

# The Individual in Marxist (and Proudhonian) Social Analysis

Eric Fleischmann

8/5/2023

One of the main obstacles for a libertarian, even *left*-libertarian, appreciation of Marxian analysis is the assumption that it necessarily denies any role for the individual to play in both material struggle and general social analysis, leaving that entirely to mass class concepts like the proletariat, lumpenproletariat, bourgeoisie, etc. In contrast, libertarians right and left tend to lean toward the view, articulated well by Karl Hess in his reading of both Ayn Rand and Emma Goldman, that history is less a struggle between classes and more a struggle of individuals against institutions, this in turn leading to general libertarian and specifically agorist class theories that center the use of state violence by individuals as the basis of class divisions. And yet, David Harvey points out in chapter one of his *Companion to Marx's Grundrisse*, though Karl Marx sees “[t]he individual and individualism” as “by-products of the rise of a certain kind of society” and “Marxism, or any socialist line of thought derivative of Marx, is . . . seen as the mortal enemy of individual liberty and freedom,” the Marxist response is to ask:

If capital did come into being as the ‘natural’ consequence of such inalienable individual rights, then why do we live in a society characterized by wage slavery, the impoverishment of the mass of the people and the total and accepted violation of these supposed ‘inalienable’ rights by capital on a daily basis (particularly in the labor process)?

Further: “why do those who so loudly proclaim their belief in individual liberty and freedom so fiercely resist all collective attempts to construct a world in which the necessity that curbs that freedom is eradicated?” And while these libertarian class theories analysis certainly offer credible alternatives unto themselves as well as excellent critiques of structural Marxists like Louis Althusser and many doctrinarian Marxist-Leninists, they resist giving credit to the more complex and nuanced approaches that both Marx and many later (particularly democratic and anti-authoritarian) Marxists utilize in their materialist social analyses.

In particular, they ignore—as do many vulgar Marxists—the important role that abstractions of generality play in the work of Marx. Berrtell Ollman writes on pages 88-89 of his book *Dance of the Dialectic* that much of the confusion around categories, stages, boundaries among Marxist

and non-Marxists alike results from missing that Marx speaks on different levels of generality—differentiated from one another by the principle that enough *quantitative* difference (for example, in scale) leads to a discernable *qualitative* difference. The ‘lowest’ of these are the specifics of the individual:

Starting from the most specific, there is the level made up of whatever is unique about a person and situation. It’s all that makes Joe Smith different from everyone else, and so too all his activities and products. It’s what gets summed up in a proper name and an actual address. With this level—let’s call it level one—the here and now, or however long what is unique lasts, is brought into focus.

From here the generality becomes wider and wider:

- Level Two: “[D]istinguishes what is general to people, their activities, and products because they exist and function within modern capitalism, understood as the last twenty to fifty years.”
- Level Three: “Capitalism as such. . . . Here, everything that is peculiar to people, their activity, and products due to their appearance and functioning in capitalist society is brought into focus.”
- Level Four: “[T]he level of class society. . . . This is the period of human history during which societies have been divided up into classes based on the division of labor. Brought into focus are the qualities people, their activities, and products have in common across the five to ten thousand years of class history.”
- Level Five: “[H]uman society. It brings into focus . . . qualities people, their activities, and products have in common as part of the human condition.”
- Level Six: “The level of generality of the animal world, for just as we possess qualities that set us apart as human beings (level five), we have qualities (including various life functions, instincts, and energies) that are shared with other animals.
- Level Seven: “[T]he most general level of all, which brings into focus our qualities as a material part of nature, including weight, extension, movement, et cetera.”

So for example, as opposed to an orthodox economist who talks about production and distribution as something that can be categorized and analyzed outside of historical conditions—the “formalist” position in debates around economic anthropology—Marx differentiates between capitalist production (Level Three), past modes of production (alternative Level Threes via Level Four), and production in general (Level Five) to situate any kind of social (and ultimately economic) category within a particular historical structure and not as natural givens. This also grounds the Marxist critique of liberal social analysis which leaps from Level One to Level Five—individuals and society in general—in order to sidestep issues of class.

As such, when well-intentioned Marxists talk about class instead of individuals they are not ignoring individuals but rather speaking in generalities Level Two, Level Three, and/or Level Four; or, if they are genuinely trying to remove the individual equation, they are *stuck* on those

levels.<sup>1</sup> For Ollman (on pg. 110), this accounts for much of the debate within Marxism. As he writes...

those who argue for a strict determinism emanating from one or another version of the economic factor (whether simple or structured) and those who emphasize the role of human agency (whether individual or class) can also be distinguished on the basis of the vantage points they have chosen for investigating the necessary interaction between the two (Althusser 1965; Sartre 1963). To be sure, each of these positions, here as in the other debates, is also marked by somewhat different abstractions of extension for shared phenomena based in part on what is known and considered worth knowing, but even these distinguishing features come into prominence mainly as a result of the vantage point that is treated as privileged.

And (on pg. 91)...

[t]hus, when G. D. H. Cole faults Marx for making classes more real than individuals (1966, 11), or when Carol Gould says that individuals enjoy an ontological priority in Marxism (1980, 33), or, conversely, when Louis Althusser denies the individual any theoretical space in Marxism whatsoever (1966, 225-58), they are all misconstruing the nature of a system that has places—levels of generality—for individuals, classes, and the human species.

This does not resolve the debate by any means, but rather gives it more context. There is still the question of what units and abstractions are given ontological priority. Even if one refuses to commit to a particular one at all times, it is still necessary to articulate some kind of priority at least case by case.

In a sense, this is the issue that autonomist Marxists are attempting to address in discussions of the “revolutionary subject.” On the one hand they attempt to articulate the living subjectivity of individual humans and their interpersonal relationships on Level One as a feature of the working class on Level Two and Three. This involves moving beyond the more deterministic elements of Marx’s *Capital*, which tends to position the working class as an object of Capital’s will. In contrast, many autonomists such as Antonio Negri have looked to the *Grundrisse*, which tends, as Immanuel Ness explains in his introduction to *New Forms of Worker Organization*, to imply...

...somewhat ambiguously, that since labor is a living subject not objectified by the means of production, it has the ability to control those means of production. In *Capital* the worker is turned into an object because that is the only way for capitalism to rationalize his or her existence—by rendering the worker an abstraction—whereas in the *Grundrisse* Marx conceives of labor as subjective, thus implying that the bourgeoisie’s control of labor is limited by the desires and actions of the proletariat, who are no longer an objective piece of the equation.

---

<sup>1</sup> Ollman emphasizes that these abstractions of generality are his own interpretation and that different Marx scholars may draw them with different boundaries. I think this helps further elucidate what I mean in my C4SS study on historical materialism by aiding HM with a “non-epochal vision of history,” which doesn’t deny the incredible importance of analyzing distinct socio-historical totalities like feudalism or capitalism, but rather emphasizes that *they are abstractions* and that the reality of things is substantially messier—though still following the logic of quantitative change accumulating to create qualitative change—especially when analyzing our own moment in history and its potential futures.

It is from this class subjectivity and his reading of Baruch Spinoza's politics that Negri conjures up the "Multitude;" not as "a poetical notion, but a class concept." The...

multitude [is] all the workers who are put to work inside society to create profit. We consider all the workers in the whole of society to be exploited, men, women, people who work in services, people who work in nursing, people who work in linguistic relations, people who work in the cultural field, in all of the social relations, and in so far as they are exploited we consider them part of the multitude, inasmuch as they are singularities. We see the multitude as a multiplicity of exploited singularities. The singularities are singularities of labour; anyone is working in different ways, and the singularity is the singularity of exploited labour.

In this sense, Negri applies a sort of (but not quite) methodological individualism that "puts an end to the concept of working class as a simplistic concept, as a mass concept" and holds instead that "[t]he industrial working class never has produced value being a mass, value has always been produced because any worker added his/her particular contribution to the creation of value." Instead of an undifferentiated mass, Negri's multitude is a network of unique people who, as much as they have in common in terms of economic exploitation, are just as much plural and multiple. This breakdown of the mass aspects of Marxist analysis opens up the networking of non-proletarian workers such as peasants (like the Indigenous-autonomist Zapatistas) who "have always been considered to be outside the working class, to be something that should become working class. This always has been complete rubbish because the peasants always worked, worked hard, worked on things, worked as singularities." It also emphasizes the sexual and gendered divisions of labor in class contexts (an important point made by Marxist, socialist, and materialist feminists), pointing to important work done by homemakers—usually women—in generating value as part of the process of "social reproduction." The motion then of the working class is not that of a predetermined, mindless collective but rather is forwarded by the unique constellations of workers that emerge via social networking, collective struggle, and spontaneous world-building, restricted but also constituted by particular material, historical realities.

This stigmergic motion has a much more libertarian sensibility and, alongside the autonomist rejection of party politics and the state in favor of worker self-organization, renders this Marxist view quite close to that of proto-libertarian anarchist Pierre-Joseph Proudhon. Sociologist Pierre Ansart speaks on how Proudhon, "undoubtedly a theorist of classes, contradictions and social conflicts," seeks to avoid "a simple dichotomy between 'holism' and individualism." Instead, "Proudhon aims to show that combining the labour of individuals yields a particular reality, a real force, which is not reducible to the sum of individual contributions. And, since this phenomenon is general, Proudhon often returns to this idea that society is a being, even if it is a system of contradictions, whose reality and laws should be studied." He rejects the common Marxist view of a "unilateral historical determinism leading to a revolution; rather, he intends to identify the plurality of needs and determinisms that together cause historical ruptures;" with a focus on the "capacity of the working classes: people who have been dominated by economic, political and ideological constraints can escape the forces that oppress them," and generate "forms of individual and collective liberation and emancipation are possible, as is the achievement of greater justice." Specifically, Proudhon, according to Robert Graham in "The General Idea of Proudhon's Revolution," argued late in life for...

a radical separation of the working class from bourgeois institutions. He urged the workers to reject all participation in bourgeois politics. He proposed that they organize themselves into their own autonomous organizations in opposition to the existing capitalist system. He emphasized the need for an alliance between the working class and the peasantry. Through their own direct action and solidarity, the workers and peasants would become increasingly conscious of themselves as a class and of their growing political capacity. Ultimately they would displace the regime of the bourgeoisie with the mutualist regime of equality and justice.

Such a “mutualist regime” would, unlike the coercive collectivism of totalizing communism, be built upon the voluntary networking amongst worker collectives, independent producers, and popular financial institutions; a vision not unlike the strategy of, to quote Kevin Carson’s book of the same name, “‘Exodus,’ developed in the last book of [Negri’s and Micheal Hardt’s] *Empire* trilogy (*Commonwealth*), [envisioning] the share of capitalist production that was directly administered by workers, based on their direct occupancy of the means of informational production and the superfluity of capital, enabling workers to simply cut capital out of the process altogether.” Though the interaction between Proudhon’s ideas and autonomism varies, as such they share much in common, lending credit toward sociologist Georges Gurvitch’s view “*that no social doctrine that is concerned about both dedogmatizing Marxism and correcting Proudhon by surpassing them both is possible without a synthesis of the thought of these enemy brothers. For these enemy brothers are condemned to seeing their contributions melt into a third doctrine*” based on “worker self-management.”

The Anarchist Library  
Anti-Copyright



Eric Fleischmann  
The Individual in Marxist (and Proudhonian) Social Analysis  
8/5/2023

Retrieved 8/6/2023 from <https://c4ss.org/content/58827>.  
This piece is part of a series on "red mutualism" at Mutualism Co-op. Read more here:  
<https://c4ss.org/content/59582>.

**[theanarchistlibrary.org](http://theanarchistlibrary.org)**