

MYTHSTAKES BOOK TWO: GOSPELS OF WORK

CHAPTER ONE

Welcome to the second book in the Mythstakes series. I would like to begin with a refresher for those who have forgotten or have not read book one.

This series of books is concerned with the creation and consequences of 'Mythstakes', which refer to stories popularly and sincerely believed to be true, but which have little evidence in support of their validity and substantial evidence showing they cannot be true.

In the last book, we concentrated on the Mythstake that says money's origins lie in barter exchanges, with coinage and, later, credit subsequently introduced to smooth difficulties encountered by individuals as they swap commodities back and forth among themselves.

I do not intend to repeat all the evidence showing this tale of money's origins cannot be true, but since the topic of this book seek to expand upon points laid out in the closing passages of book one, I think a repeat of those passages would be useful to ensure all readers have the necessary context for what is to follow. If you have read book one, by all means skip the following section.

Why The Barter Myth Endures

What is it about the myth of barter that makes it so convincing even in the face of so much refuting evidence? Here, we must appeal to the assumptions that drive the creation and perpetuation of 'mythstakes'. Whenever people refuse to change their assumptions, even when faced with a great deal of evidence that those assumptions are wrong, you can be sure that an ideology is in operation. That was the main reason why the geocentric model survived for so long, even as centuries of observations contradicted its premises, and why the Big Bang theory dominates today, despite its awful track record in terms of predictive success. So, what ideology lurks beneath the myth of barter?

Perhaps it is significant that Smith's 'Wealth of Nations' was published just eighty-nine years after Isaac Newton (1642-1726) published his monumental 'Principia', most famous for its three laws of motion and inverse square law of gravity. Newton's theory of physics was considered our best cosmological model until the twentieth century, and even now the predictions derived from it are valid in all but the most extreme cosmic situations.

So, Newton's cosmology had been a part of society for almost a century by the time Smith put his ideas down on paper, and that is enough time for ideas in one discipline to influence thoughts in others.

According to John Gribbin (b 1946), 'Principia's' biggest impact on society lay in the way it showed, via rigorous experiment, data gathering and math, how the whole universe could be understood using essentially mechanical principles.

Understandably, then, the Newtonian universe is often compared to a great clockwork device. As Gribbin said, "think of a great church clock of Newton's time, not just with hands

marking off time, but with wooden figures that emerge from the interior on the hour...a great complexity of surface activity, but all happening as the result of the tick-tock of a simple pendulum”.

So one could imagine the Creator setting that pendulum in motion, or analogously, pronouncing some simple equations, and from that moment onwards all else would be set in motion. This is a picture of a universe that is not governed by magic and the whims of capricious gods, but rather a mechanistic cosmos built by a divine watchmaker which would run all by itself, ultimately reducible to a set of physical laws that are, in principle, understandable to human minds.

Well, if you were a libertarian like Smith and were determined to show that an economy could run like a well-built machine, then taking a Newtonian viewpoint must have been the way to do it. After all, if, as Newton argued, God had arranged matter just so in order to ensure an eternal, harmonious universe despite all the chaos we seem to witness (all those supernovae, asteroid strikes and so on) why not also suppose providence would have arranged things so that a balanced, harmonious economy would result from the selfish pursuit of material gain?

The problem is that Newton's theories were concerned with relatively very simple things and phenomenon, such as the paths planets must follow if we assume an inverse-square law. But Smith's field of study was the most complex thing in the known universe, namely humans and human behaviour. It's inherent to the deductive approach to break surface complexity down into its underlying simple foundations. The danger lies in the potential to ignore factors you shouldn't really dismiss.

In the case of Smith's theory, and indeed of anyone whose economic model is based on the myth of barter, the flawed assumption is that anyone and everyone who is lending and borrowing does so based on purely 'economic' motivations. This is another way of saying that credit and debt are intrinsically impersonal and that therefore we treat an obligation a cousin owes as no different to a debt owed by a complete stranger.

Of course that's not really true. In reality, we treat people differently depending on what relationships and history we have built up, and there are all kinds of conflicting emotions, behaviours, morals and so on, influencing our decisions. We lend, borrow, and repay not just out of cold economic logic but out of friendship, animosity, love, spite, altruism, jealousy, solidarity, selfishness...the list of possible reasons why we might do favours, roll over a debt or demand repayment now go on and on.

All these contradictory moral principles, emotions and beliefs are necessary aspects of any theory of human behaviour, but it all makes for an inconveniently messy and confusing subject of inquiry. A lot of what people do is beyond quantification, making it particularly challenging for those who would reduce human behaviour to a set of equations. For those determined to do so, it is preferable to ignore all the complexities involved in real human exchanges and to begin instead with an imaginary past where there is no credit and there is no debt and then to imagine a way in which purely-competitive markets where nobody cares about anything but the value of material goods can arise. The temptation of barter lies in the way it presents an idealised beginning in which rational agents make on-the-spot

exchanges, thereby implying a world of individuals who don't owe anything to anyone and who have nothing influencing such exchanges except the best-possible price.

As Graeber said, "for there to even be a discipline called 'Economics' that concerns itself first and foremost with how individuals seek the most advantageous arrangement for the exchange of goods, it must assume that such goods need have nothing to do with war, passion, mystery, sex or death. Economists assume a division between different spheres of human behaviour that simply doesn't exist".

The Theological Roots of Economic Thought

'The economy' is another concept that seems so familiar to us it's hard to believe we could ever have lived our lives without taking it into consideration. It must exist and it must be really important, after all, because the news talks about it all the time.

But the idea that there is this field of study known as 'Economics', with its own principles and laws that could be studied in isolation to ethics, theology and politics, was a novel one in Smith's day. As Graeber explained, "barter played a crucial role in developing the idea that there was 'the economy', which operated by its own rules, separate from moral or political life, that economists could take as their field of study".

Prior to Smith, it certainly wasn't assumed that 'Economics' was a thing unto itself. No, it branched off from theology, and many of Smith's most famous quotes concerning markets and market competition were actually derived from a different moral universe.

But what is the 'economy'? In seeking the answer to that question, we come across a problem much like the one connected to seeking a concise and complete definition of 'money'. There does not appear to be universal agreement about how to define the 'economy'.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word refers to "the branch of knowledge concerned with the production, consumption, and transfer of wealth". Alfred Marshall (1842-1924), author of one of the standard textbooks in this field, summarised it as "the study of people in the ordinary business of life".

If one searches for other concise definitions, a pattern emerges. All such quotes manage to describe what an economy is and what an economy does, but somehow such summaries seem insufficient. Could our inability to completely define what an economy is have the same explanation as the difficulty in defining 'money'? I think one could make a strong case arguing that this is indeed so. A regular contributor to a forum I belong to has a saying that's worth pondering, because there's a good deal of truth in it. "Capitalism", this person likes to tell us, "is what happens while you are making other plans".

What we see in such a quote is reasoning much like that of economists such as Ludwig von Mises (1881-1973) and Friedrich Hayek (1889-1992). These thinkers put forward arguments to show that if you were to try and plan for and command an economy on any large scale, the sheer complexity of that task would soon overwhelm the planners, resulting in disaster.

This, they believed, was the ultimate explanation for the tragedies of Stalinist Russia, Maoist China and other dark periods of a history we label as 'Communist'.

Some politicians and leading thinkers (Margaret Thatcher (1926-2013) being a good example) took findings like these and concluded that the development and domination of Capitalism was somehow a form of manifest destiny. Really, there's no point in seeking alternative ways of organising ourselves because, as the UK's first female Prime Minister liked to remind everyone, "there is no alternative". Although one does not necessarily find any overt religiosity in such statements, one nevertheless gets the impression that advocates of this 'no alternative' stance see the hand of God keeping us all in check, ensuring we always stick to His preferred economic system (capitalism) and punishing us if we ever stray from the righteous economic path. Adam Smith famously spoke of an 'invisible hand' guiding our behaviours, which obviously lends itself to this kind of thinking.

The Diverse Ancestry of Capitalist Modes of Thought

Is it really true, though? I don't think so, and attribute this thinking to mythstakes that have succeeded in diminishing our ability to imagine alternative futures. We'll be discussing such things in later books in this series. But here and now I want to focus on resolving the problem of how alternative economic systems can possibly come into being, if you cannot plan for such an outcome. After all, we know that, if you trace human history back far enough, you find yourself contemplating people who in no way could be considered as being under a capitalist economic system, because back then it did not exist. Somehow, we went from a world devoid of capitalism, to one where it is a global phenomenon. How, when planning large-scale economic change is inevitably a disastrous thing to do?

The answer, as readers have no doubt figured out already, is the same explanation as the complexity and diversity of life and the existence of money, banking and finance. In other words, we're not talking about something that was planned, but nor should we believe it all came about by accident. We are instead contemplating systems that evolved.

As ever with evolved systems, we have to allow for radical adaptation, by which I mean things later becoming repurposed for uses quite removed from the original purpose. Where money and economics is concerned, a few examples of radical adaptations would be:

The most primitive forms of money almost certainly had nothing to do with the impersonal exchange of goods and the moral duty to clear debts. Instead they were symbolic gestures involved, one way or another, in rearranging human relationships, operating in an entirely different sphere that recognised human life as unquantifiable and understood that, as fundamentally social beings, humans should form relationships that endure rather than seek to cancel out the connections we have with each other.

Today, people talk about 'rights' as though they are something people possess, as in the refrain "you cannot do this, I have my rights". If you trace this way of thinking back to its roots, the starting point is very surprising, for it began in ancient slave law. Other surprising points of origin are medieval Chinese Buddhism (where the roots of investment capital are to be found) and the American Dream, as encapsulated by President Lincoln (1809-1865), which actually revised feudal practices surrounding 'services'.

And then there is the 'ideal family', or at least what was considered the ideal from the establishment of capitalism by the 18th century to the late 20th century. That ideal, recall, was that a woman's place was in the home, doing the unpaid work of reproducing the workforce, 'reproduction' in both the sense of giving birth to the next generation of labourers, and also in the sense of maintaining their health by producing care, food, hygiene and other basic necessities labourers need so they can continue to be exploited.

In tracing the evolution of the 'ideal nuclear family' back to its roots, feminists like Sylvia Federici (b1942) have located its origins in a surprising place: the great and terrible witch trials of the 17th century. Ultimately, the persecutions of witches served two useful purposes for the establishment of Capitalism. It strongly persuaded people to look at the world in a 'rational' rather than a 'magical' way (the former way of thinking being much more useful for those seeking to quantify and slap a price tag on everything) and it also undermined worker solidarity by sowing the seeds of suspicion and creating divisions like men versus women, and young versus old. Without the paranoia and suspicion that accusations of witchcraft brought about, the fall of Feudalism may well have resulted in a more communist reality than the hyper-individualistic Capitalist system we ended up with.

Remember, none of this came about because some folk planned for things to turn out this way. There never was a group of conspirators, gathering in secret, hatching their nefarious plot to inject a fear of magic and witches into the populace, all so worker solidarity would be undermined and women's reproductive powers would be 'enclosed' and made to serve capitalism's purposes, much as the common land enclosures forced labourers to 'choose' Capitalism. It's just that, as these developments were put into practice for whatever reason, things developed in ways few if any could have foreseen that eventually led to the modern Capitalist world.

This is just a tiny example of the complex way the web of history wove itself as the modern world developed. We'll be coming back to the topics mentioned above in later books, and in so doing reveal how a good deal more violence went into establishing capitalism than the myth of barter, with its strangers meeting to engage in friendly swaps, would have us believe.

Dubiously 'Productive'

Here, though, I want to consider world that evolved out of our myriad actions and consider that something has obviously gone wrong.

Perhaps the best evidence for this claim would be a remark made by Lloyd Blankfein (b1954). He was the CEO of investment bank Goldman Sachs who, in 2009, made the following claim: "The people of Goldman Sachs are among the most productive in the world".

Look at the year in which Blankfein made that claim. 2009 was the year following the worst economic and financial crisis since the 1930s. Goldman Sachs had been a major player in bringing about the subprime mortgage bubble, engaging in all sorts of dodgy practices disguised under impenetrably complex financial jargon, before the bubble popped and US

taxpayers had to dig into their pockets and hand over \$125 billion in order to bail out this company, apparently one of the “most productive in the world”.

Mind you, Goldman was just one company among a whole banking and financial system that got bailed out, a move that cost tens of trillions of dollars to ‘rescue’ the whole system. This rescue package resulted in years of harsh austerity for ordinary workers and hardly any punishment for the executives of the banks and financial services that mostly caused this near meltdown. If anything, firms like Goldman Sachs benefitted from the fiasco they helped bring about, by betting against the very instruments they had created and which were sold to people’s pension funds as “safe investments”.

Perhaps the most surprising thing about this situation is that the ruling classes continue to get away with it, despite the obvious absurdity. Think about it. Whenever people who provide everyday services- railway workers, nurses, carers, shop assistants, people like that- demand pay packets that reflect the cost of living, you can guarantee that two responses will be forthcoming. First, the question “but where will we find the money to pay for all this?”, will be asked in a tone of voice that makes it clear the question is rhetorical because of course there is insufficient money and such demands are beyond all economic reason. But, while the money needed to pay a living wage is nowhere to be found, somehow politicians have no problem ‘finding’ the trillions needed to fight wars and bail out banksters.

Secondly, calls to raise the pay packets of ordinary people invariably meet the counter “but that would cause inflation”. Do we ever hear such warnings when executives decide to reward themselves a few million on top of the millions they already receive, plus the gold-plated pensions and other expensive perks? No we do not. There is, apparently, no risk involved in vastly increasing the wealth of those who already possess more wealth than is personally practical (what the hell can they spend it all on, other than wasteful luxury or political lobbying to further increase their power over others?). But, woe be to any economy that would pay a decent wage to the blue collar worker, for to do so is to step onto the inflationary slippery slope. In order for a country to be rich, it seems, most of us have to stay poor.

Indeed, not only that, but Capitalism seems to have developed in such a way as to bring about an inverse correlation between the social benefits a class of worker is likely to bring, and the compensation that class receives. In other words, if you do work that obviously benefits people, you’re almost certainly so poorly paid you can hardly manage without family assistance or charity. On the other hand, if you’re, say, a hedge fund manager or a corporate lawyer, engaged in work that is pretty useless for anything other than protecting and increasing the ill-gotten gains of an elite minority, great are the financial rewards that come your way.

Narrow Conceptions of ‘Work’

In making such a statement I am continuing a debate that has gone on since time immemorial. Ever since ancient times, people have considered economic activity as being of two types. This division can be put in a variety of ways. We might speak of the ‘virtuous’ on one hand, and the ‘vile’ on the other. We might instead speak of the ‘industrious’, to be

contrasted with the 'lazy'. But these days the most popular way of dividing economic activity is this: the 'Productive' on one hand, and the 'unproductive' on the other.

Another word we should think about is 'Work'. What are we referring to when we call something 'work'? In my previous book ('How Jobs Destroyed Work') I pointed out that, whenever people refer to 'work', they will talk as though that term refers exclusively to 'jobs' or, at any rate, to activity one is paid for (wages, commissions, royalties, whatever form paid compensation takes). This attitude leads to some bizarre points of view. Most especially, it is not unusual to hear people say things like "I am no longer working. I gave up work in order to raise our kids".

It's rather peculiar how motherhood so often gets classified as 'not working'. A case could be made that bringing up the next generation is among the most important work anyone can ever do. Similarly, those who devote their time to looking after those who are too elderly or infirm to live without support are doing work of tremendous social value. But by the 'work equals jobs' attitude, if such efforts are rendered on a voluntary basis (most carers are family members who care for infirm relatives without expectation of payment) most would conclude such folk are "not working".

As well as thinking about 'work' as if that term should always be thought of as synonymous with 'jobs', we also find a tendency to divide human activity between 'work' and 'play'. Here, the dividing line is not drawn between activities one is paid to perform and those services rendered voluntarily, but rather according to whether the activity could be said to have intrinsic meaning in some form or other. Is what you are doing fun? Enjoyable? Spiritually rewarding? In short, could it be said that one would engage in such activity for its own sake? If so, such activity is properly categorised as 'play'.

Perhaps the best indication that we are supposed to think this way is the career advice that goes something like this. "If you can get paid doing what you love, you'll never work a day in your life".

Why should that be so? Well, if 'play' is any activity done for its own sake, its opposite or negative would have to be action that's never carried out for its own sake. No wonder, then, that 'work' is a word used to describe activities that are often onerous and repetitive, devoid of any intrinsic appeal (and certainly not enough to maintain one's interest for long) but which one sets about doing out of a hope or expectation that something else will be accomplished as a result, be that a cooked meal, a tidier environment, the construction of a bridge, or myriad other things that can result when humans perform certain routines.

Dividing human activities into 'play' and 'work' is arguably another case of imagining human existence to be far less messy and complex than is actually the case. Really, though, people engage in all kinds of practices, customs, rituals, ceremonies, teachings, performances, trials and activities that blur the line between frivolous 'play' and serious 'work'. Children, for example, enjoy playing 'dress-up', putting on various costumes and acting out roles. When they do this, we call it 'play'. But a lot of professions require dressing up in costumes too. Those enforcing the law need to be distinguished from everyday folk, and so on go the police uniforms and the robes and wigs of court judges. The rituals and customs of religious ceremonies or the State Opening of Parliament also involve a considerable amount of

dress-up and acting out of roles. In fact, it's quite hard to think of a job that does not entail slipping on some kind of uniform and adopting a persona suited to a role that's different from one's private self.

Indeed, this kind of play-acting is such an important part of professional life, it explains how come con artists can get away with pretending to be doctors or commercial jet pilots when they have none of the practical skills such jobs require. So long as they wear the uniform and exude the air of calm, assured professionalism expected of a real pilot, doctor or whatever, people will tend to believe what is right before their eyes.

Given that there are many forms of action that blur the line between 'work' and 'play' and the myriad other roles and performances people might engage in, we unsurprisingly find great variation regarding how to draw the borders around such activities across different cultures. But what about the attitude that dominates in our culture? How did such attitudes come about?

Anyone interested in seeking out the roots of our modern attitudes would do well to consider certain traditions that formed in the Eastern Mediterranean. The traditions I am talking about are the ones we find in the Book of Genesis (most especially chapter two) and the works of Hesiod (b circa 700 bce), a Greek who wrote epic poetry.

Consider the myths of the Garden of Eden and Prometheus. What both of these tales do, is explain why we should have to go out into the world and seek work. Of course we would rather not do this, because we can all imagine more pleasant ways of living, such as lazily plucking fruit in God's own garden, or feasting on ambrosia and nectar up on Mount Olympus. But, alas, such a life is no longer available to us. Long ago, these myths tell us, something was done to anger the gods, and the cost of defiance was a life of toil.

So, according to these myths, we are forced to work because this is a punishment visited on us by God/the gods for some past sin. But, we also find something else in these myths, which is the idea that there is more to work than just punishment. These myths, you see, also insist that humans are blessed with the ability to crudely re-enact the divine power of creation. Work is the way we go about achieving this, reforming the world around us to suit our needs through an application of brain and brawn.

In other words, mythical tales such as these are based on our common definitions of work, because they explore the idea that nobody wants to work (because, after all, who would volunteer to be subjected to punishment?) but, at the same time, there is a creative element to such toil, the hope that we might accomplish something beyond the work itself.

Now would be a good time to stop and ponder the following question. Why should this 'something beyond' be equated with 'creation'? In asking such a question, we re-examine the claim that proper, valuable work is 'productive'. Really, it's odd that this should be how we prefer to think about economic activity, because very little work people do these days should be thought of in such terms. In saying this, it might seem that I am denigrating the contributions of the majority, because today 'productive' is used as a synonym for 'valuable', 'praiseworthy', 'useful', and other such virtuous traits. But this is not my intention at all. Instead, I am pointing out that most work does not 'produce' anything, and that there are

other terms we could use that are much better descriptors of what people actually do in their jobs.

But if that is the case, why do we insist on calling all work 'productive'? Basically, the overuse of this term serves much the same purpose as the myth of barter. It radically simplifies human activity so as to render it calculable by economists and, as we shall see later, it's a convention whose origins lie in the theological beginnings of 'economics'.

If you think about it, not many jobs really involve the production of something. If you work in a managerial role, for example, you are not employed to produce anything, but rather to coax the required performance out of other employees. Even if your job entails actually making something, it's arguably more accurate to think of such work as performing some kind of transformation or rearrangement of materials, rather than pure 'creation'.

In other words, if our work is to be compared to that of the gods, it would be a bit more accurate to liken what we do to the origin myths found in cultures like ancient Egypt or Sumer. Why? Because, in these origin myths, the universe is not created out of nothing, but instead through acts that reshape and reform some pre-existing material.

Actually, a case can be made that there is a kind of sleight of hand involved in the creation act carried out by the Biblical God, because while it is commonly read as a tale of Yahweh creating the world out of nothing, it's quite possible to read it as creating the world out of a pre-existing substance, just like prior creation myths.

Gendered Attitudes To Work

There is also a sleight of hand involved in human work, only in this case the cheat is not to make some primordial substance disappear, but rather to make a great deal of work that people actually do disappear, all so that we can think of work entirely in terms of 'productivity'. In the case of human work, the sleight of hand involves gender related attitudes.

This sleight of hand is easier to identify in sources from Greek and Roman antiquity, where the focus was very much on the 'punishment' aspects of work. In our day and age, pretty much any job is seen as noble, the surest way to develop oneself into a better, more rounded character. But that's not how the male aristocrats of Ancient Rome or Greece thought about much of the physical labour and services that had to be performed in order to maintain society. Such work, they felt, was best left to slaves and women. Male aristocrats sought to avoid work of this kind, because far from forming character they saw it as diverting time and energy away from the sort of social and political obligations men should rightly be engaged in.

As we all know, Ancient Greece did nurture some of the giants in philosophical thought, such as Socrates (c. 470-398 bce) Plato and Aristotle (384-322 bce). If figures like these were able to devote so much time to philosophical or political thought, it was mostly because they never had to get their hands dirty, being in a position to tell others (slaves and women) to get on with work of that kind.

Returning to the story of the Garden of Eden, we find a distinction around gender here too, one which tells us something interesting about the supposed link between 'work' and 'productivity'. In this myth, God hands out two punishments. One for Adam and all sons to follow him, another for Eve and all her daughters.

For 'Men', the punishment is a life of toil. As Yahweh tells Adam, just before ejecting him from Eden, "by the sweat of your brow will you eat your food". God ensures this work will be tough and painful labour, by having the earth spring weeds, nettles, thorny vines and other hazards and obstacles man must continually overcome in order to crudely reenact the creative process.

Eve and all her daughters, meanwhile, are punished with their own kind of painful labour. In this case, though, the unhappy circumstances women must henceforth endure is particularly gruelling and painful childbirth. "I will make your pains in child-bearing very severe: with painful labour you will give birth to children".

As in the case of the toil imposed on sons of Adam, the labour women are inflicted with is not just a punishment but also a form of creation. Indeed, quite possibly the act that comes closest to pure creation any human can perform: that of producing a whole new human being, fully formed, from one's own body.

Normally, the process of fertilisation and birthing is called 'reproduction' rather than 'production'. Both words share the same root, and this tells us something important about our attitudes to 'work'. We got the word 'produce' from the Latin word 'producere', which means "to bring forth". 'Work' and childbirth are both called 'labour' not just because both involve punishing exertion, but also because the same core metaphor is at the centre of our beliefs concerning 'production' and 'reproduction'.

Take the latter first. Of all the things humans can do, giving birth is the one most likely to be thought of as miraculous. Because it is a miracle, isn't it? What father has not been overwhelmed with emotion upon seeing his son or daughter brought forth, fully formed, from the mother's body?

Of course, it's not really a miracle, more like the end result of an enormous amount of molecular and cellular processes that somehow divide one cell into two, then four, then eight, along the way differentiating those cells into specialised types until you end up with an organism comprised of trillions of cells working in such harmony we don't see a society of cells coordinating their activities, but rather a single person. But all such processes are hidden away from us. From our perspective babies pop, fully formed, out of women's bodies. The products we use in our everyday lives seem to appear in much the same way, only with the difference that, instead of emerging fully formed from women's bodies, they are 'brought forth' from factories and other places that manufacture the things we need.

Another similarity with this sort of 'production' and human 'reproduction' is that this sort of labour also hides much of the actual work going on. What this 'hiding away' does is to enable a kind of fantasy land not altogether different from the one male aristocrats in Ancient Greece lived in.

For, as David Graeber explained, “in so many patriarchal social orders, men like to conceive of themselves as doing socially, or culturally, what they like to think of as women doing naturally”.

The way to do this is to believe that, just as the Biblical God created the world out of ‘nothing’, heroic entrepreneurial types build businesses “from scratch” and then products are brought forth from those factories etc, products that change the world. As Graeber said, “men see themselves as creating the world from their minds and brawn”.

Really, then, this way of thinking about work almost entirely in terms of ‘productivity’ is very much a theological concept. ‘Production’ is what connects this way of thinking to theology because, as Graeber explained, “production is thus simultaneously a variation on a male fantasy of childbirth, and of the action of a male creator God who similarly created the entire universe through the sheer power of His mind”.

James Brown (1933-2006) famously sung “this is a man’s world”, and the lyrics of that song portray a world created by male brains and brawn. The song also adds the caveat that all such heroic effort would be for naught if men did not have the love of a good woman to support them. But this comes nowhere close to acknowledging the role women play. If Men are able to live a fantasy of creating the modern world, it’s because what is seen as the essence of work (productivity) offloads onto women the majority of labour, involving nurturing, tidying and maintenance that needs to be done in order to preserve the illusion that “this is a man’s world”. In other words, it’s pretty much the same trick that male aristocrats of Ancient Greece pulled, delegating to women or slaves most of the dull and dirty jobs. Frankly, it was ever thus in patriarchal societies, where we often find males taking over the sort of work people will later tell inspiring tales about, while delegating to women the sort of labour one tells stories during the process of doing such work.

CHAPTER TWO

In the last chapter there was talk of boundaries drawn around variations of human activity. As the feudal era gradually gave way to Capitalism, this habit would give rise to what Mariana Mazzucato (b 1968) has called the 'production boundary'; a way of dividing human activity into useful/useless, valuable/ valueless, productive/ unproductive forms.

It would be a while before human activity was thought of in such precise, binary terms. Indeed, if anything, definitions of what should and should not be considered valuable work became more blurred by events brought about by the collapse of feudalism.

Mercantilism

Feudalism was not immediately replaced by Capitalism, a system that would not be firmly established until the 18th century or thereabouts. Back in the 16th century, a series of economic principles that were not Capitalism were adopted by most European nations. During this period, governments were struggling to secure the funds required to maintain armies and bureaucracies. Both were expensive to maintain but also considered vital assets. This was because an era of overseas trading had begun, and such practices blurred the line between honest business practice and outright robbery. Embarking on colonial conquests and then protecting trade routes with the newly annexed lands was proving to be a very costly business, one which raised an all-too familiar question: Where will we find the money to pay for all of this?

Now, in modern times (as in any period where money is based on credit) that is a silly question that ignores the truth that money is imaginary. Therefore, you don't really need to 'find' it, because it has no physical existence. Instead, you need to get most people to believe it exists, and to adapt their behaviours and attitudes accordingly. However, there are periods of history in which money does take on more physical forms, and one such period came about during the era we are now discussing.

The basic thinking at this time was very much zero-sum. The idea was that the world contained a finite amount of wealth and so, if one was to amass more wealth, that must inevitably result in rivals having less. Rival countries were therefore racing to claim or conquer as much of the globe as they could, and during this time of exploration/conquest, European countries made an astonishing discovery: a hitherto unknown continent which turned out to be a source of great riches in the form of gold and silver.

So, for once, the question "where will we find the money?", had an obvious answer. It was over there in the Americas, either in the form of treasure amassed by such civilisations as the Mayans, Aztecs and Incas, or running through seams underground, waiting to be mined.

The way these lands and their inhabitants were exploited in a debt-fuelled rush to turn gold/silver bullion into coinage makes for fascinating and disturbing reading. But that's a subject we'll cover in later books. What I want to focus on here is how the discovery of so much gold and silver changed attitudes concerning what represented wealth and prosperity. As this vast treasure from the Americas poured into Europe (though, actually, most would go to China) the elites of these countries (but not so much everyday folk) came to view gold or

silver as the best way to represent wealth and prosperity. In fact, more than that, gold/silver did not merely represent money; once stamped into coins it was money. Once that attitude was fully in place, it seemed natural that 'productive activity' should be any activity connected to the acquisition of precious metals and their minting into coins.

Scholars and politicians of this period did indeed argue that the way to achieve and maintain national power and prosperity was through the accumulation of precious metals. But, they did not just seek to lay their hands on as much bullion as possible; they also sought to establish protectionist trade policies that would work to ensure the inflow of precious metals would be stimulated while simultaneously preventing the outflow of gold and silver. Because a good deal of these practices involved the use of merchant-adventurers, those who practiced such activities became collectively known as 'Mercantilists' from the Latin 'Mercator' or 'Merchant'.

So, in between 'feudalism' and 'Capitalism' there was 'mercantilism'. In England, the best-known advocate of mercantilism was Sir Thomas Mun (1571-1641) who was himself a merchant as well as the director of the East India Company. He wrote an influential book called 'England's Treasure by Forraign Trade', in which he pretty much summed up mercantilist thinking in one sentence, advising that the nation should "sell more to strangers yearly than wee consume of theirs in value".

The mercantilists believed more needed to be done than just ensuring selling stuff to 'strangers' (he meant foreign countries) maintained a positive balance of trade. They also defended the growth of national government, because they considered that to be essential to the aims of funding wars and expeditions, and also for keeping trade routes open and for controlling colonial markets.

Given that the thinking during this period was "the more for us, the less for our rivals", it should come as no surprise to learn that governments in the mercantilist era did what they could to preserve a positive balance of trade. After all, they wanted to limit the money available to foreign powers. To that end, ministers set about establishing monopolies and franchises which were then granted or sold to companies seeking to profit from these exclusive rights. The most famous of such arrangements was the monopoly on trade in the East Indies, owned by the East India Company mentioned earlier, but all kinds of monopolies and regulations were enforced at this time. In France, for example, there was a vast bureaucracy milking every conceivable trade through regulatory measures.

Political Arithmetic

Mercantilism did more than just bring about a growth in monopolies and protectionist trade policies, though. It also encouraged budding economists to think of wealth production in national terms and to show much more interest in statistical analysis. The English government, for example, had started to collect data on the number and causes of deaths around London by 1600, because the government was keen to quantify how the outbreak of plague was affecting the populace. Figures like these were published annually, and in 1662 one John Grant (1620-1674) relied on such figures to produce 'National and Political Observations Made Upon the Bills of Mortality', which was the first work of statistical analysis.

As well as seeing the development of statistics, this was also the time when Britain was pioneering attempts to quantify national income. One person who attempted such a thing was Sir William Petty (1623-87) who was a member of parliament when John Grant published his 'Bills of Mortality', working as a tax administrator in Ireland under Oliver Cromwell's commonwealth government (he had also worked as personal secretary for Thomas Hobbes, who pretty much invented political philosophy).

Petty wrote several treatises that today would no doubt be regarded as 'economics' but which he himself referred to as 'Political Arithmetic', a discipline he defined as arguments based on "number, weight and measure". As he set about pioneering this sort of work, Petty not only started accounting for the national income, but also established a primitive version of what became known as the 'quantity theory of money', which is a theory that tries to explain the relationship between changes in the money supply, and prices.

One of Petty's aims was to figure out how much economic potential was contained in a limited amount of cash, and from such studies he concluded that money's effectiveness really depended not so much on how much money there was altogether, but rather on how quickly money was changing hands. But, more importantly for how 'Economics' came to see itself, Petty also came to believe that such a mathematical approach could enable those who mastered 'Political Arithmetic' to calculate the path to national prosperity with as much reliability as astronomers were able to track the orbits of planets.

Sir William Petty was not the only person doing pioneering work in economics at this time. Somebody else involved in such work was Gregory King (1648-1712) who, as well as being an engraver and a genealogist, also worked as a statistician.

Working under the latter capacity, King produced a detailed compilation of the nation's wealth according to class and religion. Given the messy and incomplete data both he and Petty had to make do with back then, this work was surprisingly accurate. In 1699 parts of King's work made it into print, included in 'Essay Upon the Balance of Trade' by Charles Davenant (1656-1714) regarded as the first serious attempt to account for the wealth of a nation.

What made the data that these pioneers in economics worked with so messy, was the rudimentary government tax figures and the patchy statistics on the consumption of basic commodities. It is a testament to the ingeniousness of both men that they were able to produce such detailed estimates. In doing so, they laid the foundation for modern national accounts.

It should also be pointed out that, at this stage, Petty and King's chief concern centred on calculating the nation's input. Questions concerning how that input came about were not issues concerning these men. As a consequence, their estimates lacked a clear value theory.

Petty's and King's Production Boundary

From the 1660s to the late 1690s, though, both Petty and King engaged in work that, while not explicitly intended to draw production boundaries around human activity, nevertheless drew implicit boundaries, as budding economists attempted to distinguish between genuine value creators, and wealth takers.

All this was largely kicked off by Petty, as a result of a decisive breakthrough he made around this time. He came to see that when one treated a country as a closed system, then every coin spent by one person would be an equivalent income for another person. This insight provided Petty with a way of making up for a lack of available statistics, because it enabled him to assume that a nation's income was equal to its expenditure. Of course, this was not entirely accurate, but instead relied on certain simplifying assumptions, such as ignoring the fact that people can save, rather than spend or invest, their money. But, ignoring such complicating details, Petty arrived at a figure for the nation's income, something he arrived at by calculating expenditure per person, multiplied by the population.

Ignoring savers was not the only omission carried out by Petty. He also chose to calculate some forms of spending and to omit others. The way he made that choice is important for the current topic, because it created an implicit boundary between 'productive' and 'unproductive' work.

In Petty's case, though, the boundary was drawn between money spent on "food, Housing, Cloaths, and all other necessities" and, outside of that boundary, all other "unnecessary expenses".

As he worked on this, Petty came to see any branch of the economy not concerned with producing what he considered to be 'necessities' as not adding anything to the national income. That is to say, he was beginning to draw a boundary between valuable and non-valuable work.

For Petty, the production boundary looked something like this. Placed within the boundary, and therefore considered to be value creators, were "husbandmen, seamen, soldiers, artisans and merchants....the very pillars of any common-wealth". As for those situated outside of the boundary, and therefore not really doing anything to increase the nation's wealth, that for Petty was where one should place "all other great professions" which "do rise out of the infirmities and miscarriages" of proper, value-creating work.

But what 'great professions' did he mean, exactly? Well, Petty was thinking of Lords, civil-servants, clergymen, lawyers, and people like that. As far as he was concerned, those working in such professions could not be said to be essential to production or exchange. At best, they were necessary evils, good only for facilitating production and maintaining the status quo.

During the late 1690s, Gregory King had become concerned with England's ability to wage war, and this concern led him to run a comparison between that country's income with that of Holland and France. Relying on a wide range of sources, King drew up detailed calculations of the income and expenditure of roughly twenty different occupation groups, from paupers up to the aristocracy.

In carrying out such work, King was drawing an implicit production boundary, just as Petty had done. In King's case, 'productivity' was defined as income that was greater than expenditure. Working with that assumption, King deemed the most productive group to be merchant traders, calculating their income to be a quarter more than their expenditure. The next most productive group, according to King, were "temporal and spiritual lords", and after them he placed a variety of prestigious professions. All such groups belonged within the production boundary, classified as "wealth creators" by King's reckoning.

Farmers, however, were put right on the boundary. King placed this group there, because he believed farmers to be a group who earned almost no more than they spent. As for those placed outside the boundary (meaning they were definitely 'unproductive') that, for King, was where society should place seamen, labourers, servants, cottagers, 'common soldiers' and paupers. These 'unproductive masses' represented just over half of the total population. King calculated that these groups consumed more than they produced, and in his opinion that made them leeches on the public wealth.

Subjective Attitudes in 'Objective' Studies

It's important to note that both Petty and King let certain prejudices shape their 'production boundaries'. They would hardly be alone on this regard. In the following centuries, other economists and policymakers would come along with ideas concerning how to divide human activity according to whether it did, or did not, produce value. In just about every case, such 'production boundaries' were not drawn in an entirely impartial way, but instead were inspired at least in part by predominant social attitudes and personal preferences.

Returning to Petty's and King's analyses of who did or did not produce value, one thing worth noting (because it highlights what was just said) are the discrepancies between these men's work. By no means do they concur on who should be placed within the production boundary. Notice, for instance, how several of the group that were 'wealth makers' by Petty's analysis included seamen, soldiers and unskilled labourers, while for King these belonged outside the production boundary. For King, pretty much all the professions he deemed 'productive' were viewed as 'unproductive' by Petty. What's going on here? How can cold, logical economic calculations lead to such divergent outcomes?

The answer, as readers have no doubt guessed, is that both men allowed personal prejudices to influence their work. Petty, as you may recall, had worked for Oliver Cromwell (1599-1658). It's safe to assume, then, that this was a man with republican instincts. Historical records also show his origins to have been humble. It should not be much of a surprise, then, to find this working-class republican favouring common folk as his work drew an implicit boundary around those who did (and did not) create the nation's wealth.

King, on the other hand, had long moved in aristocratic and court circles, and -surprise surprise- those "great professionals" who had been deemed unproductive by Petty belonged firmly within the production boundary, according to King.

It should be pointed out, as well, that at this early stage in the development of economics, the different production boundaries drawn by King and Petty were not just a result of personal prejudice. Just as important at this stage was the primitive nature of 'political

arithmetic'. In neither case were these men linking their work to a value theory that would have enabled them to quantify such concerns as how an economic system would reproduce itself and ensure conditions for future production were maintained, and nor was there any attempt in either case to quantify or model relations between different groups and individuals in the economy.

Since such details were missing, there was not much to constrain Petty and King, and so these men were free to label human activity as 'productive' or 'unproductive' however they chose to. As Mariana Mazzucato pointed out, "any policy for economic growth was...idiosyncratic because it was unclear what generated it".

Market Crashes Cause a Rethink

By the 18th century, though, it became starkly clear that an underlying value theory was something the developing 'science' of economics desperately needed, or else things could go haywire. This realisation came about as the mercantilist system was rocked by some of history's worst cases of financial turmoil.

Now, earlier it was said that this was a period in which 'money' was considered to be coinage. But, while people at this stage in history were encouraged to think of coinage as 'real money', one should not suppose that all purchases and sales were mediated exclusively by cash. Poorer folk relied mostly on various forms of community credit, while those at the top of society were using their own forms of 'credit' to massively increase the money supply with 'paper' money.

As well as expanding the money supply in this way, many of these financial elites believed in 'inflationary theory', which basically held that the more money there was circulating the economy, the better off everyone would be.

One such inflationist was John Law (1671-1729). In 1716 he had been appointed head of France's central bank, a position that placed him in charge of paying off France's national debt. As well as being chief of France's central bank, Law was also the head of the Mississippi Company, newly formed in America. Thanks to that latter position, Law was able to issue banknotes that were guaranteed by all the land that was waiting to be claimed (or stolen if indigenous people got there first). The plan was that Law's scheme would flood the economy with cash, and that would help the French government repay the national debt.

Instead what happened was that overconfidence and infinite naivety, combined with paper money that could be expanded indefinitely so long as people believed in it, came together and caused wealth to seemingly take off like a rocket. Indeed, the sums investors were holding became so large that a new word was coined in order to describe them. They became known as 'Millionaires'.

Ultimately, though, this vast bubble was based on assets that could not be realised, and the madness of crowds can only inflate such bubbles for so long before loss of faith causes all such imaginary money to disappear, transforming valuable notes into worthless paper.

Law's system crashed in 1720. This was also the year when the South Sea Company, an English company that had tried a similar share-based scheme, also collapsed.

Great wealth, it seemed, could suddenly vanish as confidence underlying assets evaporated. Little wonder, then, that following such financial calamities there was more focus on building solid foundations in value theories. Something else that encouraged such work was an increasing concern to explain why it should be that some countries should fall into decline, while others experienced growth and prosperity.

Concerns such as these led to the first proper treatise on economics. Its author was an Irishman by the name of Richard Cantillon (1680-1734) He had taken part in John Law's scheme by buying and selling ridiculously overvalued Mississippi Company shares. However, he was not completely blind to where all this inflation was heading, and in fact he took the precaution of secretly exchanging his own banknotes before the company collapsed. Thanks to this shrewd move, Cantillon was one of the few millionaires who did not lose his money.

He would later move to London where he would meet an untimely end at the hands of a murderer. Before that, he wrote that treatise on economics, the title of which was 'An Essay on the Nature of Commerce in General'

In this work, Cantillon relied on a method of abstraction that was first adopted by Pierre le Pesant, sieur de Boisguilbert (1646-1714) and which would be adopted by subsequent economists. Basically, the idea is that you establish a series of criteria for experimentation, and then you maintain "all other things being equal". This is another way of saying that you are not attempting to factor in every conceivable variable (which would be impossibly complex) but are instead testing a single factor in a theoretical laboratory, if you will.

One thing Cantillon was keen to do was to develop a theory capable of explaining how the price of a commodity is determined. This work led him to a key realisation that would one day become mainstream economic thought, but not before other economic systems rose up and had their period of popularity.

Cantillon's key insight was as follows: what determines the price of an item was not how much it cost to produce, but rather how much demand for it there was. This makes him the forerunner of modern 'laws of supply and demand' schools of economic thought. By the time he had further developed the quantity theory of money that Petty had advanced, Cantillon's work effectively ended Mercantilism's time as the predominant economic school of thought.

Old Ways Never Quite Die

At this point, I feel it is important to point out that Mercantilism no longer dominating should in no way be confused with mercantilism disappearing altogether. When we talk about one economic system replacing another, this gives the impression that the old ways disappear, so whereas once upon a time, everyone adopted Feudalist practices (for example), now everybody is a Capitalist. Reality is more complex than that. The old ways never really disappear entirely. Countries continue to practice mercantilism, such as when they put up protectionist barriers. Companies still adopt practices that are really more like feudal

arrangements than purely 'capitalistic' modes of practice. In reality, human life involves moving back and forth between different, and sometimes contradictory, modes of interaction, and this happens on the personal, familial, societal, national and global level. It's really just a convenient fiction for economists, this supposition that, since Capitalism now dominates, we all act in an exclusively 'Capitalistic' way, all the time, and that all human interaction is built around exchange and that's that.

Anyway, 'An Essay on the Nature of Commerce in General' was first published in France, where it had quite an impact on a new generation of French thinkers. From this there arose the first 'school' of economic theoreticians who would begin the serious search for the ultimate source of value.

As mentioned before, this did not kick off with economists leaping from mercantilism to theories of value based on supply and demand. Instead, value theories would first see 'land' as the source of all value, and then, following the industrialisation of economies, they would think in terms of a labour theory of value.

CHAPTER THREE

The Physiocrats

Before there were Neo-liberal or Classical economists there were physiocrats. The pioneer of this form of economics was one Francois Quesnay (1694-1734) He lived in an age when societies were predominantly agrarian, with most people earning a living through working the land, or seeming to derive their wealth ultimately from those who did.

Given the sort of society he knew, it's understandable that Quesnay originated the source of value in the way he did. He believed all value ultimately came from the land.

As to who created value, Quesnay thought that was pretty clear. Nobody did. His reasoning was that if you trace any production back far enough, you always find people making use of resources that nobody created but were just lying around waiting to be discovered. So, strictly-speaking, only God really had the ability to make anything literally from scratch.

Accordingly, Quesnay did not think of human work as 'productive' but rather as 'transformative'. His 'production boundary' was drawn to reflect his assumptions. Pride of place was given to those whose work entailed producing commodities from the rawest possible materials. Those who worked the land and waters; farming, fishing and mining; digging up minerals and ores, bringing meats to markets, growing crops from seeds, got as close as anyone could to producing value in Quesnay's eyes.

As for artisans, manufacturers and others whose jobs entailed transforming raw materials into products, Quesnay didn't consider such work to be value creating, but rather a recirculation of value that already existed. But, as he saw this redistribution of value as benefitting society overall, he considered such work useful, if not quite as essential as that of those who supply the raw materials everything else ultimately depends on.

And then, most definitely outside of the production boundary, there was the 'sterile classes', comprised of landlords, the nobility and the clergy. Quesnay saw the activities of this group as being particularly unproductive, because he believed them to represent a class that only redistributed wealth to itself thanks to its owning the land and therefore being in a position to practice rent-extraction.

Anyone who contemplates the nature of competition with an eye to self-advantage inevitably acknowledges the need for a referee to ensure cheating doesn't predominate, and the rule of law to ensure people interested in getting their hands on as much of other people's stuff as possible don't do the obvious thing and just steal it. So, like anyone who contemplates such things, Quesnay acknowledged that a nation's wealth could only be upheld through "proper management by the general administration". In other words, he saw a need for government regulation sufficient to break monopolies and to establish the conditions under which healthy competition and trade could thrive. He therefore didn't exclude Government, but neither did

he include government activities within his production boundary. The State, in his opinion, facilitated the true wealth-creators but was not actively creating that value.

Wages, Rent, and Profit

Contemporaries of Quesnay came along and refined things somewhat. One such contemporary was Anne Robert Jacques Turgot (1727-1781). Just as Quesnay had, Turgot assumed that land was the source of value, but he revised the production boundary in a way that emphasised the character of the work being done, not the category of work itself.

Turgot's main revision of the physiocrat production boundary involved a reclassification of the 'sterile' class. What Turgot did was to argue that some members of this class played essential supporting roles such as administering justice or overseeing work. He thought that only when they gave up farming altogether and lived on rent alone did they become the 'disposable class'. In other words, whereas before it had been assumed that one either worked the land for wages, or owned the land and received rent, Turgot's refinement of the production boundary led to the three income categories of not only wages and rent but also profit.

The method of categorising incomes in this way would remain through subsequent redrawings of the production boundary, and redrawn it was, as changes in society prompted reexamination of the question 'where does value come from?'.

Left/Right Concepts of Undeserved Wealth

In many societies there is a general concern that others are seeking to get their hands on unearned wealth, and quite often emotions not unlike hatred, aimed at those who are perceived to have actually succeeded in getting 'something for nothing'.

In modern times this pervasive concern/fear can be roughly said to be of two types, one born from the right wing of politics, and the other more leftist. Let's take the latter first, which focuses on the idea of privilege. Imagine somebody has inherited a fortune and has come under criticism by those who oppose the idea that wealth should flow like sap up the family tree. What might this heiress say in defence of the money bequeathed to her?

One tactic might be to insist that she is not some layabout for whom life is devoid of all struggle and want; she has faced and overcome challenges and in so doing earned what comforts she has today. The leftist response to that would be that she should "check her privilege". What this refrain basically means is that there exists in the world others who have a much more legitimate claim to have shouldered the burden of life's challenges, and who therefore would, in any genuinely meritocratic society, receive a fairer distribution of the wealth of the world that, unfortunately, instead gets concentrated into the riches of an elite minority.

The roots of this attitude are found in the theories of Karl Marx (1818-83), whose ideas we'll be going into more detail later. For now, all that needs to be known is that Marx considered the march of history to consist of an ongoing war. While a cursory glance at this long

struggle makes it seem as though the fight has been between different opposing groups (such as slaves versus owners in one historical period, and the aristocracy versus the peasantry in another) Marxist analysis showed that it was really the same war, the technical name of which is a 'Class War', and though they may go by different names throughout history, really it's always fought between the same opposing classes. History, according to Marxist theory, is an ongoing struggle between 'the oppressor' and 'the oppressed'.

But who were the oppressors and who were the oppressed? In Marx's magnum opus, 'Das Kapital', this seemed quite clear. The oppressors were the 'bourgeoisie' (aka the capitalists) who owned the means of production in an industrialised society, and the oppressed were the 'proletariat' (aka the working classes) who they employed to maintain, manage and run the means of production.

According to Marxist theory, throughout long periods of history it appears to be the case that the oppressors are securely in power. This is partly because material wealth tends to flow to this group, and there are ways to convert material wealth into political power, which can then be used to gain access to more material wealth (and it's not difficult to see a positive feedback loop developing out of a situation like that). But, the oppressors don't just pursue ever-greater levels of material wealth and political influence. This is also the class that mostly gets to write the history books, commissions the art, organises the educational systems and in short gets to shape culture and cultural attitudes in its image.

All of which has an interesting effect on that other class, the 'oppressed'. Does this group tend to go around bemoaning despondently "woe is us, for we are oppressed!"? The answer is no, because it is normally the case that this class a) does not even know it is oppressed and b) is hardly aware that it is a class. True, people may well be very aware that life for them is a struggle and that to achieve even a fraction of the material wealth and cultural acclaim amassed by an elite minority is a near-impossible task. But they normally consider all this to be perfectly natural, the way things have always been and always will be. The oppressed is a class conditioned to think this way by the elite minority 'oppressors' who control the cognitive map.

Revolutionary Moments

As John McMurtry (1939-2021) said of the Feudalist era, "the last dark age is easily recognisable to us now. Not once in a millennium of philosophy does rational challenge of a significant form of its ruling social order occur: not of slavery nor serf bondage...not, in short, of any form that might seem worthy of critical recognition....the entire institutional fabric of society is apotheosised as the will of God, with any criticism of it a blasphemy".

Notice, though, that this quote opens with the recognition that feudal systems of oppression are now "easily recognisable". In Marxist theory, this has come about because history alternates between two phases. There is 'normality', in which the oppressed class is not even aware that it is the oppressed class (or, perhaps it would be more accurate to say, not aware that things could be different) but then there are those revolutionary moments in history, in which the oppressed class becomes conscious of two facts that the elite minority have tried to hide from them: that they are the oppressed class and that, in terms of collective strength, it is they who are the mighty.

Marx believed that revolutionary moments in history, where an elite minority gets overthrown, had happened before and would inevitably happen again with the current 'Capitalist' era. Why should this inevitably happen? Because the endless pursuit of more material wealth could not help but place increasing strains on society and the environment. These social and environmental problems would have to be solved in a way that did not upset the current 'natural' order of things, or else civilisation would collapse.

It would mostly fall on the working classes to actually do the work of solving all the problems in keeping the 'engine' of capitalist production running, and this would be impossible unless this class became more educated and more organised. But, Marx insisted, you could not have an oppressed class becoming increasingly well-trained, technically efficient and organised, without this class also becoming smart enough to become conscious of the fact that human societies don't just happen because it is "the will of the gods" or "the will of the market". No, systems like 'feudalism' and 'capitalism' only exist if people wake up every day and recreate them.

Obviously, no individual can accomplish this, for it is necessarily an intersubjective phenomenon. We collectively recreate systems like feudalism or capitalism, and could just as easily wake up tomorrow and collectively create a different system. Preferably, a system in which the oppressed are no longer largely alienated from the material wealth they were almost entirely responsible for creating, but finally receiving what was always their due.

Post-Marxism

In Marx's day, those who should receive their due were the working class. But, in the post-Marxist era an idea developed, which was that some 'oppressed' were more oppressed than others and therefore had greater claim to compensation when the wrongs of history were corrected. Marx's heroes had been the working-class men who operated the machinery of the industrial revolution (probably because such a group was the most trainable and organisable, since their jobs already entailed a high degree of discipline, punctuality etc).

Then, feminists like the aforementioned Sylvia Federici came along, insisting that the oppression experienced by working-class men paled before that experienced by women. Marxist-feminists such as she insisted it was actually women who did the bulk of the uncompensated work needed to keep Capitalist society functioning, and therefore they should be first in the queue once the socialist revolution ended the current regime. Later, critical race theorists like bell hooks (1952-2021) came along, insisting that coloured minorities (particularly female coloured minorities) had suffered the most oppression.

On and on went this Leftist search for the most oppressed minority, to the point where, unless you happen to be the fat, black, homosexual, transgender offspring of a third-world lesbian single-mother Muslim...you have no right to speak of hardship and are clueless with regards to just how sheltered and comfortable your fake existence is. Check your privilege!

Of course, it's easy to mock this pursuit of ever-more finely defined notions of the oppressed minority (it's like that old Python sketch based on stereotypical Yorkshiremen, outdoing one another with tales of personal hardship, only put forward by painfully sincere academics

rather than comedians making a joke) but mockery should not blind us to the fact that there is some truth to this idea that the material wealth amassed by modern society did rely on far more robbery and exploitation of minority people than most of us really care to acknowledge.

In fact, as individuals we should, perhaps, all 'check our privilege' and recognise just how much of what we each call 'mine' was in fact created by others, most of them long dead, never having received any historical recognition for their contribution to our lives.

But, the downside of this striving to identify the 'most oppressed of the oppressed' is that it works against the one trump card the working class holds, which is collective strength. Think of that scene from 'Monty Python's Life of Brian', where we learn that the only thing more despicable than the Romans are the splinter groups that have split off from the 'People's Front of Judea'. In the midst of a clash between two such groups, Brian desperately tries to remind the squabbling crowd that "surely, we should be united against the common enemy!".

Similarly, today all these culture warriors championing ever-more exacting definitions of "who is really oppressed" in their books, lectures, documentaries and speaking engagements are arguably doing harm to the Marxist cause by sowing division and mistrust among the working class while also, by feeding the activist-industrial complex and becoming 'successful' (rich and famous, due to their much sought-after opinions) actually becoming agents of the capitalist system that should be identified as the true common enemy of the People.

The View From the Right

While the admonition coming from the Left is "check your privilege", those on the Right shout "get a job!". The thinking behind such a call appears to be as follows. "I don't owe anything to anybody. All that I have was built from scratch (or, "I climbed the corporate ladder from the bottom rung upwards") and, thanks entirely to my working hard and smart, I earned a comfortable existence. It would be even more comfortable were it not for the fact that hard-working folk like me are besieged on all sides by lazy rascals who want all the hard-won luxuries I have, but without striving to deserve it. This is intolerable. People like that should be rounded up and made to do a job- any job, I don't care what. We certainly cannot afford anything more than bare-bones social security, because mollycoddling people only encourages them to become lazy and entitled, and before you know it society has broken and we've all been dragged down into the gutter".

How much truth is there in such a statement? Not very much, frankly. Probably the nearest thing to a true statement is the bit about starting at the bottom rung of a career ladder and working your way to the top. This does happen. For example, a person may begin working life washing dishes in a professional kitchen, and eventually make it to head chef or even, perhaps, the owner of a chain of restaurants, thanks in large part to their taking opportunities as and when they arose, and putting in the effort needed to train oneself to work as a highly coveted professional chef.

Really, though, such a statement is more of a collection of fantasies and misunderstandings than an expression of the plain truth. Take the idea that, by taking on a job, one can clear debts. Believing this requires a fundamental misunderstanding of the relationship between

money and debt. The way our banking and financial systems work, all money is created out of debt. Therefore, every paycheque one person receives creates a debt that others are obliged to pay off. Also, inevitably, all the money those people have represents debt others are obliged to repay. But, how are they going to repay that debt, other than by 'borrowing' or 'making' money, both of which necessitate- you guessed it- creating more debt? Should those people find employment and receive some kind of monetary compensation, all the money they receive will, as ever, represent a debt others have to 'repay'. In short, then, being employed never really pays off debt, it just displaces that debt, making it somebody else's problem.

In other words, the world of employment is akin to a game of musical chairs, with everyone competing not to be the one who, through mathematical inevitability, will be left without a chair once the music stops (or, in the case of this game of 'displace the debt', left with no choice but to default). When viewed in this way, the banking and financial system is not just there to manage money, but to ensure the 'money' part of 'debt/money' will tend to float upwards, collecting in the hands of the asset-owning rich, while the 'debt' tends to sink down so that, even if they were to work every hour a human being can possibly work, there is no escaping the debt necessarily accumulating from employment and other 'moneymaking' activities, at least, not for everybody. For some, the outcome is that the asset-owning rich (who, after all, own the banking/ financial system) get to take hard assets off of those who 'default' on their debt. Since 'hard assets' can include property, some people can end up homeless.

The popular opinion from the Right, though, is that homelessness and other hardships born of poverty are the just deserts of lazy rascals; a painful but necessary lesson that you don't get anywhere in this world without working to earn what you covet. Those who think this way tend to view debt accumulation as being driven primarily by people paying for luxuries they cannot afford. It's not too hard to find cautionary tales of the jobless bum who refused to cut his cloth accordingly, racking up credit-card debt buying fancy shoes and high-tech gadgets, until reality bit and now here he is with his hand out, expecting us hard-working folk to pull him out of the financial hole he dug for himself.

Given the popularity of such tales in the right wing of the press, one would be forgiven for thinking that the number one reason why people fall hopelessly in debt is because they want a life of material luxury, only without putting in the hard graft required to earn it. But this isn't the main reason why people end up crippled by debt at all. No, the main reason is...being crippled. Or, more precisely, having an illness or injury that lowers one's quality of life, and insufficient social healthcare. Think of this as a Hobson's Choice between staying crippled physically, or being crippled financially.

Becoming indebted through acquiring material luxuries one cannot afford is not even the second main reason for becoming crippled by debt. Throughout history, people have tended to end up indebted not because they chased unaffordable luxury, but because of some social event they felt compelled to stage appropriately. When we talk about 'needs', we should take into account the extent to which 'needs' are, to a social animal like a human being, simply other people's expectations.

Imagine that it would be an absolute family disgrace not to put on a 'proper' funeral, or that your daughter is about to reach a milestone birthday (she'll only be sixteen once). To what extent is the huge personal and social pressure a person feels to properly mark such occasions a real need, rather than a flippant expenditure of money they could and should not pay? I think it was the philosopher David Hume (1711-1776) who pointed out that, in purely functional terms, wearing a sack would protect one from the elements as well as a silk shirt would. But if a person should feel immense social shame about being seen in public wearing a sack instead of a silk shirt, then isn't it fair to say that wearing a silk shirt is a genuine need?

The Collective Roots of 'My Stuff'

But, while it's important to point out things like this, because they seriously question the right-wing fear of being besieged on all sides by lazy rascals who want material luxuries they didn't earn, these are not the main mistaken assumption.

No, the greatest mistaken assumption of all is the idea that an individual ever could build up even a modest (let alone luxurious) lifestyle from scratch. Consider the stereotypical right-winger, purveying all that he has bought and considering it to be 'his' property. Money does not turn natural resources into materials, nor materials into products. A simple thought-experiment shows this to be the case. Imagine that you had a big sack, full of money. And, not just paper money, but gold coins of the finest purity. You throw your sack of gold coins at a tree and shout the command, "become a set of table and chairs!". Would your money really cause that tree to transform into a table and chairs? No, of course not. Money, in and of itself, has no such power.

Ultimately, there is only one power on this planet that is capable of turning natural resources into materials, and materials into products that satisfy human needs, and that is human labour power. We may augment our physical and mental capabilities by exploiting animals or developing technological aids. Maybe one day we'll have figured out how to make robots and artificial intelligences that manage, maintain and manufacture everything we need. But here and now it is human labour power that really provides all we need to lead a decent life.

That being the case, instead of looking around one's home and thinking "all this is mine because I paid for it", we should, instead, look at all that is around us and ask ourselves, "how much actual work did I myself contribute to bringing this into existence?".

Try it yourself. Look around the environment you are currently in and ask yourself how much of your own personal labour was invested in what you see around you. I can safely say that, even if the environment is your own home, at least 99.99% of the stuff you see around you contained no labour from you whatsoever. Far from building material wealth "from scratch", you contributed virtually nothing to the world of human cultures, materials and products.

This is not because you are 'lazy' but because you are a human being. As a human being, you are a social animal who is almost completely dependent on the support of others, most of them long dead. As an individual, you can only ever contribute an infinitesimal amount to the store of human knowledge. Whether you are a billionaire entrepreneur or a homeless bum, your personal contribution, when compared to the totality of human achievement,

amounts to next to nothing. So, really, it's not just the 'workshy' who expect social support and access to material luxuries they never really earned. This is how we have always lived, and the more complex civilisation becomes, the more true this is.

In our high-tech, hyper-individualistic cultures, we are not supposed to think this way. We are encouraged to look up to so-called "self-made millionaires", fed propaganda that we too may achieve as much by pulling ourselves up by our bootstraps. Instead of continuing to believe nonsense like this, we should instead accept the truth, as articulated by Thorstein Veblen (1857-1929):

"Natural-rights theory of property makes the creative effort of an isolated, self-sufficing individual the basis of ownership vested in him. In so doing it overlooks the fact that there is no isolated, self-sufficing individual. Production takes place only in society- only through the cooperation of an industrial community. This industrial community may be large or small...but it always comprises a group large enough to contain and transmit the traditions, tools, knowledge and usages without which there can be no industrial organisation and no economic relation or individuals to one another or to their environment...There can be no production without technical knowledge and there is no technical knowledge apart from an industrial community. Since there is no individual production and no individual productivity, the natural-rights pre-conception...reduces itself to absurdity, even under the logic of its own assumptions".

In other words, the tale of the heroic entrepreneur who built a fortune from scratch, although very popular and told like it is a matter of historical fact, is really nothing but a myth. In fact, more than that, given that it runs contrary to all evidence, it is not just a myth but a 'mythstake'. We are encouraged to look down on people who have the cheek to expect social support, an attitude that entails ignoring the fact that we all, each and every one of us, contributed next to nothing to the material comforts we nevertheless have access to.

Saucy Boys Marry Too Early

We are supposed to live by the motto "working (by which we really mean 'Jobbing') is always good". But, really, I don't think this is the attitude right-wing propaganda really instils in us. If asked, "why do people job?", most people would, I suspect, answer, "to earn a living".

Consider that phrase, "earning a living". If that is what people are doing when they go out to work, one would expect people to return from a day's employment in a happier, healthier, more invigorated state than they began the day with. They should, in short, look and act as if they had partaken of the elixir of life.

But I don't know many people who finish the working day or week in such a fit and happy state. In fact, for the most part, people return from their jobs feeling tired and irritable, complaining about the boss, the customers, this or that infuriating bureaucratic procedure. The best days are weekends, vacations and public holidays, the worst day of the week is Monday, and is it coincidence that this is, traditionally, the start of the working week? That jobs (mostly) suck is even reflected in our culture, for example in songs like the Bangles' 'Manic Monday', the chorus of which goes, "It's just another manic Monday/ I wish it was Sunday".

How many people heard those lyrics and thought, “I don’t get it. Why should anyone wish it were Sunday? Monday is the best day of all, because that’s when we get to do the only thing a human being should be doing, which is to job, job, job!”.

Most people don’t really adopt the motto “work is good” or expect to get much in the way of reward from their job. Rather, their attitude is more like “not working is very bad” and believe that anyone refusing to submit to employment should be punished, just as it was mostly fear of punishment that compelled them to take on the job they do. Without that background of coercion, I suspect most people would quit their jobs. I also suspect it would not make much difference if they did (it might even improve things) because most jobs these days don’t really contribute to what humans actually need to live happy, healthy lives, but instead work in various ways to distort our values and conceptions of ‘needs’, all ultimately to feed a system for which ‘enough’ is an alien concept.

Where did this attitude, “not working is very bad” come from? To answer that question, we should return to that time when Capitalism was taking over from Feudalism, and what that meant for conceptions of wage labour.

It’s important to understand what is meant by ‘Capitalism’. Most people, it seems, think the word simply refers to ‘market activity’. We often speak of ‘market Capitalism’ as though the two necessarily belong together. But this is not really the case. Where one finds markets one does not necessarily find ‘Capitalism’. That term does not refer to market activity in general, but rather to a more specific form of trading. What form capitalist trading takes is something we’ll get in later books. Here, the thing to focus on is what effect ‘Capitalism’ had on the relations of service that had existed in the Feudalist era.

Recall how, earlier, we saw how equating ‘work’ with ‘productivity’ entails a sleight of hand effected through gender. But this brings us only partway towards understanding modern attitudes to work. In particular, we have not yet seen much explanation for how we went from the attitude “most work should be avoided, because it interferes with the development of the best qualities in men” which prevailed in such cultures as Ancient Greece, to “all work is sacred and necessary for the development of well-rounded adults”, which is the predominant attitude today.

The origins of this way of thinking is found, not in Ancient Greece, but rather in a much later period, namely the European Middle Ages. This is a period we’ll be returning to later when our focus will be on the origins of economic thought in theology. Few who lived during this period would have missed such a connection, because back then economic matters fell under the jurisdiction of the Church, and concepts to do with money were used in Biblical rhetoric, for example “the wages of sin” or ‘Christ the redeemer’.

But there’s an additional element to this period that is of more relevance to the current topic, one which is very much a Northern European idea. What idea am I referring to? The notion of ‘service’.

Today, we are most familiar with medieval royalty and nobles having servants in the form of lords- and ladies-in-waiting. All period dramas show kings, queens and other high-borns surrounded by liveried servants attending to their every need.

What are so-called 'ladies-in-waiting' waiting for? They were waiting to become entitled themselves. But that didn't mean they were just hanging around waiting to gain an inheritance. Really, the ultimate aim of the service they rendered was to enable these men and women to learn the skills and manners expected of a lord or lady. It was transformative labour, only what it produced was not so much stuff, but rather properly-developed adults.

And this was the case through all layers of feudal society. Really, though, the kind of 'service' that had the greatest influence on people's lives back then, and also on attitudes today, was not feudal service but what historical sociologists call "life cycle service".

The essence of life-cycle service was the expectation that anyone of working age should spend the first seven to fifteen years of this period working as a servant, typically for a household of higher rank. The craft guilds are probably the most familiar example of 'life cycle service'. Master craftsmen took on teenagers and trained them as apprentices. By embarking on this 'journey', guided by responsible adults, apprentices became journeymen and, in the fullness of time, full-fledged master craftsmen in their own right, adults equipped with all the means to set up their own smithies etc and support their own married life.

It would be a mistake, though, to suppose that this path to adulthood was one trod only by artisans. This was not the case at all, for the expectation was that peasants would spend teenage years as 'servants of husbandry', working in households that were slightly better off. So, for example, you had 'milkmaids', a term referring to daughters of peasants doing a particular kind of service.

Where commoners were concerned, the services they rendered in the first years of their working lives were not undertaken on a purely voluntary basis. Servants were paid for such work, meaning something rather like wage labour existed long before anyone had heard of 'Capitalism'.

However, there were some crucial differences between wage labour under 'life cycle' service, and how we think of jobs today. For one thing, people in Medieval Europe not only expected to be paid but also expected their superiors to take more interest in how those wages were spent. It was expected that a good share of one's wages would be saved. There was a good reason why such an expectation should have been prevalent in this society, one centred around the purpose of waged labour.

That purpose, fundamentally, was not one geared towards the production of stuff, but rather the development of responsible adults. In other words, people who had the skills, finances and experiences needed to manage households, farms or shops, training the next generation as they themselves had been taught.

This meant that the period of wage labour lasted for a much shorter time compared to expectations today. Today, most people remain in wage labour for the majority of their adult

life, with retirement pushed ever further into one's future. Sixty-five years, seventy years, eighty...perhaps never to quit wage labour until death comes for you.

In the medieval period, though, wage labour was something only adolescents did. Admittedly, adolescence lasted a bit longer compared to 20th century expectations. Medieval people didn't typically get married until they were in their thirties. That meant that what we would now think of as one's teenage years, with all the rebelliousness and experimentation in alternative lifestyles associated with this stage in a person's life, lasted for as much as twenty years.

And there was indeed rebellion and experimentation. The 'adolescents' of the medieval period were encouraged to create alternative cultures, with names like 'Abbots of Unreason' and 'Lords of Misrule' that speak of the anarchic nature of such cultures. During certain popular festivals these anarchists were even allowed to seize the reins of power, at least temporarily.

All of this happened because medieval society blurred the boundaries between 'work', 'play' and 'education'. All this was done, ultimately, for the purpose of creating well-rounded adults who, having been trained in the necessary skills, manners etc, no longer needed wage labour, for they had the ways and means to pursue self-employment.

In short, wage labour in feudal times was not so much 'productive' work but more like 'transformative' work. In other words, what was much later to become the work ethic of Protestantism had been formed many hundreds of years before the 19th century, or at least some of the key aspects of the Protestant work ethic originated in the medieval period.

Remember that, under feudalism, wage labour existed but was understood to be a temporary part of life, something adolescents did as they learned how to become full-fledged adults. What Capitalism did, though, was to bring about conditions where wage labour became a more-or-less permanent way of adult life. You had one class of people who owned the means of production, and another class who were forced to volunteer their services to that class on a permanent basis, mostly because guild structures, the commons, and other things that granted them the ability to work independently were eroded as society was reconfigured to suit Capitalistic ways of life.

So, whereas once wage labour had been a temporary stage in one's adolescent life, now, under the emerging Capitalistic system, wage labour became something that effectively trapped people in a state of permanent adolescence. What with the guild structure breaking down, enclosures acts taking away common land and other changes, folk who once saw wage labour as a short stage in one's life development from apprentice to journeyman to master, now found themselves in a situation where the final stage of that journey would never be reached. As David Graeber explained, "in traditional terms [this] meant that they would not be in a position to marry and start families of their own. They were expected to live their entire lives effectively as unfinished human beings".

As it dawned on people that the way to becoming a mature adult was disappearing in this new Capitalist age, many opted for what would have been a dramatic act of rebellion under

the Feudalist system. Rather than wait to become 'masters' (i.e, full-fledged adults) they opted to marry early, leave their masters and set up homes and families of their own.

The effect this had on the employing class was to set off a wave of moral panic, familiar to those of us who have heard contemporary moralising over, say, teen pregnancy. A good example from the sixteenth century would be 'The Anatomie of Abuses' by Philip Stubbes (circa 1555-c. 1610)

"You shall have every saucy boy of ten, fourteen, sixteen or twenty years of age, catch up a woman and marry her, without any fear of God at all...or, which is more, without any respect how they may live together, with sufficient maintainance for their estate...This filleth the land with such store of mendicants....that in short time it is like to grow to great poverty and scarceness".

It reads rather like an opinion piece in a right-wing newspaper, railing against workshy characters living beyond their means and storing up future trouble for decent middle-class folk, doesn't it? It reads, in other words, like a very familiar expression of moral concern.

But, while today we may be used to certain members of the commentariat concerning themselves with how to reform the poor and shape them into people who support, rather than bring about the downfall, of society, prior to Stubbe's manifesto the middle class had not shown much interest in how the poor lived their lives. Given the existence of life-cycle services, that lack of concern is understandable. Under feudalism, adolescence did not last long, because the stage of wage labour transformed adolescents into adults in a relatively short time.

But the purpose of wage labour under Capitalism was not one of transforming adolescents into adults. Rather, its purpose was to create commodities to be sold on markets in pursuit of ever-increasing profit for the bourgeoisie. More to the point, Capitalist relationships trapped the working classes in a state of permanent adolescence, or at least it must have seemed that way to folk who were used to defining 'adulthood' as living free from the need to work under another's orders. Wage labour no longer offered a way to become a well-rounded adult. But reformers like Stubbes had to offer all those 'frustrated adolescents' something. What, though?

What Puritan reformers like him did was to return to the theological roots of economics. "What did the story of Adam and Eve tell us?", they asked. It taught us that work is both punishment and redemption. God could have created a perfect world, but He left it in an unfinished state so that humans would have jobs to do. It was a mistake to think of labour as being primarily a means of satisfying material needs. Work was (as Graeber explained) "self-mortification, and as such had value in itself, even beyond the wealth it produced, which was merely a sign of God's favour (and not to be enjoyed too much)".

The Gospel of Work

Really, though, Philip Stubbes' manifesto only identified the problem and what would result if it were left unaddressed. In order to find the 'solution', we have to turn to one Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881), an essayist who proposed a 'Gospel of Work'. In this essay, Carlyle

insisted that work necessarily had a positive transformative effect on body and soul, because that's the way God planned it:

"A man perfects himself by working...Consider how, even in the meanest sorts of labour, the whole soul of man is composed into a kind of real harmony, the instant he sets himself to work!...All true work is sacred...Oh brother, if this is not 'worship' then I say, the more pity for worship, for this is the noblest thing yet discovered under God's sky. Who art thou that complaineth of thy life of toil? Complain not!"

This, I feel, is a very important essay, for it contains much of the attitudes that prevail today. First of all, it reads like a celebration of work for work's sake. There is intrinsic nobility in working, according to this essay, and this is a belief shared by modern opinion writers. All such professionals, after all, valorise work and praise 'hardworking folk' as the most admirable of human beings. We're all supposed to think this way, even though a case could be made that quite a lot of 'hardworking folk' are actually doing more harm than good. They may, for example, be doing work that runs dangerously close to fraudulent practices designed to increase the ill-gotten gains of the obscenely wealthy (as a lot of financial/banking practices turned out to be). They might be generating enormous amounts of waste and pollution that does enormous environmental and social harm (as consumerism and the throwaway culture clearly does). They may be engaged in work that exists mainly to make the less well-off feel bad about themselves (which is what bureaucracies designed to compel people to "get a job" tend to do). Really, I feel the world might well be a better place if people doing work like that would just quit and go relax on a beach, enjoy socialising with family and friends, read a book etc etc. But to say such a thing is tantamount to sacrilege. The appropriate attitude, in our day and age, is that work is always good, those that avoid work are always bad (unless, that is, they have cashed in their chips and retired) and that the only policies worth pursuing are those that create more jobs.

Secondly, Carlye's essay arguably sows the seed for the inverse correlation between the social value of a job and the paid compensation such workers get. The thinking appears to be as follows. All work is noble, and some forms of work particularly so. What forms of work are these? Why, the sort that are of obvious social benefit; the jobs that absolutely must be undertaken or else human life would be a good deal more miserable, if not flat-out impossible. Tellingly, Carlye is also quoted as saying, "the wages of every noble work do yet lie in heaven or else nowhere", which is to say that work of obvious social value has absolute value. As Graeber explained, "if work is noble, then the most noble work should not be compensated, since it is obscene to put a price on something of such absolute value".

As you might imagine, arguments such as this proved immensely popular among the Capitalist classes, since the message clearly was that the more necessary the labour of the proletariat became, the less compensation they ought to receive. It was, in other words, an ideal attitude if one's aim was to maximise profits, since the implication was that the absolute minimum wage was the only appropriate wage packet for one's employees.

You will be just as unsurprised to learn that the workers' movements that were starting to form roughly when Carlye produced 'Gospel of Work' were a great deal less impressed by this sort of argument. The working classes crammed into the "dark satanic mills" of the industrial revolution knew all too well that labour under the Capitalist regime had anything

but a positive effect on one's health. If it did have a divine quality, they would argue, it was to be found in the fact that it was the true source of wealth.

Today, the name most often linked to the socialist struggles that arose from this attempt to redefine where value comes from is Karl Marx. But, actually, quite a bit of work was done in laying down the roots of socialism and anarchism before Marx made his impact on economic and philosophical thought. The next chapter will be concerned with those pre-Marx radicals.

CHAPTER FOUR

Saint-Simon

So, who were these earlier socialists? Two particularly influential thinkers in early socialism were Claude-Henri de Saint-Simon (1760-1825) and Mikhail Bakunin (1814-76). Saint-Simon had come from an aristocratic family (as had many other socialist leaders) and was not really a socialist himself. But he did put forward ideas on how to reorganise society in more meritocratic ways, and this interest in a more rational reorganisation of society had a socialist flavour to it, since socialism is basically concerned with greater equality in political power and in the distribution of goods.

In figuring out how society might be more rationally organised, Saint-Simon came up with a vision of an international federation. It would be run by efficient clerks and experts, whose aim would be to maximise the benefits of society, industry and welfare.

In Saint-Simon's day, industries tended to be run by rich people who were by no means necessarily qualified to lead such operations. After his reorganisation of society, it would be qualified experts who would run the industries. The old aristocrats would not be the only ones who found themselves replaced in Saint-Simon's revolution. Gone too would be priests and theologians, replaced by scientists whose task would be to help bring about a society that was devoted to efficiency, expertise and industriousness.

What really secured Saint-Simon's fame was not such much his own ideas, but rather his ability to gather some of the great minds of his day. This gave rise to the school of 'Saint-Simonism', which was turned into France's leading socialist movement by its students.

The Saint-Simonists continued their founder's aim of meritocracy, and also included the abolition of private property. In its place would be social control over the means of production. In aiming for such a thing, the Saint-Simonists were establishing themselves as diametrically opposed to the liberal capitalist view. That, after all, was the belief that private ownership was what resulted in the most rational market. The socialists disagreed, insisting instead on methods that took into account general benefit rather than any single party's personal interest.

Bakunin

Saint-Simon and the students of the Saint-Simonist school did have one or two revolutionary ideas. However, it was really Mikhail Bakunin who pushed for the more revolutionary aspects

of early socialism, to the point where he could be considered an anarchist as much as a socialist.

Bakunin's more radical stance was the product of a total mistrust in both States and the concept of 'control'. He believed the State's aim was to exploit the working class. Since that was its true purpose, the workers should not seek to gain political power, because so long as the State existed, governmental power would tend to turn those who wielded it into members of the very ruling class that Bakunin wanted to see the end of.

Instead, he insisted, those in agreement with him should become a revolutionary, rather than a political force, and the aim of that revolutionary force would be the total overthrow of State power. By the time Bakunin's revolution was complete, the difference between 'work' and 'leisure' would be erased, and the means of production would be like recreational parks, in the sense of being open to all. No longer would private ownership dictate what goods should be manufactured and how they should be distributed. Rather, the People would control the means of production and would make whatever they wished.

Utopian Socialists

So, before Marx was even born, people like Bakunin and Saint-Simon were thinking along socialist lines, in the sense of imagining a more just society and calling upon people to actually establish it.

But, if socialism had already begun before Marx so much as drew breath, why did he not just follow the path laid down by those earlier socialists? The answer is that Marx believed them to be too utopian in their thinking, and indeed he labelled them 'Utopian Socialists', which was by no means a compliment. In fact, 'utopian thinking' was something Marx held in deep contempt.

What was it about the ideas of these earlier socialists that Marx regarded as 'Utopian'? Well, the basic problem, as Marx saw it, was that people like Bakunin and the Saint-Simonists were basing their thoughts on the concept of the 'Social Contract', which had also been central to the ideas of economists like John Locke (1632-1704), Adam Smith and David Ricardo (1772-1823).

What does the term 'social contract' imply? It seems to suggest that the terms and conditions for how society is run are written down somewhere, or at the very least that there is general agreement as to what those rules are. If society is something designed by people, it ought to be possible to tear up the existing 'social contract' and write up a new, improved version. Right?

But Marx did not believe it could be as simple as that. As he saw it, the 'Utopian socialists' were vaguely imagining a better society, but they were not really basing such dreams on the actual 'rules' that governed it. Indeed, they had no real theory of society at all. The reason why they had no real theory of society, Marx believed, was because they had never really developed an understanding of how Capitalism really worked, how it had actually come about, or what it was really leading to. Since all that understanding was missing from their

thoughts, the 'utopian socialists' did not really know what forces would bring about their ideal society. They were just dreamers, with no workable plan to realise such dreams.

The word 'Utopia' was coined by St. Thomas More (1478-1535), and from the very beginning it was deliberately intended to have a dual meaning. More intended the term to mean both a perfect society and 'nowhere'. While we can express thoughts like "tomorrow we shall build a perfect society", it's not at all clear that we know what we're talking about when we say such things. Marx believed that people were really talking about 'nowhere' whenever they spoke or wrote about some society that only existed in the future. This was something they could not really imagine, because all they had to work on were current or prior concepts, beliefs, paradigms etc, which were wholly inadequate for understanding a radically different 'tomorrow'.

Time Before Clocks

To see Marx's point, consider 'employment' as it is conceived of today. To people like us, well-used to capitalist concepts of work, the employee-employer relationship seems simple enough. The employee is certainly not enslaved by the business he or she works for. The employer never owns you. Instead, you have a mutual agreement that a portion of your time (9am-5PM say) will be spent working for the business, and that during that time the fruits of your labour will be the owner's property, his or hers to sell for their own profit. This is a contract that you are free to break at any time (actually, there may be conditions that prevent you from just walking away or being fired on the spot, but the point is that employment contracts can never tie an employee to one employer permanently).

As I said, there's seemingly nothing particularly complex about such arrangements, and so one might think that, if we could travel into the past and meet our pre-Capitalist ancestors, we could easily explain 'wage labour' as it exists under Capitalism. But, would it really be so easy? What would happen if you were to say, "I work from nine to five"? It's not likely that your audience would have any clue as to what you were talking about. In order to understand what "nine to five" means, you need a 'Clock Concept' of time, which is to say a notion of time as divided up into discrete units of hours, minutes and seconds. But, if you have travelled to a past where clocks do not exist, and won't be invented until hundreds of years later, obviously nobody will have a 'clock concept' of time.

Indeed, during the Feudalist era, if people thought of 'time' at all, they regarded it as something that belonged to God. The idea that something as metaphysical as 'time' could be commodified and sold would have been a completely alien concept to them, while to us it is one of the most basic and familiar facts of everyday life.

And "working from nine to five" is one of the simpler arrangements of the Capitalist era, not at all complex like those financial operations put together by theoretical physicists that even modern economists like Alan Greenspan admitted were too obscure and complex to fully grasp. We may conclude, then, that our ancestors could not have really understood how Capitalism would function, why employees are not slaves and why employers were not (necessarily) fraudsters, commodifying something that belonged only to God.

We don't have time machines, so we cannot travel into the past and confuse our ancestors with our 'Capitalist' ways of thinking. If our descendants from a post-Capitalist era were to visit us, it's just as doubtful that we would understand how their society worked. How could we, when our thoughts and language lack the concepts needed to understand such things?

But, if the outcome of a genuine revolution in society is unimaginable, what is the point of 'Socialism', 'Communism', or anything that entails dreaming of a better tomorrow? Why should anyone believe things could be different in the future if the future is something we can't really imagine?

Marx's answer to that was that, yes, social paradigms that are yet to be are mostly unimaginable, but what we can do is identify reasons why the current paradigm is not the final one, destined to remain dominant for all time. In developing such ideas, Marx turned not to the Socialists or the political economists, but to the ideas of Georg Wilhelm Hegel (1770-1831), as modified by Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-72).

CHAPTER FIVE

Idealism

Sometimes, words are used in an everyday sense that is quite different to their philosophical meaning. A good case in point would be the word 'Idealism'. Used in the everyday sense, the term is a form of criticism. An 'idealist', in this sense, is anybody who holds vague and naive ideas about a better tomorrow or alternative reality. "Oh, listen to John Lennon (1940-1980) singing about 'a brotherhood of man'. What wish-washy hippy idealism!".

But the philosophical meaning of an 'idealist' has nothing to do with wishful thinking, but is instead a way of thinking that is diametrically opposed to 'Materialism'. In other words, an Idealist philosopher is someone who maintains that the world and everything in it is constituted by ideas. If there is a 'material' world, it's only because minds form ideas, dreams, or concepts of 'materials', but really such things have no existence beyond thoughts. The 'material world' only exists as an idea or collection of ideas.

So, the basic belief of Idealism is that the world is comprised entirely of ideas. But, what is the true nature of those ideas and, if they manifest in the minds of gods, to what extent can humans grasp such concepts? Such questions caused disagreement among the German Idealist philosophers.

For Hegel, that disagreements, oppositions and contradictions existed in Idealist (and, indeed, any) philosophical school of thought was no bad thing. This was because he held contradictions to be key to enabling consciousness to progress towards better understanding. It achieved this by posing contradictory difference within itself, and then overcoming this self-alienation through further insight.

Ludwig Feuerbach took this Hegelian concept of alienation and used it as a criticism of religious thought. We have unrealised perfection, but rather than work towards a practical improvement of our condition, we instead project all of our unrealised perfection onto an imaginary non-human being, i.e God. Feuerbach's stance began as a criticism of religious illusion, but it later developed into radical materialism. He had a saying, which was "you are what you eat". What he meant by that was that ideas do exist but they are secondary. For humans, material wants are the primary driving force behind what we do and what we think. By marrying Hegelianism with materialism, Feuerbach pioneered an approach that Marx would follow.

Hegelianism

Since Hegelianism is such an important part of Marx's own philosophy, it's worth going into a bit more detail regarding the philosophy of Hegel himself. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel spent most of his life as a professional academic. He was particularly interested in the Greek polis, but understood that modern political parties were too large to make a direct comparison to ancient Athens' direct democracy a viable proposition.

He did, however, believe that the modern State could be perfected, and that the way to achieve such an aim had something to do with Idealism. Now, the philosophy of idealism had not begun in 19th century Germany, but rather in Ancient Greece. Plato was an idealist philosopher. He believed that ideas had prior existence to human thought and the material world. According to the Platonic concept of Idealism, ideas exist in a perfect and eternal state. Hence, Ideas themselves never changed, but feeble human minds only had a crude concept of such perfect, eternal Ideas, though a few were believed to be capable of applying certain mythical-philosophical practices that would make them "Philosopher Kings" who were more adept at understanding the eternal, perfect world of the Idea.

Hegel's Idealism was different, in that he did not believe in a pre-existing eternal world of ideas. Instead, he believed Ideas to be capable of perfection but not yet in that supreme state. There was a process going on, a process that would culminate in the ultimate and perfect Idea- the 'Absolute'- and that process was what human perceived as 'history'.

It was not only the realisation of the perfect idea that waited at the end of history. Hegel also believed that this same process would culminate with the development of the ideal State; with humans awakening to full consciousness and the realisation of spirit; and with God achieving full consciousness of His divinity. It would be inaccurate to think of these as three independent outcomes, for reasons that should become clear once it is understood how Hegel updated Aristotle (384-322 BCE)

Hegel's Update

It had long been held by philosophers that Aristotle had discovered logic. With that discovery having been made, all that was left for humans was to refine their capacity for reason (the defining human characteristic, according to Aristotle) which would enable them to improve Aristotelian logic as far as it was possible to improve it. The idea that there might be a whole other logic, as yet unknown in the philosophical world, never occurred to anyone.

Or rather, that was the case until Hegel pondered the relationship between humans, society, and God. In doing so, he came to see that knowledge should not be thought of as a long (infinite?) list of isolated true or false factual propositions, but rather as an evolutionary history of deeply interrelated concepts.

Not having this understanding, philosophers had concerned themselves with isolated, technical questions about knowledge. Hegel believed that philosophy required a change of focus, one that entailed examining the historical process of human thought and culture that produce it.

But, what about the material world, how did that fit into the picture? Here, I want to return to a metaphor introduced in book one, namely the 'Cave of the Mind'. As readers of book one will recall, we imagined 'stepping outside of it'. In my earlier scenario, this was possible, imaginatively speaking, because it was assumed that there really was a material world, existing independently of the mind. Hegel denied this possibility, dispensing with the material world altogether. Or rather, he did not believe the material world had an existence beyond Mind itself. Instead, all reality, including its material contents, are constituted by the Mind and is its creation.

Furthermore, it is a creation that can change, and in fact will change as an inevitable consequence of the nature of human consciousness. For Hegel, when we refer to 'Human Consciousness' we are not talking about something that is fixed, but rather something that is inherently dynamic. Human minds change. We develop new concepts, new categories. Since we use these contents of the mind to determine how we experience the world, it follows that knowledge is always contextually dependent. This insight led Hegel to another flaw in philosophical thought (as he saw it). If one describes philosophy as "the search for whatever is actually the case", such a definition does rather suggest that there is an objectivity philosophy can search for. The end goal would be the discovery of complete philosophical truth.

Platonic Idealism obviously lent itself to such a belief, since it held that the world of Ideas existed in an eternal, fixed state. But what if knowledge is not some timeless product already existing in some metaphysical plane? What if knowledge is, instead, an inherently dynamic cultural and historical process? If that were the case, then it would be in the very nature of ideas to undergo change, and there really are no stable, objective facts or truths out there, waiting to be discovered.

If that is what Hegel believed, then it would be appropriate to call him one of the first postmodern philosophers. A key aspect of postmodernism, after all, is the denial of any stable, objective facts. Postmodernism tells us that we have no facts, just beliefs that are as slippery, fluid and unstable as language itself (and just as prone to conforming to power structures).

But if that was Hegel's belief, then his philosophical position would have led him to a flat-out denial of any final stage in the evolutionary struggle of ideas. But actually, Hegel's philosophy was teleological. Historical development was not a journey without an ultimate goal, but rather an always-changing dynamic process that was heading towards a final state, something Hegel defined as "the actual knowledge of what is".

Now, you'll have noticed that Hegelianism was described as "an evolutionary struggle of ideas". Why describe it in such terms? Because Hegel denied that human consciousness was static. It was, rather, in a constant state of evolution, only it was not an evolutionary process that produced new species, but rather one that produced new conceptual frameworks.

Natural selection has been described as "nature red in tooth and claw", and it's not hard to see where that idea came from, what with all those wildlife films showing predators desperately charging down prey, so their young may fill their bellies, and the prey running for

its life. In Nature's cruel, harsh logic, the winners get to eat (and procreate) while the losers get eaten.

Hegel saw something vaguely similar going on in the dynamic process underlying history, in the sense that human understanding evolved through conflict and resolution, with less adequate ideas absorbed by newer, more adequate ones. As this process developed, human consciousness was doing more than merely apprehending the world. It was also manipulating and changing it.

The Dialectic

But, what was this 'process'? In asking such a question, we are really seeking the nature of this logical process that took Hegel beyond Aristotelian logic. Hegel's approach had a name. It's called the 'Dialectic'.

The Dialectical approach is most closely associated with Hegelianism, but one should not take that to mean the Dialectic was Hegel's invention. In fact, its origins lay in Ancient Greece, and it took the form of a particular argumentative process, whereby two opposing views would seek not to just defeat the opponent but to reconcile what were seemingly opposing views, bringing about a greater truth.

Now, key to this process (and this is what Hegel focused on developing) was an understanding that argumentative positions should not be thought of as 'Right' versus 'Wrong'. Unfortunately, we rarely incorporate such an understanding into our lives, and this flaw is reflected in our conception of history. How so? Well, in the sense that we tend to assume that our current state of knowledge is basically correct and that we roughly know 'what is actually the case'. We are not like our ancestors, whose ideas regarding politics, economics, the nature of reality and so on were fundamentally wrong and needed to be replaced. We need only to refine the systems of knowledge we currently have.

However, until such time as we reach the 'Absolute', we are really deluding ourselves into believing our current concepts are basically correct. They do have flaws, in the sense of at least some parts of our knowledge being false or incomplete. But then, how do we know this, if we assume our current knowledge is correct? The answer, according to Hegel, is that we don't all assume this. Instead, some of us notice that current knowledge is false or incomplete, and those people adopt a contradictory position. They defend the 'Antithesis' that opposes the 'Thesis', or the current set of dynamic concepts that are the mainstream assumption of "what is actually the case". Those who champion the antithesis assume, just as those who defend the Thesis do, that their ideas are correct. But, in actual fact, neither side is completely right or totally wrong. The two opposing sides don't remain locked in never-ending conflict, because a third idea inevitably arises that manages to dispense with the flaws in both the thesis and the antithesis, while retaining the good parts of both. This third component of the Dialectic is known as the 'Synthesis'.

So the direction of history goes Thesis-Antithesis-Synthesis? Not quite. The synthesis is not perfect. It also contains flaws and is not complete, although as usual its followers tend to ignore this fact (or, maybe, they just can't see it). In other words, it effectively becomes the

new thesis, and what does a thesis inevitably bring about? Its antithesis. So, the direction of history really goes “thesis-antithesis-synthesis-thesis-antithesis-synthesis.....”

And on and on, until finally the ‘absolute Idea’ is reached, where absolute consciousness and social harmony are finally achieved. ‘Absolute consciousness’ sounds rather like a description of God, and in fact Hegel believed this forward progression of history was to end with society achieving full understanding of social harmony, humans achieving full awareness of their spiritual social being, all of which were deeply interrelated processes involved in the awakening of the one Spirit, or God.

The Story of Man A

Being storytelling animals, it always helps if historical events or processes can be presented in narrative form, and so Hegel came up with a mythical version of the past in order to better explain the dialectical process.

Throughout this narrative, it is assumed that humans are social beings, and that what defines us is our relation to others. Hegel’s mythological account of history begins with a primeval self-consciousness. Let’s call it ‘Man A’. Man A does not actually have much in the way of self-consciousness, because he is without social relationships and his mind is totally focused on the practical business of surviving. His instinct is that the world belongs to him and he may (indeed, must) use its resources in order to sustain his life.

Then, Man A meets another human being, ‘Man B’. In ‘Phenomenology of Spirit’, Hegel presented an argument in which there is an awakening between God and humankind that runs in tandem with an awakening recognition by every individual of another. But this recognition does not immediately happen when ‘Man A’ and ‘Man B’ meet. What prevents such recognition at this stage is the fact that Man B has a primeval self-consciousness that is pretty much identical to that of Man A. In other words, Man B’s instinct is that the world, and everything in it, belongs to him.

When Man A and Man B meet, then, their instincts cause each to regard the other not as fellow human beings, but rather as an obstruction to one’s ownership of the world. There then ensues a life-and-death struggle between Man A and Man B, with each fighting to achieve recognition as master of the world.

Eventually, one of them figures surrender is better than death, so he submits to the rule of the other. Now they are no longer Man A and Man B but rather ‘Master’ and ‘Slave’. The former believes he has gained the recognition he instinctively feels he should always have had.

Really, though, he is mistaken. The recognition he needs can only come from a fellow self, but the recognition he is actually receiving comes from the Slave, in other words from a being reduced to an object and a means. Although he does not realise it, the master is defined by the slave even more than the slave is defined by the master. Both are trapped in their own form of dependency and alienation.

However, it turns out that the slave is not as trapped as the master. Being 'the slave', he is obviously put to work, and he gains something from his labours. Self-respect slowly forms in his mind as he comes to see himself reflected in the work of his hands. While it may seem as though the slave is the property of the master along with the rest of the world, the slave comes to recognise the world around him as being something he has made with his own hands. The work he is doing is serving as an education; he is teaching himself how to gain skills that will exceed the master's own knowledge and organisation. The master, meanwhile, remains paradoxically trapped in a state of dependency. After all, without 'the slave', who is the 'master' master to? He would be a master to nobody if the slave ever gained independence.

But that is what the slave is working towards, and eventually the slave's self-awareness grows to the point where he is in a position to take over the power of his former master. So, now the slave is free? Not quite. Hegel pointed out that there was something else the former slave would need to do in order to realise the final stage of human development, which was to revoke the power of 'master' and learn instead to respect the individual reality of the Other, now fully recognised as a fellow human being.

Throughout this tale, it seemed like 'Man A' and 'Man B' went through many struggles. There was the struggle to sate one's basic desires; the struggle to escape dread and alienation; the struggle to achieve full self-awareness. But all the time there was really only one true struggle, the struggle for recognition as a social being.

The Perfect State?

As well as presenting us with this myth, Hegel also considered the awakening of the spirit from the perspective of 'Family'. Here, he begins with children, whose consciousness is determined first of all by their families. This makes them instinctively loyal to 'the family'. What enables such basic loyalty is the fact that the child does not yet possess much in the way of a unique self-identity.

For adults, though, things are rather different. They have a greater sense of their own unique identity, because they have gained recognition from a wider social context than just 'the Family'. For them, inner being is determined by the more complex relationships to be found in the larger world of civic authority.

A greater sense of one's own unique identity results in two things. The adult becomes driven by self-interest, and with self-interest comes the desire to accumulate property. So, whereas the child's instinctive loyalty is focused on the immediate family, the adults form relationships with the wider community that are driven primarily by economic considerations.

Therefore, market economics has come into being. At this point, Hegel would appear to be in agreement with John Locke. This is because Locke understood that a competition among self-interested individuals could not really function without there being a legal system in place that regulated people's behaviour. Hegel likewise believed that legal systems served this vital purpose.

However, as far as Locke was concerned, the State was merely a regulatory body, a product of contractual negotiations. But for Hegel the State was much more than that. The growth of the State did not simply happen because it was convenient to regulate self-interest, but because human destiny is intimately tied up with the State. The State is an organic and inevitable consequence of human nature.

For social contract theorists like Locke and Adam Smith, the State was best thought of as a referee, there to enforce the minimum possible rules and regulations needed to keep self-interested pursuit of gain from degenerating into theft and fraud. For Hegel, though, the State was more like an extended family. Membership of this 'family' came with certain responsibilities, namely the necessity to develop a measure of altruism toward, and solidarity amongst, the fellow citizens of one's state. Out of those responsibilities comes the need to pay taxes (since such payments are needed to support the weaker members of the 'Family') and the duty to fight wars, should the 'Family' come under attack.

And wars would happen, because the dialectical process driving all this involved incessant conflict between huge, often ruthless historical forces. Also, Hegel thought that it was the 'right' of some more evolved States to dominate others.

"More evolved" implies an evolutionary process that is heading in a certain direction, and for Hegel that direction was toward 'National Freedom', something he believed would result once a synthesis had been achieved between the subjective desire for abstract limitless freedom and the objective demands of social and political life. Out of such a synthesis would come the ideal political society, as Hegel saw it. It would not be comprised of a State, but rather an assembly of States. In this assembly, different elements of society would decide what political decisions should be undertaken, and would have a say in what legislation should be on the books.

But, if there are many interest groups, what is to stop one particular group from dominating the rest? In Hegel's ideal political society, an elite group that is appointed on merit and is extremely powerful would be on hand to ensure that never happened. He called this elite group the 'Universal Class', who were pretty much like professional civil servants.

At the very top of this political structure would be a hereditary monarch. Such a monarch would be a symbolic figure, the very embodiment of the unity of the State. That State would be a divine idea as it existed on Earth, and therefore ought to be worshipped as the manifestation of the Divine on Earth.

There was something rather familiar about Hegel's ideal society, because it closely resembled the constitutional monarchy of Hegel's own 19th century Prussia. Indeed, Hegel did not consider the 'highest synthesis' to be some event that had yet to come about. Rather, he believed that the Battle of Jena (1806) marked the end of history and that the Prussian State really was the fully realised State.

That was a controversial belief, to say the least, and it caused a split among the followers of Hegelianism. On the one hand you had the 'Right Hegelians', who agreed with Hegel that the Prussian State had indeed reached the final Hegelian stage of perfect rationality. The 'Left Hegelians', on the other hand, believed that there was still a long way to go, and much

still to be understood, before it could be said that history had ended with the highest synthesis. The most famous of the 'Left Hegelians' was Karl Marx.

CHAPTER SIX

Karl Marx is often thought of as a materialist. As was the case with Idealism, 'Materialism' tends to mean something other than its philosophical meaning when used in everyday speech. The everyday meaning was encapsulated in Madonna's (b. 1958) song, 'Material Girl', which is all about a woman whose main (only?) criteria for judging men as suitable partners is that they are rich and therefore able to purchase all that money can buy for her.

But the philosophical meaning of 'materialism' has nothing to do with accumulating purchasable items, but instead presents a worldview that opposes 'Idealism'. Whereas the latter philosophical school of thought insists that the material world exists only in the mind, materialism insists that something as ephemeral and immaterial as thoughts, dreams, and other conscious experiences are somehow created by material objects and forces. We can therefore quite safely say that Marx was thinking along materialist lines when he insisted that the idealists had everything the wrong way around when they claimed consciousness created 'social being'.

"Morality, religion, metaphysics, all the rest of ideology and their corresponding forms of consciousness, thus no longer retain the semblance of independence. They have no history, no development; but men, developing their material production and their material intercourse, alter, along with their real existence, their thinking and the products of their thinking. Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life".

So, according to this worldview, in order for there to be consciousness, all you need is life, or self-replicating material objects. The former is (somehow) an epiphenomenon of the latter.

But, while, epistemologically speaking, Marx thought of the material world and consciousness as closely bound together (with the former more fundamental than the latter) when it came to his plans for a radical transformation of society, a materialist worldview proved to be inadequate.

The Limits of a Materialistic Reality

The dominant materialist worldview of Marx's time was the one presented by Enlightenment empiricism. Think back to the idea that the Newtonian universe could be likened to a clockwork mechanism. This was adequate if all you wanted was a self-regulating system

operating according to invariable laws, but in Marx's day (as well as in ours in most cases) machines only carry out the tasks they were built for, or they simply malfunction. This is what made the materialist worldview an inadequate philosophy in Marxist thought. That, after all, was based on the revolutionary idea that the world is dynamic; not just self-regulating but capable of change.

Still, Marx believed that an understanding of human history had to be built on material foundations. "[Materialism] shows that history does not end by being resolved into 'self-consciousness', as 'spirit of the spirit', but that in each stage there is found a material result; a sum of productive forces, an historically created relation of individuals to nature and to one another, which is handed down to each generation from its predecessor; a mass of productive forces, capital funds and conditions which, on the one hand, is indeed modified by the new generation, but also on the other prescribes for it its conditions of life and gives it a definitive development, a special character. It shows that circumstances make men just as much as men make circumstances".

The closing remarks in that quote show that Marx was developing a different materialist worldview to that of somebody like, say, Thomas Hobbes. For Hobbes, consciousness was the mere reflux of material circumstance, but it would not do for Marx's revolutionary approach to assert that human history is just the determined product of its material conditions and that's that. There would, after all, be no hope of ever really transforming society if that were the case.

Marx had to incorporate materialism into his philosophy, but Hobbesian 'Mechanical' Materialism would not do. Instead, Marx developed 'Historic' Materialism, something he felt would better explain not only the origin, character and function of ideas in terms of the historical conditions to which they belong; but also how revolutionary transformations could occur, such that tomorrow's society could be different from today's.

Marx Turns To Hegel

To help him in developing 'historical materialism' Marx turned, strangely enough, to Hegel the avowed Idealist. Actually, the decision to apply some aspects of Hegel's philosophy was not all that bizarre. After all, the dialectic presented a model of historical development in which contradictions make a transformation from one society into another all but inevitable. That gave revolutionary political thinkers like Marx something to track as they studied contemporary life for signs of transformative effects.

The thing that Marx found most appealing about Hegel's dialectic approach was the way it presented history. What are we talking about when we use that word? Prior to Hegel, for the most part 'History' had been seen as just a sequence of random and contingent events whose only links were crude cause-and-effect (plus a lot of random accident). But for Hegel, 'History' referred to a process of development that could only be understood holistically, since the extent to which we can understand any one event depends (in this way of thinking) on the extent to which we also understand all preceding events.

'Historical development' was a Hegelian concept that appealed to the revolutionary in Marx, because it implied that history was headed somewhere, rather than self-regulating its way to

stasis as in mechanical materialism. But Marx did not just follow Hegel; he also cast a critical eye over his dialectic approach. At the heart of this Marxist criticism of Hegelianism was the question: "If there is historical development, what, exactly, is 'developing'?"

Now, in Marx's day, materialism was by no means the fashionable philosophy in Germany. Rather, idealism was. According to that philosophy, consciousness was the very foundation of reality. Marx, however, disagreed that consciousness could just 'dream up' the material world, and pointed out that much must have already taken place before we can even form coherent ideas. At the very least, we could not introspect about the material world without already being bound up with the physical world. And we were bound up (Marx thought) because each and every one of us came into the world ready-inserted into a whole set of material conditions, relations and social institutions.

Marx put it like this:

"The production of ideas, of concepts, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men. The language of real life, conceiving, thinking, the mental intercourse of men, appear at this stage as the direct efflux of their material behaviour. The same applies to mental production as expressed in the language of politics, laws, morality, religion, metaphysics etc, of a people. Men are the producers of their conceptions, ideals etc. Real, active men, as they are conditioned by a definite development of their productive forces and of the intercourse corresponding to these, up to its furthest forms. Consciousness can never be anything else than conscious existence, and the existence of men in their actual life process".

Basically, Marx was saying that conscious experience does not create material reality; rather, it is economic reality that can determine how we think. "Consciousness does not determine life", Marx wrote, "life determines consciousness".

'Freedom' For Marx

How bound up by material conditions are we, according to Marxist philosophy? That depends on whether you examine Marx the Philosopher, or Max the Political Thinker. As we have seen, in an epistemological sense Marx saw consciousness as tightly bound to the material world. But, in his political thought we can see a desire to loosen those bonds. This is because 'freedom' for Marx involves our being able to realise our fully human natures. We are least like other animals, Marx thought, when we are free to produce, giving physical expression to our thoughts in a way that is liberated and independent from any immediate material need. Marxist philosopher, Terry Eagleton (b. 1943), put it like this. "Freedom for Marx is a kind of creative, superabundance over what is materially essential, that which overflows the measure and becomes its own yardstick".

We saw earlier how, for Marx, 'History' is pretty much the story of a class struggle between 'the Oppressor' and 'the Oppressed'. But what is to be gained by victory? For Marx, victory is not just the end of oppression, but the end of alienation. As we shall see later, Marxists see 'Alienation' as having been part of the human experience from the dawn of our species, because conditions have brought about a separation between our 'species nature' and the practicalities of living.

In the epoch Marx was most interested in, material development had progressed to a point where a minority were liberated from the demands of productive labour, and could therefore devote their lives to such pursuits as Politics, Academia, the Arts, and cultural development. But this was only a partial accomplishment of liberation from immediate material concerns, because that minority who worked in philosophical halls, political arenas and art galleries were ultimately funded by the labour-power of all those for whom urgent material concerns took priority. Thus, when Idealists like Hegel went around fantasising that thought was somehow independent of material reality, that was in large part due to the fact that a minority were indeed freed from such concerns. As Marx pointed out:

“Division of labour only comes truly such from the moment when a division of mental and manual labour appears. (The first form of ideologists, priests, is concurrent.) From this moment onwards consciousness can flatter itself that it is something other than consciousness of existing practice, that it really represents something without representing something real; from now on consciousness is in a position to emancipate itself from the world and to proceed to the formation of ‘pure’ theory, philosophy, ethics etc”.

Why the scare quotes around the word ‘pure’? Because Marx seeks to remind his readers that, when class society dreams up some noble progenitor of ‘class’ (by saying it sprung from unfettered individual imagination, say, or from previous cultures) what they are really doing is turning a blind eye to culture’s lowly heritage. For, in Marx’s worldview, culture really only has one parent, and it is labour. And what is Labor synonymous with in Marxist thought? Exploitation. Or, at least, that remains the case for as long as alienation continues to manifest in the human condition.

Regarding history from a dialectical viewpoint resulted in it seeming less like a collection of past events, and more like a necessary process everything goes through on the way to achieving full maturity. Whenever we think of something as starting off in a primitive state and then developing into something modern, we are basically adopting the Hegelian view of history. Marx (along with his collaborator, Friedrich Engels (1820-95)) adopted this sort of view of history by presenting it as a progression from overt exploitation to freedom from alienation. As this was a Hegelian way of thinking, Marx and Engels were obliged to adopt the ‘Laws’ by which, according to Hegel, the Dialectic operated. This was something they were happy to do.

Hegel's Laws

But what were those ‘laws’? According to Hegel, three laws defined how the Dialectic operated. The first of these was the ‘Law of the Transformation of Quantity into Quality’, which is neatly demonstrated with a kettle of water. When the kettle is switched on, the liquid it contains will go through a period of quantitative change, in the sense of the water’s temperature gradually increasing.

But then, quite suddenly, a qualitative change takes place, with the liquid turning into a gas. According to Hegel, this situation applies in general. For the most part, things change gradually- quantitatively- but sometimes they can suddenly transform into a different state.

Even whole societies can, on occasion, undergo transformations. Only, for Marxists, such transformations are more appropriately called 'Revolutions'.

Now, in our comparison with the kettle, it was said that the water suddenly starts turning into a gas. This might make it seem as though 'suddenness' is a defining characteristic of revolutions. Another characteristic one might take to define revolutionary acts is violence, which did indeed feature in such historical events as the French and Russian revolutions.

But while Marx did seem to consider insurrectionary force to be a necessary factor in constituting socialism, what really defined social revolution was not speed, suddenness or violence. No, what was revolutionary about social change was the fact that it involved one possessing class being ousted and replaced by another.

Saying "one possessive class is replaced by another" might give the impression that nothing really changes in the Marxist view of 'Class War' with its Oppressors versus Oppressed. But actually, in the Marxist view, the dialectical process did have an end point, because it was expected that the working classes coming to power would entail the communal ownership of the means of production, and under those conditions classes themselves would disappear.

Marx himself put it like this. "All the preceding classes that got the upper hand sought to fortify their already acquired status by subjecting society at large to their conditions of appropriation. The proletarians cannot become masters of the productive forces of society, except by abolishing their own previous mode of appropriation, and thereby also every other previous mode of appropriation. They have nothing of their own to secure and fortify; their mission is to destroy all previous securities for, and insurances of, individual property".

Unity of Opposites

Let's move on now to the second law, which was the 'Law of the Unity of Opposites'. It is not difficult to think of things that exist in opposition. 'Good' and 'Bad', 'Day' and 'Night', 'Hard' and 'Soft', 'Loud' and 'Quiet'. But ask yourself: Would any of these definitions make sense in the absence of their 'opposites'? Could we really have a concept of 'daytime' if night never fell? If silence was all there was to be heard, how could you possibly know what was meant by 'Loud'? No wonder, then, that Hegel thought in terms of 'unity of opposites'. Things in opposition tend not to really exist separately from each other, but instead form unions outside of which there is no existence for either of them.

On that note, think of the 'positive' things in our current, competitive, individualistic societies. The things we are all supposed to aspire towards. Most people want to be 'winners', to be regarded as 'successful'. And what does it take to deserve such accolades? Above all else, it seems, one needs to become rich and famous. The ideal is to bring about "equality of opportunity", such that there is nothing, other than individual striving, to prevent any individual from achieving 'success' as it is defined today.

But think back to this notion of 'unity of opposites'. If nobody ever lost, what meaning would 'winning' have? If we all gained attention and recognition from the work we did, what reason would we have for singling some individuals out as 'famous'? And, perhaps most importantly

of all, if nobody was poor, what meaning would there be in calling anyone 'rich'? Frankly, "rich, famous and successful" have no meaning in the absence of their opposites.

Since this is the case, it must also be true that, the more the 'negatives' in these unities of opposites exist, the more meaning there is in being "rich, famous and successful".

For this reason, I compare an ideal capitalist society to the Lottery. This is not because I think 'success' in Capitalism is simply a matter of luck, as is the case with winning the Lottery, but because the Lottery pretty much provides 'equality of opportunity'. After all, anyone who buys a ticket has more or less the same (tiny) chance of winning the jackpot as any other participant.

However, in order for there to be a 'jackpot' (in other words, a very substantial 'win') it is essential that the vast majority of participants turn out to have bought worthless tickets. Imagine a lottery in which only one number is drawn, the number '6'. A billion people enter, each buying a ticket for £1. The results are announced, and each of the billion participants whoop for joy, having just won the Lottery. But, of course, the prize fund would then be divvied up among all billion 'winners'. So each individual only gets back the £1 they paid in (actually they'd probably get less back, as some money has to go to maintaining the structure of the lottery system).

In order for there to be a huge payout, the Lottery has to be setup in such a way as to make the chances of winning very small indeed. This means there is something rather dishonest about all those promotions that only ever show participants winning jackpots, claiming 'this could be you'. The implication is that 'equality of opportunity' is primarily concerned with producing 'winners'. But if the promised prize is fame and fortune, equality of opportunity's prime concern has to be ensuring the vast majority fail. Why? Because it is only when you have plenty of poor people that you can have a few who become extremely rich; only when you have most people afforded little to no recognition for their service does it make sense to consider 'fame' as a noteworthy achievement. Both the Lottery and Capitalism, then, are primarily dependent on failure. The vast majority of us must keep on believing we can be 'winners' too, so that we continue to pay into the system, but the vast majority must also lose, regardless of how much work we contribute, because it is the losers holding worthless tickets that actually provide the funds that the 'jackpot winners' appropriate.

Thing is, though, we are really talking about two opposing extremes here. A lottery or economic system set up to ensure everybody ends up equally poor is just not fair or worthwhile. Most people acknowledge that some people bring something to the workplace that should rightly earn them greater rewards. They may have a skill that makes them 'special', for example, or they may have taken on a greater burden of responsibility. Very few people insist on equal pay across the board (although in a later book we'll discuss the logic of one philosopher who did precisely that) but instead see the ideal as recognising outstanding talent, but not paying out so much to the elites that you cannot afford a comfortable life for those on the bottoms rungs of the socioeconomic ladder.

When asked how they think money is actually (rather than ideally) distributed, people tend to assume that there is a bit more concentration of wealth at the top and that, therefore, those

on the bottom experience more material hardship than would be the case under an ideal redistribution of collectively-produced wealth.

But what people think is the actual distribution does not come close to the immense concentration of wealth and the burden of material hardship necessarily imposed on the 'losers'. The cost of losing is not trivial, like sacrificing a pound a week so you can count yourself among those who stand an infinitesimally small chance of winning the Lottery, but rather dire consequences like homelessness, malnutrition, and other dreadful outcomes for mental and physical health that are an inevitable consequence of any 'equality of opportunity' system that promises astronomical material rewards and thus must impose worthless lives on the vast majority, just as the vast majority must find their tickets are worthless every time the Lottery announces somebody has just been elevated to the status of a multi-millionaire in one stroke of extraordinary luck.

Negation of the Negation

Hegel's third law was the "law of the negation of the negation", which should be familiar since we already talked about the dialectical process of thesis-antithesis-synthesis. The 'antithesis', recall, exposes the contradictions in the 'thesis' and brings about its negation. But the antithesis also has contradictions that are exposed by the 'synthesis' and so we get the "negation of the negation". But this was not just a destructive process for Hegel or Marx, because it was thought that contradictions would be eliminated but any good achieved in each epoch would be retained.

No wonder, then, that something like the Dialectic was so much more appealing to Marx than traditional formal logic. The problem with formal logic was that it was static and that it presented the underlying nature of reality as something that was unchanging. As a result, 'change' had been something previous philosophers had enormous difficulty in accounting for.

But Hegelian logic was dynamic rather than static, and so it was better equipped to deal with transformations, which obviously appealed to revolutionaries who desired a different tomorrow. The Dialectic method encouraged thinkers like Marx to study social phenomenon in terms of motion and change, and to seek out contradictions and oppositions in nature and society, for in such contradictions lay the route to revolutionary progress.

Even though Hegelian philosophy presented us with a view of historical development that is progressive, and heading inexorably toward an ultimate goal, Hegel himself had little to no concern for the future. His message to those philosophers who might want to plan for or recommend a particular future was "the owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the failing of the light". What that rather cryptic comment meant was that we only have wisdom in hindsight. This was an attitude that Marx very much disagreed with, leading to one of his most famous quotations:

"Philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point, however, is to change it".

So it is by no means the case that Marx simply followed Hegel. Rather, he was quite willing to cast a critical eye over his work. Indeed, when it came to the Dialectic, Marx found aspects of it very useful indeed, but was unable to accept the Dialectic in the form Hegel had developed.

In explaining the drawbacks of Hegel's dialectic, Marx wrote, "my own dialectic method is not only different from the Hegelian, but is its direct opposite. For Hegel...the thinking process is the demiurge of the real world, and the real world is only the outward realisation of the idea. With me, on the other hand, the idea is nothing else than the material world reflected in the human mind and translated into terms of thought".

Think back to our cave. From the Hegelian point of view, that cave, its contents, and indeed all of material reality only exists because some mind/s dreamed of/had ideas about/ were conscious of such things. Ideas are what ultimately make the world. What Marx was saying was that Hegel had got things entirely the wrong way around. While it was correct to say that history was heading in a particular direction, driven there by an internal dialectic whose driving force was contradictions, it was quite wrong to suppose that it was Ideas that were the primary and fundamental force of this process. Quite the opposite, in fact. It was objective material forces and economic realities that lay at the foundation of everything, ultimately determining human ideas.

Therefore, in Marx's 'Historical Materialism', the dialectic was seen as the product of the material satisfaction of needs, whereas Hegel had made Reason or Ideology the driving forces. One gets the impression that, for Hegel, what people are divided over are primarily such abstract issues as 'the general good' or 'personal freedom'. For Marx, though, people were first and foremost concerned with maintaining or increasing material standards of living.

So, both Hegel and Marx saw history in dialectical terms, meaning both thought there was an incessant war between ideas going on, and that this determined human consciousness and history. But whereas for Hegel this dialectical struggle was fought between ideological parties divided over abstract Hegelian ideas, Marx saw the dialectic as being driven by decidedly material economic forces, with the main struggles and contradictions occurring between social groups that had a common relation to the means of production. In other words, between classes.

By taking Hegel's dialectic and turning it the "right way up" (as Marx saw it), Marx developed a 'dialectical materialism' that could be used as the foundation of revolutionary theory. The dialectic, when interpreted in primarily materialistic forms, presented a model of history that was dynamic rather than static, which insisted on change, and which was useful for charting a direction from which revolutionary activists could learn. Not only that, but it achieved all this in a 'scientific' way, no appeals to gods or miracles required.

Marx's Historical Process

For Hegel, the dialectical process was heading in the direction of the fully realised State. Marx disagreed with him in regards to the ultimate endpoint of the dialectical process. But if that was so, where did he suppose Dialectical Materialism was headed? Victory, for Marx, equated to the human race achieving full self-realisation in which no person's life or creative

powers are a means to an end but an end in itself, and all humans live lives that fully realise their species-nature. Before that final victory is established, though, people will be exploiting, and exploited by, various forms of alienation that separate humans from their species-nature.

So, at the heart of Marx's materialist dialectic was a concept of changes in human nature, driven by economic forces. Marx believed that there were three stages or 'moments' to this dialectical process.

At the very beginning, it is our primitive understanding of the natural world that 'alienates' (separates) us from our true species-nature. For Marx, the human story begins with our species living freely and cooperatively, which at first seems like humans began in the communist Eden that was supposed to be established only at the end of his Dialectical struggle.

However, there are some crucial elements missing at this early stage. Most importantly, Marx saw the human race as living just like any other animal. Like them, humans at this stage are entirely consumed by their species-life and, as a result, determinism rules their lives, for we have yet to develop any capacity to reflect on, or act to change, our circumstances.

Something is going to have to change if humans are to realise their full species-nature, and for Marx achieving such a goal requires the use of 'productive forces' and the development of 'productive relations'. At this early stage, human relations exist in only a basic form in which humans are only barely self-aware. What dictates basic human relations is the necessity to produce and exchange goods so as to satisfy our material needs. But nature does not provide much at all in terms of products, only raw materials. In order to transform raw materials into products, humans must make use of 'productive forces' or the human labour, practical skills, tools and machines that extract and transform raw materials.

As well as unleashing 'productive forces', humans would also need to work together, organised into what Marx called 'productive relations'. This, for Marx, was fundamental to realising our full species-nature.

"The human essence of nature exists only for social man; for only here does nature exist for him as a bond with other men, as his existence for others and their existence for him, as the vital element of human reality; only here does it exist as the basis of his own human existence... Society is therefore the perfected unity in essence of man with nature, the true resurrection of nature, the realised naturalism of man and the realised humanism of nature...It is above all necessary to avoid once more establishing 'Society' as an abstraction over or against the individual. The individual is the social being".

Fully realising such natural harmony and social relationships will define the transition to the third and final stage in Marx's dialectic. But before we progress to that stage, we must first go through the second stage, which is what Marx mostly focuses on in his opus 'Das Kapital'.

What sets off the 'second stage' is that some people gain control over the forces of production. In various ways, these people come to see themselves as the owners of land, human labour, or the tools and equipment needed to transform raw materials into goods.

Therefore, whereas in stage one alienation was attributable to environmental determinism, from now on in stage two alienation will largely be the result of exploitation.

As far as Marx is concerned, while humans clearly have the capacity to behave in selfish, uncaring ways, this is not really the main defining characteristic of 'human nature'. It might sometimes seem like it is for those of us living through stage two, but that's only because a change in the forces of production led to a change in how we relate to one another. So long as stage two exists, it's difficult for us to recognise our fellow humans as ends in themselves rather than as a means to an end. In other words, what we have in stage two of dialectical materialism is exploitation, brought about by the willingness of some people to take advantage of others.

Once 'exploitation' enters the picture, primitive communism comes to an end, and the human race finds itself divided into the classes of 'Oppressor' and 'Oppressed'. Now, it is sometimes thought that the notion of social class is central to Marx's outlook, but actually that's not quite correct. We discover what is really central to Marx's outlook in this quote from his 'Communist Manifesto'.

"The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle".

Not 'social classes', then, but 'class struggle'. In other words, central to Marx's outlook is this notion of a state of mutual antagonism existing between two classes, on account of conflicting material interests.

But, while one can assert that humans are divided by, and in conflict over, class struggle, that just brushes over the reasons why humans should have to live in this state of permanent warfare to begin with. Why can't we all just live in peace?

Ancient Modes of Production

In order to understand why not, Marx turned to the history of material production, and a key concept, which was 'mode of production'. By 'mode of production', Marx meant an historically specific combination of certain forces of production with certain relations of production. By 'forces of production', he meant not just labour power, but also the various means of production that a society has at its disposal.

Anything that is capable of producing value counts as a productive force. A factory, then, is a productive force, as is a tractor, a smartphone or even a humble pencil. But where do such 'productive forces' come from? It would be absurd to say they just pop into existence from nothing, and indeed Marx never supposes such an absurdity. Rather, he sees productive forces as being invented, developed and deployed within the framework of particular social relations of production.

When Marx talks about 'social relations of production', he is referring to the antagonistic relations between those who own and control the means of production, and those who don't and therefore are forced to place their labour power at the disposal of the owner class. Contradictions build up from these antagonistic relationships, but before such buildups can

begin, antagonistic relationships have to come about, marking the end of primitive communism and the birth of Class society. For Marx, the first Class society is 'Tribal'.

"It corresponds to the undeveloped stage of production, at which a people lives by hunting and fishing, by the rearing of beasts or, in the highest stage, agriculture. In the latter case it presupposes a great mass of uncultivated land. The division of labour is at this stage still very elementary and is confined to a further extension of the natural division of labour existing in the family. The social structure is, therefore, limited to an extension of the family; patriarchal family chieftains, below them members of the tribe, finally slaves".

It is from these conditions, according to Marx, that the next stage in slave society evolves, one he called the 'Ancient Mode of Production'.

It "proceeds especially from the union of several tribes into a city by agreement or by conquest, and which is still accompanied by slavery. Besides communal ownership we already find moveable, and later also immovable, private property developing, but as an abnormal form subordinate to communal ownership. The citizens held power over their labouring slaves only in their community, and on this account alone, therefore, they are bound into the form of communal ownership, and with it the power of the people, decays in the same measure as, in particular, immovable private property evolves".

Slavery: Eliminated Or Hidden?

Because the 'Ancient Mode of Production' is based, ultimately, on slavery, it is fair to say that, for some unfortunate souls, Class Society begins at a stage that is as far from ideal as it is possible to be. After all, for Marx, full-self-realisation as a social being is how humans would see themselves, and how they would live, in a world devoid of exploitation and alienation. But a slave is in no position to regard their own life as an end in itself. In fact, in many ways a slave cannot be regarded as a human being, due to the fact that such a creature is the actual property of the ruling class.

Of course, in biological terms a slave is as much a human being as any other person. But, in social terms, to be enslaved is to be subjected to the ultimate alienation, because slavery involves separating a human being from the social bonds and obligations that turn one from a human animal into a person. Socially speaking, a slave is not a person. A slave is property.

For Marx, the end of alienation is one of the things to be accomplished in the final stage of his dialectical process. At this stage, though, it could not be more overtly in place. Now, one way of interpreting what is to come would be to say that each subsequent major stage advances towards greater freedom. A feudal peasant was 'bound' to the lord by various forms of hierarchal customs, but they had more personal autonomy than a slave did. A wage labourer has more autonomy still. Indeed, in some sense the wage labourer is (or should be) a completely free human being.

Those of us (the majority, actually) who find they have little choice but to carry on doing wage labour they would rather not do may well question the extent to which an employee is really 'free'. Marx would have agreed with such skepticism for, as we shall see, he saw wage

labour as being the product of forms of 'freedom' that, ironically enough, place the employee in a situation of near permanent servitude.

Viewed from such a perspective, rather than becoming increasingly liberated as history marches on, we instead evolve more subtle and less obvious ways of maintaining the exploitation and alienation that class society depends upon. Slavery never really goes extinct in class society. Rather, it just gets pushed out of sight.

In Marx's view, antagonistic relations result in the forces of production and the relations of production entering into contradiction with each other, ultimately leading to crisis.

"At a certain stage in their development, the material productive forces of society enter into contradiction with the existing relations of production, or- what is but a legal expression of the same thing- with the property relations within which they have been at work hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces, these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an epoch of social revolution".

Rise of the Capitalists

Remember that, for Marx, true human nature is to live as a self-actualised social being, but this can only come about once material conditions have been transformed so as to support and sustain such modes of being. Any mode of production that can only carry out that transformation to a limited extent collapses under the weight of its own contradictions. Such was the fate of ancient modes of production, making way for feudalism.

"Like tribal and communal ownership, [feudal property] is based again on community; but the directly producing class standing over against it is not, as in the case of ancient community, the slaves, but enserfed small peasantry".

But such a society did not remain simply one of peasants bonded to the landed estates of the lords, for in the towns there grew up mercantile guilds. "As soon as feudalism develops, there also arises antagonism to the towns. The hierarchal structure of landownership, and the armed bodies of retainers associated with it, gave the nobility power over the serfs. The feudal organisation was, just as much as the ancient communal ownership, an association against a subjected production group class; but the form of association and the relation to the direct producers were different because of the different conditions of production".

The social relations of feudalism were antagonistic from the perspective of the primitive capitalists working in the towns, because the development of a middle class was held back by the guild system and other realities of feudal society.

As Marx pointed out, "The immediate producer, the labourer, could only dispose of his own person after he had ceased to be a slave, serf, or bondsman to another. To become a free seller of labour power, who carries his commodity wherever he finds a market, he must further have escaped from the regime of the guilds, their rules for apprentices and journeymen, and the impediments of their labour regulations. Hence the historical movement which changes the producers into wage-workers, appears, on the one hand, as their

emancipation from serfdom, and from the fetters of the guilds, and this side alone exists for bourgeois historians”.

“On the one hand”? That implies another way of looking at this situation, which we’ll come to in a moment. For now, though, we’ll just say that the antagonism sparked a bourgeois revolution, one in which the merchants and manufacturers in the growing towns seized power and forced the aristocracy into cooperation. The result of this revolution was to break the fetters that held the middle classes back, ultimately bringing about a new mode of production that unleashed the forces of production on a scale to dwarf anything that had come before. The name of this mode of production? Capitalism.

One might well ask why, after four hundred or so years of Capitalism and all the technological development that has gone on in this era, we are still not at the final stage in Marx’s dialectical process. Is it simply because, even in the 21st century, material development is still too primitive to enable full communism? Or are there other factors we should consider?

The Mental Block of Metaphysical Reasoning

Marx believed that there were other factors that stood opposed to a human nature that took self-development to be an end in itself. But to recognise them we had to stop thinking materially and instead tackle certain metaphysical notions. He pointed out that, in class society, there always exists a form of metaphysical reasoning that just cannot accept human social life as an end in itself, but instead must imagine something ‘higher’ to which human activity should be brought to account. Hegel’s own concept of the ‘Absolute Idea’ would be one example. Others would include ‘Morality’, ‘Religious sanctions’, ‘Duty’ and ‘Profit’.

Does that mean to say Marx is opposed to morality? Not really. Rather, he denies that ‘morality’ is to be found in some laws set above the process of unfolding and actualising our creative social potential, or that it exists in some august set of ends pitched beyond such a process. Instead, as far as Marx is concerned, the process of unfolding our creative powers and capacities is what morality consists of. It is a process that is inseparable from our common nature and, as such, needs no more justification than does the desire for friends, or smiling, or laughter.

What this form of metaphysical reasoning does is to imagine some sort of ethical system that is universally applicable. In that sense, it is inclusive. But, Marx insisted, such universality brings it into conflict with a form of instrumental reasoning that is also a feature of class society.

What feature is that? Well, it’s the idea that the individual ought not to be ends in themselves, but rather that they exist only for the sake of some greater goal. As we have seen, for Hegel that greater goal was the political state. In Marx’s day it was ‘universal happiness’ (this did appear to be the dominant Utilitarian thought of his day). In our day and age it could be said to be ‘economic growth’ or, perhaps, ‘environmentalism’.

Whatever form it comes in, it stands opposed to full communism so long as it maintains conditions in which the energies of the majority are made instrumental to the profit of the

few. In Class Society, means/ends reasoning is the form of rationality that tends to dominate, and the ultimate outcome is that the self-realising species being becomes converted into a mere tool of material survival- a deeply ironic outcome, given that this is the least functional thing about a human being.

As Marx said, "labour, life activity, productive life appears to man only as a means for the satisfaction of a need, the need to preserve physical existence. But productive life is species-life. It is life-producing life. The whole character of a species, its species-character, resides in the nature of its life activity, and free conscious activity constituting the species-character of men. [But, in Capitalism] life appears only as a means of life".

A pro-Capitalist perspective tends to view Communism as being opposed to Individualism. It likes to portray Communist society as totally conforming, rank upon rank of nameless, faceless comrades dressed in dehumanising grey outfits, united in their poverty and subjugation to the Communist regime. But Marx was certainly not opposed to Individualism, and nor was he opposed in principle to instrumental reasoning. After all, his own revolutionary politics concerned itself with the fitting of means to ends, and rational action in the absence of instrumental reasoning is just impossible. Rather, he had such a deep respect for the individual, he was compelled to oppose a regime like Capitalism. Why? Because, while it may make a big thing of individualism in theory, in practice it tends towards the opposite, because under Capitalism men and women are preferably reduced to anonymously interchangeable units.

Bringing about such a reduction requires a considerable amount of violence and coercion, which brings us back to that 'other hand'. Right after commenting about the only aspect of the 'transition' from feudalism that bourgeois historians want to talk about, Marx comments on those aspects they ignore.

"But, on the other hand, these new freedmen became sellers of themselves only after they had been robbed of all their own means of production, and all of the guarantees of existence afforded by the old feudal arrangements. And the history of this, their appropriation, is written in the annals of mankind in letters of blood and fire".

So, when we talk about the 'free labourer', we should take into account that 'freedom' has more than one meaning in the context of Capitalist relations. On a positive note, the proletariat retains total ownership of their labour power, which can never be commodified and sold outright. Rather, the labourer must always be free to remove one's labour power and seek to apply it elsewhere.

But, the proletariat were also 'liberated' from any means of adequately providing for themselves. It's hard to see how that could bring about conditions that would feel like a liberation. It would seem more like an alienation, being separated from the community support that humans depend upon. The Class that were really liberated thanks to land privatisation were the Capitalists, because it meant land no longer functioned as a means of subsistence and would instead function as a means of accumulation and exploitation.

It was also a liberation for landlords because, as Sylvia Federici explained, "[they could] unload onto the workers most of the cost of their reproduction, giving them access to means

of subsistence only when directly employed. When work would not be available or would not be sufficiently profitable, as in times of commercial or agricultural crisis, workers, instead, could be laid off and left to starve”.

That last comment reveals the stark choice faced by wage labourers under a Capitalist system lacking Socialist checks and balances. What such a system does is to force workers to voluntarily alienate their labour power, or else fall foul of dire artificial poverty. Why is it artificial poverty? Because, the processes that Marx referred to in his ‘other hand’ removed support that would have prevented much of the poverty that people suffered as Capitalism rose to dominance. Nor is this injustice relegated to the past. As Federici has shown, in various ways the Capitalist system continues to impose entirely unnecessary poverty on the human race, such as perpetuating malnutrition even though modern food-production techniques can and do produce more food than is needed to end world hunger. The ‘freedom’ promised by Capitalist ‘free markets’ mostly consist of the freedom of those with financial and political power to take away the freedom of everybody else.

A Denial of Nature

Remember that in Class Society there is an antagonistic struggle between groups. In the case of Capitalist society, one of the things this struggle entails is a disagreement over what ideal working conditions should be like. It is from such a struggle that we get seemingly bizarre attitudes to ‘work’.

To illustrate what’s so bizarre about it, let’s imagine that dolphins became very reluctant to be in water. If that were so, it should strike anyone as very odd, because dolphins are obviously meant to be aquatic mammals. They have streamlined bodies. Their limbs have been modified into flippers that make them great swimmers. They are able to hold their breath for a very long time, and their breathing apparatus is arranged in such a way as to ensure they can remain almost totally immersed when they occasionally take a break from the business of the day to take another breath. Yes, dolphins look very much like they should take to a life swimming in the seas as the existence they evolved to fit. So if such creatures had to be subjected to ‘carrot/stick’ methods of persuasion/ coercion in order to get them swimming again, wouldn’t this reluctance to do what they were obviously born to do strike us as very odd behaviour indeed?

This is just a silly made-up story. Dolphins show no sign of wanting to give up the lifestyle for which they are so superbly adapted. But, there is an animal that does seem reluctant to live the life it evolved to suit, and that animal is the Human Being. Why do I say that? Because humans obviously evolved to work. Everything about our physiology and psychology points to this fact.

Let’s start with our hands. Whereas a dolphin’s limbs are clearly evolved to enable proficient swimming, our four fingers and opposable thumbs are just as clearly adapted to shape materials into tools and then use those tools in a great many ways in order to further shape the world around us to suit our purposes. Both the creative power needed to imagine that which does not yet exist, and the ability to form and handle tools that will give solid form to such figments of the imagination, requires a big brain. In terms of its ratio to body size, humans have the biggest brain in all of nature.

An individual person is obviously limited in their ability to transform the world. But evolution took care of that too, by giving us powers of communication and a need to socialise, so we could form groups, exchange ideas, and do collectively what could not be done alone. Moreover, we evolved to actively socialise. Our bodies and our minds need work in a social context (even when working alone you're almost certainly holding a dialogue in your head with imaginary others with whom you discuss problems and possible solutions. As predominantly social beings we never want to be truly alone). To be deprived of all that is to guarantee all kinds of physical ailments and mental problems.

Yet, despite all that, it does seem to be quite a popular opinion that people just don't want to work and would opt for a life of idleness unless drastic action is taken to compel people to submit to a job. One has to wonder why people don't look like barnacles if that were the case, since barnacles really did evolve to suit a life of minimal effort.

Since people look like human beings rather than barnacles, we should turn our focus away from people and instead consider the world of 'work'. The first thing we should recognise is that not all activity should be considered 'work', and certainly not engaging, meaningful work. Only activity imbued with certain qualities deserves to be thought of as meaningful work.

But what are those qualities? One of the necessary conditions is that the activity should involve 'Imagination'. Your work should ideally provide opportunities to utilise your creative, artistic powers to their fullest possible extent. The work should be 'challenging', presenting problems that require logical reasoning. The work should be 'collaborative' in a way that let's you take what is most unique and individualistic about yourself and to fully integrate that into a group. The work should enable 'mastery', the ability to develop all of your abilities to the highest standards you are capable of reaching.

If activity could involve these qualities, people would likely be very eager to do such work. This is no baseless speculation. The best videogames succeed in incorporating most if not all of the qualities activity requires to be meaningful work. This stands to reason. The business built around videogames wants to sell as many copies as they can, so obviously they are going to want the activity involved in videogaming to be as appealing as possible, because then customers will enjoy the product and recommend their peers buy it too.

One big difference between videogaming and jobs is that, other than a few 'professional' gamers who play to win prize money, or those who have monetised their gaming on platforms like YouTube, nobody gains material reward by playing videogames. Having said that, most videogames do have something like a monetary system built into the game itself. Players typically have to earn points or, in some cases, in-game currency, if they are to progress further. What these currencies tend to do is enable the player to better express their individuality by equipping themselves with customisable outfits, accessories etc, thereby gaining bragging rights among the videogaming community. But, other than virtual rewards of this kind, the vast majority of people not only work in videogames for free, they actually pay good money to be allowed to do the work videogaming provides.

Now, when it comes to the world of jobs, rather than people paying the business for the opportunity to work (as happens with videogames) the business typically has to pay them

wages. Therefore, whereas for videogames sales the worker is purely a source of profit, where jobs are concerned the employee assists in making profit but is also a cost to the business. If Capitalist incentives are what drive decisions, the company is going to want to boost profitability while minimising costs, and such imperatives result in businesses seeking to reduce if not eliminate the qualities activities need to become meaningful work.

After all, what would the ideal worker look like, from the perspective of business? First of all, I suppose, the worker should be competent at the job they are employed to do. In that sense, then, both videogames and jobs seem to agree that 'mastery' is an important aspect of work.

But, whereas videogames seek to make full mastery something one achieves after enough effort has been expended to make it feel like an achievement, as far as jobs are concerned, the employee had best gain competency as soon as possible. Minimum in-work training is therefore the condition to aim for. Similarly, videogames deliberately put challenges into the game, and then find ways of signalling to the player what they are doing wrong if the problem continues to frustrate progress. In other words, failure in the best videogames works as a learning process. As far as jobs are concerned, though, challenges are best eliminated, not used to turn activity into meaningful work.

Moreover, businesses are incentivised to try and reduce to an absolute minimum the need for an employee to utilise the powers of creativity and logical thinking. There are a couple of reasons why that is the case. First of all, maximising such qualities tends to enhance our uniqueness and individuality. Imagine that you had an employee who performed a vital role in your business, and was so uniquely talented as to be irreplaceable. You then learn that this special employee was run over and killed on her way to work. Such an outcome would be deeply problematic, to say the least.

Conversely, imagine if there was nothing at all unique and special about any employee. Imagine if you could think of people merely as interchangeable units. Employee number 101 is not available today? No matter. A quick call to the temping agency or the recruitment consultancy will have employee 202 here soon, and s/he will slot into the vacant role in no time.

What sort of wage could such an easily replaceable employee expect? A uniquely skilled, vitally important employee wields enormous bargaining power and can therefore negotiate a high fee for their services. On the other hand, an employee who can be replaced at a moment's notice has next to no bargaining power and therefore has little or no choice but to accept the minimum possible wages and benefits employment can offer.

Are these conditions good? Well, I suppose they are if you are a capitalist seeking to maximise profit and reduce costs, and you know those not jobbing have little to no social safety net to rely on. A person who has some other means of supporting themselves would likely consider employment devoid of the qualities needed for work to be meaningful and think "no thanks, such drudgery does not appeal". A person without such alternatives is forced to volunteer for wage slavery.

So, what we find in the world of videogames and the world of employment are opposing incentives, due to the fact of who pays who in order to work. Whereas videogame creators try (but do not always succeed) in maximising the qualities that turn activities into meaningful work, employers try (but do not always succeed) in turning activity into cheap labour, which is necessarily activity devoid of the qualities that provide meaning.

They do not always succeed, because the nature of some work and current state of technology means some businesses have to rely on at least some workers who are very creative and artistic, who tackle problems that really exercise powers of logic and which take a long time to master. This provides another reason why jobs are comparable to the lottery. It is a rare thing indeed to land a job that is socially valuable, personally rewarding and also pays enough to end the material concerns most of us regularly deal with, so actually having a job like that is truly like winning the jackpot in the jobs lottery. Advertisements for services that help people find jobs tend to portray a world in which anyone seeking employment is likely to land this sort of dream job, just as advertisements for the Lottery tend to show the big winners. But, really, the hope (from the employer's perspective) is that technological developments and other factors will enable them to reduce the qualities of meaningful work and so lower costs. Just as the Lottery wants the vast majority to buy worthless tickets, the jobs market wants the vast majority to have work of minimum meaning, reward, and maximal cheapness. After all, there is no choice if your aim is to make some enormously rich, other than to make lots of others poor.

AI

Today there is a lot of talk about using artificial intelligence to 'assist' workers and so boost productivity. It's usually put that way- 'assisting' employees rather than replacing them altogether with robots. While that may be the case (for now) it's obvious that the more you can offload the demands of creativity and logic to a machine, and the more technological advances can lower the time it takes to achieve mastery in a task, then the less special, replaceable and the cheaper once highly specialised and expensive employees will become.

In Marx's day, and indeed up until the late 20th century, the most effective way to devalue worker skills was to maximise division of labour via the production-line system. This was seen as another way in which Capitalism imposed alienation on people, because rather than enabling us to be engaged in the sort of work that nurtured one's natural desire to develop into an all-rounded individual, it instead put people in employment in which their human powers could only be realised in crippling one-sided ways.

Commenting on this situation, Marx wrote, "the division of labour offers us the first example of how, as long as man remains in natural society, that is, as long as a cleavage exists between the particular and the common interest, as long, therefore, as activity is not voluntary, but naturally, divided, man's own deed becomes an alien power opposed to him, which enslaves him instead of being controlled by him. For as soon as the distribution of labour comes into being, each man has a particular exclusive sphere of activity, which is forced upon him and from which he cannot escape. He is a hunter, a fisherman, a herdsman...and must remain so if he does not want to lose his means of livelihood".

So then, the ideal arrangement, from the point of view of Capitalist modes of production, is that the price that must be paid for a day's labour is as low as it possibly can be; that the time and resources required to reproduce that labour-power is reduced as much as possible, and that the working-day should go on for as long as it possibly can.

But, beyond a certain point, that results in hell for the working-classes, for they are being made to do work stripped of all meaning, reduced to components in a de-humanising system, doing drudge labour for so long as to require a whipping or some other means of squeezing more work out of an exhausted workforce. And then, when they finally get a break, their subsistence pay is enough to keep the dire effects of absolute poverty at bay....but only just.

So, what are ideal conditions for the Capitalist class- squeezing maximum profit from labour-power- creates appalling conditions for the working-classes. But, the demands of that same profit-maximising system creates conditions that lead to revolution, or so Marx predicted in the final chapter of volume one of *Das Kapital*:

“Along with the constantly diminishing number of the magnates of capital, who usurp and monopolise all advantages of this process of transformation, grows the mass of misery, oppression, slavery, degradation and exploitation; but with that too grows the revolt of the working-class, a class always increasing in number, and disciplined, united, organised by the very mechanism of the process of capitalist production itself. The monopoly of capital becomes a fetter on the modes of production, which has sprung up and flourished along with, and under it. Centralisation of the means of production and socialisation of labour at last reach a point where they become incompatible with their capitalist integument. The integument is burst asunder. The knell of capitalist private property sounds. The expropriators are expropriated”.

Only, the dialectical unfolding of the historical process did not quite turn out this way. In fact, it was Communism that collapsed, after having subjected the unfortunate souls who had to live under regimes that sought to implement it to some of the most dire conditions in history, as well as some of its worst tyrants.

Why did historical unfolding not play out as Marx and Engels predicted? And what part did Mythstakes play in all this? The next books in this series will dig deeper into such questions. But, at the end of this book, a word of advice. The next book to come is meant as more of an addendum to this one. It will concentrate on the first few chapters of Marx's '*Das Kapital*'. If that does not sound like your idea of a fun and informative read, by all means skip it and jump to the book which follows it.

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