



# Marxist Historiography

Week Three Lectures



# But why is Labour Power a Commodity?

"That the owner of money encounters labour-power as a *commodity* on the market is not a matter of course. Two conditions have to be satisfied for this to be the case. First, there must be people who act as *free proprietors* of their own labour-power, who are therefore in a position to sell their labour-power. A slave or a serf is therefore not in such a position, since the sellers of labour-power must be *legally free people*. But if these people have the means of production at their disposal and can produce and sell their own commodities or can subsist from the products of their own labour, then they will probably not sell their labour power. They are only *driven* to sell their labour-power – and this is the second condition – if they do not own any means of production, if they are therefore not only legally free but also free of substantive *property*. Then they actually treat their labour-power as a commodity. The existence of workers who are 'free' in this double sense is an indispensable social precondition of capitalist production." (Heinrich, 2012: 91).

# How did workers become "Free in a Double Sense"?

"The capital-relation presupposes a complete separation between the workers and the ownership of the conditions for the realization of their labour. As soon as capitalist production stands on its own feet, it not only maintains this separation, but reproduces it on a continually extending scale. The process, therefore, which creates the capital-relation can be nothing other than the process which divorces the worker from the ownership of the conditions of his own labour; it is a process which operates two transformations, *whereby the social means of subsistence and production are turned into capital, and the immediate producers are turned into wage labourers*. So-called primitive accumulation, therefore, is nothing else than the **historical process of divorcing the producer from the means of production**. It appears as primitive, because it forms the prehistory of capital, and of the mode of production corresponding to capital." (Marx, 874-5).

# What does this tell us about "Marxian Historiography"?

- Marx's book, *Capital Volume One*, which we read a segment of for this week, presents two very different types of analyses.
  - First, He presents a structural (often termed Epochal) analysis, exploring the economic logic and structures underpinning our (capitalist) society. [remember Productive Forces]
  - Second, He presents a historical analysis of how these structures came into being and what sustains them. This is a very contingent analysis, which contains much more agency than was present in his structural chapters. [Remember Relations of Production]
- Marxian historiography is often a balanced negotiation of these two kinds of analyses. Marxian historiography doesn't just examine class conflict and labour, but it examines it in a very specific way.
  - Marx's "history" of Primitive Accumulation (and his history of the Working Day) are arguably the first examples of Marxian Historiography.

# Rigby on Marxist Historiography

Rigby: "Marxist Historians can be distinguished from their non-Marxist colleagues in terms of their common vocabulary and concepts, and their shared body of interests, questions, and historical emphases" (870).

Rigby: One of Marx's most enduring historical theories was his oft-claim of the "social primacy of the productive forces" (873). Technological Determinism?

Rigby: "Unlike Capitalism, where there *is* a powerful, indeed historically unprecedented, tendency for the productive forces to develop, all pre-capitalist modes of production were, as Marx himself argued, inherently conservative" (874).

# Rigby on Marxist Historiography

Many Marxists have also sought to explain the economic foundations of certain political institutions, like the state, law, church, etc. Many of these authors have sought to show the primacy of productive forces, and they have tried to show that many of these "superstructural" forms of governance are oftentimes merely supporting the base or reacting to changes in the base.

# Rigby on Marxist Historiography

Some Marxists (and in some of his writings, Marx would be in this crowd), while they see capitalism as exploitative like no other mode of production in human history, see it as "progressive": i.e. facilitating the level of technological development and cultural unity to enable socialism and communism to take hold.

There is a divide between those Marxists who study historical societies as a way of differentiating them utilizing Marx's productive forces/relations of production models and those who instead study social movements (class struggle) in history.

# Historical Progression in Marx and Marxist writing

Rigby: "Marx and Engels frequently claimed that society's relations of production 'corresponded' to the level of development reached by its productive forces, a claim which they illustrated for each stage of historical development, from primitive communism, through the ancient, Asiatic, feudal, and Capitalist modes of production" (871).

# Limitations of Marxian Historiography

- The differentiation between base and superstructure is difficult to maintain and prove, even when one consults Marx's theories on the subject. The primacy of the productive forces are even harder to prove.
  - Table with legs
- Many have critiqued Marxists for uncritically applying concepts which were developed to address the nature of capitalism onto non-capitalist and pre-capitalist societies.
- Many have critiqued the historicism present in some uses of Marx's theory, namely the notion that history progresses from one mode of production to another. This was addressed by Louis Althusser through his notion of "articulation of modes of production".

# Social History and Marxian Theory: E.P. Thompson

Social Historians sought to resurrect the life of workers and poor people by utilizing new sorts of resources and questions to understand the "social world" in which they lived. They were often sympathetic to Marxian theory and the detrimental effects of capitalism.

We read his article "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism", which deals with the development of a universal concept of "time" and how it relates to labour, production, and culture.

Certain "modes of production" or communities prior to industrial capitalism had their own logic of time. Madagascar & "a rice cooking" (1/2 hour), Irish croft communities and shadows cast on the floor.

# E.P. Thompson on Time

The existence of a measurement of time was necessary for the modern notion of labour power to take hold, as well as many of our conceptions of exploitation. Furthermore, for those trained on the clock, "task-orientation" lifestyles appear wasteful and must be stopped (primitive accumulation).

Thompson interestingly looks to a "watch tax" as a way to analyse how many people owned watches and therefore looked to "modern" conceptions of time.

The enclosure methods were just one form of turning peasants to proletarians, forced adherence to a different time schedule was another way. This was a change in technology and culture: base and superstructure.

"Moments are the Essence of Profits"