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
Is Marx correct in his definition of exploitation?

## Introduction

In this essay Marx's views on exploitation is analysed. Marx has a very limiting definition of what constitutes as exploitation. This causes issues in instances such as situations that don't seem exploitative have to be by definition exploitative, or strange contradictions can arise. Marx's definition has developed a lot of debate on the morality of exploitation, which will not be discussed in this essay. Instead, the purpose of this essay is to create a definition of exploitation that is more useful in philosophical debate and relieves some of the issues of the previous definition. First, I will provide some background on Marx and his views as a critique on liberalism. Second, I will explain Marx's labour theory of value, which from there I will derive his definition of exploitation. Third, I will critique this definition and develop a new one that solves the issues that arise from the previous one. Lastly, I will show that even with less extreme definition of exploitation, Marx's arguments against capitalism being exploitative are not minimized.

## Main

Marx's ideas can be seen as a critique on liberalism. Liberalism is the view that government can interfere insofar as to ensure the basic rights of individuals but does not interfere beyond which happens in the private sector (Stahl, 2022). Liberals believe that ensuring basic human rights is all that is necessary for the equality in society. Here is where Marx disagrees. Fundamentally, Marx does not see society as equal even with the ensured basic rights. He believes that a capitalist society divides itself into two classes: the capitalists, and the working class. And it is the working class that are exploited in this system. Marx does not provide insight on why exploitation in this case is considered unjust and there is some debate on why this is the case. This debate, however, is highly dependent on what the definition of exploitation *is*. Therefore, the purpose of this essay is to determine if Marx's definition of exploitation is fair and if not then to define to what extent a system is exploitative, and in doing so, defining what exploitation should be.

First, I will analyse Marx's definition of exploitation, which can be simply summarized as the extraction of surplus labour. To understand what this means, it is important to understand Marx's labour theory of value. He states that nature and *useful* labour is the source of all wealth (Marx, 1970).  Useful labour is the type of labour produces what is intended and that is useful (as not all labour is necessarily useful). The vast majority of people have the capacity to perform labour and are said to have the property of labour power.

Those who rent out their labour power are called the working class. To maintain labour power requires a level of sustenance. Marx valued that sustenance on the basis of how much labour it would cost to produce. This labour, then in Marx's view, has a certain inherent value. Labour power, on the other hand, is how much value *can* be produced. Since labour itself is the inherent value, what is meant here is that the value that labour power 'produces' is thus the total amount of labour that can be done. If a person is *not* exploited, then the value that their labour power costs (in terms of labour) is equal to the value that their labour power can produce (in terms of labour). A person is *exploited* if the cost of their labour power is less than the value that they produce. Marx reasons that the cost of the labour power can only be less if the workers are either overworked or they are not provided adequate sustenance (or some other reasons in a similar vein). Surplus labour, as Marx coined, is the difference between the cost of labour power and the value labour power produces. Surplus labour is *extracted* from labour power, and this extraction is exploitative. Therefore, the definition of exploitation according to Marx, is the extraction of surplus labour.

Another interpretation of this negates the use of labour as inherent value, rather, it can be thought that labour produces things that have value, and the cost of labour power is simply the cost of the means to maintain subsistence. This brings us to the following definition of exploitation, called the technical definition of exploitation:

*A person A is exploited by another person B if A does not receive the full value of the products that A creates and if B appropriates some of that value (Stahl, 2022, p. 280).*

For instance, if person A is hired by person B to make shoes, and person B sells the shoes on the market, then person A is considered exploited by B if A does not receive the full value of what the shoes were sold for. The issue here, according to Marx, is that B has a monopoly on the means of production. Means of production is coined to mean materials or instruments necessary to produce things. In this example that would mean things such as the base material for shoes and the tools used to craft them. And because B has the monopoly on the means of production, A can only derive value from selling their labour power to B, which subordinates A to B (Marx, 1970). This subordination allows B to create conditions where surplus labour can be extracted from A, or in other words, B has the power to create

conditions where A is not sufficiently compensated for the value they produced using their labour power, and that value is appropriated by B.

This is generally the basis for a capitalist society. The value that is appropriated by B is coined capital. Capital, for Marx, has a very specific definition. Capital is specifically a property that can be extracted from the labour power of others and can be re-invested for self-enlargement. Capital is not simply wealth, capital only exists if there is a relationship between the worker and the capitalist where the capitalist extracts the value from what the workers produce, which can be used to further enlarge its capital ventures (Stahl, 2022). The act of accumulating capital is what separates the capitalists from the workers; the only two classes that exist in a capitalist society, according to Marx. In other words, a capitalist society is premised on the accumulation of capital, but only a few are able to accumulate capital, because only a few own the means of production. By definition, one cannot attain capital without having and exploiting workers. Thus, the issue is that not everyone can become the thing that the system incentivizes everyone to be. And to be the thing the system incentivizes everyone to be, has to be on the premise that others *do not* (and those who 'do not' are exploited for the others 'to be'). The premise that others 'do not' is the basis in what is coined collective unfreedom (Cohen, 1983).

I will argue that the technical definition of exploitation is too strict and subsequently, the idea that attaining capital is by definition exploitative is not useful. First, I would contend that there is the implicit question: if there is a way to generate capital for the worker, then is the system still considered exploitative? (Does this make the worker exploited as well as an exploiter? Does that make any sense)? To ask this question I have to object to the notion that, theoretically, not everyone in a capitalist society can accumulate capital. For example, everyone is theoretically able to buy stocks (and many do), which by Marx's definition would count as capital. If those stocks were to pay dividends, or even if they just increase in value, then the capital invested has a means to self-enlargement and holding a portion of a company is owning some means of production. Buying stocks, is indirectly, the potential to profit of other people's labour power. As the labour power of the company is directly responsible for its value. Arguably, this is the role of a capitalist.

According to the definition provided, this is not enough to negate exploitation. The worker is *always* exploited, even if they do accumulate capital, as long as the value they produce is less than they receive. Taking into account the issue that Marx seems to have with capitalism (which is the premise that collectively people cannot be the thing that the system

incentivizes them to be i.e. capitalists, holders of the means of production), this seems to be counterintuitive. If it is accepted that it is still exploitation, then is the worker simultaneously considered an exploiter as well? Can an exploiter be exploited? This seems like a contradiction and a strange conclusion to accept. I will also add that this definition doesn't acknowledge the contribution of person B. In the system described, there is a cooperation between person A and B, and this cooperation is necessary for any value to be extracted from person A's labour. The contribution that B provides can be in a way of organisation, or ideas, which can be described as mental labour. For example, B, who has a supply of leather devises a plan to craft the best shoes in town. To do so, he organizes the mechanics of a business and hires A to craft shoes. Without B's contribution there would not be any work for A. The proportion of contribution may be contested, but that there is any contribution at all is surely uncontested. Thus, it is unreasonable to state that A must receive the *full* value of the products that they produce. Hereby, I create a new definition of exploitation:

*A person A is exploited by another person B if A receives only the value of their labour power, while person B appropriates the full value of the products that person A created using their labour power.*

There are still some issues with this definition, it is not defined *how much* of the production value has to be necessarily shared for it to not be considered exploitation. In other words, this definition ensures that even if person A only gets an infinitesimal amount of the production value, then it is no longer exploitation. This is clearly incorrect as that negligible difference essentially equates it to the original technical definition. Therefore, this definition must be seen as the minimum criteria of exploitation. Another definition is then created that negates this issue:

*A person A is exploited by another person B if A receives the value of their labour power without their reasonable share of the value of the products they have created, while person B appropriates that share of the value.*

With this definition, the issue now is, clearly, how to define what a *reasonable share* is. This is a difficult endeavour and out the scope of this essay. But on the basis of this new definition, capitalist systems are not by definition exploitative. What it instead assumes is that

there is cooperation between A and B, and each has to be sufficiently compensated for their contributions. If this is the case, even if A is not inclined to accumulate capital to become a capitalist, A is at least not considered exploited. For example, under this definition, someone who volunteers work or is perfectly happy with their arrangements, are not by definition exploited. This definition also solves the issue of apparent contradiction that occurs when a worker does accumulate capital i.e. they are exploited and are exploiters. Now, if they receive an adequate amount of capital, they are no longer exploited. And the capital they do receive doesn't necessarily make them exploiters. An objection to this definition may state that 'reasonable share' is too vague and open to interpretation. And what is determined to be 'reasonable' is very susceptible to exploitation as those who determine what is 'reasonable' are those who have the power to implement it, which are generally the capitalists. I would agree that this is a fair objection. Regardless, this definition offers a less radical view of the situation that Marx describes.

Now the question remains: do workers still suffer from exploitation in the capitalist system? Even with this new definition, maybe not *all* those who offer their labour power are being necessary exploited. But it doesn't negate the fact that the capitalist system incentivizes accumulation of capital at all costs, and if that includes *exploitation* then that is just a means to an end. And if it is true that those who have the capital hold the negotiation power (Marx, 1970), then it is very likely that workers will enter relations with capitalists under exploitative conditions. This shows that even with a looser definition of exploitation, Marx's view that capitalist society incentivizes exploitation still stands strong, and further strengthens the arguments for ideas.

## **Conclusion**

This essay has found Marx's definition of exploitation is too restrictive to applicable. And thereby his definition of capitalist society and capitalists being by definition exploitative. Using this definition causes issues in instances where workers are given the opportunity to accumulate capital (such as buying stocks), as this causes strange contradictions to arise. Also, even if workers are happy with their arrangements and they are compensated fairly, they are by definition still exploited. And the definition of Marx does not take into account the contribution of the capitalist. From here, a new definition was devised that negates these issues:

*A person A is exploited by another person B if A receives the value of their labour power without their reasonable share of the value of the products they have created, while person B appropriates that share of the value.*

However, this definition does not give adequate parameters to what extent exploitation occurs. This discussion is out the scope of this essay. This new definition demonstrates that even with a more flexible definition of exploitation, Marx's views that capitalism is inherently exploitative is still correct.

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