wage-workers who are not productive, but who live off the state or capitalist revenue? And how is this more 'arbitrary' than ever it has been? And did not labour power pass to the people, i.e. become their property, long ago, with the abolition of slavery and serfdom?

These to me obscure eddies of the mind come about in part, I think, from taking certain passages in the *Grundrisse* out of their necessary context, from which they are by no means *Abschweifungen* but rather culminations, and forgetting that their proper understand-

(digressions)

ing requires understanding the development of which they are the results; and that the application of all theoretical propositions to reality always and without exceptions requires *mediation*. One of these mediations for the free development of the social individual is proletarian revolution; and the dictatorship of that class, which you see as evitable, but whose necessity Marx precisely characterized as one of the essential points of his teaching, is in turn a mediation of that revolution's survival; as necessary a mediation for the survival of the power of 'labour' as is a tool or implement of some kind for the mediatory activity of labour through history. Let us not forget, in discussing the 'total Marx', that, in placing labour at the centre of his thinking, Marx, thereby centred on the most adequate personification of that category, the working class, and that he did so neither merely out of sympathy ^{nor} for the sake of formal symmetry, but because he foresaw that it must and would become the *real* centre, the central and unifying force of all society, through the necessary mediation of state power. This and nothing less is the whole Marx; this alone is the concentration of the many abstractions which makes that central unity concrete.

It is sheer pragmatism or laziness to infer from the present condition of the working-class movement in one's particular country that the proletarian revolution has demised. One cannot appreciate what science means, what Marx's method signifies by way of penetration and grasp, until one recalls that virtually the entire body of the theory was worked out during a period when the proletarian movement was at best merely embryonic in the world as a whole, when neither class-conscious proletarian insurrections with state power as aim, nor wars of colonial liberation had yet occurred, and when the working class of England in particular was becoming not less but rather more saturated with bourgeois thinking and doing. If despite the all-pervading and real gloom and apathy which surrounded them during most of their productive lives, Marx and Engels were able correctly to assess and to foresee in broad outlines the rising, coming revolutionary upheavals, then we, who have 1917, 1949, 1959 and dozens of other risings behind us, and who live in the midst of palpable world-historical convulsions, if we cannot see even as far as they, how can our seeing be dignified with the name perception?