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> The great mistake of the Marxists and of the whole of the nineteenth century was to think that by walking straight on one mounted upward into the air.
>
> Simone Weil

Marx's theories are well known enough to need little more than a summary. He starts by defining the value of commodities as a function of the work necessary to produce them.[1] This labour, the source of the worker's dignity, is the only 'commodity' which he has to sell.[2] Once the capitalist has bought sufficient labour to meet

[1] 'A use value, or useful article, therefore, has value only because human labour in the abstract has been embodied or materialised in it.' Karl Marx, Capital. Vol. 1, chapter 1, section 1. This expression of 'the labour theory of value' is a basic pillar of Marxist economics. Criticisms can certainly be made of it, chief amongst them the fact that *energy* is the ultimate source of value in any economy, but for my purposes here there's no reason to question the accuracy or utility of considering the value of objects as 'congealed' labour.

[2] 'Labour-power is [the worker's] property (ever self-renewing, reproductive)… It is the only commodity which he can and must sell continually in order to live, and which acts as capital… in the hands of the buyer, the capitalist.' Karl Marx, Capital. Vol. 2, chapter 20, section 10.

his own needs he then exploits the worker—through direct oppression or through indirect improvements to 'efficiency'—for profit. This profit accumulates, making capitalists more and more powerful, until the middle-class has been absorbed into the working-class and the whole miserable, degraded mass revolts and create socialism. This process is, for Marx, both necessary and inevitable, which is why he extolled capitalism,[3] and the bourgeois state, which he believed prepared the conditions for the superior mode of production of socialism. It's also why he worshipped production *itself*, the machinery of society,[4] to which he believed that man *must* submit until the day it ceases to destroy him. Then, says Marx, all social antagonisms will magically cease. Marx's proletariat is, therefore, a kind of Christ in mass form, 'redeeming the collective sin of alienation'[5] through its historically necessary suffering. How much suffering? It doesn't matter. As the proletariat-Christ will bring heaven down to earth, 'ending the quarrel between man and man' and 'solving the mystery of history', any act which serves this messianic expec-

[3] 'Social existence determines consciousness' Karl Marx, A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy. Note that Marx's determinism is 'dialectical', in that it allows for non-linear and contingent forms of causality.

[4] 'In place of the old local and national seclusion and self-sufficiency, we have intercourse in every direction, universal inter-dependence of nations. And as in material, so also in intellectual production. The intellectual creations of individual nations become common property. National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible, and from the numerous national and local literatures, there arises a world literature… The bourgeois [capitalists], by the rapid improvement of all instruments of production, by the immensely facilitated means of communication, draws all, even the most barbarian nations into civilization. The cheap prices of commodities are the heavy artillery with which it batters down all Chinese walls, with which it forces the barbarians' intensely obstinate hatred of foreigners to capitulate.' Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, The Communist Manifesto.

[5] Marx believed that freedom cannot be realised without productive activity. His view on this subject changed, and he was certainly a fierce critic of technocratic production under capitalism, but not of technological production itself, which he frequently extolled.

rational theorising, his brutally insensitive authoritarianism, his pathetically gradualist reformist — and statist — politics, his monomaniacal worship of technological, bourgeois-managed progress, his naked contempt for ordinary people and his celebration of the civilising machine which makes slaves of us all.

An updated version of this essay appears in *Ad Radicem*, a collection of radical reflections on the system and the self.

of production *is* your self? Who or what is to do the seizing? Marx had no answer to this question. Not because he could not imagine a world dominated by, say, the internet, but because he did not — could not — ask any critical questions of the technocratic priesthood he was part of, and in some senses the founding prophet of.

Marx was the first stagversive, or professional radical; promising revolution, freedom, equality and other such marvels, but, in his *actual* assumptions and actions, supporting the system, and helping to develop it. He was uncritical of technology or of the techno-bureaucratic class of functionaries (managers, professionals, politicians, trade-union leaders) it engendered, he was contemptuous of the power of the rural poor and the working class (the peasantry and the 'insufficiently developed' proletariat, both of which were, for Marx, dispensable before the almighty laws of history) to manage their own affairs, he was supportive of colonial wars, provided they worked towards his statist revolution, and he was committed to a monstrously crude theory of human life, history and experience with nothing of interest to say about life beyond it. This is why he was feted by the bourgeois press, by edgy radicals like John Stuart Mill, by company-men, by progressive businessmen and by 'revolutionary leaders', of whom, several decades after Marx's death, Lenin was to be the most notorious, tyrannical exemplar.

If this were all, we could safely forget about him, but in all these key respects he is identical to the the countless socialists, communists and nominal anarchists[14] who followed him, which is why, once we have extracted the few observations of priceless value he made — along with those within the indispensable critique of capitalism he initiated (e.g. those of Braverman, Baran & Sweezy, Mumford, Ellul, Fromm, Berger and many, many others) — why it is so important to understand and *completely* reject his crude, hyper-

[14] Karl Marx, The Nationalisation of the Land, in which he says that 'what we require is a daily increasing production.'

tation, no matter how coercive or cruel, is morally justified. Because the God of History decrees it.

Marx celebrated the dignity of work, he endorsed independent working class action, he criticised the state and he bitterly opposed unearnt privilege but, as Camus put it 'the reduction of every value to historical terms leads to the direst consequences'; to *precisely* the degradation, dependency, statist oppression and repulsive privilege which Marx ostensibly opposed. This happens because he located the moral quality of his prophecy in bare facts; *which have no meaning*. His materialism compelled him to banish everything which does not serve the material needs of perfected society; the objective fact of 'life' which we are forced to preserve. Love, beauty, truth, dignity, independence, fellow-feeling, all must be sacrificed to this greater good, this rational, utilitarian 'life'.

Marx's economic and social theories were based on a rationally apprehensible, law-like universe, a continuation of Western civilisation's perennial endeavour to found reality on factual-causal laws, which began with the Greeks and Jews of the Iron age, and reached its modern fulfilment in the work of Hegel (the law of history), Darwin (the law of nature) and Freud (the law of mind). This project is flawed from its foundation, for the facticity and causality it is founded on *cannot* be located in reality—they are conceptual tools, phenomenally useful, but no more foundationally real than numbers are. Establishing a philosophy on a universe of caused facts, or mind-isolated things, condemns the individual to alienation from the reality *of* that universe, that which is 'beyond' the representations that the mind presents of it.[6] a mind is incapable of even perceiving what ails it—it is conditioned by its own activity—let alone remedying its problems through fiddling with the rational-material-economic structure of society.

[6] 'Labour-power is [the worker's] property (ever self-renewing, reproductive)… It is the only commodity which he can and must sell continually in order to live, and which acts as capital… in the hands of the buyer, the capitalist.' Karl Marx, Capital. Vol. 2, chapter 20, section 10.

Philosophically speaking, the inherently alienating activity of the rational mind comes in several varieties, all of which entail gross fallacies and, to the extent they govern the lives of men and women, monstrous violence. The 'varieties' that Marx held to were rationalism and materialism which (just like their ostensible opposites, empiricism and idealism) ignore what the non-rational and the immaterial have to teach us, forcing the story of humanity into an essentially mechanical *process* which can only be explained by artificial, rational *laws*. Marx, like all rational managers, had no interest whatsoever in the ineffable, in the paradoxical, in the ungovernable, in the elusive, or in the individual which embodies such *qualities*. He was only interested in the *quantitative*, material mass, motivated by entirely mechanical, utilitarian ends; the satisfying of material needs which must be met before any other airy-fairy value, like freedom for example, or peace of mind, is attended to. For Marx 'freedom' and 'peace' must begin with the rational domination of nature and must find its fulfilment in the development of industrial technology, the only way, according to Marx, that the war against 'scarcity' can be won, the unquenchable *lack* that all humans are born with.

For Marx, history was a teleological, or purpose-driven, machine, the purpose being a classless society to which the various antagonisms within society *must* inevitably terminate in. Such a paradise is essentially no different from the standard Judeo-Christian heaven he rejected; promised, but continually deferred. To this end, Marx continually praised the development of capitalism — even when it resulted in the utter degradation of working people. Following the quasi-fascistic nationalism of Hegel, he *praised* England's ruin of India, writing in his essay 'The British Rule in India', that the British empire was 'the unconscious tool of history' and that we might not be happy about the crimes of the British, or the crumbling of an ancient empire, but that we can console ourselves with the knowledge this grotesque torture ultimately 'brings us greater pleasure'. He was equally sanguine about the European colonisa-

> comprehensive contradiction and potential abolition is the proletariat. Not at all, says Illich—the proletariat is only an accomplice in the war against subsistence, which is the real site of the contradiction. The novelty that Marx misses or takes for granted is homo economicus, a being who must be "distinguished… from all other human beings." The class struggle is no more than a ritual, and a ritual, as Illich's defines it elsewhere, is "a procedure whose imagined purpose allows the participants to overlook what they are actually doing." What the antagonists/accomplices in the class struggle are "actually doing" is making war on subsistence through their joint interest in industrializing every aspect of culture and every element of livelihood—the project that marks out homo economicus from "all other human beings." Marx's "proletarians" with "a world to win" and "nothing to lose but their chains" are, in fact, tightening their fetters by trying to improve their position in the kingdom of scarcity rather than fighting for a restoration of the commons. The true universal class is the shadow workers—all those who toil "unproductively" in the shadow of production.

Marx had no idea that the working class would become subdued and domesticated by the 'development of their productive forces', that the industrialisation of their lives would force them to surrender to the God of Productivity, and lay waste a natural world in which scarcity does not exist. Marx was unable to predict that eventually *everyone* — meaning the individual psyche of everyone on earth — would inevitably become a 'means of production', a virtual capitalist-industry of one, working in front of, and psychologically welded to, the factory of the screen. How can you 'seize the means of production', as Marx told us to do, when this means

tally disciplined as capitalists and kings ever were) and the reality-absorbing power of virtual unculture and a world built to serve it.

All of this explains why Marx was contemptuous of that class of society least affected by industrialisation; namely, the peasantry. Marx (like Plato) had zero interest in the lessons that wild nature could teach man and advocated, effectively, the end of small-scale rural production. He wished to see 'modern methods, such as irrigation, drainage, steam ploughing, chemical treatment and so forth applied to agriculture…'[13] along with a 'large-scale' cultivation of the land; what today we would call a 'monocultural' farm. The extermination of bio-diverse nature and of the conscious lives of those who lived from it didn't, ultimately, concern him, just as it doesn't those who, despite much high-sounding 'eco-friendly' rhetoric, are still engaged in the suppression of subsistence and of vernacular independence. Such people don't just include land-owning nobles and information-controlling professionals but the very proletariat which Marx told us would create a classless society, but who were and still are engaged, *in collusion with the bourgeoisie and the aristocracy*, in the industrialisation of all aspects of life and culture, imprisoning themselves ever more profoundly in 'the kingdom of scarcity' that such activity produces.

David Cayley summarises Ivan Illich's account of this process;

> "The [working] man found himself in a conspiracy with his employer" insofar as "both were equally concerned with economic expansion and the suppression of subsistence." "This fundamental collusion between capital and labour," [Illich] continues, "was mystified by the ritual of class struggle." The breadth of this claim is quite breathtaking. Marx had asserted that the universal class in which capitalism meets its

[13] I am certainly not an uncritical supporter of Bakunin by the way. I find it hard to find fault with his criticism of Marx, but he was a pretty dodgy character himself.

tion of the United States. Such events were 'necessary stages' in the linear, law-like process of history which he was committed to.

For Marx only mechanical, rational processes were of any interest. He entirely ruled out consciousness (timeless or otherwise) as an agent in history. Later Marxists attempted to sneak it, or its manifestation in culture, belief, law and so on, through the back door, or they sought to understand society as a whole; undermining, in both cases, Marx's cast-iron deterministic laws[7] and the foundations of Marxism itself. Marx himself had no interest in exploring non-historical, non-causal and non-factual realities which is why, beyond his penetrating analysis of the alienating effects of capitalist economics on the human psyche, he had almost nothing to say about love, art, death, reality, morality or anything else of vital interest to human beings. His vision of revolutionary change, a mechanical, utilitarian process which must follow the direction of history, was a betrayal of free human nature.

The utilitarian need to meet material needs, for Marx *the* determinant factor in human affairs, manifests as the economy, the mechanism by which such needs were met at scale. For Marx, thought, awareness, instinct, belief, inspiration are, first of all, subordinate to the need to eat, sleep and keep warm, and then, as societies grew, to the need to plant crops, build houses, manufacture trousers and so on. Apparently, we don't first of all need to be aware, to think, to believe, to have instincts and to be *inspired* to hunt, cook, make fire, fire clay, write books, tile floors or run restaurants. Not that material needs and the economy don't explain much of the world, or shape man's attitudes — obviously they do[8] but positing material-economic facts as the

[7] 'Social existence determines consciousness' Karl Marx, A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy. Note that Marx's determinism is 'dialectical', in that it allows for non-linear and contingent forms of causality.

[8] 'In place of the old local and national seclusion and self-sufficiency, we have intercourse in every direction, universal inter-dependence of nations. And as in material, so also in intellectual production. The intellectual creations of in-

sole or primitive determining factor in man's life reduces him to a component in a material history machine, which isn't just a morally repugnant conception of humanity, but intuitively false — at least to anyone conscious enough to experience their own inner reality — logically false — as all economic relations are founded on an original conception of property and on a coercively maintained assumption of scarcity — and empirically false — what actually happens simply doesn't bear out Marx's predictions. He was confident, for example, that the immiseration of the proletariat would compel it to revolt against the bourgeoisie. As we know, that didn't happen and doesn't happen; man *enters* the capitalist world in a submissive state which only gets worse as he is stupefied by poverty (particularly in the third-world), crippled by professionalism, domesticated by technology and pacified with the various sops offered to him by the welfare state — a quasi-socialist mechanism perfectly consonant with capitalist self-perpetuation.

The so-called 'real basis' (Engel's words) on which Marx established his laws of history led to four disastrous interconnected consequences; **statism**, **reformism**, **technophilia** and **professionalism**. Statism — attempting to create a socialist state (or 'nationalist capitalist' state) which will then be overthrown by the proletariat — was, according to Marx, an indispensable step on the road to communism. This is why he made the almost unbelievable demand that 'the bourgeoisie must first come to the helm'. As with many socialists and communists to follow, he made vague gestures towards

dividual nations become common property. National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible, and from the numerous national and local literatures, there arises a world literature… The bourgeois [capitalists], by the rapid improvement of all instruments of production, by the immensely facilitated means of communication, draws all, even the most barbarian nations into civilization. The cheap prices of commodities are the heavy artillery with which it batters down all Chinese walls, with which it forces the barbarians' intensely obstinate hatred of foreigners to capitulate.' Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, The Communist Manifesto.

conscious reality. The alienating effect of having one's capacity to freely work, learn, speak, heal and die completely uploaded into a 'weightless' technosphere, or appropriated by a class of technicians (calling themselves 'managers', 'teachers', 'scientists', 'doctors' and occasionally 'businessmen' and 'politicians') was invisible to Marx, as it is to all the professionals who, directly or indirectly, have followed him up the blind alley of technological progress. Bakunin (and, incidentally, Dostoevsky) saw the writing on the wall;

> A scientific body to which had been confided the government of society would soon end by devoting itself no longer to science at all, but to quite another affair; and that affair, as in the case of all established powers, would be its own eternal perpetuation by rendering the society confided to its care ever more stupid and consequently more in need of its government and direction.

We now find ourselves in the dead-end that Bakunin[12] predicted and that Marx and his many followers directed us towards, one where it is no longer principally kings or capitalists, but professional, technical experts, and the bewildering supermachine they tend, which oppress us. The military power and property power of kings and capitalists still exists, but it has been supplanted by the managerial power of technicians (who, as their universal acceptance of lockdowns and the latest bio-fascist phase of the system demonstrated, are just as happy to see the working classes bru-

[12] Notwithstanding his casual realisation, sketched in the Gundrisse, that the 'human being comes to relate more as watchman and regulator to the production process itself… As soon as labour in the direct form has ceased to be the great well-spring of wealth, labour time ceases and must cease to be its measure. Capitalism thus works toward its own dissolution as the form dominating production…' For some reason Marx did not pursue this insight.

the state one day withering away, but like the constantly deferred freedom of all tyrannous authority, it could only be effected by first granting power to experts (such as Lenin's 'vanguard party') who will manage the state-mechanism for the 'good' of the people. That this party might (and time and time again *did*) manage the state in its *own* interests didn't seem to occur to Marx, nor that the technological progress that he demanded as a prerequisite for meeting the needs of such a state would further bloat it with a centralised techno-bureaucracy, again with its *own* interests.

In fact Marx had no intention of bringing down the state, he wished only to reform it from within. This is why the concrete reforms he called for in The Communist Manifesto, his 'radical' programme for revolutionary change, called for an inheritance tax, graduated income tax and centralization of credit and communications.[9] Mikhail Bakunin, who, like all anarchists worth their salt, endeavoured to do away with the state by *actually doing away with it*, opposed this feeble, self-serving gradualism tooth and nail;

> Marx is an authoritarian and centralising communist. He wants what we want, the complete triumph of economic and social equality, but he wants it… through State power, through the dictatorship of a very strong and, so to say, despotic provisional government, that is by the negation of liberty. His economic ideal is the State as sole owner of the land and of all kinds of capital, cultivating the land under the management of State engineers, and controlling all industrial and commercial associations with State capital. We want the same triumph of economic and social equality through the abolition of the State and of all that passes by the name of law… We want the reconstruction of society and the unification of mankind to be achieved, not from

[9] Albert Camus, The Rebel.

which may never set foot in a factory) is so keen on perpetuating the factory system, and resists the idea that if man is to be in control of the factory *the whole factory has to be destroyed and rebuilt for man* — and not just one factory, but *all* the interlocking systems which feed into and from it. Factory-man understands that a radical threat to the industrial system is a radical threat to his own being, which is why he receives radical critiques of industrial technology in almost exactly the same way as fundamentalist believers take radical critiques of their prophets or sacred texts.

Marx understood very well the horrific effects of mechanisation, the means by which it could be used to further exploit labour,[10] but his understanding of what the full 'development of the productive forces' of mankind, through technological progress and expansion, would inevitably entail — the ruin of man and the absorption of the human psyche into a nightmarish, self-informed (and, ironically enough, non-material) simulacrum — was next to nil.[11] He did not understand, or did not want to understand, that a technocratic system demands a bourgeois technocratic management elite. His analysis of productive alienation was second-to-none, and still justly celebrated, but his obsession with class exploitation blinded him to exploitation by the democratic mass, by the technocratic system, by professional power and by the abstracted hyperworld parasitically overwhelming

[10] '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.' Sounds great doesn't it? But just wait till we combine 'education with industrial production'. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, The Communist Manifesto.

[11] By forcing man to sell his children to capital, by lengthening the working day, by intensifying labour and 'depriving it of all interest', by stealing 'everything that is necessary for the workman to live, robbery of space, light, air and protection of his person' and by throwing him into the street when he can no longer compete with the machine. See Capital, chapter 15.

> above downwards by any sort of authority, nor by socialist officials, engineers, and either accredited men of learning—but from below upwards, by the free federation of all kinds of workers' associations liberated from the yoke of the State.

In Marx's 'above-downwards' reconstruction of society, nature and human-nature continue to be dominated, only now in the name of the people, by technocratic officials and with the deferred aim of doing away with the authoritarian state. The embarrassing fact that authoritarian domination persists, and continues to ruin that which it is supposed to liberate, is pushed out of view by socialists, as is the fact that, in essence, nothing has changed. 'Work', to take one critical example, was supposed to be liberated in a communist society. The idea was that by taking over the industrial system of production developed in a capitalist economy, with all its specialists, and their theories, and all its technicians, and their machines, something fundamentally different would thereby result. In the real world this is a ridiculous ambition. A capitalist machine which, as Marx himself told us, exercises total control over the working man — over where he works, over how fast he works and over what tiny specialised manoeuvres he is expected to make — remains the *same* machine when governed by a communist state. It cannot do or be otherwise. How is a furniture-factory for example (the kind that makes IKEA flat-packs), to hand over autonomy to the individual worker? How is the individual labourer to take complete control of the productive apparatus of the shop floor, devised *for* a mechanised, rigidly hierarchical system, and designed *to* mechanically discipline the workforce? The factory was designed to produce the maximum number of goods at the lowest cost and the highest speed; this is what its machines are for. How then are they to be used to produce high quality handmade goods, at the pace the individual worker chooses, and with the individual worker able to autonomously

exercise his discriminating intelligence on the whole process of manufacture? How is the ikea factory to be reformed, under communist governance, into a small-scale craftsman's workshop?

It isn't. It can't be. The factory, as it is, has to be destroyed. And not just its physical architecture and machinery, but its ideological and organisational structures; the *division of labour activity* into a thousand hyper-specialised tasks, and the *division of labour purpose* into the intellectual work of the manager and the submoron machine servitude of the worker. Somehow, magically, all this can be reformed, under communist or socialist governance, back into a dignified whole, although nobody knows how. Marxists and socialists simply *hope* that all of the scattered tasks required by, say, the mechanised industrial cake-making system (one man on the mixing machine, one man on the baking machine, one man on the cutting machine, one man on the boxing machine) will somehow, by itself, dissolve into the autonomous activity of a single baker, and that the management class will, once freed of the pressures put on it by capitalist owners, freely join hands with the drones who follow their orders, cheerfully re-skill each other and then triumphantly march towards a lower-tech society that makes the specialist skill of the manager, and the power based thereon, obsolete. We are supposed to imagine that the bureaucratic techno-elite demanded by a global industrial machine will renounce its power when that machine is taken from the hands of private business owners and given to the socialist state, and that nuclear power plants, oil-powered container ships and injection-moulding factories will be thereby reformed to serve low-energy, local economies.

This idea is, to anyone able to perceive it without the distorting ideological filters of leftism, a ludicrous, childish, *religious* belief. An immense industrial factory can no more be reformed for the benefit of man than a tractor can be repurposed to dig over a garden. And just as the *land* has to be redesigned to fit the needs of the tractor, so *man* has to be redesigned to fit the needs of the factory, which explains why factory-man (including a management class