

The Communist Manifesto of 1875 - The Critique of the Gotha Programme

We are publishing below a text written by one of our sympathisers examining Marx's critique of the Gotha programme of 1875. The text looks at Marx's critique of wage labour, which forms the basis of capitalism, and gives his insights into what labour will be like under communism. The text illustrates Marx's method which is to proceed from a ruthless criticism of what exists, namely inhuman, unfree, alienated labour and points to the possibility of a better world, "labour as the manifestation of life and therefore enjoyment of life." In this we see the secret of the continuing power of Marx's work which will endure as long as the evils of capitalist society. The relevance of Marx's work to today both worries and baffles the capitalist class who thought his relevance had been destroyed by the collapse of the Russian bloc.

The Critique

Marx was a revolutionary who saw his work as forming part of the theoretical arsenal which could be used in the struggle to build a better world. It is significant that the critique of the Gotha Programme was suppressed at the time it was written. The Gotha Programme was accepted as the basis of the creation of the German Social Democratic Party in May 1875. Marx's criticisms were only published 16 years later in 1891, eight years after his death. This was a prelude to the distortion and suppression of sections of his writings and thought which followed in the next century. The present short text refutes interpretations of Marx which were given widespread currency under firstly, the Social Democracy of the Second International, and secondly, under Stalinism. Two key elements which have been distorted until they are totally contrary to Marx's own conception are the nature of labour under communist society, and communist society itself. Social democracy, together with Stalinism and "critical Stalinism" namely Trotskyism, Maoism and their respective camp followers, see labour under communism as wage labour for the state. Communism itself, they see as state capitalism. Such notions stand in direct contradiction to labour as fulfilment of life and humanity and communism as a free union of individuals which Marx saw as the essential characteristics of communism."... our position is altogether remote from the said programme of principle and we have nothing to do with it" Marx wrote in a letter accompanying his *Critique of the Gotha Programme*. Marx continued "It is my duty not to give recognition, even by diplomatic silence, to what in my opinion is a thoroughly objectionable programme that demoralises the Party". The author of the Gotha Programme was a certain Wilhelm Liebknecht! To Liebknecht and the leaders of the new party, unity was considered to be more important than the details of the Programme itself. August Bebel, who tried and failed to correct some of the program's errors at the foundation congress, wrote in his 1910 memoirs: "It was no easy task to agree with the two old men in London. What we saw as clever calculation, adept tactics, they saw as weakness and irresponsible complaisance; ultimately, the fact of the unification was the main point."

The Critique is not as well-known as The Communist Manifesto, but it has the same purpose. It is a clear and direct statement of Marx's communism. Written near the end of his life in order to demolish the state-doting doctrines of the Gotha Programme, it contains a condensed discussion of...

the essential elements of the capitalist mode of production, its revolutionary transformation into its opposite and a rough portrayal, in a few bold strokes, of what Marx had called in *Capital* the "union of free individuals" destined to succeed the existing social order. ⁽¹⁾

The Gotha Programme begins with the claim that "Labour is the source of wealth and all culture". No, says Marx, "Labour is not the source of all wealth. Nature is just as much the source of use values". Here Marx defends one of the few insights that he claimed to be his very own, the two-fold nature of the commodity, the distinction between use value (why we want an article) and exchange value (what an article is worth on the market). These reveal that there is a conflict about the purpose of production at the very root of the production system. ⁽²⁾ Wealth exists as an accumulation of things, but also as a mass of value: in developed capitalism, of course, value is realised in money or money's worth.

Nature is the "non-organic life" of the human and the human as "a part of nature." The labourer can create nothing without nature, without the sensuous external world.

Grundrisse

It is false to say that labour in so far as it creates use values, that is material wealth, is the unique source of the latter... The use value always has a natural substratum. Labour is the natural condition of the human, the condition of material exchange between human and nature, independent of all social forms.

Critique of Political Economy

the global condition of material exchange between the human and nature, an everlasting natural condition of human existence and thus independent of all forms of this existence, rather equally common to all its social forms.

Capital, Volume I

Marx's concern is that wealth as value (a set of numbers in a ledger rather than a set of things) is a distinct and modern conception of wealth. Value is the creation of new social system of capitalism, a point entirely lost to the German Workers' Party which just demanded "a fair distribution". This is the same compromise with capitalism we see in Social Democracy and in liberal modern movements.

Marx begins *Capital* with this revelation of the two-fold nature of the commodity. Why do commodity goods in our society have two forms, useful goods and valuable goods? This is one of the two key questions the classical economists never asked. The other is 'How did capitalism arise?' To see that it is a puzzle that there are two forms of wealth in the commodity is to see that capitalism is not the natural order. This new social game we are forced to play stands on some kind of problem at the root of the production system.

Ten years earlier, Marx argued that "a man who produces an article for his own immediate use, consumes it himself, creates a product but not a commodity," and that "to produce a commodity" it is "not only Labour but Social Labour" that is relevant (_Wages, Price and Profi_t). Also, according to Marx it is not labour as such but "socially necessary labour (time) " that produces commodities. This type of labour is social labour because it is:

1. subordinated to the social division of labour;
2. it is socially determined average labour (time), and
3. it is destined to satisfy certain social wants.

Producers enter into social contact through the exchange of commodities. Marx stresses the specific character of this labour.

The conditions of labour positing exchange value are social determinants of labour or determinants of social labour, but social... in a particular way. This is a specific kind of sociality. [It is a situation in which] each one labours for oneself and the particular labour has to appear as its opposite, abstract general labour, [and] in this form, social labour. [It has this] specific social character only within the limits of exchange.

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Labour in communist society

What will labour be like after capitalism has ended? Marx stresses that labour in that society would not simply be a means of life but would itself become life's "first need." Not every division of labour would be abolished. What must be abolished is the division of labour which puts individuals under its "enslaving subordination". In 1844 Marx distinguished between two types of labour.

The first is labour in the absence of private property in the means of production where "we produce as human beings." Here labour is a "free manifestation of life and therefore enjoyment of life," where the "particularity of my life is affirmed." Here labour is "true, active property."

The second is labour carried on under private property, the "alienation of life". "It is... not the satisfaction of a need; it is merely a means to satisfy needs external to it". It is, therefore, "*forced labour*... not his own, but someone else's". This is labour as "*self-estrangement*".

Thus through estranged labour man... creates the domination of the person who does not produce over production and over the product... The relationship of the worker to labour creates the relation to it of the capitalist... Private property is thus the product, the result, the necessary consequence, of alienated labour.

True, it is as a result of the movement of private property that we have obtained the concept of alienated labour (of alienated life) in political economy. But analysis of this concept shows that though private property appears to be the reason, the cause of alienated labour, it is rather its consequence... Later this relationship becomes reciprocal. Thus property cannot create alienated labour. Before labour can be appropriated in the form of property it must first take the form of alienated labour. Thus the proprietorial relation between a person and a thing expresses a more fundamental social relation between people. The legal form of private property presupposes the social relation of alienated labour. (3)

Simon Clarke explains this well:

the essential social relationship between people, their mutual need for one another, appears in the alienated form of a relation between things and my social dependence on the other person appears in the alienated form of my dependence on things. With the extension of exchange and the division of labour the activity of labour becomes an alienated activity, for the thing that the labourer produces has no inherent connection with the needs of the labourer: the labourer does not produce the particular object because it responds either to his or her need to engage in a particular form of activity, or to a need for that particular product, or to a recognition of the need of another for that product. The labourer produces simply

in order to exchange the product for another product, in order to earn a living. Thus the product as an indifferent thing comes to dominate labour. (4)

[Here] my individuality is to such an extent alienated that this activity is hated by me and is a torment. It is only an appearance of activity imposed only by an external necessity and not by an inner need.

Paris Notebooks

One year later, Marx observes that the labourer's activity is not "a free manifestation of his human life," it is rather a "bartering away, an alienation of his powers to capital." Marx writes that "[this] labour is an unfree, inhuman, unsocial activity conditioned by and creating private property" and then adds that "the abolition of private property only becomes a reality if it is conceived as the abolition of [alienated] labour" (*The Holy Family*). All production, considered as "appropriation of nature from the side of the individual... is mediated by definite social forms" (*Critique of Political Economy*). Now consider labour's social dimension. The question becomes relevant re whether the labour process operates "under the brutal lash of the slave supervision or the anxious eye of the capitalist". (5)

These two forms of labour are the dominant types of labour that has operated in class societies. Throughout class society labour has been an activity forced on the individual - either as directly forced labour under "personal dependence" as in pre-capitalism or as alienated labour under "material dependence" in commodity capitalist society (*Grundrisse*). Such labour has reduced the labourer into a "labouring animal" (*Theories of Surplus Value*). The division of labour so far has been involuntary. The "human being's own activity dominates the human being as an alien, opposite power" (*German Ideology*). This form of labour is quite different from the human being's "free individuality" as it will exist in communism. Referring to Adam Smith's idea of labour being a "sacrifice of freedom" Marx says that labour "in its historical forms of slavery, serfdom and wage labour" always appears "repulsive, forced from outside". "Labour has not yet created the "subjective and objective conditions in which labour would be attractive and self-realising for the individual". Labour can be seen as an "activity of freedom", as self-realizing and indeed as "real freedom" when labour is not imposed from outside (*Grundrisse*). When Marx speaks of the "abolition" of the division of labour and labour itself in his writings prior to *The Critique of the Gotha Programme*, it is with reference to the different forms of labour which are forced upon the worker. This is the type of labour which has to be abolished. Labour, transformed into a "self (affirming) activity" becomes not only a means of life but also life's "prime need" in the higher phase of communism.

Wage labour

Marx exposes the true nature of capitalism in his attack on the Gotha Programme's limited conception of the wage. Marx makes two points. The first concerns the "iron law of wages". The Programme claims that wages will always remain at subsistence level. This was Marx's position in the 1840s, about which Engels claimed, "Marx had adopted it [from me] and Lassalle had borrowed it from us." Marx abandoned this position. Instead, Marx emphasised in *Capital* that the needs of the labourer were relative, and included "a moral and historical element". Similarly, in the unpublished *Resultate* Marx wrote:

The minimum wage of the slave appears as a constant magnitude, independent of his labour. For the free labourer this value of his labour power and the corresponding average wage are not predestined by the limits determined by his sheer physical needs, independently of his own labour. It is here like the value of all commodities, a more or less constant average for the class; but it does not exist in this immediate reality for the individual labourer whose wage may stay above or below this minimum.

Marx has no subsistence theory of wages, but he does speak of the "absolute impoverishment" of the labourers under capitalism. Wage labour signifies the "absolute poverty" of the labourer. In *The Critique of the Gotha Programme* Marx says "labour power [is]... absolute poverty not as penury but as total exclusion from the objective wealth".

The second point that Marx makes on the wage clearly shows his fundamental difference with bourgeois political economy.

Marx argues that the wage is not what it appears to be, the value or price of labour. It is a masked form of the value or price of labour power. "Thereby," writes Marx,

the whole hitherto existing bourgeois conception of wage as well as the criticism directed against it was once and for all thrown overboard and it was clearly shown that the wage labourer is permitted to work for his living, that is to live in so far as he works gratis a certain time for the capitalist; that the whole capitalist system of production revolves around the prolongation of this unpaid labour through the extension of the working day or through the development of productivity, intensity of labour etc. and that the system of wage labour is a system of slavery and, indeed, a slavery which becomes more severe to the same extent as the social productive powers develop, whether the labourer receives a higher or a lower wage.

Marx restates here what he had written in *Capital*, Volume I ("On the transformation of value, the price of labour power into wages"). There he had shown the distinction between the value and price of labour power. He added there that it had taken a long time for the world history to decipher the secret of wage, which was Marx's own achievement. This is why he is so angry that the Gotha Programme backslides from his result: "And after this understanding has gained more and more ground in our party, some return to Lassalle's dogma although they must have known that Lassalle *did not know* what wages were". Wages are not the same as remuneration! Roman army soldiers were given regular money payments and additional benefits, such as salt (hence salary.) They did not earn a wage as they did not work for capital. They were not wage workers for capital. Neither is a partner in a contemporary solicitors' firm who receives a salary.

The wage labourer is permitted to work for his living... in so far as he works gratis a certain time for the capitalist.

Capital and wages are mirror concepts. Of course, in advanced capitalism the factory is the form of social organisation that has become normative. Hospitals and schools are run just as though they were factories. The pay arrangement of the factory, wages, has become normative, too, hiding the real nature of wage labour. Above all, commodity producing wage labour is abstract social labour:

individual labour must present itself as *abstract, general social labour* only through its alienation. ⁽⁶⁾

In *The Critique of the Gotha Programme*, Marx demands the end of the state itself along with the classes at the end of the "revolutionary transformation period". In *The Civil War in France*, Marx argued:

[The] Commune, which breaks with the modern state power, has been mistaken for a reproduction of the medieval Communes; [it] has been mistaken for an attempt

to break up into the federation of small states; the antagonism of the Commune against the state power has been mistaken for an exaggerated form of the ancient struggle against over-centralization.

Its true secret was this: It was essentially a working class government, the product of the struggle of the producing against the appropriating class, the political form at last discovered under which to work out the economical emancipation of labour... The political rule of the producer cannot co-exist with the perpetuation of his social slavery. The Commune was therefore to serve as a lever for uprooting the economical foundation upon which rests the existence of classes, and therefore of class rule. With labour emancipated, every man becomes a working man, and productive labour ceases to be a class attribute.

... the Commune intended to abolish that class property which makes the labour of the many the wealth of the few. It aimed at the expropriation of the expropriators. It wanted to make individual property a truth by transforming the means of production, land, and capital, now chiefly the means of enslaving and exploiting labour, into mere instruments of free and associated labour. But this is communism, "impossible" communism! (7)

This might have been the beginning of the new society. This was the possibility of a way forward, a practical alternative to bourgeois rule. That alternative was direct government by workers themselves through a system of councils composed of directly elected and recallable delegates.

Of course, it was not as the Commune crashed to a bloody defeat at the hands of the French state. But Marx could see that, whatever "bourgeois right" remains in the sphere of distribution, it did not require a state to enforce it. Marx envisaged society itself distributing not only the labour tokens among its members, but also the total social labour time among the branches of production. That became his vision because that is what he saw beginning in Paris. The point is, what is capitalism? It is built on the separation of individuals from society's control. They can then dominate it by seizing the means of production, thus creating the class of workers. Whether the individual owners are called Microsoft, Citibank, LandSecurities or the British Government, they are there to seize the social surplus (alienated labour).

Marx's communism is often misunderstood. Even Korsch wrote:

Marx here fundamentally clarifies the real theoretical and practical relationship between the present and future 'society' and the (present and future) 'State'. (8)

The only way forward is the abolition of the key institutions of capitalist society: the state (to be replaced by democratic workers bodies) and wage labour and capital (by co-operative and socially directed labour).

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(1) Paresh Chattopadhyay: [A Manifesto of Emancipation: Marx's 'Marginal Notes' 125 Years Later](#) .

(2) Scott Meikle: [Was Marx an Economist?](#) .

(3) *Collected Works*, Volume 3, pp271-2, 273, 274-5, 278, 279, 279-80.

(4) Clarke, S. (1991): *Marx, Marginalism and Modern Sociology: From Adam Smith to Max Weber*, London: Palgrave Macmillan.

(5) 1962a: 198-99.

(6) K Marx, *Theories of Surplus Value*, Volume 2, London 1969, p504.

(7) marxists.org .

(8) Karl Korsch: *Marxism and Philosophy*, marxists.org |