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## **Was Marx an Economist, Philosopher, or Both?**

### **I. Introduction**

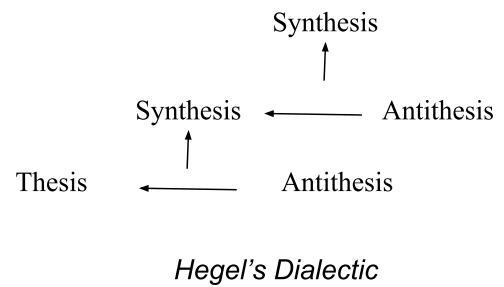
Not often do you find a philosopher who exclusively thinks about abstract ideas. Intellectuals don't jump right into philosophy as their calling, but rather are led to it by the demands of the world around them. The state of affairs that thinkers are born in define the kinds of questions that they will have to ask, and give them the tools that they will use to pursue them. The German intellectual culture that Marx was born into was marked very clearly by G.W.F. Hegel, a highly influential philosopher, and successor to Immanuel Kant. This influence was something that Marx never fully broke from for the rest of his life. The generation following Hegel were aptly called the Young Hegelians, and contained figures such as Bruno Bauer and Ludwig Feuerbach. They had a more radical and markedly atheistic interpretation of Hegelianism. Marx took the fire from the Young Hegelians and pointed it towards the goals of social change and the political arena. The philosophical tradition he came from informed him that the world was made up out of the material world of human wants, and the various modes of productions to achieve said wants. Economic conditions were not necessarily the primary substrate of reality to Marx, but he recognized that they shaped absolutely every other facet of human experience. It was only natural that economics would be his primary focal point.

Many have trouble fitting Marx into the category of philosopher or economist. I say that this is a meaningless distinction. It's like asking whether Aristotle is a philosopher or a logician, or whether Spinoza is a philosopher or a theologian. In this essay, I will demonstrate how the evolution from Hegel to Marx led his focal point naturally to tackling economics and its gatekeepers, and how Marx' economic theory is tied to his philosophy of historical materialism.

### **II. Hegel and the Dialectic**

Hegel was a successor to Kant in multiple ways, but he incorporated concepts that were lacking from the Kantian metaphysical view. First of these was the emphasis not on the analysis of individual objects, but on the analysis of the process of realizing and understanding the world over time through the

consciousness or Spirit. If Kant was concerned with pictures in frames, then Hegel was concerned with movies on rolling film. The way in which this occurred according to Hegel was through dialectical logic. The process is quite simple, but has many strong implications. First, a thesis is presented. If the thesis in itself does not hold up or has gaps then it implies an antithesis. These two theses battle it out and a subsequent synthesis is born. Then the process restarts. This goes on until a final thesis is achieved to which no Antithesis can arise. This is the final Absolute Spirit which the Dialectic is marching towards, and is for all intents and purposes the God of Hegel's philosophy. The ultimate goal of the system is to have consciousness reach a point at which there is nothing outside its understanding. Partiality is the sin; Unity is the heaven.



The first important field that Hegel would then need to tackle is political philosophy. If this was really how ideas worked, Hegel would want to understand the world in social context that was best suited for the dialectic to unfold. He was primarily concerned with discovering absolute laws that were a final actualization of the dialectic. Peculiarly, however he seemed to believe that the final forms of this law was to be found right where he was in Early 19th Century Berlin. How convenient! The relationship that characterized Berlin was the tension between civil society (families, business, private interest) and the State (the king, the law, public interest). The purpose of civil society and the people within it were to continue the dialectic while the State would curtail private interests in favor of the public interest. To Hegel this was the finalization of the social dialectic, the most total and unified social form possible. Here is one of the first places that Marx would begin to critique what Hegel believed to be an absolute system. David McLellan comments, "Marx finds this odd on two counts : firstly the state is said to predate and produce its own elements. But this involves a reversal of the true relationship:

The Idea is thoroughly subjectivism. The actual relationship of family and civil society to the state is grasped as their inner imaginary activity. Family and civil society are the presuppositions of the state, they are really the active forms, But in speculation this is reversed. As the Idea is subjectivised, the actual subjects - civil "society, family, circumstances, caprice, etc.', - become unactual, objective moments of the Idea, meaning something else.

Thus Hegel's whole enterprise of reconciling the universal and the particular is a failure : the real elements of the state - family and civil society - are everywhere subordinate to the spirit of the state, whose mystical power infuses the other social spheres with a part of its essence.” (MBM 111) These errors and others would lead to the next movement that took place after Hegel, and more accurately described Marx’ philosophy.

### **III. The Young Hegelians and Marx’s Break**

Marx true teachers were the Young Hegelians, the generation of scholars who took the dialectical aspect of Hegel’s philosophy, but shed its teleological and religious side. A key figure in this movement was Ludwig Feuerbach. His work, *The Essence of Christianity* flips the dialectic on its head. In the traditional dialectic humanity arrived at Christianity because it was the natural logical outcome of the dialectic. However, Feuerbach makes the point that the God of Christianity was made by humans and then retroactively put into the system. We made God so that he could make us. The dialectic does not point towards an absolute end, but is rather dependent on the desires of the humans that are enacting it. “But philosophy should' not start from God or the Absolute, nor even from being as predicate of the Absolute ; philosophy had to begin with the finite, the particular, the real, and acknowledge the primacy of the senses.” (MBM 107) Hegel believed that we moved from polytheism to monotheism because it was a more coherent logical step. Feuerbach believes that both the Greco-Roman Gods, the Judeo-Christian God, and any other conceivable Gods were merely a projection of the desires of their faithful followers. Those who loved war would naturally worship perfect war in the form of Ares. Those who loved freedom from tyranny would naturally worship the “self-evident truths” of free speech and free markets. Feuerbach called this process projection.

The philosophical community was so thoroughly influenced by Feuerbach to the point that some considered him **the** philosopher. (MBM 108) The rest of Marx’ philosophy was built on this inversion of the dialectic that Hegel had started. He similarly borrowed a concept that Feuerbach used called mystification. “This term, taken from Feuerbach's Theses', meant to deprive something of its own independent nature by making this nature into a mere emanation of an imaginary entity.” (MBM 109) It was by the process of mystification that other philosophers would derive the world of particulars from the world of ideas and absolutes that they made up to fit the world. To end mystification one would need to be concerned with the real empirical particulars of the world around them; to get out of the Ivory Tower per say.

Marx was still frustrated with the Young Hegelians in one respect. They were concerned with nature and the religious world while Marx' was motivated to put pressure on the State. Marx said in a letter to his colleague Arnold Ruge, "The only point in Feuerbach's aphorisms that does not satisfy me is that he gives too much importance to nature and too little to politics. Yet an alliance with politics affords the only means for contemporary philosophy to become a truth. But what happened in the sixteenth century, when the state had followers as enthusiastic as those of Nature, will no doubt be repeated.' For Marx, the way ahead lay through politics, but a politics which questioned current conceptions of the relationship of the state to society." MBM (107-108) Feuerbach had realized the social conditioning that created the various gods that man worshipped, but Marx was willing to go farther. Far enough to say that even the liberal project that had given life to civil society and the private bourgeois realm were similarly mystifications. He declared this boldly in his famous *Theses on Feuerbach*, "The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it." (McLellan 173)

#### **IV. Marx's Historical Materialism**

Marx' conception of history as a product of the material base is the framework for the rest of his philosophy. The work in which he most clearly lays it out is *The German Ideology*, an attempt by himself and his partner Engels to tie to together their philosophical views. The historical dialectic like the Hegel maintains the dialectical logic, and like the Young Hegelians starts from the material and particular world, but unlike both does not have concepts battle one another, but has various modes of production battle one another on the grand historical stage. It's not a moral trek towards the grand final best idea, but a process that history unfolds whether you like it or not. Joseph Schumpeter comments:

"The economic interpretation of history does not mean that men are, consciously or unconsciously, wholly or primarily, actuated by economic motives. On the contrary, the explanation of the role and mechanism of noneconomic motives and the analysis of the way in which social reality mirrors itself in the individual psyches is an essential element of the theory and one of its most significant contributions. Marx did not hold that religions, metaphysics, schools of art, ethical ideas and political volitions were either reducible to economic motives or of no importance. He only tried to unveil the economic conditions which shape them and which account for their rise and fall." (Schumpeter 10-11)

The preconditions of the historical dialectic are the best explained by four historical moments laid out in *The German Ideology*. These are the closest things we have to the natural categories that Marx makes before he lays out his conception of history.

1. Man must be in the position to be able to make history, and therefore must satisfy his basic needs. The first moment is then the production of the means to satisfy needs and to sustain human life.
2. Once the primary needs have been satisfied the particular means that were used to satisfy the first will create new needs. For example, if a herd of sheep is used to satisfy the initial need for clothing, then a new need arises for a fence to keep the herd in place overnight. The means chosen therefore have an integral place in determining what means will be seen as necessary in the future.
3. The third moment is that there must be some aspect of reproduction, relationship between man and woman to sustain humanity over time. This does not presume the family, just that there is some aspect of reproduction present in any given society for it continue over time.
4. The fourth and most Marxian moment is that the current social conditions are always the product of the previous era. In Newton's words, every society is only where it is because it is standing on the shoulders of giants.

So Marx turns his focus to **economics** as the primary driving force of history, not religion and ideas like his predecessors had. What he still maintained from Hegel was the dialectical mode, and from Feuerbach he kept the concept of human and empirical reality as the beginning of his analyses. His theory of the actual events of history was built up out of the dominant mode of production being insufficient and then subsequently revolted against. Modes of production first arise from the combination of human existence and the division of labor. The division of labor characterizes various forms of ownership that unfold in the dialectic. To summarize, unorganized productivity was insufficient and faced the division of labor as an opponent to which it lost. This formed the tribal style of ownership which culminated in empires. Empires faced barbarians and culminated in feudal lordships. The feudal lords were faced with the bourgeoisie, and now the bourgeoisie rule supreme under the capitalist mode of production.. This is the source of the famous phrase from the Communist Manifesto, "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles." (McLellan 246) If this was truly the end of history then we would be finished, but Marx wants things to change. He sees capitalism as an

unnecessary mystification which is susceptible to revolution. His next step is turn his cannons towards the academic gatekeepers of capitalism, the economists.

## V. The Critique of Political Economy

Marx had been critiquing the work of the classical economists from early on in his career all the way to its culmination in *Das Kapital*. In the Young Hegelian style, he accused the political economists of mystification. “Let us not be like the political economist who, when he wishes to explain something, puts himself in an imaginary original state of affairs. ... Similarly, the theologian explains the origin of evil through the fall, i.e. he presupposes as an historical fact what he should be explaining.” (McLellan 86) Theologians would find things in the world that couldn’t be explained as particulars and then created God in such a way to explain and justify their position. The way that political economists had been operating is to come up with situations that historically explain their theories rather than taking the particular aspects of the world and deriving their propositions from them.

The position that Marx notes the classic economists start from is private property. The relationship of owner to owned is primary, rather than the relationship between man, nature and his needs like in *The German Ideology*. It is from this relationship that they derive the concepts of the different economic goods to be owned. The major categories of economic goods were Labor, Capital, and Land, however Marx notes that there is absolutely no reason to separate these categories. The economists only feel the need to separate these as they have accepted these categories from their experience in their specific economy. They don’t make the recognition that they are in a particular mode of production, and thus treat their current mode as if it is the one that has always existed. “Political Economy starts with the fact of private property, it does not explain it to us.... Political Economy does not afford us any explanation of the reason for the separation of labor, and capital, capital and land.” (McLellan 85)

In some manuscripts written in 1844, now dubbed appropriately the Economic & Philosophic Manuscripts, Marx lays out his concept of alienation. Again this concept is borrowed from Feuerbach, but instead of being applied to religion it is applied to the political situation. When mystification occurs the mystifier will expend time, energy, and life into the mystified object. This is what the religious do to God; they make him up to solve some problem, and then alienate their life by dedicating it to an imaginary God. Marx is not concerned with God, but with a similar mystification, the commodity. The commodity is a part of the capitalist mode of production. It’s a product of man’s labor that can be separated or alienated from him. “We start with a contemporary fact of political economy: The worker becomes poorer the richer is his production, the more it increases in power and scope. The worker

becomes a commodity that is all the cheaper the more commodities he creates. The depreciation of the human world progresses in direct proportion to the increase in value of the world of things. Labor does not only produce commodities; it produces itself and the laborer as a commodity and that to the extent to which it produces commodities in general.” (McLellan 86) At this point, the laborer can even turn their own labor into a commodity which they alienate from themselves. Their work is no longer an enjoyable part of their life. The mystification and subsequent alienation in capitalism needed to be critiqued, and who better to take on the task than Marx himself.

## **VI. Marxian Economics**

Marx most succinct and coherent work is *Das Kapital: A Critique of Political Economy*. The work analyzes the capitalist mode of production specifically. Therefore, he is not making assumptions that aspects of capitalism extend past capitalism’s role in history. What he does do is construct an economics that both marks the limits of capitalism and offers a backbone to then rely on.

He starts by analyzing the commodity, the product of capitalism. The commodity is characterized by its ability to be exchanged. The obvious purpose of all goods or commodities is that they satisfy some human need and in turn have a sort of value. This use-value is measured qualitatively as it is a commodity’s qualities that allow it satisfy a need. The question is then raised ; how can two people in the market trade goods on terms of quality? Why is my hat exchangeable for your pants? On what terms are they equivalent? The only thing common to all commodities is the labor-time expended into them, as was mentioned in the Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts. Therefore, 1 coat that took 10 hours to make can be exchanged for the amount of linen that can be made in 10 hours. The labour-time is then the source of the value for commodities and their exchange-value is defined in terms of the other goods of the market. Saying that a coat is worth 10 hours is meaningless, but saying that it is worth 10 hours of linen allows me to understand these in terms of exchange-value. Money is a good with no use-value. Money is only made of exchange-value; it is the ultimate equivalency.

“Commodities come into the world in the shape of use values, articles, or goods, such as iron, linen, corn, &c. This is their plain, homely, bodily form. They are, however, commodities, only because they are something two-fold, both objects of utility, and, at the same time, depositories of value. They manifest themselves therefore as commodities, or have the form of commodities, only in so far as they have two forms, a physical or natural form, and a value form.” (McLellan 466-467)

So commodities now have two senses of value, one qualitative and one quantitative. The exchange-value aspect of commodities is not derived from the nature of good itself. It is this part of the commodity that makes it mystified and transcendent. The medieval mode of production was characterized by the belief in God, and feudalism was organized according to that belief. Though the belief in god persists in capitalism it is really characterized by the Fetishism of commodities, and these principles guide the social order. “In order, therefore to find an analogy, we must have recourse to the mist-enveloped regions of the religious world. In that world the productions of the human brain appear as independent beings endowed with life, and entering into relation both with one another and the human race. So it is in the world of commodities with the products of men’s hands. This I call the Feteishm which attaches itself to the products of labour, so soon as they are produced as commodities, and which is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities.” (McLellan 473-474)

The second part of Marx’ theory of Capitalism was his theory of its demise, particularly that it would fall when the working class had grown and been oppressed to the point that they could bear it no longer. You may ask, “What is inherent to capitalism that would cause a particular class to be oppressed?” Marx’ theory of surplus value gives the answer. A normal commodity exchange takes this pattern; C-M-C. Someone produces a commodity, sells it for money, then buys another commodity with it. From another perspective, commodity exchange can take this pattern; M-C-M’. Someone buys a commodity, and then sells it at a higher price for profit. This circulation of commodities is specifically referred to as capital. How is this possible if exchange only happens between equivalent commodities? Let’s return to the nature of labor as a commodity. The value of any good is determined by the labor-time that goes into it, but how exactly is the value of labor determined. Marx’ answer is that it is the same as the labor-time needed to sustain and reproduce that same labor. Therefore, wages for six hours of work is paid in only enough wages to sustain the worker to come back and produce six more hours of labor. This would be the cost of housing, training, food etc.. If the same amount of resources could sustain a worker for twelve hours that could have for six hours, then why would the capitalist pay them any more? Twelve hours of work can be paid six hours of wages, and this is where the capitalist makes his profit. Directly from the worker’s surplus value. This twofold sense of understanding both the exchange-value and use-value of labor is one of the many things Marx’ thought absurd in capitalism, and where a result of the mystification and alienation caused by commodities.

Marx’ economics is based on labor precisely because it is the one aspect of classical economics that could be retained and considered a relevant in all social modes of production. This is because it is the only part of a human economy that is derived directly from the four moments. All satisfaction of need requires a minimal degree of labor. Studying laborer to product is then more the substance of an economy



than a series of private property exchanges or any other system designed at a particular time in the historical dialectic.

## **VII. Conclusion**

Imagine if Marx had made the claim that the world evolved in a historical material dialectic, but had never critiqued the classical economists nor wrote *Das Kapital*. Critics would assuredly say that Marx was being facetious about his work, he never studied political economy, and he couldn't explain why the dialectic moved in the pattern it did. In some sense the historical dialectic was obvious to him. Clearly, the world was very different to people in the past, and had fundamentally changed. It was this fact that led him to study economics, and what he found he was disgusted with. The classical economists were declaring universal truth to societally contextual truths. To attack them was his best strategy, not only to show the relevance, but the power of his theories. Whether his conclusions were correct or not, Marx was likely the most influential social thinker of the 19th Century. To restate the answer I stated in the introduction, Marx' philosophy and economics are not separable categories. They are inseparable aspects of an entire life's work of philosophy.

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