

For Marx, what are the evils of Capitalism and how are they to be resolved in the future?

Analysing Marx is somewhat of a difficult task, especially with regards to his theories about the evils of Capitalism and their resolution. This is not to say that Marx is unclear, but rather that his ideas tend to change in their specificities over time. In order to avoid confusion, therefore, I wish to establish straight away, that the majority of the material in this essay will be taken from Marx's middle writings, particularly the Communist Manifesto. Should, therefore, inconsistencies appear in my analysis with other analyses, please first examine any disparity between both with relation to source-material.

Marx believed, fundamentally, that Capitalism had evil effects on society¹, the most prominent of which I shall discuss later. He also believed, that Capitalism, accompanied by its own social logic, would result in its own collapse, just as prior socio-economic systems had also collapsed in on themselves throughout the course of history. This feature of Marx's historical materialism was principally informed by a sort of economic determinism (I say 'sort', because the debate over whether or not Marx held a fundamentally deterministic viewpoint is one that far exceeds the scope of this essay), of which I shall speak of later in the essay.

So, what of Marx's objections to Capitalism? As a thinker who was very much dissatisfied with the capitalist mode of production, Marx had countless objections to countless perceived evils that he felt were very much characteristic of Capitalism. In this account, I shall only discuss the most crucial and most pertinent to Capitalism itself, particularly Marx's concepts of "Alienation" and "Exploitation".

Exploitation, in the Marxian expression, was the process by which the worker is forced to sell their labour power (a portion of their life which they agree to dedicate to production) to the capitalist for less than it is worth. This happens as a result of the worker's living labour (after all other expenses are accounted for) producing surplus value (accumulated labour) for the capitalist, while the worker is only paid a disproportionately low wage. Essentially, "exploitation" is the act of procuring a "profit" in accumulated labour as a result of the purchase living labour. Why then, is this a bad thing for Marx, surely this could happen under any system? No, is the Marxian reply, for Capitalist exploitation is **class** exploitation, reinforced by the pre-existing conditions of the capitalist system. A single act of exploitation is by no means drastically problematic, but a situation in which the entire proletariat can only maintain its survival by allowing itself to be exploited on a class-scale, for Marx, is an unforgivable evil. Exploitation itself also has a fundamentally alienating effect, resultant from the treatment of the worker on par with the machine: just as the capitalist profits from his machines, paying only for their raw maintenance, so does he with the worker. This shall be explored in greater depth when I move to the subject of Alienation.

Before discussing Alienation, another principal evil of Capitalism in the eyes of Marx, it is important to understand some of the negative effects of Capitalism that cause Alienation to exist as a phenomenon. Principally, this is the control of **meaning** by the bourgeoisie. Indeed, Marx highlights the way in which concepts, as perceived by the bourgeoisie as a class are *'made into a law for all, a will whose essential character and direction are determined by the economical conditions of [bourgeoisie] existence'*. For Marx, similarly, the humanity² of the worker is defined in the terms of the bourgeoisie, but for the worker it is not humanity at all. This brings us nicely onto the first³ type

1 Karl Marx, Capital Volume One - Preface to the First German Edition: Marx talks of Capitalism's *'modern evils'*

2 As Marx would put it, 'species-being'. I will use the terms interchangeably unless referring to the 'bourgeois concept', when proletarian 'humanity' should be understood as a non-human trait, distorted by the factors of production.

3 This is, arguably, the third type of alienation, according to the manuscript on Estranged Labour amongst Marx's Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts. I present it here as the first because many of the arguments which underpin it appear before those for the official 'first two' types. The official order here would be: 3,1,2,4.

of Alienation according to Marx: alienation from the notion of humanity. The bourgeois notion of proletarian humanity, as Marx sees it, is best expressed in the Communist Manifesto, when Marx explains that, under Capitalism, 'the living [proletarian] person is dependent and has no individuality'. Indeed, in *Wage Labour and Capital*, Marx highlights how the division of labour, a key feature of Capitalism, forces the worker into more and more simple, mechanised roles. Tasks originally dependant on the initiative of the craftsman become a series of mindless motor actions: our worker becomes the colleague and the servant of the machine; an automaton in the world of the automaton⁴, commodity in a warehouse of commodities, human only in the sense that he believes himself to be so. It is here that an understanding of the bourgeoisie as the owners of meaning as well as capital is necessary. The capitalist mode of production forces the proletarian to depend on his behaviour 'as a commodity' for the continuation of his life: like the capital in a factory he too is exploited. The bourgeoisie tell us, argues Marx, that his behaviour as a commodity and his dependence on the capitalist are, for the proletarian, a feature of his 'human' life'. Marx elaborates on this concept in the Communist Manifesto, highlighting that "the ruling ideas of each age have been the ideas of the ruling class", thus it is the proletarian who is not only subject to bourgeois capital, but also to bourgeois concepts of life itself. Likewise, the proletarian is doubly alienated in this fashion: first, of the worker from human behaviour by the mode of production; second, of the worker from the very concept of humanity, by the all-smothering philosophy of the bourgeoisie.

Marx's second concept of alienation, which draws on concepts espoused in the explanation of the first, is the alienation of the worker from the products of his labour. Indeed, just as the division of labour simplifies the worker, it also simplifies his involvement with his product: he no longer 'creates' a product, but simply facilitates an industrial process in which the totality of an object's design remains pre-ordained: in some sense, the product remains 'anonymous' to him and thus impersonal. Secondly, because of the nature of wage-labour, highlights Marx, the worker not only does not own the object he creates but furthermore has no desire to produce it for the sake of itself, the object is simply, as Marx puts it, 'the means for the physical subsistence of the worker himself'.⁵ As a result, the product **dominates** the worker: it is in the service of the object, as Marx puts it, 'that he receives work... [and] means of subsistence': it is not the activity of the worker that shapes the product, but the demands of the product that shape the worker's activity. The ultimate result is a situation in which the product contains no imprint of the worker himself; neither in its physical characteristics, nor in its 'geist': the concepts of craft and spirit are done away with altogether in the age of mass-industry.

The third concept of alienation, according to Marx, fundamentally precedes the second: for Marx, "the estrangement of the object of labour is... summarised... in the activity of labour itself".⁶ Thus, when we turn to the activity of labour itself we find that it too is alienated from the worker. As we established when discussing the second concept, Marx views the worker's participation in wage-labour as a necessary precondition for survival in the capitalist mode of production. As a result, as Marx puts it, "[wage] labour is external to the worker... it does not belong [to him]". Indeed, not only, argues Marx, is his labour "coerced" but it is 'forced labour'. It is this same 'labour of self sacrifice' that causes the worker to become alienated: the very labour that the proletarian sells to the capitalist so that he may survive is turned against him, it becomes intrinsically undesirable and his

4 Though Marx, in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, tends to use more animal-oriented metaphors, by 'Wage Labour and Capital', three years later he seems to have switched to a more mechanistic vocabulary and to have developed his concept of alienation from the self considerably, separate from the other forms of alienation. It seems that the concept of the proletarian as property of the capitalist class, combined with the division and subdivision of labour causes him to become '*transformed into a simple monotonous force of production, with neither physical nor mental elasticity*'. Similarly, by the time he had written the communist manifesto, Marx's expression of this sort of alienation, the type that concerns him most, seems entirely mechanistic and inorganic.

5 Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, 1844 – *Estranged Labour*

6 Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, 1844 – *Estranged Labour*

wage-labour is even-less his own. Indeed, for Marx, after the worker sells his labour-power, the whole act of labour ceases to be his 'spontaneous activity' and becomes the property of the capitalist: he is alienated from his labour because it no longer belongs to him. Thus it is not only the labour that the capitalist purchases from the worker that becomes his property, but the very act of labour that becomes the collective property of the capitalist class.

The fourth and final concept of alienation for Marx was the alienation of the worker from his fellow human beings. Indeed, having been dispossessed of his labour, his free will and forced into assimilation with the bourgeois concept of proletarian humanity, the worker is essentially robbed of his species-being. Because of this, the proletarian becomes estranged from his fellow humans also. This, argues Marx, is the logical conclusion from the dispossession of species-being: if a man cannot understand the concept of his own humanity, he cannot understand that of others, just as he is alienated from himself he becomes alienated from others.

Though Alienation and Exploitation are considered the 'key' concepts in Marx's objections to Capitalism, they are only a fraction of the 'evils' he perceives the system to have produced. One such evil is the expansion of the downtrodden underclass, which, for Marx, is drawn not only 'from all classes of the population', as a result of the increasing centralisation of capital in the hands of the bourgeoisie, but also from across the globe, as the capitalist system 'creates a world after its own image', compelling 'all nations, on pain of extinction' to adopt the same model. Though some readings of Marx would suggest that he deems this evil 'necessary' (that the proletarian class should be expanded is a feature in the necessary downfall of Capitalism), it is important to examine his comments in the 1882 Russian Edition of the Communist Manifesto, in which Marx asserts that it is possible for a society to develop Communism without Capitalism. Indeed, Marx states of post-feudal Russia, which had not yet entered Capitalism, despite 'the rapidly flowering capitalist swindle', that it would be possible to build Communism. For Marx, as the country had 'more than half the land owned in common', akin to the 'primeval common ownership of land' featured in his first stage of history, it would be possible to 'pass directly to the higher form of Communist common ownership'. This, for Marx, presents the possibility that 'the present Russian common ownership of land may serve as the starting point for a communist development'. As a result of this, we can conclude that all negative features of Capitalism that serve a secondary role of preparing it for the rise of Communism are not, or at least not always, necessary for Marx.

Of course, this analysis also calls into question the place of Capitalism in Marx's historical model of society, which Marx often termed a '*prehistory of human society*'⁷. Before analysing Marx's historical model and, specifically, the place of Capitalism within it, I will, however, explain its traditional interpretation. Marx espoused essentially four stages of society over the course of pre-communist history, each determined by their own mode of production⁸. First, for Marx, comes the tribe-like stage, in which the mode of production is simply "*a further extension of the natural division of labour existing in the family*", with resources plentiful enough for the concept of individual 'ownership' of property not to exist. Just as production is an extension of familial division of labour, the social structure is also generally familial, with 'patriarchal family chieftains' and simply 'members of the tribe', all of shared kinship. There are also 'slaves', as Marx puts it, which exist outside the family unit and thus, in a sense, exist outside of society. Marx and Engels have occasionally described early iterations of this stage as close to a 'primitive', pre-agrarian Communism⁹.

7 K. Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1977, with some notes by R. Rojas.

8 Marx, Karl and Frederick Engels. *The German Ideology Part One, with Selections from Parts Two and Three, together with Marx's "Introduction to a Critique of Political Economy."* New York: International Publishers, 2001.

9 Engels, Friedrich (1884). *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*. Marx/Engels Internet Archive (marxists.org) 1993, 1999, 2000.

After tribal conquests or diplomacy, dwelling is formalised in the 'union of several tribes into a city[-state]', in a stage epitomised by the ownership of slave-labour by the early-state, often referred to as 'slavery'. While communal ownership still exists throughout this stage, it is here that the beginnings of private property (by which Marx means 'capital'), as well as the formal class-society of citizen and slave are developed. As private property becomes increasingly formalised a third class-strata also emerges, one which Marx describes as in an *'intermediate position between propertied citizens and slaves'*: the proto-proletariat. It is important to note, however, that at this stage wage labour has not yet come into existence: this only occurs when both economic and social power have concentrated to a sufficient degree with the ruling classes, the system of slavery becomes unworkable and thus the 'feudal' stage of ownership is reached.

By the feudal stage of ownership the class-strata has expanded into a vast social hierarchy, in which the scope of society is expanded from the city to country, with the feudal lord or monarch's power-base being just as much in the wide village population as in the towns. At the same time, however, as this stage progresses the influence of merchants and the early mercantile movement becomes all the greater: they are required to sustain the wealth of the ruling class. As time progresses, travelling merchants establish an economic stronghold in the cities, eventually becoming the early capitalists. With the maturation of the bourgeoisie as a class comes a stark conflict of interests with the feudal lords, whose power and influence depend on the serfdom of the proto-proletarians. In order for the bourgeoisie to fully exploit capital the serfs must be freed from their hierarchical obligations; and thus, argues Marx, *'begins an epoch of social revolution'*

With the end of feudalism comes Capitalism, which for Marx signifies the epitome of the inequality of class based society: the ever increasing difference between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat exist as a caricature of prior class relations. Though the system itself has already been explained in depth, from a historical perspective the one thing that seems to distinguish Capitalism from prior social systems is the way in which the success of the the capitalist class has the intrinsic property of preparing society for the the inevitability of Communism¹⁰. Unlike previous stages of history, where Marx describes stage-transition as the result of side-effects of pre-existing system, it seems that under Capitalism the progress of the system itself directly correlates with the process of the extinction of the bourgeoisie as a class. However, this discussion of the collapse of Capitalism will be handled later; for the moment let us, again, examine the question of the necessity of Capitalism as a precursor to Communism. Simply put, Capitalism is, under Marxist theory, not necessary for Communism. Though this is highlighted by Marx himself in the preamble to the 1882 Russian Edition of the Communist Manifesto it is actually the result of the nature of Marx's historical materialism. Indeed, though it is often misconceived by critics of Marx that the historical process he describes in his 'stage theory' of society is inevitable this concept could not be farther from the truth. Though Marx believes, definitively, that **Communism** is inevitable, the road to Communism itself is by no means determined. Indeed, Marx explicitly highlights this misreading in his 1877 letter to the Editor of the *Otecestvenniye Zapisky*:

“But that is not enough for my critic. He feels himself obliged to metamorphose my historical sketch of the genesis of Capitalism in Western Europe into an historico-philosophic theory of the *marche generale* [general path] imposed by fate upon every people, whatever the historic circumstances in which it finds itself”¹¹

Indeed, Marx's stage theory **must** be seen only as a sketch of the road to Capitalism (hence why I

10 Marx, Engels. *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, Marx/Engels Internet Archive (marxists.org) 1987, 2000

11 Marx, Karl. *Letter from Marx to Editor of the Otecestvenniye Zapisky*, Marx/Engels Internet Archive (marxists.org) 1987, 2000

have not included the two stages of Communism in his political theory, unlike some encyclopedias) rather than an objective statement of the history of society. With this in mind, now that we move on to a discussion of how Communism is to emerge we do so with the understanding that this is only with regards to the emergence of Communism in **capitalist** society, as Marx alludes to in the preface to the Communist Manifesto's Russian edition.

How then, does Capitalism become Communism? This occurs in two stages, the first of which is, as Marx puts it, the establishment of a 'period of the revolutionary transformation...' from capitalism to communism, in which 'the state can be nothing but the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat'. The second, for Marx, is simply Communism itself.

Marx, as I alluded to earlier, sees the transition from capitalism to communism as fundamentally powered by the prior expansion and concentration of the proletariat as a class. It is with this creation and then concentration of the 'mass proletariat' that the first stage of transition begins. Indeed, with the concentration of the proletarian masses comes solidarity in 'combinations against the bourgeois' in the trade-union movement, which both defends sections of the proletariat in the short term but more importantly, argues Marx, creates an 'ever expanding union of workers', supported by the rise of mass-infrastructure characteristic of the capitalist system. It is through precisely this 'ever expanding union' that the proletarians achieve a 'class-consciousness' and eventually progress to the level of broad political representation which eventually develops into 'stronger, firmer mightier' political parties (a claim that Marx substantiates with the example of the Ten-Hours Bill in England) to represent the political will of their class. Their political struggle is, in fact, even aided by the ruling classes, from when the bourgeoisie seek to harness the political whim of the proletariat. For Marx, the political involvement of the proletariat helps to provide the educational 'weapons for fighting the bourgeoisie'. Similarly, argues Marx, the precipitation of the ruling, educated classes into the proletariat, combined with the sympathies of bourgeois academia (such as Marx himself) provides further political education to the proletariat, eventually raising the proletariat '*to the position of the ruling class to win the battle of democracy*'; in other words, the proletariat have now established the **means** for achieving Communism.

Having now achieved 'revolutionary dictatorship' (by which Marx means control on the level of the bourgeoisie at the height of Capitalism), the proletariat set about establishing Communism through the institution of certain measures. Marx espouses these, in the general case, as:

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1. Abolition of property in land and application of all rents of land to public purposes.
2. A heavy progressive or graduated income tax.
3. Abolition of all rights of inheritance.
4. Confiscation of the property of all emigrants and rebels.
5. Centralisation of credit in the hands of the state, by means of a national bank with State capital and an exclusive monopoly.
6. Centralisation of the means of communication and transport in the hands of the State.
7. Extension of factories and instruments of production owned by the State¹²; the bringing into cultivation of waste-lands, and the improvement of the soil generally in accordance with a common plan.
8. Equal liability of all to work. Establishment of industrial armies, especially for agriculture.
9. Combination of agriculture with manufacturing industries; gradual abolition of all the distinction between town and country by a more equable distribution of the populace over the country.
10. Free education for all children in public schools. Abolition of children's factory labour in its present form. Combination of education with industrial production, etc

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Once these ten measures are implemented, argues Marx, the effect will be that class distinctions, and

12 Marx, here, emphasises also the prior state-seizure of capital, a result of the proletarian 'dictatorship'.

with them the very notion of class will disappear. With it, argues Marx, the proletariat 'will thereby have abolished its own supremacy as a class' and what was previously class-capital will become capital in common ownership. With an end to class, too, comes an end to political power, for it 'is merely the organised power of one class oppressing another'. With an end to political power, the state itself will simply wither away, its property and capital becoming that of the collective.

Though Marx explains how capitalism itself shall fall and in turn how communism shall rise, what of the evils of capitalism, how is it that they are done away with entirely? From the Marxist perspective, one can argue that the evils of capitalism can be defined as those evils inherent to the system itself: just as the evil effect of slavery were abolished when slavery itself was abolished, the evils of capitalism abolished when capitalism itself is abolished. In this sense, I suppose, one could deem this question logically self-defeating (something cannot be an evil of capitalism unless capitalism itself exists to have those evils attributed to it), though such a refutation would seem somewhat pedantic. Instead, understanding the evils of capitalism to be evils of society considered to be symptomatic of the capitalist system, the Marxist answer is that communism not only abolishes capitalism but also abolishes the grounds for all societal evil: without class there are no collective interests to enforce; without political power, there is no means to establish them and without the state itself, there exists no means of enforcement either. Ultimately, Communism does **not** promise to rid the world of **all** evil, simply to resolve the evils of capitalist society and the capitalist mode of production, the preconditions for which it simply abolishes.

In reaching a conclusion, I will start with the question: what are the benefits of Communism? My simple answer to this is that it is **not** any of the systems which precede it. Indeed, the road to Communism is ultimately destructive by nature: the entire goal of the Communist ideology is to **abolish** the preconditions for class conflict, inequality and oppression common to the societies that precede it and thereby abolish, with them, their evil effects. It is here, too that the crucial problem of Communism comes to the fore: it is, by its own admission¹³, the fundamental **abolition** of all that has provided the means to all of mankind's "*progress*" so far: social identity, political power and, most fundamentally of all, the state; it is a leap of faith.

13 See: Marx's theory of the development of society throughout history, discussed earlier in this essay. By abolishing traits common to all societies outside of the proto-communist tribal stage, without the establishment Communism runs the risk of simply repeating "prehistory" rather than surpassing it