

Notes for an Introductory Discussion of Karl Marx

Session I

General Topic of Discussion: Karl Marx, “On the Jewish Question” & “Theses on Feuerbach”

Outline of Discussion

1. Religious vs Political Identity
2. Civil Society vs Political State
3. Marx’s Use of ‘Judaism’
4. Emancipation from Estrangement and Alienation through Criticism

Flow of Discussion

- A. got us started with a passage from p. 34, which we eventually wound up reciting in full: “The conflict in which the individual, as the professor of a particular religion, finds himself involved with his own quality of citizenship and with other men as members of the community, may be resolved into the secular schism between the political state and civil society. For man as a bourgeois ‘life in the state is only an appearance or a fleeting exception to the normal and essential.’ It is true that the bourgeois, like the Jew, participates in political life only in a sophisticated way, just as the *citoyen* is a Jew or a bourgeois only in a sophisticated way. But this sophistry is not personal. It is the sophistry of the political state itself. The difference between the religious man and the citizen is the same as that between the shopkeeper and the citizen, between the day-laborer and the citizen, between the landed proprietor and the citizen, between the living individual and the citizen. The contradiction in which the religious man finds himself with the political man, is the same contradiction in which the bourgeois finds himself with the citizen, and the member of civil society with his political lion’s skin.”
- We reasoned from this that the religious person, for example, is split between their particular religious commitments and their role as a citizen like any other. This is then mirrored in a secular schism between particularized civil society, on the one hand, and the general political state, on the other.
- Sticking with the topic of religion, we looked back to p. 32 and discussed Marx’s characterization of religion as humanity’s recognition or identification of itself in a roundabout fashion—that is, through an intermediary. This involvement of something ‘other’ in our self-understanding provides the opening for what Marx terms ‘alienation’ more broadly.
- Whereas Tocqueville saw religion as the bulwark guarding against the devolution of civil society into private interests, Marx instead sees religion as an exemplar of this distinctive split between private interests and political identity.
- To elaborate his point, Marx makes the extremely troubling choice of tapping into stereotypes about ‘Jews’ that were running rampant in his time. In doing so, his goal is to attack what he sees as the cultural ascendancy of egoistic motivations and private interests, both of which intensify human alienation under capitalism. His project here is economic, not theological, but nevertheless we decided that this in no way excludes him or his text from due criticism.

- The big question, though, seems to be this: how does emancipation occur for those trapped within particular private interests and identities? This applies to those who are particularized or atomized in any sense, whether religious or secular. There are many modes of human estrangement from self and others, but the goal, for Marx, is to get past alienation in all its forms. That's why emancipation of all humankind must, in his eyes, proceed through emancipation from the dominant economic ways of thinking. His project is aimed at moving past our private and particular modes of mediating our own self-awareness to ourselves, theologically, economically, or otherwise.
- Marx writes that the beginning of all criticism is the criticism of religion—but that appears to be far from the end of his critical project.

Session II

General Topic of Discussion: Karl Marx, “Economic & Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844” and “The Communist Manifesto”

Outline of Discussion

5. Economic Mediation of Human Self-Consciousness
6. The Commodification of Labor
7. What It Means To Be Human (for Marx)
8. Estrangement from Species-Being
9. Money as the Engine for Alienation

Flow of Discussion

- We got things started by reminding ourselves that, for Marx, money, products, and the means of production are not just neutral tools, but rather media through which humans form a consciousness of their own selves. So it’s fair to say that human consciousness is mediated to itself in an alienating way—that is, through the dominant alien force of money, which takes on a god-like role.
- The remedy for this state of affairs, according to Marx, is emancipation. But he doesn’t just mean civil emancipation—the ability to freely go out and get involved in society. And he doesn’t just mean political emancipation—the liberty to participate as a political agent. He is after a higher form of emancipation, which he calls ‘human’ emancipation—the freedom to get directly involved in the constitution of your own self-consciousness as a member of the human species.
- G. then pointed us to a passage on p. 71: “The worker becomes all the poorer the more wealth he produces, the more his production increases in power and range. The worker becomes an ever cheaper commodity the more commodities he creates. With the increasing value of the world of things proceeds in direct proportion the devaluation of the world of men. Labour produces not only commodities; it produces itself and the worker as a commodity—and does so in the proportion in which it produces commodities generally. [paragraph break] This fact expresses merely that the object which labour produces—labour’s product—confronts it as something alien, as a power independent of its producer. The product of labour is labour which has been congealed into an object, which has become material: it is the objectification of labour. Labour’s realization is its objectification.”
- Both the laborer and her product, then, are congealed into a commodity. The dynamic activity of many humans is reduced to the value of a product. The abstract idea of labor, too, seems to be reduced to a concrete object—again, the product. ‘My’ life-activity goes into the object of my labor—but then, contra Locke, that object becomes someone else’s property, rather than my own. This is how the production process of modern industry actually provides us with a material realization and objectification of the worker’s self-alienation. ‘I’ really do put myself, in some sense, into an object, and that object becomes the property of another.

- Dan then pointed us to a related passage on p. 73: “Political economy conceals the estrangement inherent in the nature of labor by not considering the direct relationship between the worker (labour) and production.”
- Labor, for Marx, is the life-activity of humankind, and life-activity defines what it is to be a certain kind of life. Human life, of course, is also self-conscious activity, and yet we still must begin with praxis. What makes us human is what we materially, physically, really do. The fact that we can then reflect on this is important, but it doesn’t change the basic underlying reality.
- Marx isn’t telling us, of course, that in order to overcome estrangement we should go back to immediate, non-reflective animal activity. As humans, our self-consciousness has always been mediated—but we have to realize that it is mediated not just in thinking, but, more primarily, through material praxis. If we are going to push through this current stage of alienating mediation, then, we have to do so in the material world, rather than in, say, the contemplative world of Plato or Aristotle.
- Within these modern relations of production, then, the worker is estranged not only from herself, but also from the species-being that unites her with her fellow human beings. A key mechanism involved in this process is money. Through money, the seemingly stable characteristics of things and people can be altered. Money has the power to change reality. The value of all things is then reduced to money and the fluidity of its exchange. (Here we thought back to Constant, and the way commerce reshapes modern human consciousness.)
- Money is not simply a representative instrument, but is the god-like alien force that mediates human consciousness to itself. Through the universalizing power of money, all value can be re-determined in terms of fluctuating market ‘prices.’ The profit motive, meanwhile, intensifies class struggle by driving the bourgeoisie to exploit the proletariat more and more, so as to reap more surplus value. This in turn allows for more accumulation of capital, more hiring, more production—and so the cycle continues.
- The only way to break this cycle, in Marx’s eyes, would be to alter the underlying mode of production that keeps our society going.