

## :: The Hegelian Ruin of Political Economy Qua Marx ::

Written by Snax - 2/17/17

In the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* by Karl Marx, it is argued that externalization to objects as the objectification of labor is a loss of the laborer, a reduction of subjecthood. I will argue that this is incorrect, not only as a misunderstanding of subjectivity, but an incorrect formulation of materialism's synthesis with idealism on Marx's part.

I will open by saying that I believe Marx makes these mistakes due to both a misunderstanding of Hegelian phenomenology and Feuerbachian materialism, as Marx's view doesn't seem consistent with either of them, despite his having been a scholar of both. I focus almost entirely on Hegelian metaphysics, as I believe Marx draws more directly from that framework than the other. Further, I don't believe a proper synthesis is possible between the two, so claims of Marx as having attempted to do so are also problematic. I'll touch on this later, but I'm stating it now so this is made apparent upfront.

In understanding the particular aspect of Marx's view which is to be invectively attacked here, we should first look at a short passage Marx gives starting only three paragraphs into the work where I believe he begins to show this fatal misunderstanding of phenomenological and materialist metaphysics, namely where he states that, "Competition, freedom of the crafts and the division of landed property were explained and comprehended only as accidental, pre-meditated and violent consequences of monopoly, of the guild system, and of feudal property, not as their necessary, inevitable and natural consequences."<sup>1</sup> Another translation of this reads that these crafts and property were, "Conceived only as accidental, deliberate, forced, consequences."<sup>2</sup> I place both translations here to show that there is no linguistic divide present, that there is a real contradiction maintained no matter how this is translated. Yes, the political economy as Marx describes it is both 'accidental' and 'pre-meditated', both 'accidental' and 'deliberate'. I believe this contradiction arises not simply as a misstep in writing, but as a real contradiction in his view that property is both of the subject and independent of the subject at the same time, something which follows from a malformed application of Hegelian and Feuerbachian metaphysics. This passage is meant simply to be kept in mind as we construct the rest of his view.

So getting into the real argument now, there are two specific paragraphs that I believe Marx's entire essay, *Alienated Labor*, reduces to, and these two specific paragraphs are also crucial to the rest of the essay such that the rest of the essay completely hinges on the assertions of these paragraphs being true. So, for the rest of this paper I will be referring to these two specific paragraphs alone, modulo that I will also reference the sentence quoted earlier. The first of these two paragraphs in question, full and bare, is as follows:

"The worker becomes all the poorer the more wealth he produces, the more his production increases in power and size. 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. Labor produces not only commodities: it produces itself and the worker as a *commodity* - and this in the same general proportion in which it produces commodities."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Marx, Karl. *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, as edited by Steven M. Cahn. p 832.

<sup>2</sup> Marx, Karl. *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, as translated by Lloyd D. Easton and Kurt H. Guddat. p 312.

<sup>3</sup> Marx, Karl. *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, as edited by Steven M. Cahn. p 833.

We will ignore any potential issue concerning the accuracy of Marx's statements regarding increased production actually lowering labor cost in general, as the economic function typically espoused is rather that labor cost is a matter of competition than it is of demand and production of a product. Instead, let's outline a couple things about this paragraph so as to make clear what its explications and implications are.

Explicitly, Marx is saying that the laborer's labor is less valuable the more efficient it is, that the more product that can be facilitated by the labor, the less value one unit of that labor is per product. This is all well and good as an explicit statement, but I believe there is an implication here that makes this view muddled by materialist waters. He is confusing materialist objective value of products with the subjective value of Hegelian phenomenology. First, he asserts there is intrinsic value to the product made by the laborer, which he names as being the *means of life* later on the same page.<sup>4</sup> Second, he asserts there is a value of the laborer himself such that this subject-value is of the same *kind* that the object-value is. We know this is what he means as he says in the quoted paragraph that the laborer is himself a commodity. This is simply not metaphysically proper, especially given both Hegel and Feuerbach. It is a confusion of the way a laborer can relate to his labor, a confusion required for Marx to make his other arguments, and therefore a confusion that undermines the rest of his essay.

Explicit to the last sentence of that paragraph, Marx says that labor produces itself, and further that the laborer is a product. Again I believe this is a metaphysical confusion. Labor as seemingly defined by the rest of Marx's essay is such that it is a necessitation of the *means of life* qua products. This means that necessarily labor is *of* laborers and *for* products. Labor is *of* subject and *for* object. This must be maintained if the subject ever requires some objects as its *means of life*. However, Marx perverts this principle by explicating that labor produces itself, as this would be a subject-to-object process that can now reproduce itself like amoeba. What force of magic this is done by, I am unsure. It is impossible given the framework as just established. Additionally, the laborer is the subject by which establishes value of objects here. If the subject itself establishes value of itself under other objects, as some subject-object that is less valuable than others, this would be a perversion of the phenomenological capacity for valuation to begin with, as the thing with the capacity for assigning value must necessarily be of the greatest value, else it has no value in assigning values. I cannot see this last sentence quoted from Marx as anything other than a complete confusion of Hegelian metaphysics.

Shifting now to the paragraph that subsequently follows the first, the second of the two paragraphs in question, full and bare, is as follows:

"This fact expresses merely that the object which labor produces - labor's product - confronts it as *something alien*, as a *power independent* of the producer. The product of labor is labor which has been embodied in an object, which has become material: it is the objectification of labor. Labor's realization is its objectification. In the sphere of political economy this realization of labor appears as loss of *realization* for the workers; objectification as loss of the *object* and *bondage to it*; appropriation as *estrangement*, as *alienation*."<sup>5</sup>

There are two errors competing for devastation within this paragraph. The first is an impossible claim, a contradiction *déclaré*. In the first sentence Marx attempts to reference a square-circle (squirrel?), a married bachelor, so to speak. He overtly claims that there is an object created by labor that is foreign to the production of objects qua labor (the laborer is an object created by labor, yet is somehow wholly distinct and alien to both the entire rest of objecthood and labor). This seems to be

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<sup>4</sup> Marx, Karl. *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, as edited by Steven M. Cahn. p 833.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

simply an overt logical misstep on his part, as this is verily the claim that laborer can be separated from his labor in such a way that one is alien to the other, yet each desperately dependant on each other.

This may seem to attain alignment with Hegelian metaphysics, but it only does so in jest. It may be the case that this first contradiction starts to sound like lord-bondsman phenomenological speak, but again, I believe it is clear that Marx misinterprets Hegel about this issue. Marx is suggesting that like the lord creating relation and value for the bondsman, the laborer (read: subject) creates relation and value for the labor (read: object); but Marx draws this parallel falsely, as unlike the lord-bondsman relation of Hegel, whose relation is predicated on a one-sidedness where the lord is not dependant on the bondsman for any valuation nor for existence, the laborer is dependent on the labor for Marx's very *means of life*. In the other direction now, the bondsman under Hegel's dialectic is not dependant on the lord for its existence, as the lord attempts the opposite- to end the bondsman. This would be in Marx's view the same as saying then that the object of labor only ever has the capacity to cease existing should the laborer engage with it. Again, this may superficially sound aligned with Hegel's view, but I will further draw out how this is an issue with the second error in the quoted paragraph.

The last sentence of the prior quoted paragraph asserts there is a loss incurred on the subject for creation of the object, and further that there is bondage of the subject to the object. This flies in the face of Hegel, and I believe this particular assertion solidifies the position that Marx fundamentally misunderstood Hegel's metaphysics. The subject is infinite in the Hegelian dialectic, and as such can never feel *loss*, as there is nothing outside its reach and consequently nothing that it does not already have within its capacity for ownership. There is no way for the subject to lose part of itself under Hegelian metaphysics, so the externalization of self into objecthood is simply not possible given the Hegelian framework. If this was not enough, Marx goes on to claim that the subject is then placed in bondage by his objectification. This makes sense prima facie given Marx's view of the *means of life* by which the subject subsists, however it is not consistent with the rest of the dialectic, as again, the subject could not in principle be restrained by object, as the lord is outside the limitations of the bondsman.

The only response I believe Marx could attempt to give regarding this issue of Hegelian metaphysics would be that he is clearly trying to ascribe a collapse of the lord-bondsman, a collapse of subject-object into what we take as the human condition. If this were true, then there could be object relations that the subject was truly indebted to, but this still I take great concern with. I believe it was for good reason that Hegel separated the lord and bondsman when discussing absolute spirit and the phenomenological distinctions of being. The subject-object is not object as subject nor subject as object, it is a distinction between the *kinds* of things that a being is, part subject and part object, separate and distinct from each other. To collapse the two would be to collapse the distinction, which Marx may be trying to do, but in doing so he has also entirely removed the distinction, making it impossible to discern what is subject and what is object such that the properties of either cannot be directly ascribed to the following reduced entity Marx hath left us with.

For this malformed application of metaphysics, particularly of Hegelian metaphysics, I believe Marx builds his entire framework as a straw hut in low tides, which leaves us with no uncertain terms as to why Schopenhauer is known as having said, "But the height of audacity in serving up pure nonsense, in stringing together senseless and extravagant mazes of words, such as had previously been known only in madhouses, was finally reached in Hegel, and became the instrument of the most barefaced general mystification that has ever taken place, with a result which will appear fabulous to posterity, and will remain as a monument to German stupidity."<sup>6</sup> Indeed Hegel has confused a great many, and left us with detritus like Marx as the result. I now return to the first quoted passage by Marx, to which he claims

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<sup>6</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer, *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, trans. Haldane-Kemp (*The World as Will and Idea*, vol. 2), London: Kegan Paul, p. 22.

there is both accidental and deliberate political economy. That sentence is only possible if Hegel was wrong or if *Marx got Hegel wrong*. I don't take it merely as comfort to assume the position that the latter is far more secure than the former. So with that being said, and wrapping up the objections laid out from the two quoted paragraphs, we find that in principle it could not be the case that there is a loss to the laborer through externalization of objects; there simply could not be a loss of subjecthood through this process. For as much as Marx *talks*, we find he ends up *saying* nothing.