

Marx, Anarchism, and the Revolution of the Everyday

A Theoretical Exploration of Marx's Relationship to Anarchism

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Traditionally, advocates of the revolutionary path to socialism have emphasized the ‘objective’ factors leading to the necessity of socialism over capitalism. Marxists have usually tried to unite these ‘objective’ factors to ‘subjective’ factors — namely, the revolutionary consciousness of the proletariat. Capitalism cannot maintain itself. It prioritizes valorization, or what we usually call “profitability,” over the maintenance of society itself. These networks of commodities, of transactions, are themselves the nervous system of our society. They both are born out of our increasing social interconnection, and increase them.

The “anarchy of capitalist production,” nevertheless, endangers the viability of those networks. Capitalism is a mode of production that does not work on a social basis, social relations are only instruments to it. Its drive for valorization depends on the maintenance and stability of that very society. Capitalist society eats itself, although it is forced to constantly struggle against this cannibalistic drive in old and new ways. But it is a failing struggle, and it is clear that this insatiable drive to devour has now put the earth into dire ecological straits which pose an existential threat to humanity. For this reason, the question of revolution against capitalism can develop within the consciousness of the broad masses of working people.

When we think of revolutionary socialism, we usually think of two ‘options’ within it — Marxism, or ‘statist socialism’ if you like, and anarchism. Both are supposed to disagree with reformism, but part ways on the issue of the state. By extension, their analysis of strategies and tactics, of ‘means and ends,’ tend to be directly at odds. The antagonism between Karl Marx and 19th century anarchists has been exaggerated by Marxists and anarchists alike in the past century and a half. This is, in hindsight, a result of the confrontations between the two movements at various points in the 20th century.

This may seem strange to us today, but thinking about Marxism and anarchism as closely related was quite common until well into the 20th century. There were many historical figures who dwelled in the space between the two, such as William Morris, Lucy Parsons, Georges Sorel, Victor Serge, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, José Carlos Mariátegui, and even the young Mao Zedong. This is not even touching on the influence of anarchism on global ‘state socialism’ as a whole, which includes the Bolsheviks through Sergey Nechayev, Mao through Peter Kropotkin, and Kim Il-sung through Shin Chae-ho.

Though Marx engaged in arguments and even political struggle against anarchists, he did not fundamentally define himself in opposition to anarchists. He criticized other revolutionaries primarily in order to avoid the reappearance of capitalism in their methods.¹ This included anarchists, reformists, nationalists, ‘state socialists,’ and ‘Marxists’ alike. These critics tended to reduce capital to something one-sided, rather than the totalizing force that it has proven itself to be. Thus, they found themselves caught in the logic of capitalist power, often without even realizing it — for example, by advocating schemes to realize ‘true’ private property, legal equality, political unity in the state, and so on. By pursuing this thread of caution towards the ‘capital within us,’ we can both understand the real disagreements Marx had with anarchists and understand the specificity of his method. Instead of being a crude and authoritarian ‘statist,’ we can recognize Marx as developing a unique critical dialectic of capitalism which unites theory and practice by expressing the ‘theory’ embedded in our everyday life.

¹ Peter Hudis, *Marx’s Concept of the Alternative to Capitalism* (Boston, Massachusetts: Brill, 2012), pp. 4–8.

STIRNER'S UNIQUE

Marx's engagements with anarchists can serve as moments to trace along the thread of this dialectic. By critiquing anarchists, he developed and clarified his own approach of immanent critique.

Marx's youthful critique of the egoist Max Stirner was arguably his first engagement with what we now consider anarchism. Particularly because Stirner shattered Marx's faith in abstract humanism, his philosophy should be considered important for Marx's intellectual development.

As a young man in the 1840s, Marx emerged from the radical democratic and atheistic milieu of Young Hegelianism into communism. He took significant influence from his engagements with the philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach and his followers, such as the proto-Zionist Moses Hess.² Feuerbach started from radical atheism, arguing that humanity created God as an expression of a "human essence", rather than God creating humanity.³ In this argument, Feuerbach relied on an anthropological concept of a "human essence" which was supposed to be alienated and expressed in a projected way through the figures of gods and spirits. To him, communism meant recovering this "human essence," or realizing human nature.⁴

Max Stirner, also part of the Young Hegelian milieu, is an obscure figure who is known primarily for his views expressed most famously in *The Ego and Its Own* (1844). Here, he took aim at the anthropological humanism of Feuerbach, along with Christianity, Judaism, liberalism, communism, private property, the state, and many other concepts. Possibly playing on Hegel, he arranged the course of an individual's life as ascending through psychological-philosophical stages from childhood to old age, repeated on a social scale in the ascendance of races from "Negroidity" to Caucasians who become "*really Caucasians*" in discovering egoism.⁵

Stirner opened his book with the now famous line: "All things are nothing to me."⁶ He expressed his lack of interest in various causes, from that of God to humanity, pointing out mockingly that every other concept gets to have its "egoism" over the world while the cause of the Unique, is "never to be my concern."⁷ Against these abstract concepts which try to subordinate the UNique to their cause, he says that his concern is "only what is mine [das Meinige], and that

² Zhang Yibing, *Back to Marx: Changes of Philosophical Discourse in the Context of Economics* (Göttingen University Press, 2014), pp. 67–68.

³ Zhang, *Back to Marx*, pp. 68–69.

⁴ "What do I take as my principle? Ego and alter ego; 'egoism' and 'communism'; for both are as inseparable as head and heart. Without egoism, you have no head; without communism, you have no heart," Zawar Hanfi, trans., "Fragments Concerning the Characteristics of My Philosophical Development," in *The Fiery Brook: Selected Writings*, by Ludwig Feuerbach (London, United Kingdom; New York, New York: Verso Books, 2012), 265–96. This quote should be taken in the context of Feuerbach's earlier identification of love (heart) and reason (head) as key components of the natural being of "man," "What, then, is the nature of man, of which he is conscious, or what constitutes the specific distinction, the proper humanity of man? Reason, Will, Affection. To a complete man belong the power of thought, the power of will, the power of affection. The power of thought is the light of the intellect, the power of will is energy of character, the power of affection is love. Reason, love, force of will, are perfections—the perfections of the human being—nay, more, they are absolute perfections of being. To will, to love, to think, are the highest powers, are the absolute nature of man as man, and the basis of his existence. Man exists to think, to love, to will," Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. Marian Evans, 2nd ed. (London, United Kingdom: Trübner & Co, 1881), p. 3.

⁵ Max Stirner, *The Ego and Its Own*, ed. David Leopold (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 62–64.

⁶ Stirner, *The Ego and Its Own*, p. 5.

⁷ Stirner, *The Ego and Its Own*, p. 5.

is not a general one, but is — unique [einzig], as I am unique.”⁸ The Unique is beyond conceptualization. The Unique is so concrete as to be beyond concepts, which are always too abstract for it.

The Unique, in fact, is concrete beyond concreteness, which designates a specific thing: “[...]I am the creative nothing [*schöpferische Nichts*], the nothing out of which I myself as creator create everything.”⁹ This line expresses a proto-existentialist philosophy of freedom. It should be paired with a later paragraph, the last line of which is now infamous but is rarely understood:

As I find myself behind things, and that as mind, so I must later find myself also behind thoughts, namely, as their creator and owner [Schöpfer und Eigner]. In the time of spirits thoughts grew until they overtopped my head, whose offspring they yet were; they hovered about me and convulsed me like fever-phantasies, an awful power. The thoughts had become corporeal on their own account, were ghosts, such as God, emperor, Pope, fatherland, etc. If I destroy their corporeity, then I take them back into mine, and say: ‘I alone am corporeal’. And now I take the world as what it is to me, as mine, as my property [Eigentum]; I refer all to myself.¹⁰

This last line is usually interpreted as Stirner literally claiming the entire world as his private property. Stirner is apparently trying to take private ownership of everything that he possibly can. In light of the context I have given, it is hopefully clear that this is an uncharitable and narrow reading. Stirner is instead speaking in almost proto-existentialist terms. He is a perspectivist — the world is the “property” of the “I” in the sense of being the creation of its perception. We do not view the world from nowhere, but from the perspective of the “I.” The “I” creates and arranges the world from its standpoint, which cannot be interchanged with any other standpoint.

The independent existence of the “Other” (whether “God, emperor, Pope, fatherland,” or something else) is merely the creation of the “I,” the self-alienation of the Unique. Things can only have power over us only if we identify them with our interest. The power of “spirits” (abstract concepts) over the Unique is their egoism — and their egoism is merely a quality borrowed from the Unique, which creates them out of itself. In this way, his discourse is similar to that of his contemporaries Ludwig Feuerbach and Moses Hess. Feuerbach said that God was the self-alienation of Man, Hess said that money was the self-alienation of man, while Stirner said that spirits are the self-alienation of the Unique. The uniqueness of Stirner in this milieu was that the “Unique” was meant as a basically empty concept. It was meant as a concept beyond conceptualization.

Stirner’s Unique refrains from social doctrines out of its very abstractness. Stirner rejects society-as-such.¹¹ He attacks private property and money, right alongside socialized property. He considers them spirits repressing the flourishing of the Unique through law and the state.¹² He does not believe the Unique flourishes either through private property or the lack of it. Private property is not actually the “property” of the Unique’s perspective, as it is guaranteed through the state (a spirit), while socialists do not appreciate the inherent proprietorship of existing as an Unique. Against any abstract social notion of property or ownership, Stirner says that his

⁸ Stirner, *The Ego and Its Own*, p. 7.

⁹ Stirner, *The Ego and Its Own*, p. 7.

¹⁰ Stirner, *The Ego and Its Own*, p. 17.

¹¹ Stirner, *The Ego and Its Own*, p. 271.

¹² Stirner, *The Ego and Its Own*, p. 115.

property is “Nothing but what is in my power! To what property am I entitled? To every property to which I empower myself. I give myself the right of property in taking property to myself, or giving myself the proprietor’s power, full power, empowerment.”¹³

Stirner turns from a critique of the state as alien to the interests of the Unique to calling for a “Union of Egoists.”¹⁴ This is meant to be an association where the self-interest of each Ego is meant to be the premise of association. Of course, such self-interest remains abstract and open by the very nature of Stirner’s philosophy, and his amoralism also means he considers it immaterial whether the Unique subordinates another for its interests or not. Nevertheless, the truth of his philosophy comes out as ultimately non-reactionary. The conclusion of Stirner’s book ultimately places his understanding of the flourishing of the Unique in the power of self-creation, which is necessarily a creative negativity:

I am owner of my might, and I am so when I know myself as unique. In the unique one the owner himself returns into his creative nothing, of which he is born. Every higher essence above me, be it God, be it man, weakens the feeling of my uniqueness, and pales only before the sun of this consciousness. If I concern myself for myself, the unique one, then my concern rests on its transitory, mortal creator, who consumes himself, and I may say: “All things are nothing to me.”¹⁵

Stirner is an “active nihilist” — the world has no fundamental meaning, so one should exercise one’s power and create one’s own meanings.¹⁶ All the old spirits fall apart upon the Unique’s realization of their basis in the creative power of itself. Everything is ultimately the creation of the Unique, and dispelling the spirits is simply a realization of this fact. It might create a crisis of meaning for someone so deeply dependent on the egoistic interests of the spirits, but this crisis is necessary in order to return to the truth of the “creative nothing” — the true creator of these values, these spirits. We must create our own values based on our egoistic interests, we must have values which emerge purely out of the perspective of the Unique.

This all-destroying critique of abstract concepts and affirmation of the Unique’s uniqueness interested and troubled the young Marx and Engels.¹⁷ One thing was for sure: Stirner had destroyed the intellectual viability of Feuerbach’s humanism. It seemed ridiculous to say that “Man,” as an incredibly abstract concept, could have any particular “essence” or nature in light of Stirner’s criticisms. Where could one really locate that “essence” in actual, specific individuals? Further, how could one claim capitalist society alienates us from that “essence” if that “essence” cannot even be pinned down beyond historical, social, and individual variability?

Thus, before trying to refute Stirner, Marx and Engels incorporated his insights. One November 19, 1844 letter of Engels to Marx is especially demonstrative of their attempts:

We must not simply cast it aside, but rather use it as the perfect expression of present-day folly and, while inverting it, continue to build on it. This egoism is taken to such a pitch, it is so absurd and at the same time so self-aware, that it cannot maintain

¹³ Stirner, *The Ego and Its Own*, p. 227.

¹⁴ Stirner, *The Ego and Its Own*, p. 161.

¹⁵ Stirner, *The Ego and Its Own*, p. 324.

¹⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, ed. Walter Kaufmann, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York, New York: Vintage Books, 1968), p. 17.

¹⁷ Zhang, *Back to Marx*, pp. 233–234.

itself even for an instant in its one-sidedness, but must immediately change into communism. In the first place it's a simple matter to prove to Stirner that his egoistic man is bound to become communist out of sheer egoism.¹⁸

This is working well within Stirner's home field. Engels suggests arguing that communism is the natural form which a "Union of Egoists" would take. The basic abstract Unique, which transcends history and society, remains secure as the basic foundation from which we engage in the world. The rejection of bourgeois society is thus purely on the grounds of this Egoism — it is a rejection beyond history on the basis of a concept beyond history.

Marx, making his break with Feuerbach's humanism, began to approach this dilemma from another angle. The idea of an abstract "Man" could of course not be affirmed, but could the category of "Man" or "society" really be characterized merely as spirits produced by the Unique? Neither the abstract generalization, nor the empty, ahistorical and asocial individual seemed to make sense as starting points. Working over this issue of individual (Unique) and universal (Man), Marx made a breakthrough in his Theses on Feuerbach (1845): "Feuerbach resolves the essence of religion into the essence of man. But the essence of man is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of the social relations."¹⁹ Both abstract "Man" and the arch-individualist Unique are two sides of the same coin. The transcendence of this dualism, between the individual and general, is through realizing the social character of the individual and the individual as the basis of society. "Humanity" is no abstract essence, but is simply the whole of "the ensemble of the social relations." The same is true of the "Unique" which is beyond history, as the isolated individual. The individual itself is a product of a certain arrangement of social relations. Our perspectives, from out of our "I," are already laden with ways of thinking and attributing meaning which come from the history of society — most obviously in language.

Revolution thus cannot rest on the secure foundation of either "Man" or the "Unique," but must work from these social individuals to the transformation of society as a whole. There is no ultimate, transcendent foundation which we can rely on for revolution — there is only what is possible out of the immanence of "the ensemble of social relations." As Marx expresses it: "The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-change can be conceived and rationally understood only as revolutionary practice."²⁰

This is the revolutionary dialectic, the immanent critique, which became central to Marx's later analysis of capitalism. When Marx and Engels set out to critique the Young Hegelians as a whole in what we now know as *The German Ideology* (1846), Marx began to formulate this new perspective directly against Stirner. Stirner had led him beyond both Feuerbach's "Man," and Marx now stepped beyond Stirner's own "Unique." This text is now known as one of the earliest expressions of historical materialism proper, and his approach is especially strengthened in his critique of Stirner.

While *Theses on Feuerbach* had broken apart both the concepts of abstract "Man" and the "Unique," Marx had to also address the issue of alienated powers. If there was neither a "Man" nor an "Unique" which could alienate their own "essential" powers into things outside and above

¹⁸ Friedrich Engels, *Marx & Engels Collected Works: Letters 1844–1851*, vol. 38 (Lawrence & Wishart, 2010), pp. 11–12.

¹⁹ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, including *Theses on Feuerbach* (Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 1998), p. 570.

²⁰ Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach*, p. 570.

them, then how could social domination be explained? Marx began to answer this by critiquing Stirner's own answer to the phenomenon of domination:

Further, the man who, as a youth, stuffed his head with all kinds of nonsense about existing powers and relations such as the Emperor, the Fatherland, the state, etc., and knew them only as his own 'delirious fantasies', in the form of his conceptions — this man, according to Saint Max, actually destroys all these powers by getting out of his head his false opinion of them.²¹

This is Stirner's notion of the Unique returning to itself. These spirits only have power if the Unique alienates itself into them (that is, they only have power over us if we grant it to them with our consent). Therefore, we escape their power by clearing away these spirits, by recognizing our Unique as the center of our world. For Marx, this simply means that Stirner clears away his mystified concepts of these social powers as morally good and justified, and thinks that by choosing his own Unique's interest that he escapes their actual, material power. Marx responds:

On the contrary: now that he no longer looks at the world through the spectacles of his fantasy, he has to think of the practical interrelations of the world, to get to know them and to act in accordance with them. By destroying the fantastic corporeality which the world had for him, he finds its real corporeality outside his fantasy. With the disappearance of the spectral corporeality of the Emperor, what disappears for him is not the corporeality, but the spectral character of the Emperor, the actual power of whom he can now at last appreciate in all its scope[...]²²

These powers do not merely emanate from the consent of individuals, but exist objectively regardless of our subjective consciousness of them. Carrying out an act of will, breaking the identification of our Unique with them, does not actually break their power. Their power does not come merely out of our identification with them, our subjective consent to them, but through all the complex "practical interrelations of the world." Think about our own world of bureaucracy, law, private property, and money. They are certainly bound up with all kinds of subjective delusions and ridiculous beliefs, but they have a concrete power in our lives.

Money becomes necessary with a given arrangement of society. It tends to be associated with massive empires, dense social systems, and with the power of the state in exchange. In other words, it is the "universal" in a society that has become complex and 'split'. At the same time, money is not strictly necessary or the only way to organize a complex society. Some highly dense societies have existed without money, like Tawantinsuyu in the Andes, so it is not the only way to express a universal. It is historically and socially specific, and has elements of both social necessity and contingency.

State power similarly is not merely illusory even in its mythic nature. Organized, official, public, civilian police forces are a historically modern phenomenon. Nevertheless, both their physical power and their historically developed moral sanctifications — "To Protect and Serve," for example — are real limitations. Agency is specific to a specific situation, not the unlimited choice of the Unique. We might act in the world from a specific perspective, but from the beginning of our lives we think and act in an existing network of social relations which we must work through.

²¹ Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, p. 137.

²² Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, p. 137.

For Marx, we thus cannot rely on liberation out of the “Unique.” Revolution must work through that network of social relations itself. Breaking the “spectral” appearances of things is a necessary step for changing our situation, but it is only a beginning. We change ourselves and the world, one intertwined with the other. By insisting on the abstract “Unique” as our foundation, we merely naturalize our historically-specific situation of an alienated world. That very alienated world is the condition for us to insist on our “Unique.”

Marx does not entirely disagree with Stirner’s critique of abstract categories here, but believes that these abstract categories are still operative on a social level. Yes, the categories are incoherent, but their apparent coherence comes from the practice of everyday life conjuring them up (the base-superstructure analogy was meant to describe this). They emerge out of specific arrangements of our complexes of relationships. A revolutionary dialectic means to work through the incoherence of the categories practically, to dissolve them practically rather than contemplatively. One abolishes them through a practical critique which reveals their historical transience out of their own historical conditions of existence.

Marx’s use of an altered egoist communist argument from Engels’ letter reveals the incorporation of this dialectic into his new concept of communism:

Communism is quite incomprehensible to our saint because the communists do not oppose egoism to selflessness or selflessness to egoism, nor do they express this contradiction theoretically either in its sentimental or in its highflown ideological form; they rather demonstrate its material source, with which it disappears of itself. The communists do not preach morality at all, as Stirner does so extensively. They do not put to people the moral demand: love one another, do not be egoists, etc.; on the contrary, they are very well aware that egoism, just as much as selflessness, is in definite circumstances a necessary form of the self-assertion of individuals[...]²³

Marx recovers elements of Stirner’s arguments that bourgeois private property represents a repression of the individual’s flourishing. Communists need not appeal to morality, as Feuerbach and Hess do, but can work through the interests of these social individuals to glimpses of a new world. It is this very contradiction between individuals and the conditions of existence which they originally create that leads to the need for revolution. Marx continues:

Communist theoreticians, the only communists who have time to devote to the study of history, are distinguished precisely by the fact that they alone have discovered that throughout history the ‘general interest’ is created by individuals who are defined as ‘private persons’. They know that this contradiction is only a seeming one because one side of it, what is called the ‘general interest; is constantly being produced by the other side, private interest, and in relation to the latter it is by no means an independent force with an independent history — so that this contradiction is in practice constantly destroyed and reproduced. Hence it is not a question of the Hegelian ‘negative unity’ of two sides of a contradiction, but of the materially determined destruction of the preceding materially determined mode of life of individuals, with the disappearance of which this contradiction together with its unity also disappears.²⁴

Communism emerges out of the concrete developments of society and its history itself by way of these individuals. The revolutionary action of these individuals is not, however, the ahistorical

²³ Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, p. 264.

²⁴ Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, pp. 264–265.

and asocial agency of the Unique. It is instead situated, historically specific freedom which is freedom within an already defined situation. That situation is the ground and premise for that freedom, but that freedom also enables transcendence from beyond that ground. In this sense, Marx incorporates elements of Stirner's identification of the Unique with the "creative nothing." What he does to go beyond Stirner is to point out the emptiness of the Unique's emptiness. The individual is nothing in particular, not even a foundation of emptiness from which freedom emanates. Freedom is always already social and historical, and thus the flourishing of freedom can only be realized by working through the dialectics of history.

PROUDHON'S JUSTICE

Having clarified his new, critical dialectic out of his engagement with Stirner, Marx continued to follow this thread in theory and practice. While in exile in France in the early 1840s, he had engaged with the radical democratic circles of Paris. He became acquainted with the darling of radical Parisian politics, Pierre Joseph-Proudhon. Proudhon published *What is Property?* in 1840, which popularized the well-known slogan "Property is theft!"²⁵ Though he criticized private property, he did not wish to necessarily abolish it. Instead, almost like Thomas Paine in *Agrarian Justice* (1797), he wanted to allow only property which was the product of the individual's labor — or perhaps he would prefer to say "individual possession."²⁶

That individual labor would be the basis of a truly "free market," where each could exchange the products of their labor with the other according to their self-interest. This way, the interests of the individual and society were supposed to be reconciled. Such a system was apparently the solution to the issues of both capitalism and communism. Proudhon was also the first person to refer to himself positively as an anarchist, creating the modern circle-A symbol for anarchism with the slogan "Anarchy is Order."²⁷ Nevertheless, most anarchists today are not very similar to him ideologically. Most are social anarchists, a subject to be taken up below.

Marx, like many in his generation, was initially strongly influenced by *What is Property?*.²⁸ He was especially interested in Proudhon's use of categories from political economy to demonstrate the irrationality of bourgeois society. This seemed to promise a popularization of immanent critique as a revolutionary method.

In 1846, Proudhon published his *System of Economic Contradictions, or the Philosophy of Poverty*. This was supposed to incorporate the science of dialectic into a general philosophical system definitively proving the irrationality of capitalism and the need for a different system in the name of individuality's flourishing. Marx considered it to instead be a bad joke. In 1847, he published a harsh response titled *The Poverty of Philosophy*. He immediately opened by mocking Proudhon's political economy and philosophy alike:

M. Proudhon has the misfortune of being peculiarly misunderstood in Europe. In France, he has the right to be a bad economist, because he is reputed to be a good German philosopher. In Germany, he has the right to be a bad philosopher, because

²⁵ Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, *What is Property?*, ed. and trans. Donald R. Kelley and Bonnie G. Smith (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 13.

²⁶ Proudhon, *What Is Property?*, pp. 214–216.

²⁷ Proudhon, *What Is Property?*, p. 205.

²⁸ Zhang, *Back to Marx*, pp. 62–63.

he is reputed to be one of the ablest of French economists. Being both a German and an economist at the same time, we desire to protest against this double error.²⁹

Marx's critique of this try at dialectic is the central theme of the book. His specific criticisms of Proudhon, and what he suggests instead, thus represent another point along the thread of his dialectic of capitalism. Proudhon's philosophy is significantly more eclectic than Stirner's, and also significantly less relevant to modern anarchism. Nevertheless, his concept of dialectic and the issues which Marx sees in it relate directly to the criticisms Marx already levied at Stirner.

In a high point of *Poverty*, Marx attacks Proudhon harshly for speaking of dialectic as a contradiction between good and bad, where one must preserve the good and get rid of the bad.³⁰ Marx immediately exposes the ridiculousness this approach using the example of slavery:

Slavery is an economic category like any other. Thus it also has its two sides. Let us leave alone the bad side and talk about the good side of slavery. Needless to say we are dealing only with direct slavery, with Negro slavery in Suriname, in Brazil, in the Southern States of North America[...]³¹

What would M. Proudhon do to save slavery? He would formulate the problem thus: preserve the good side of this economic category, eliminate the bad.³²

Though Proudhon operates under the nominal cover of dialectic, there is no dialectic in his approach. The "negativity" in it is not negation, it is just what is "bad." There is no "creative nothing," no transcendence. Every unity, every category, is basically taken as a given in this approach. It is quite literally one-sided. Proudhon cannot see that the "good" and "bad" side of things are an identity. To dialectically transcend something does not mean preserving the "good" in it, but to escape the framing of the contradiction or opposition entirely. Instead of the "good" or "bad" side of slavery, abolish slavery and universalize "free" wage labor. This does not mean the new, emergent category is necessarily the penultimate "good" – the entire point is that it is only a moment. It will fall away through the practical critique of historical actors as well.

Marx emphasizes the importance of this creativity in dialectic further along, still critiquing the ridiculous good-bad dialectic:

Indeed, from the moment the process of the dialectic movement is reduced to the simple process of opposing good to bad, of posing problems tending to eliminate the bad, and of administering one category as an antidote to another, the categories are deprived of all spontaneity; the idea 'no longer functions'; there is no life left in it. It is no longer posed or decomposed into categories. The sequence of categories has become a sort of scaffolding. Dialectics has ceased to be the movement of absolute reason. There is no longer any dialectics but only, at the most, absolutely pure morality.³³

²⁹ Karl Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy* (Paris, France: Foreign Languages Press, 2021), p. 22.

³⁰ Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy*, pp. 102–103.

³¹ Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy*, p. 103.

³² Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy*, p. 105.

³³ Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy*, p. 104.

In some ways, Marx sounds much like Stirner here. To speak in moralizing terms like Proudhon does, trying to realize principles of “eternal justice”, is to put things beyond the power and innovation of individuals. Everything is already decided from the outset. There is no longer the negative-creative power of historical actors. While Stirner would say that this moralizing is morality as a spirit created by the Unique, Marx would say that this is a limitation of a historical dialectic within the terms of capitalism. Because Proudhon lacks the negative-creative character of dialectic, Marx says:

He takes the first category that comes handy and attributes to it arbitrarily the quality of supplying a remedy for the drawbacks of the category to be purified. Thus, if we are to believe M. Proudhon, taxes remedy the drawbacks of monopoly; the balance of trade, the drawbacks of taxes; landed property, the drawbacks of credit.³⁴

In a sense, Proudhon becomes basically reformist. This character which Marx identifies would later become the ground for Proudhon’s gradualism.³⁵ Marx goes further in his critique of Proudhon, arguing explicitly that Proudhon’s vision of a “just” and “good” society is well within the bounds of capitalist society:

In any case, it will think it very naive that M. Proudhon should give as ‘revolutionary theory of the future’ what [David] Ricardo expounded scientifically as the theory of present-day society, of bourgeois society[...]³⁶

Ricardo shows us the real movement of bourgeois production, which constitutes value. M. Proudhon, leaving this real movement out of account, ‘fumes and frets’ in order to invent new processes and to achieve the reorganization of the world on a would-be new formula, which formula is no more than the theoretical expression of the real movement which exists and which is so well described by Ricardo.³⁷

Proudhon’s cooperative market system (mutualism), which is supposed to be a truly “free” market, is simply the conscience of capitalism. Value cannot be the basis of a new society, or for revolutionary arguments about equality and social worth. To argue for the equality of human beings based on the equality of their labor’s value is to simply think like a capitalist.³⁸ It is to be complacent with the homogenization wrought by the domination of valorization. It is to be complacent with the domination of living workers by their dead labor in the form of a commodity and in the form of the capital that they feed.

The point of communist revolution is to abolish value production, not to give each individual ‘the full value of their labor.’ To try and realize “justice” within bourgeois society is merely to try and realize bourgeois justice. It means to internalize capitalism into our vision of an alternative to it. This is where Marx’s engagement with Stirner continued to influence his dialectic. Proudhon’s

³⁴ L. Gambone, “Proudhon’s Libertarian Thought and the Anarchist Movement,” Spunk Library, 1996, <http://www.spunk.org/texts/writers/proudhon/sp001863.html>.

³⁵ L. Gambone, “Proudhon’s Libertarian Thought and the Anarchist Movement,” Spunk Library, 1996, <http://www.spunk.org/texts/writers/proudhon/sp001863.html>.

³⁶ Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy*, p. 43.

³⁷ Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy*, p. 48.

³⁸ Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy*, p. 48.

moralism simply meant the domination of working individuals by the abstract and impersonal power of capital.

Out of this critique, Marx emerged with a clearer understanding of capitalism and the necessary revolution against it. He would continue to return to Proudhon in order to contrast his own dialectic to Proudhon's complacent "dialectic." In the midst of writing *Capital*, he responded to a letter from J. B. Schweitzer asking for his evaluation of Proudhon. In the January 24, 1865 response, he expressed his quite harsh re-appraisal of Proudhon's older work, *What is Property?*:

The very title of the book indicates its shortcomings. The question is so badly formulated that it cannot be answered correctly. Ancient 'property relations' were superseded by feudal property relations and these by 'bourgeois' property relations. Thus history itself had expressed its criticism upon past property relations. What Proudhon was actually dealing with was modern bourgeois property as it exists today.³⁹

Marx, as in his critique of Stirner, chastises Proudhon for his lack of historical specificity. When one speaks of "property," one must mean a specific arrangement of relations. There is no property-as-such. There is always a very specific form of property, which exists in a specific arrangement of social relations. Marx continues:

The question of what this is could have only been answered by a critical analysis of 'political economy,' embracing the totality of these property relations, considering not their legal aspect as relations of volition but their real form, that is, as relations of production. But as Proudhon entangled the whole of these economic relations in the general legal concept of 'property,' he could not get beyond the answer which, in a similar work published before 1789, Brissot had already given in the same words: 'Property is theft.'⁴⁰

Marx considers the legal aspects of property as their codifications in officialdom rather than being their "real form." Proudhon does not think of property as a social relation, but as a thing. Not only that, he does not think of property as variable — not as "relations of production" embracing "the totality of these property relations." It should be remembered that in 1844, Marx had already said that alienated labor precedes private property. He had been emphasizing the primacy of social relations to social forms for a long time.⁴¹ Proudhon remains stultified by his overly generalizing concept of property, which he sticks to out of his fixation with "eternal" definitions of a morally good order. Marx goes on to mock the very slogan of "property is theft":

The upshot is at best that the bourgeois legal conceptions of 'theft' apply equally well to the 'honest' gains of the bourgeois himself. On the other hand, since 'theft' as a forcible violation of property presupposes the existence of property, Proudhon entangled himself in all sorts of fantasies, obscure even to himself, about true bourgeois property.⁴²

Here, Marx actually sounds almost exactly like Stirner. Stirner himself had said that the idea of property being theft presupposes a validity of some notion of property or ownership anyways.⁴³ Like Stirner, Marx saw such a slogan as purely speaking within the terms of the society

³⁹ Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy*, p. 202.

⁴⁰ Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy*, p. 202.

⁴¹ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 and the Communist Manifesto* (New York, New York: Prometheus Books, 1988), p. 81.

⁴² Stirner, *The Ego and Its Own*, p. 223.

⁴³ Stirner, *The Ego and Its Own*, p. 223.

one is trying to criticize. However, he again distinguishes himself from Stirner in his critique of Proudhon:

[Proudhon] shares the illusions of speculative philosophy for he does not regard economic categories as the theoretical expression of historical relations of production, corresponding to a particular stage of development in material production, but arbitrarily transforms them into pre-existing eternal ideas, and that in this roundabout way he arrives once more at the standpoint of bourgeois economy.⁴⁴

Marx's critique of Proudhon centers on his fixation with "eternal justice," with moralizing critique. He again emphasizes the social-historical specificity of the categories in our lives, hitting a rather anti-foundationalist point. From his earlier critiques of "Man" and "Ego," he added a critique of "Eternal Justice."

BAKUNIN'S NATURAL-BEING

To make a step towards modern anarchism, we must step into social anarchism. Social anarchism refers generally to those schools of anarchism which emphasize forms of collectivity, variously defined, as a means of liberation. Typically this means placing weight in collective struggle and alternatives to the state and capital in communal life.

This is not to say social anarchism is strictly delineated from all other forms of anarchism. It is simply a general theme which has now come to the forefront in global anarchism since the beginning of the 20th century. Social anarchists similarly warrant an especially interesting and fruitful comparison to Marx in their closeness and distance. Mikhail Bakunin is the most obvious example.

The issue of Bakunin and Marx's conflicts with him in the 1870s are quite well-trodden at this point. The arguments of the two sections of the International Workingmen's Association, 'anti-statist' and 'state socialist,' are commonplace. I am not interested here in the debates over whether Marx acted authoritarian in his role, or whether this or that detail was justified or not. Instead, I want to continue the thread through their philosophical disagreements and the substance of Marx's critique of Bakunin.

The main disagreement between Marx and Bakunin typically commented on is the issue of the state and of participation in parliaments. Apparently, Marx was the 'statist' and Bakunin the 'anti-statist.' Partisans of both positions agree with the characterization. This does not get to the root of the matter, however. Marx was no mere 'statist,' as his endorsement of the 1871 Paris Commune as the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' and his criticisms of Ferdinand Lassalle make clear.⁴⁵ The disagreements between the two go deeper, into their concepts of humanity and revolution themselves.

Bakunin's major difference from Marx lay ultimately in his concept of a human nature. He argued that there was, in every person, an animalistic-humanistic instinct towards "natural justice," and that "natural impulses" are already in accordance with "natural law."⁴⁶ To him, revolution

⁴⁴ Hudis, *Marx's Concept of the Alternative to Capitalism*, p. 204.

⁴⁵ Hudis, *Marx's Concept of the Alternative to Capitalism*, p. 204.

⁴⁶ Mikhail Bakunin, *God and the State* (New York, New York: Dover Publications, 1970), p. 30; Ann Robertson, "The Philosophical Roots of the Marx-Bakunin Conflict," *Marxists Internet Archive*, December 2003, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/bakunin/bio/robertson-ann.htm>.

meant the freedom of these “natural impulses” to roam, both without limitation by other individuals and through cooperation with other individuals.⁴⁷ In quite Enlightenment-derived terms, Bakunin identified justice with the laws of nature, and argued that:

Respect for man is the supreme law of Humanity, and that the great, the real object of history, its only legitimate object, is the humanization and emancipation, the real liberty, the prosperity and happiness of each individual living in society.⁴⁸

For Bakunin, humans were both “the highest manifestation of animality,” or of the natural order, and humanized in “the deliberate and gradual negation of the animal element in man.”⁴⁹ Though emphasizing this conscious element of human beings, he did not believe that human society was arbitrarily created out of random decisions of individuals. Instead, contrasting natural laws to laws made by human societies and standing above individuals, he said that the laws of human nature “are inherent in us; they constitute our being, our whole being, physically, intellectually, and morally: we live, we breathe, we act, we think, we wish only through these laws. Without them we are nothing, we are not.”⁵⁰

These natural laws are identical to our very being. In this way, Bakunin has some relation to Feuerbach’s humanism. Human beings are free to create themselves, but do so within the framing of their very species-being. Thus, liberty means to act in accordance with human nature, with natural laws, themselves.⁵¹ These natural laws further extend to our being “intellectually” and “morally” — meaning that our opinions and moral conscience are expressions of our very being. We must be free to think, believe, feel what we desire, because that is an expression of our very natural-being.⁵² A free society, an anarchist society, would mean an association premised on the liberation of our natural-being impulses and drives.

Bakunin’s naturalistic thinking ultimately colored his conflict with Marx. His criticisms of Marx continuously come back to this theme, whether in ways that are still familiar or seem very outdated. Beginning in the essays that became *Marxism, Freedom, and the State* (1867–1872), Bakunin publicized his analysis of the International’s split. He famously engages with Marx as a “statist,” but the other elements of his criticisms are not as well known. Earlier, Marx and Engels had attacked him for his racialist Pan-Slavism.⁵³ Bakunin tried to turn this accusation of nationalism against them, claiming that Marx emerged as the true chauvinist: “The policy of [Otto von] Bismarck is that of the present; the policy of Marx, who considers himself at least as his successor, and his continuator, is that of the future.”⁵⁴

Bakunin believed that Marx saw history as simply stages along the way to the universalization of Western European-style capitalism across the world, then to a “People’s State,” and then to a communist promise which the “People’s State” could never deliver.⁵⁵ Ultimately, he attributed this intractable difference between himself and Marx to a difference in national-racial being:

⁴⁷ Robertson, “Philosophical Roots.”

⁴⁸ Bakunin, *God and the State*, p. 57.

⁴⁹ Bakunin, *God and the State*, p. 10.

⁵⁰ Bakunin, *God and the State*, p. 29.

⁵¹ Bakunin, *God and the State*, p. 30.

⁵² Robertson, “Philosophical Roots.”

⁵³ Henryk Katz, *The Emancipation of Labor: A History of the First International* (New York, New York: Greenwood Press, 1992), pp. 99–100.

⁵⁴ Mikhail Bakunin, *Marxism, Freedom and the State* (Anarchy is Order, 1999), p. 36.

⁵⁵ Bakunin, *Marxism, Freedom and the State*, pp. 66–68.

Let us consider the real, national policy of Marx himself. Like Bismarck, he is a German patriot. He desires the greatness and power of Germany as a State. No one anyway will count it a crime in him to love his country and his people; and since he is so profoundly convinced that the State is the condition sine qua non of the prosperity of the one and the emancipation of the other, it will be found natural that he should desire to see Germany organized into a very large and very powerful State, since weak and small States always run the risk of seeing themselves swallowed up. Consequently Marx as a clear-sighted and ardent patriot, must wish for the greatness and strength of Germany as a State.⁵⁶

Bakunin does not consider Marx's nationalism to be objectionable in itself — he says that such a thing is a natural impulse. His Pan-Germanism is a naturally German desire, a desire inherent to identification with Germany. Marx's natural nationalist tendency, unobjectionable in itself, has overextended into a misguided statism. This statism, in order to maintain itself, in turn expands both Germany and bourgeois civilization across Europe.⁵⁷ Power corrupts, power justifies power.

Bakunin appeals to the German proletariat against Marx's ostensible Pan-German aspirations, characterizing his statism as in fact anti-national.⁵⁸

Regardless of this anti-national character of Pan-Germanism, Bakunin addresses himself primarily to “the Latin and Slav toilers” as allies against Marx.⁵⁹ With the Latin “race” being “tired of bourgeois civilization” and the Slav “race” being “almost ignorant of it and despising it by instinct,” the two appeared to Bakunin as a much more natural source of revolutionary initiative.⁶⁰ To him, their natural-being was purer, less obscured by the artifice of bourgeois civilization compared to the Germans. Thus, his naturalist-humanist perspective extended also into a certain racialism, an appeal to the natural-being of national characters.

In his *Statism and Anarchy* (1873), Bakunin continued this style of critique against Marx. He appealed once again to the natural anarcho-communalistic tendencies of the “Slavic race” against the statist tendencies of Germans.⁶¹ He went further than before, taking his characterization of Marx's “statism” as anti-national to new levels. He blamed Marx's characteristics on his Jewishness here instead of his Germanness:

By origin Marx is a Jew. One might say that he combines all of the positive qualities and all of the shortcomings of that capable race. A nervous man, some say to the point of cowardice, he is extremely ambitious and vain, quarrelsome, intolerant, and absolute, like Jehovah, the Lord God of his ancestors, and, like him, vengeful to the point of madness.⁶²

⁵⁶ Bakunin, *Marxism, Freedom and the State*, p. 51.

⁵⁷ Bakunin, *Marxism, Freedom and the State*, pp. 64–67.

⁵⁸ Bakunin, *Marxism, Freedom and the State*, pp. 64–65.

⁵⁹ Bakunin, *Marxism, Freedom and the State*, p. 68.

⁶⁰ Bakunin, *Marxism, Freedom and the State*, pp. 67–68.

⁶¹ Mikhail Bakunin, *Statism and Anarchy*, ed. Marshall Shatz (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 37–40.

⁶² Bakunin, *Statism and Anarchy*, p. 140.

Marx's very natural-being was simply defined by his Jewishness. As a Jew, he was thus naturally cunning and deceitful.⁶³ This was not merely a choice, but an expression of his very Jewish-being. Earlier, in an 1871 private letter, Bakunin had gone much further than this in his anti-semitism. Sounding much like Goebbels, he claimed:

This entire Jewish world, which forms a single profiteering sect, a people of blood-suckers, a single gluttonous parasite, closely and intimately united not only across national borders but across all differences of political opinion — this Jewish world today stands for the most part at the disposal of Marx and at the same time at the disposal of Rothschild. I am certain that Rothschild for his part greatly values the merits of Marx, and that Marx for his part feels instinctive attraction and great respect for Rothschild.⁶⁴

Thus, the reactionary potentials of Bakunin's natural-being theory become very clear. Marx conspired to accumulate power out of the Jewishness of his being. Marx saw progressive potential in capitalism because he admired the Jewish financiers who were supposed to control the capitalist system. The obvious conclusion, if this was the natural-being of the "Jewish race," would be their extermination. This is where Bakunin's criticism flies off of a cliff into a 19th century predecessor to fascism.

Marx's response to Bakunin's criticism did not focus on his antisemitic remarks. This is not very surprising, since Marx tended to downplay or avoid directly acknowledging his Jewishness in political contexts. His counter-critique does, however, reach to the philosophy behind Bakunin's natural-being racism. In a notebook, Marx responded to Bakunin's criticisms while analyzing Statism and Anarchy. Directly addressing the claim that he was complacent with capitalism as "progressive" and thus identified with Pan-Germanism, Marx replied:

He understands absolutely nothing about the social revolution, only its political phrases. Its economic conditions do not exist for him. As all hitherto existing economic forms, developed or undeveloped, involve the enslavement of the worker (whether in the form of wage-labourer, peasant etc.), he believes that a radical revolution is possible in all such forms alike[...] The will, and not the economic conditions, is the foundation of his social revolution.⁶⁵

Marx is not satisfied with Bakunin's argument from out of human nature. This natural-being philosophy lies behind Bakunin's belief that "a radical revolution is possible in all such forms alike[...]" Revolution emerges out of our very being, which perhaps takes on the tone of a racial being. That is, revolution emerges from willpower, rather than emerging immanently from specific social relations. Here, Marx's criticisms of Stirner resurface in a different form.

Bakunin also does not see the presence of proletarian revolution as already a possibility in capitalist development. To Marx, the rise of the "collective worker" out of capitalist universal dependency, tying the new class of proletarians to all of society through the market, represents

⁶³ Bakunin, *Statism and Anarchy*, pp. 140–141.

⁶⁴ Mikhail Bakunin, "On Marx and Rothschild," *libcom.org*, 1871, <https://libcom.org/library/bakunin-marx-rothschild>.

⁶⁵ Karl Marx, "Conspectus of Bakunin's 'Statism and Anarchy,'" *Marxists Internet Archive*, 1874, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1874/04/bakunin-notes.htm>.

also a universalizing revolutionary subject.⁶⁶ Marx again considers ‘subjective’ and ‘objective’ factors to be inseparable, identical in the form of the proletariat.

In some ways, Marx emerges out of his counter-critique as more individualist than Bakunin. For instance, he quotes Bakunin calling for a system wherein: “The whole people will govern, and there will be no governed.” Against this, Marx says: “If a man rules himself, he does not do so on this principle, for he is after all himself and no other.”⁶⁷ To Marx, “the whole people” is an abstraction. In a sense, “the whole people” has the same issue Bakunin identified with the “People’s State” that he attributed to Marx. If individual self-determination is to be realized, can it be done so with the abstract generality of “the people” as its ground? Once again, he sounds much like Stirner — “for he is after all himself and no other.” Marx believes an emancipated arrangement instead must be premised on individuality on a structural level. It must be a free association of free individuals, in other words.

On this concrete unity of individualities, Marx says: “With collective ownership the so-called people’s will vanishes, to make way for the real will of the cooperative.” The people’s will is basically identified with the abstraction of nation-states, of citizens. Collective ownership and cooperative production instead represent “directly social” ways of relating with others. Collectivity is not premised on an indeterminate mob, but on cooperation of each with all. Their individuality and sociality alike are the premise of the social system. Marx again affirms this principle responding to Bakunin’s questioning of whether his “Worker’s State” could include every worker in governance: “Certainly! Since the whole thing begins with the self-government of the commune.” Marx clearly took great inspiration from the 1871 Paris Commune as a model for the dictatorship of the proletariat. Though he considered this class rule as distinct from the mature communist society to be established, they were to be of the same lineage. The free associative character of communism is already present in the foundational role of the commune to the dictatorship of the proletariat.

On this rule of the proletariat, which is the first step to negating capitalism, Marx responded to Bakunin that: “As the proletariat still acts, during the period of struggle for the overthrow of the old society, on the basis of that old society, and hence also still moves within political forms which more or less belong to it, it has not yet, during this period of struggle, attained its final constitution, and employs means for its liberation which after this liberation fall aside.” Establishing working class government means to move “within political forms which more or less belong” to bourgeois society. That is, the working class is still a class within capitalism and generally a class within class society. Its very distinctness as a class is premised on its identity with capitalists in capitalist society. To abolish the capitalists is to work to abolish its own condition of existence as a class, and thus the very character of class rule (governmental power). Thus, the revolution begins from out of the everyday lives of workers (whether reformist or insurrectionist), reaches a peak in their ascendance to the ruling class of society, and culminates in their abolition of their own class identity as workers.

Here, it is clear that Marx strongly valued the immanence of revolution to the proletariat itself. While Bakunin appealed to ideals embedded in a natural-being, always present behind our specific social situations, Marx appealed to the immanence of revolution in our everyday lives. Marx focused on analyzing capitalism not in order to establish London as the model for the entire

⁶⁶ Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1., pp. 468–469.

⁶⁷ Marx, “*Conspectus*.”

world, but to show that capitalism contains the seeds for its own transcendence. This insight is what he saw lacking in Bakunin. He believed that this led Bakunin to close the gap of Is and Ought with a pure appeal to will, in order for the Ought to break out of the Is.

The philosophical difference between the two also becomes clear in their approaches to strategy. Bakunin engaged in conspiracy to forge tightly disciplined cells of secret societies, working with the Russian nihilist Sergey Nechayev.⁶⁸ He and Nechayev believed that these secret societies were necessary to maintain the natural ideas of liberty, and to disperse them among the spontaneous revolts of workers without trying to lead them. To lead would be to suppress their natural, vital force of instinct. Nevertheless, the ideals needed to be preserved in intellectual form.

Marx, on the other hand, wanted to engage in open struggle and to derive these “ideals” from out of the revolutionary struggles of workers themselves.⁶⁹ Already in *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), he had announced that “communists disdain to conceal their views and aims.”⁷⁰ Further, expressing his understanding of the role of Communists, he said that they “do not form a separate party opposed to other working-class parties.”⁷¹ Rather than forming a dictatorship above workers, telling them what ideals to adhere to, or making a hard distinction of spontaneous practice and theory, Marx saw the role of Communists as expressing what is already present in the actions of workers. They “point out and bring to the front the common interests of the entire proletariat,” and “always and everywhere represent the interests of the movement as a whole.”⁷² Neither apart from nor above them, they were to work through the dialectic of revolution.

CAFIERO’S WORKERS

Marx’s engagement with anarchism as it overlapped with his critique of capitalism is clearest and most direct in his correspondence with Carlo Cafiero. Cafiero was an Italian militant in the First International who had begun his political career in the 1870s as a follower of Marx and Engels, but who soon turned to Mikhail Bakunin’s anarchism.⁷³ Rather than rejecting Marxism as incompatible with anarchism, he saw the two as siblings.

Cafiero, while falling on Bakunin’s side of the split in the International and arguing intensely with Engels, kept up correspondence with him and Marx.⁷⁴ The split in the International, solidified at the Hague Congress in 1872, naturally had wide-reaching political consequences. However, it was not nearly as all-or-nothing as we might assume today, although it led to the dissolution of the First International by the close of the 1870s. Nonetheless, it did not foreclose exchange between the two ‘positions’. That exchange offers us insight into differences, with Cafiero being a perfect figure through whom to closely examine them.

Cafiero began to draft a summary of Marx’s *Capital* (1867) after being imprisoned for revolutionary activity in Benevento in 1877.⁷⁵ He aimed to develop a means of teaching a working-class

⁶⁸ Katz, *The Emancipation of Labor*, pp. 57–58.

⁶⁹ Katz, *The Emancipation of Labor*, pp. 14–20.

⁷⁰ Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, p. 243.

⁷¹ Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, p. 222.

⁷² Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, p. 222.

⁷³ Mathieu Léonard, “Carlo Cafiero and the International in Italy: From Marx to Bakunin,” in “Arise Ye Wretched of the Earth”: *The First International in a Global Perspective*, ed. Fabrice Bensimon, Quentin Deluermoz, and Jeanne Moisan (Boston, Massachusetts: Brill, 2018), p. 368.

⁷⁴ Léonard, “Carlo Cafiero,” p. 372.

⁷⁵ Léonard, “Carlo Cafiero,” pp. 374–376.

audience the critique of capitalism developed by Marx. Marx approved of this project and shared his concerns about the text's legibility for a popular audience.⁷⁶ He had already revised *Capital* significantly from 1872–1875 for its first publication in French.⁷⁷ Rather than a mere translation, he aimed to develop a new model for future editions which would be clearer for a working class public. Cafiero published his summary in 1879 and Marx greeted it with approval, telling Cafiero that other attempts at summary had clung “too pedantically to the scientific form of discussion,” while Cafiero’s summary succeeded in “moving the public for whom the summaries are intended.”⁷⁸

Marx’s approval is often cited by some anarchists as proof of the quality of Cafiero’s summary, such as translator Paul M. Perrone.⁷⁹ However, Marx also expressed reservations towards Cafiero’s summary, and the content of which illustrates his concept of working-class self-activity against capital, and how it differed from that of anarchists. Of the limitations of Cafiero’s summary, Marx said:

As far as the conception of things, I believe I’m not deceiving myself in attributing a gap to the considerations espoused in your preface, and that is the proof that the material conditions necessary to the emancipation of the proletariat are generated spontaneously by the development of capitalist exploitation. After all, I agree with you (if I interpreted your preface well) that it isn’t necessary to overload those who you wish to educate. Nothing will prevent you from returning, at the opportune time, to the charge of bringing out this materialist basis of *Capital*.⁸⁰

This immediately draws our attention to Cafiero’s preface where he is supposed to lay out these “considerations.” How does he conceive of “the emancipation of the proletariat” relative to the conditions “generated spontaneously by the development of capitalist exploitation?” If, according to Marx, there is a gap between these two, then where can we find it in the text? The tail end of Cafiero’s preface seems to be the issue in question: “May the workers read [*Capital*] and think about it carefully because in it is contained not only the story of *The Development of Capitalist Production*, but also *The Martyrdom of the Worker*.”⁸¹ In this summarization of what *Capital* is the story of, Cafiero identifies the classic theme of poverty at one pole creating wealth at the other. “*The Martyrdom of the Worker*” is the very condition of the “*Development of Capitalist Production*.” In other words, the exploitation of the working class is the condition for the accumulation of capital.

Where is the gap that Marx spoke of? It is that here, the proletariat figure as victims (or martyrs) of exploitation, but their self-emancipation is not located in this very condition of exploitation itself. Cafiero agreed with self-emancipation, but he located it elsewhere than in the immanent condition of being an exploited wage-laborer itself.

⁷⁶ Léonard, “Carlo Cafiero,” p. 376.

⁷⁷ Marcello Musto, “When Marx Translated *Capital*,” *Jacobin*, September 17, 2022, <https://jacobin.com/2022/09/karl-marx-capital-das-capital-french-translation-150-years>.

⁷⁸ Karl Marx, *Karl Marx’s Capital: Briefly Summarized by Carlo Cafiero*, trans. Paul M. Perrone (Marxists Internet Archive, 2018), <https://anarch.cc/uploads/carlo-cafiero-karl-marxs-capital.pdf>.

⁷⁹ “First published in 1879, this work was highly praised, even by Marx, whose opinion of the work can be read in the Appendix at the end of this translation,” Paul M. Perrone, *Karl Marx’s Capital*, p. 3.

⁸⁰ Marx, *Karl Marx’s Capital*, p. 65.

⁸¹ Carlo Cafiero, *Karl Marx’s Capital*, p. 5.

How, then, does Marx's approach differ here from the summary which Cafiero offered? Raya Dunayevskaya famously commented in 1958's *Marxism and Freedom* on the chapter about the fight to shorten the workday in *Capital*, arguing that it is one of the central expressions of Marx's philosophy of working class self-emancipation.⁸² Before examining Marx's analysis of this process, we should see whether the gap in Cafiero's summary extends into his version of the chapter on the workday:

This is how capital whips labor, which, after much suffering, searches until the end to resist it. The workers unite and demand, to the powers that be, the establishment of a normal workday. One may easily comprehend how much of this they are able to obtain, considering that the law must be made and upheld by the capitalists themselves, against whom the workers would like to contend.⁸³

Cafiero's summary of the chapter on the working day certainly includes class struggle, this cannot be denied. He further incorporates an anarchist objection to legalistic reformism, which fails to comprehend that "the law must be made and upheld by the capitalist themselves." It is true that the state in capitalist society takes on a capitalist character, and plays a constitutive role to capitalism, but this concept of law is rather one-sided. That Cafiero sees in law only the machinations of capitalists, and not the ability of workers to stretch the 'social contract' by exercising their collective strength, shows another element of the gap stemming from the distinguishing characteristics of Marxism and anarchism alike. Here, the state-legal form figures as an artifice alone, a standard anarchist criticism, rather than a historically necessary artifice, the point of Marx.

What Cafiero gets from the workday chapter is that the transcendent elements of class struggle, the revolutionary elements, must be located outside of and beyond law. If we want to abolish the present state of things, changing the law is hopeless and a waste of time. Marx, on the other hand, sees this total abolition, this new world, as already immanent in the 'gradual' activities of the workers to improve their conditions within bourgeois society. The struggle to shorten the working day in *Capital* does not merely prove the emptiness of reformism, but sharpens the consciousness of the proletariat as a class and as the social embodiment of capitalism's self-destruction:

It must be acknowledged that our worker emerges from the process of production looking different from when he entered it. In the market, as owner of the commodity 'labour-power', he stood face to face with other owners of commodities, one owner against another owner. The contract by which he sold his labour-power to the capitalist proved in black and white, so to speak, that he was free to dispose of himself. But when the transaction was concluded, it was discovered that he was no 'free agent', that the period of time for which he is free to sell his labour-power is the period of time for which he is forced to sell it, that in fact the vampire will not let go 'while there remains a single muscle, sinew or drop of blood to be exploited'.⁸⁴

Here, Marx is relatively in the vein of Cafiero. Labor power, the worker's only commodity which they can sell, is sold under an illusion. The worker is supposedly a "free agent" by law. They are "free" to sell their "own" commodity. In actuality, the worker's very "freedom" from

⁸² Raya Dunayevskaya, *Marxism and Freedom: From 1776 until Today* (New York, New York: Bookman Associates, 1958), pp. 87–91.

⁸³ Cafiero, *Karl Marx's Capital*, p. 16.

⁸⁴ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Vol. 1., trans. Ben Fowkes (London, United Kingdom: Penguin In Association With New Left Review, 1976), pp. 415–416.

ownership of anything else drives them, by threat of starvation, to sell to the capitalist. The capitalist squeezes them for more work time as one strategy to extract greater and greater surplus-value. This is “The Martyrdom of the Worker” which enables “The Development of Capitalist Production.” Yet, out of the workers’ struggle against this very “vampire,” a glimpse of a new world emerges. The worker does not merely fall further into the disappointment of victimhood in trying to change the law, but comes to a greater level of consciousness:

For ‘protection’ against the serpent of their agonies, the workers have to put their heads together and, as a class, compel the passing of a law, an all-powerful social barrier by which they can be prevented from selling themselves and their families into slavery and death by voluntary contract with capital. In the place of the pompous catalogue of the ‘inalienable rights of man’ there steps the modest Magna Carta of the legally limited working day, which at last makes clear ‘when the time which the worker sells is ended, and when his own begins’. *Quantum mutatus ab illo!* [What a great change from that time!]⁸⁵

We are now far beyond what Cafiero saw in *Capital*. The workers’ struggle itself, regardless of whether it results in total legal victory, clarifies for them their distinct philosophy of life. Instead of remaining within the abstract rights of the citizen or of ‘natural rights,’ the workers move through their very concrete and “modest” demands to distinguishing themselves from their form as commodities — as salespeople of labor-power. Rather than aiming for more work, they seek to limit work in the name of being something other than what they are when they’re clocked into a job.

To distinguish the time “which the worker sells” and “when his own begins” is to begin to seek a way of living beyond the capital-relation, beyond just producing more surplus-value like a good little proletarian. The agency of their workers, their self-emancipation, thus comes out of their everyday life and everyday struggles even within the contracts of capitalist society. This is what Marx was getting at, and the lack thereof in Cafiero’s summary was the gap that he was speaking of. The ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’ factors in capitalism’s demise are united in the people tied up in the capitalist relation.

Of course, this distinction of “work” and “life” is still only a beginning. Feminist critics of Marx, like Tithi Bhattacharya, have pointed out that the distinction between the time “which the worker sells” and “his own” can become entangled back into capitalism.⁸⁶ With the remaking of the world in the image of capital, which is another way of saying with the global ascendancy of the capitalist mode of production, capital wields the power to re-organize everyday life around its needs. Even if the individual capitalist doesn’t have legal control of us when we’re clocked out, the general class of capitalists can still have control over our lives off the clock. In particular, the promotion of the nuclear family and the unpaid domestic labor of women as a means of reproducing the worker’s ability to “work” by replenishing him in the realm of “life” is one way that this happens.⁸⁷

⁸⁵ Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1., p. 416.

⁸⁶ Tithi Bhattacharya, “Introduction: Mapping Social Reproduction Theory,” in *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression*, ed. Tithi Bhattacharya (London, United Kingdom: Pluto Press, 2017), pp. 12–14.

⁸⁷ Bhattacharya, “Introduction,” pp. 10–12.

Revolution practically emerges out of the everyday resistance to capital, there must be no gap in our theory. When Cafiero speaks directly of revolution, he does not sound entirely alien to the revolutionary project of Marx. Yet there are important differences which reveal the continuity of this gap:

The disease is sweeping. It's been a long time that the workers of the civilized world have known it; certainly not all, but a great number, and these are already preparing the means of action to destroy it.

They have considered these:

I. That the first source of every human oppression and exploitation is private property;

II. That the emancipation of workers (human emancipation) will not be founded upon a new class rule, but upon the end of all class privileges and monopolies and upon the equality of rights and duties;

III. That the cause of labor, the cause of humanity, does not have borders;

IV. That the emancipation of workers must be done at the hands of the workers themselves.⁸⁸

Marx certainly agreed with the central role of bourgeois private property to the capitalist system, but would not agree that it was the "first source of every human oppression and exploitation." Already in 1844, he had said that rather: "Private property is thus the product, the result, the necessary consequence, of alienated labor, of the external relation of the worker to nature and to himself."⁸⁹

Further, Marx of course believed that the working class had to become the ruling class of society in order to ensure "the end of all class privileges and monopolies." The working class could not abolish class relations, including its own identity as a class, before abolishing the world it is born of. This is Marx's concept of the revolutionary process, rather than relying on an automatic realization of a "human emancipation." In a sense, a collective humanity must be built by struggle within and against the old world.

Finally, Marx certainly agreed with Cafiero that "the emancipation of the workers must be done at the hands of the workers themselves." This was the substance of his and Engels' critiques of utopian socialists. But, unlike Cafiero, this meant that Marx sought to express the glimpses of a new world already present in the struggle of the workers themselves. In a word, Cafiero's call for emancipation does not concretely answer the question: How? Or, out of what basis?

Cafiero foresaw this criticism of abstractness, and responded thusly:

This is not the place for a revolutionary program, already elaborated and published long ago elsewhere in other books; I confine myself to conclude, replying with the words taken from the lips of a worker and placed in epigraph to this volume: 'The worker has made everything; and the worker can destroy everything, because he can rebuild everything.'⁹⁰

⁸⁸ Cafiero, Karl Marx's Capital, p. 63.

⁸⁹ Marx, Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, p. 81.

⁹⁰ Cafiero, Karl Marx's Capital, p. 64.

This quoted statement expresses a strong revolutionary sentiment, but fails to reveal that the very fact that “[t]he worker has made everything” is what already holds the seeds of the worker’s self-emancipation. The aim of Marx’s dialectic of capital and revolution is that the ability of the worker to “destroy everything” and “rebuild everything” can be seen within the fact that “the worker has made everything.” Capital is created out of the expropriation and exploitation of workers, their being “free” in a dual sense – to sell their own labor-power as their commodity, and freedom from any other ability to survive. It is this position of the proletariat, as the desolation of capitalist society, in which Marx saw the promise of a class which could only abolish itself by abolishing class society as a whole.

KROPOTKIN’S COMMUNISM

Peter Kropotkin, also a Russian anarchist, is arguably the historical figure who is most representative of modern global anarchist thinking. He is also the closest comparison to Marx in terms of major anarchist philosophies. Both called for a revolution of everyday life from out of everyday life, but their divergences give a final clear view at the gap between Marx and anarchism.

Beginning life as an aristocrat renowned for his natural scientific work, Kropotkin rejected his title and turned to revolutionary activity in the 1870s.⁹¹ Like many of his generation, he was inspired by the glimpse of a new world opened up by the 1871 Paris Commune. From his natural scientific background, he developed a theory of anarchism which especially emphasized connecting natural laws to anarchist principles.⁹² His *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution* (1902) expressed this idea by critiquing excessive emphasis on “natural selection” or competition in evolution and emphasizing solidarity as an important factor to the survival of species.⁹³

From this innovative perspective, Kropotkin expressed his skepticism of both utopianism and of a “progressive” character in capitalism.⁹⁴ He tried to point towards a communism already present in everyday life, especially as something inherent to the nature of humans as a species.⁹⁵ To him, it was clear that a natural order of anarcho-communism needed to rupture through the artificial and irrational system of statist and capitalist society.⁹⁶ In the early 1890s, he set out to lay out his vision of this anarcho-communist society in *The Conquest of Bread* (1892). Around the same time, he was writing the essays which would make up a book with much the same themes titled *Fields, Factories, and Workshops* (1899).

Kropotkin appealed against the irrationality of capitalism for the natural rationality of communism, pointing out the communism he already saw in our everyday practices:

The consequences which spring from the original act of monopoly spread through the whole of social life. Under pain of death, human societies are forced to return to first principles: the means of production being the collective work of humanity, the product should be the collective property of the race. Individual appropriation is neither just nor serviceable. All belongs to all. All things are for all men, since all men

⁹¹ Peter Kropotkin, *The Conquest of Bread and Other Writings*, ed. Marshall Shatz (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. viii-x.

⁹² Kropotkin, *The Conquest of Bread*, pp. xvi-xix.

⁹³ Kropotkin, *The Conquest of Bread*, p. xviii.

⁹⁴ Kropotkin, *The Conquest of Bread*, pp. 68–69, 103.

⁹⁵ Kropotkin, *The Conquest of Bread*, pp. 32–36.

⁹⁶ Kropotkin, *The Conquest of Bread*, p. 19.

have need of them, since all men have worked in the measure of their strength to produce them, and since it is not possible to evaluate everyone's part in the production of the world's wealth.⁹⁷

A new, stateless, classless, moneyless society, organized on the basis of mutual aid and collective labor, was possible. Cooperation had created society, and stood as the very basis of human nature. To realize communism meant to realize the natural premises of society itself, which had been obscured by the delusions of class society.

Kropotkin considered "Collectivism," a label under which he included Marx, to fall within these delusions. It should be noted that he wrote this long after Marx had died in 1883, but addressed the immediate legacy of Marx in European socialist movements. By putting forward the slogan "from each according to their abilities, to each according to their contributions," Kropotkin believed that the "Collectivists" operated well within the logic of the capitalist wage system. He particularly took issue with their distinction between skilled ("complex") and unskilled ("simple") labor in remuneration:

Well, to establish this distinction would be to maintain all the inequalities of present society. It would mean fixing a dividing line, from the beginning, between the workers and those who pretend to govern them. It would mean dividing society into two very distinct classes — the aristocracy of knowledge placed above the horny-handed lower orders — the one doomed to serve the other; the one working with its hands to feed and clothe those who, profiting by their leisure, study how to govern their fosterers.⁹⁸

He does, however, throw a bone to Marx, as opposed to his social-democratic followers:

We know the answer we shall get. They will speak of 'scientific socialism'; they will quote bourgeois economists, and Marx too, to prove that a scale of wages has its *raison d'être*, as 'the labour force' of the engineer will have cost more to society than the 'labour force' of the navy. In fact — have not economists tried to prove to us that if an engineer is paid twenty times more than a navy it is because the 'necessary' outlay to make an engineer is greater than that necessary to make a navy? And has not Marx asserted that the same distinction is equally logical between two branches of manual labour? He could not conclude otherwise, having taken up on his own account Ricardo's theory of value, and upheld that goods are exchanged in proportion to the quantity of work socially necessary for their production.⁹⁹

He quite clearly thinks of Marx as an uncritical follower of David Ricardo, the bourgeois political economist. Like the other Ricardian socialists, Marx is supposed to believe that there is an exactly measurable quantity of "socially necessary (minimum average) labor-time" in each individual commodity. On this basis, Kropotkin ends up believing that Marx thought the solution was for the 'full value' of an individual's labor to go their wages:

The evil of the present system is therefore not that the 'surplus value' of production goes to the capitalist, as Rodbertus and Marx said, thus narrowing the socialist conception and the general view of the capitalist system; the surplus value itself is but

⁹⁷ Kropotkin, *The Conquest of Bread*, p. 19.

⁹⁸ Kropotkin, *The Conquest of Bread*, p. 149.

⁹⁹ Kropotkin, *The Conquest of Bread*, p. 149.

a consequence of deeper causes. The evil lies in the possibility of a surplus value existing, instead of a simple surplus not consumed by each generation; for, that a surplus value should exist, means that men, women and children are compelled by hunger to sell their labour for a small part of what this labour produces, and still more so, of what their labour is capable of producing. But this evil will last as long as the instruments of production belong to the few.¹⁰⁰

Kropotkin argues that surplus-value comes ultimately from the monopoly of capitalists on the means of production, a monopoly akin to all other class societies through which one part of society controls the surplus that the other produces. Naturally, this means the means of production should be controlled by the people who work, and the surplus should be distributed to them according to need. Kropotkin considers this in line with natural rationality, while capitalism is irrational.

There can be no exact measure of the value of each product, and the law of equivalence operating in exchange is alien to the basic premises of human sociality.¹⁰¹ To try and distribute “according to contribution” misses the point, and represses the basic human instincts of unselfish solidarity and mutual aid. The rule of equivalents means dividing society and social labor up in a way that is untrue, when humanity has survived and defined itself as a species purely out of its natural inclination to give without expectation of equivalent exchange.¹⁰²

Each human being contributes to the labor of the other. Society, sociality, mutuality, solidarity— these are the premises of any of our individual actions. We cannot act without acting on the ground laid by the labor of previous generations, we cannot flourish unless people freely exchange their knowledge with us and ensure our ability to flourish (for instance, by producing our needs through their labor). It is therefore a myth, and a harmful one at that, to speak of individual contribution.

The irony in this criticism of Marx is that Marx agreed almost entirely with Kropotkin’s criticisms!¹⁰³ He also considered the attempt to exactly measure individual contribution to be ultimately arbitrary from the perspective of cooperative labor. This arbitrariness, however, misses the way that “the money form” is what “conceals the social character of private labour and the social relations between the individual workers, by making those relations appear as relations between material objects, instead of revealing them plainly.”¹⁰⁴ He had already criticized Proudhon in 1847 for advocating such a system with ‘full value’ going to the producer. Just like Kropotkin, he said that was more Ricardian than communist, and that Ricardo described value as the logic of bourgeois society.

He would also agree with Kropotkin that state power ensures, or rather coerces, the conditions for the sale of labor-power. Primitive accumulation, typically carried out through governmental means, forces the separation of laborers from the means of production.¹⁰⁵ The capitalist class, through this power of monopoly, owns the means of production. The workers can only purchase their needs in the society of commodities by selling their only commodity (labor-power) in exchange for money. They sell it to the capitalists who monopolize the means of production. The

¹⁰⁰ Kropotkin, *The Conquest of Bread*, p. 89.

¹⁰¹ Kropotkin, *The Conquest of Bread*, pp. 152–155.

¹⁰² Kropotkin, *The Conquest of Bread*, p. 155.

¹⁰³ Hudis, *Marx’s Concept of the Alternative to Capitalism*, pp. 193–196.

¹⁰⁴ Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1., pp. 168–169.

¹⁰⁵ Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1., p. 876.

capitalist buys their labor-power in this coerced situation, thus also owning the products of their concrete labor — including their surplus-value.

Kropotkin is not wrong about the role of this monopoly relationship in capitalism. At the same time, capital is also an impersonal power, a power beyond the personhood of specific capitalists.¹⁰⁶ Marx quotes two French sayings to illustrate the distinction of this capitalist power — there can be “No land without its lord,” but “Money has no master.”¹⁰⁷ Even capitalists find themselves compelled to “Accumulate, accumulate![...] save, save, i.e. reconvert the greatest possible portion of surplus-value or surplus product into capital!”¹⁰⁸ Production ultimately does not even have them as an end. Production seems to be for its own sake, accumulation of capital as an end in itself.

A capitalist’s relation with their capital is not an absolute relation and they have significantly more autonomy choice than their workers. The point is that this draws our attention to a broader concept of the capital relation than what Kropotkin offers us. The capital relation is unique compared to previous forms of monopoly and domination. It isn’t just that we are directly dominated by a boss, a person. We are all dominated by this society itself, the whole social machine has run out from us and now stands above as a power over us.

The point of focusing on the mechanics of value is to show that the capitalist class does not simply establish this by sheer force alone. Though any class society is defined by relations of distinction and domination, capitalism must be understood as an overall social system, and an impersonal system. Even capitalists are subject to the law of value. Value is “gravity” for all classes in a capitalist society. Like gravity, this doesn’t mean you’re immediately sucked into it and flattened (under normal circumstances). You feel it as a pulling force, a basic direction, which you act in relation to. You feel it more or less intensely according to your characteristics, your situation, your environmental context, etc, but you feel it. Other things appear as contingent and/or illusory compared to value, which appears as the truth of the world.

Value is not anything premised on ‘eternal justice,’ nor is it premised on ‘monopoly’ alone. Value is the way that total social labor-time is distributed on a total social scale in capitalism.¹⁰⁹ Value is the planless plan of capital. Individual capitalists or groups of capitalists can certainly use force to influence distribution, for example through dictatorial policies over society, but they cannot just create value arbitrarily. Value ultimately operates beyond them — it is literally the expression of our total social relations under capitalism. If one tries to abolish it immediately by force, it exerts itself indirectly. Value is not just supply and demand. Value is the system as a whole, the operation of the entire system of production and exchange in the name of feeding capital.

Marx did not disagree that the monopoly power of capitalists affected prices. This is a major subject of discussion in the third volume of *Capital*. In the first volume, he does not yet distinguish between values and prices because he is starting off with general capital, or capital-in-general. This means two things:

¹⁰⁶ Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1., pp. 247–248.

¹⁰⁷ Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1., p. 247 n. 1.

¹⁰⁸ Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1., p. 742.

¹⁰⁹ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Vol. 3, trans. David Fernbach (London, United Kingdom: Penguin Books In Association With New Left Review, 1981), p. 1022.

1. He sees the divergence of prices and value as expressed in competition between many capitals.
2. He sees total social value as equivalent to total prices of production.¹¹⁰

Marx's criticism of Proudhon, pointing out the divergence of abstract commodified labor and the concrete, living labor involved in production, pointed in the direction of value as "gravity." The 'full value of labor' cannot be the basis of transcending capitalism, because abstract or average labor-time is ultimately the way that capitalism unites individual and social labor into a social system. Thus, in *Capital*, Marx offered a brief vision of a different first step towards transcendence:

Let us finally imagine, for a change, an association of free men, working with the means of production held in common, and expending their many different forms of labour-power in full self-awareness as one single social labour force. All the characteristics of Robinson [Crusoe]'s labour are repeated here, but with the difference that they are social instead of individual. All Robinson's products were exclusively the result of his own personal labour and they were therefore directly objects of utility for him personally. The total product of our imagined association is a social product."¹¹¹

By comparing this association to Crusoe, Marx makes the point of its freedom and individuality. It is not 'split,' it is not strictly unaware of what it is doing. It is not dominated by what it makes, as capital dominates the human beings that create it. It is "an association of free men" who act "in full self-awareness as one single labour force." Rather than the total social product being value distributed across different sectors of a 'split' society, it is directly a social product for "our imagined association."

One part of this product serves as fresh means of production and remains social. But another part is consumed by the members of the association as means of subsistence. This part must therefore be divided amongst them. The way this division is made will vary with the particular kind of social organization of production and the corresponding level of social development attained by the producers.¹¹²

Distribution of the product is direct, conscious, and planned by the "association of free men," unlike the unconscious and only indirectly social distribution of capitalism. In 1875, Marx would add that this distribution would include both deductions to serve as "fresh means of production" and increased "social" parts of the product to go to "whatever is dedicated to the collective satisfaction of needs, like schools, health services etc." while "[the general administrative costs] will be very significantly restricted from the outset, and it will diminish proportionately as the new society develops."¹¹³ This distribution, and the definition of subsistence, would vary socially and historically.

¹¹⁰ Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 3., pp. 1008–1016.

¹¹¹ Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1., p. 171.

¹¹² Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1., pp. 171–172.

¹¹³ Karl Marx, "Critique of the Gotha Programme," in *Marx: Later Political Writings*, ed. Terrell Carver (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 212.

We shall assume, but only for the sake of a parallel with the production of commodities, that the share of each individual producer in the means of subsistence is determined by his labour-time. Labour-time would in that case play a double part. Its apportionment in accordance with a definite social plan maintains the correct proportion between the different functions of labour and the various needs of the associations. On the other hand, labour-time also serves as a measure of the part taken by each individual in the common labour, and of his share in the part of the total product destined for individual consumption. The social relations of the individual producers, both towards their labour and the products of their labour, are here transparent in their simplicity, in production as well as in distribution.¹¹⁴

Marx does not speak in the terms of the “Collectivists,” though he speaks of distribution by labor-time. He does not foreclose that distribution within a value-logic. Instead, labor-time is merely a measure to be apportioned “in accordance with a definite social plan.” Marx would expand on the relationship of this to communism in the 1870s.

The “Collectivists” which Kropotkin attacked were largely German social-democrats, who in turn took more theoretical influence from Ferdinand Lassalle than Marx. Lassalle and Marx had met during the 1848 wave of revolutions, though Marx very quickly grew to dislike him.¹¹⁵ Lassalle was genuinely a ‘state socialist,’ becoming a political ally of Marx and Engels primarily because of their common disagreement with the ‘antistatists’ of the International. Most of Bakunin’s criticisms lobbed against Marx — that he was a Pan-German nationalist, that he was a statist, that he was a reformist — were ultimately true of Lassalle instead.¹¹⁶

In the late 1860s, some of the early German ‘Marxists’ formed the Social Democratic Workers’ Party.¹¹⁷ By 1875, they aimed to merge with the Lassallean General German Workers’ Association in order to create the modern Social Democratic Party of Germany.¹¹⁸ This merger was to be on the basis of a party platform called the Gotha Programme. This Programme became the target of Marx’s ire, and an opportunity for him to strongly distinguish his critique of capitalism and vision of revolutionary transformation from the Lassalleans.

Marx’s critique of the Programme sounds thoroughly Kropotkinist. Against the lukewarm suggestions of the Programme, he suggested an approach which considers such “workerist” perspectives as transient. Marx touches again on the issues which Kropotkin pointed out in a “Collectivist” situation where, for the producer, “The same quantity of labour he puts into society in one form comes back to him in another.”¹¹⁹ He agrees with the criticism that “the principle here is the same as the one that applies in the exchange of commodities, so far as the exchange is one of equal values[...] a given amount of labour in one form is exchanged for an equal amount in another form.”¹²⁰ This affinity to the logic of commodity exchange is true even in a situation where “no one can contribute anything except his own labour, and nothing can become a person’s property except the individual means of consumption.”¹²¹

¹¹⁴ Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1., p. 172.

¹¹⁵ Katz, *The Emancipation of Labor*, pp. 27–28.

¹¹⁶ Hudis, *Marx’s Concept of the Alternative to Capitalism*, p. 188.

¹¹⁷ Katz, *The Emancipation of Labor*, pp. 43–44.

¹¹⁸ Katz, *The Emancipation of Labor*, pp. 43–44.

¹¹⁹ Marx, “Critique of the Gotha Programme,” p. 213.

¹²⁰ Marx, “Critique of the Gotha Programme,” p. 213.

¹²¹ Marx, “Critique of the Gotha Programme,” p. 213.

Marx, however, once again distinguishes this initial, emergent arrangement from the outright capitalist society because “principle and practice are no longer at loggerheads, and anyway in commodity exchange the exchange of equivalents exists only on average, not in each individual case.”¹²² What he is referring to here is the dual character of labor under capitalism — abstract average or general labor, which is what operates in the world of commodities, and concrete individual labor, which is the living labour that actually produces new surplus-values.

Marx goes further, arguing that this equal right ultimately has not yet transcended “bourgeois limitations.”¹²³ With the common standard of labor establishing an equality of measure, inequality still manifests (exactly as Kropotkin argued). It is ultimately an “unequal right for unequal labor,” since it “acknowledges no distinctions of class, because everyone is a worker just like everyone else, but it tacitly recognises unequal individual talent and hence productivity in labour as natural privileges. Therefore in content it is a right to inequality, like all rights.”¹²⁴

He strikes a note very reminiscent of anarchist criticism. Right, premised on the existence of law and typically some form of state ‘above’ society, only conceals the inequality or individuality of the rights-holders. Right abstracts a single characteristic from their manifold characteristics in order to establish a common standard across unique individuals — again, he sounds like Stirner.

Because of this inequality of the equal right, “one worker will in fact receive more than another, be richer than another.”¹²⁵

The solution? “To avoid all these faults, rights would have to be unequal, instead of equal.”¹²⁶ That is, the individuality of each would have to be the premise of society. There could be no more state, no more law, no more equivalence. Nothing could stand apart from the individuals who make up society. However, where Marx disagrees with the anarchist solution is when he says that: “these faults are unavoidable in the first phase of communist society when it has just emerged from capitalist society after a long and painful birth.”¹²⁷ This is a product of the first negation, of transcending capitalism still on its own basis.

Thus, because we are still on bourgeois grounds, we must remember that: “Rights can never be higher than the economic form of society and the cultural development which is conditioned by it.”¹²⁸ This is essentially the same as Marx’s contention against Bakunin. One cannot immediately leap into a totally qualitatively new society by a sheer act of will. Value-production drags us along, it permeates every aspect of our lives. Revolution is not a question of will alone, of divine force blasting value out of existence. The force and arc of revolution must account for the pull of value if we are to leave it behind in the dustbin of history.

Otherwise, we fall back into the orbit of capital, perhaps no longer seeing price tags and police and so assuming we are in a totally new world. But the power of capital remains, and it continues to influence the distribution of abundance and scarcity alike until, through long and direct struggle against it, we have established labor as a prime want for life, as the very embodiment of our freedom and openness to be what we will. Revolution both emerges out of everyday life and seeks to transcend it, yet the process of revolution will necessarily retain elements of the existing

¹²² Marx, “Critique of the Gotha Programme,” p. 214.

¹²³ Marx, “Critique of the Gotha Programme,” p. 214.

¹²⁴ Marx, “Critique of the Gotha Programme,” p. 214.

¹²⁵ Marx, “Critique of the Gotha Programme,” p. 214.

¹²⁶ Marx, “Critique of the Gotha Programme,” p. 214.

¹²⁷ Marx, “Critique of the Gotha Programme,” p. 214.

¹²⁸ Marx, “Critique of the Gotha Programme,” p. 214.

state of affairs. The literal organization of our working days, of our concept of selves in relation to society, of our labor, is still recognizably “stamped with the birthmarks of the old society.”¹²⁹

Marx’s vision of a communism developed on its own ground, the negation of the initial negation, is much closer to Kropotkin. Here, in communism-as-communism instead of communism-relative-to-capitalism, communism as an independent thing, we see the unique characteristics of the new society. Now, “the subjection of individuals to the division of labour, and thereby the antithesis between mental and physical labour, has disappeared[...].”¹³⁰ There must be no “aristocracy of knowledge placed above the horny-handed lower orders,” as Kropotkin said. Labor must become a free expression of individuality, “not merely a means to live but the foremost need in life[...].”¹³¹

This will be established “after the multifarious development of individuals has grown along with their productive powers, and all the springs of co-operative wealth flow more abundantly.”¹³² This can only be possible if cooperative labor, social labor, has been developed to a certain point. In a word, labor must be socialized, and society must have a certain density of interconnections. In his criticism of Stirner and Bakunin, Marx had identified this socializing process with modern capitalism. This socializing, which connected millions and now billions of people through a network of market dependencies, does not directly acknowledge itself as such. Society is mediated by sales, purchases, contracts — relationships between things, not people. It is only communism which realizes the truth of society to itself — again, Marx agrees with Kropotkin.

Out of this ground of capitalist development, where labor has been socialized in the “hidden abode” of production, labor can be socialized directly through social revolution. Only through this revolutionary process, emerging out of the socialized everyday, “can the limited horizon of bourgeois right be wholly transcended, and society can inscribe on its banner: from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs!”¹³³

This communist society is very similar to that described in *The Conquest of Bread*. The key difference is that Marx focused primarily on the process, the how, of its development. He did not want to describe a plan for an alternative social system extensively. He wanted to critique within the realm of everyday life, to show how the path to this new world leads out from where we are.

Kropotkin also sought to point out a communism immanent in everyday life, but believed this new world could already stand on relatively solid ground by the inherent communality of human nature. Communism meant simply recognizing the truth of human nature. To Marx, there could be no guarantees of nature: “Man,” “Ego,” “Justice,” and “Nature” could not serve as foundations. To reach our communist Ought, we had to work through the muck of our capitalist everyday Is.

Kropotkin’s criticisms of the “Collectivist” wage system are important and useful to counter the myth of meritocracy, and to point towards the need for communism. He is especially insightful in his arguments showing that communism means putting society on a social basis, recognizing the truth of society to itself. However, after exposing that meritocracy, that the strictly measurable individuality of labor-contribution is a myth, we are left with a question: Why does labor appear as individual anyways? If that’s untrue, then why do things appear that way, and

¹²⁹ Marx, “Critique of the Gotha Programme,” p. 213.

¹³⁰ Marx, “Critique of the Gotha Programme,” p. 214.

¹³¹ Marx, “Critique of the Gotha Programme,” p. 214.

¹³² Marx, “Critique of the Gotha Programme,” pp. 214–215.

¹³³ Marx, “Critique of the Gotha Programme,” p. 215.

what does that mean for realizing directly social labor on a social scale (communism)? This is what Marx wants us to think through, and what he tries to work through to pick up a path towards communism. Marx's critique of capitalism has exactly this intent, including his insistence on analyzing the value-form, prices, abstract labor, socially necessary (minimum average) labor-time, surplus-value, etc.

Kropotkin thus misses the point of Marx's critique of capital. Marx's concept of the dual character of labor, and his "value theory of labor," is meant to describe our specific historical situation of indirectly social labor and alienated sociality. It is the most universalized, densest social system yet to exist – and yet it does not directly operate on the premise of sociality. We cannot return to non-capitalist sociality, which is now rendered pre-capitalist. Instead, we must realize the truth of sociality by working through capitalism itself. Our "creative nothing," our freedom, can only realize itself through this very concrete social situation.

Marx insisted that we focus on this historical specificity of our situation in order to guarantee transcendence from out of it, to avoid creating a mirror image of our existing society.¹³⁴ By understanding the system, we can understand how to escape it. We cannot immediately leap into something totally qualitatively new. We have to work through the riddle, we have to answer it before we can take steps into a new world standing on its own foundation.

This is not to say that Kropotkin does not understand the need for a revolutionary process, or does not try to trace the immanence of revolution in everyday lives. Rather, his approach does not identify the specificity of capitalism as a social system that we have to work through. Though Marx's approach seems to get us caught in the muck of metaphysics, it does so in order to capture the way capitalism works and to express points of departure within the system itself.

Modern Marxist critiques that touch exactly on the issue of value-production hold much more water than Kropotkin's. In particular, social reproduction theorists are right that he neglected the mystified relations behind the reproduction of labor-power at a certain level, especially the labor of housewives. He neglected how these relations, hidden behind the abstract "equal right" of commodity exchange, could enable the (male) worker to make peace with their situation, for both state and the masculine trade union-bureaucrats alike to ensure that the system incorporates them.¹³⁵

The role of unpaid domestic laborers in reproducing labor-power, which in turn produces new value, is something revealed by engaging with the issue of value itself. While Marx in *Capital* and elsewhere assumed that capitalism would yield a universalization of the wage-labor relation, what we have seen within his approach itself is that the power of capital distributes total social labor-time (value) according to the demands of accumulation across the social system. This extends to waged and unwaged labor, exchange and non-exchange relations, production and consumption. The trouble with capital is that it permeates life even where we try to be something other than workers and bosses, even in the romanticized abode (really, the site of exploitation) of housewives. The gravity of value pulls us even where there isn't a price tag in front of us, and it does so even where we think we're in an oasis of authentic, non-money relationships.

¹³⁴ Hudis, *Marx's Concept of the Alternative to Capitalism*, p. 96.

¹³⁵ Selma James, "Sex, Race, and Class (1974)," in *Sex, Race, and Class: The Perspective of Winning, a Selection of Writings, 1952–2011* (Oakland, California: PM Press, 2012), pp. 92–101.

THE REVOLUTION OF THE EVERYDAY

Marx's lifelong engagements with anarchists reveal a consistent potential gap of Is and Ought in anarchism. This is not to say that all anarchists are ignorant of this approach — Fredy Perlman, for instance, was a pioneer in recovering Marx's critique of capitalism. The problem is, rather, where political conclusions do not emerge directly out of this immanent critique of our existing order.

There is a problem of failing to connect the two, either trying to absolutely condemn the Is and absolutely vindicate the Ought (Cafiero) or to become too complacent in the Is (Proudhon). Marx identified the common appeal to will by anarchists, meant to be an alternative to historical determinism, as an expression of this issue. Will is a factor in society, yes, but will is always historical and social. One can only express a will through an existing, concrete situation. That will already has a concrete content which is inseparable from the situation, including its limitations.

Rather than neglecting the issue of means and ends, Marx took this issue very seriously. He did not believe that we could or should try to already perfectly embody, in miniature, a new society. We have no foundation to stand on in human nature to assert such a thing, nor in anything else.

We have to work through the tangled thread of society as we come into it in order to reach something absolutely new. That means the new society is built through the actions of individuals who are completely of the old society. Us and our world are co-creative — we create the world, the world creates us. The two cannot be separated. The only transcendent element of historical actors is their determinate freedom within determinate situations. Our "creative nothing" is a determinate negation.

This is the substance of Marx's approach to capitalism. Marx thus rejected both those who projected too much of the capitalist Is into the future Ought and those who tried to separate the Is and Ought entirely, whether reactionary defenders of capitalism or revolutionary critics.

Marx's analysis of the dialectic of capitalism may cause some discomfort. He seemed to emphasize the "progressive" role of capitalism too much. Bakunin already objected to his analysis of capitalism as historically necessary. Some might insist instead on a pure Ought against an impure Is, a pure No. Capitalism is intolerable, it is evil. We cannot say there is anything "progressive" in it. There is "good" and there is "evil," and the two are absolutely separate.

This moralizing, however, is only an abstract negation. It is not actually a negation of the situation, because it doesn't find the negativity as a thread in the system itself. It is not situated, it tries to get beyond the situation by saying No to all of it and therefore simply becomes complacent with the Yes of the system existing. Like Marx said of Stirner, it only breaks with one's subjective consent to the system. It does not break the system itself. This has been understood by most anarchists, including Proudhon, Bakunin, Kropotkin, and Stirner in some moments. The difference is that Marx took up an extensive analysis of our current social totality, our system, to ask how we can say No through the Is.

This is especially clear in his advice to workers about trade unions and their sectional struggles in the lectures we know as Value, Price and Profit (1865). There, he lauded and defended the ability of trade unions to influence the rate of wages. Rather than there being some "Iron Law of Wages" (a Lassallean concept anyways), workers had the power to influence the norm through struggle.

Trade union struggles were therefore very important in the struggle for working class self-emancipation. They could not be enough in themselves, however. They remained within the identity of the working class within capitalism, as a "capitalist" class. Why? He answered:

Trades Unions work well as centres of resistance against the encroachments of capital. They fail partially from an injudicious use of their power. They fail generally from limiting themselves to a guerrilla war against the effects of the existing system, instead of simultaneously trying to change it, instead of using their organised forces as a lever for the final emancipation of the working class, that is to say, the ultimate abolition of the wages system.¹³⁶

Marx did not reject trade union struggle. Rather, he criticized Proudhon for this.¹³⁷ He considered them as a start in everyday struggle, but only a start. They remained within a sectional struggle against many capitals, against “the effects of the existing system.” Revolution must mean moving from everyday life, our subordination to specific capitalists or bosses, to capital-in-general. From our everyday lives to the society that they make up, and that makes us.

Trade unions fight in the realm of many capitals, against specific firms. One can imagine One Big Union to confront all the capitals at once, as the Industrial Workers of the World did, but it is close to impossible in practice. Further, it risks excluding unwaged or ‘private’ labors, and other sites where the value relation sustains beyond when we are just clocked in.

General capital, capital as a whole, is the capitalist mode of production itself. It is a conceptual abstraction from specific capitals, but it takes on a greater social reality as capital remakes the world around itself, exerting a gravitational pull which defines the One of capital-as-such. The historical creation of general capital, capital-as-such, is the triumph of the specifically capitalist mode of production globally. Global finance, global capitalist cartels, are the means through which this general capital operates. Thus, social revolution must erupt throughout the networks of society. It must target the general capital, starting from a confrontation against many capitals.

These confrontations throughout society’s nervous system are not only on shop floors. They extend throughout, to everywhere that people attack the domination of value-production. Marx’s dialectic of revolution can offer a guide to us in asking what strategies will bring us along the thread to a totally new world, and whether prevailing strategies bring us in this direction or leave us trapped within the system. We can ask: Do they jump too far, trying to leap towards absolute change “like a shot from a pistol[?]”¹³⁸ Here we can criticize absolutist approaches to revolution. Wanting immediate and total revolution without working through the threads of the situation ultimately means no revolution at all. You might burn a few things or smash a few windows, but you do not fundamentally change the order of things as a whole.

On the other hand, we can ask if strategies become too positivist. Do they lead us to becoming complacent with the order of things? Does “working within the system” just make us a harmless part of the system? This is the common issue in reformism. Eventually, reforms can become an end in themselves when the ‘reformers’ become part of the system. This is especially true of elites whose entire career, whose entire livelihood, depends on the ‘reform’ industry. Insofar as they become calcified bureaucrats, their interests come into direct contradiction to the masses of the working class.

As part of a revolutionary approach, we have to ask: Is fighting for this or that reform actually on the path to the working class taking control of society? Or is it just a means for the capitalist

¹³⁶ Karl Marx, *Wage-Labour and Capital and Value, Price and Profit* (New York, New York: International Publishers, 1976), p. 62.

¹³⁷ Karl Marx, “Political Indifferentism,” *Marxists Internet Archive*, 1873, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1873/01/indifferentism.htm>.

¹³⁸ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, ed. George di Giovanni (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 53.

state to manage the social totality, to make sure that it's viable as a cohesive whole? This is the issue Cafiero saw in engaging with the law.

We do not need to follow his absolute political indifferentism. Instead, we can try to straddle between the two (indifferentism or reformism) the way that Marx did on the issue of the workday. The question is the concrete situation itself, not just a list of policies on a balance sheet. We should not just focus on the content of the reform, but how we are getting there. Is it by voting, or by seizing it from the state? This is an issue of paternalism versus class strength.

Marx focused on the everyday lives and the everyday philosophies of workers as a source of transcendence, but not as sufficient in themselves. They are first negations of the existing order which must go further. Workers are the negativity of capitalist society, but they are still within capital. Freedom is always defined within a defined situation, but it is also the power for us to remake that situation by unraveling it.

Marx's dialectic of capital thus aimed to be within and against capital, as well as outside and beyond it. This latter concern is where he overlaps with anarchist and decolonial critiques. His specificity, however, holds bountiful lessons for us to learn from. There is no deeper, no transcendent foundation which we can rely on in revolting against capital. Revolution must come out of the immanence of our situation itself. Revolution must be revolution of the everyday to transform the everyday.

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