Marx and Hobbes on Social Division, Historical Change, and the State

Karl Marx and Thomas Hobbes, writing two hundred years apart, appear to have very different views of social division and the state. In this paper, however, I argue that Marx and Hobbes actually complement each other in surprising ways. I first discuss Marx, then Hobbes. I conclude by considering what each might have seen, had he been able to write in the hand of the other.

What is the relationship between social division and historical change for Marx? Specifically, how do social divisions explain the emergence and role of the state? But to put the question this way where Marx is concerned in skirting the real issue. Social divisions are not the root cause of historical change for Marx; they are not the bottom turtle, so to speak. Like the state, philosophy, custom, and everything else, social divisions are part of a superstructure built atop "the mode of production of material life," or "relations of production" (Marx 1978, 3). By "relations of production," Marx means something like the relationship between the various parties—workers, capitalists, consumers—to the production of goods that humans need to live, and to live pleasantly. Who produces goods? Who benefits most from this production? These are the critical questions for Marx. So the first real question for this part of the paper becomes: how do the relations of production generate social divisions?

The relations of production, according to Marx, can best be understood in terms of the alienation of the labor of human beings. Indeed, the alienation of labor is perhaps the most fundamental phenomenon in Marxist thought, the start of all things; even "private property" is the "product, the result, of alienated labor" (Marx 1978, 79). Human beings are essentially *producers* of things: deliberately and consciously to produce is an imperative of the human spirit. Humans must see their essence, will and thought, objectified in nature, or else they are no better

than animals, for "free, conscious activity is man's species character" (Marx 1978, 76). A person becomes *alienated* from her labor when her products no longer belong to her—when in fact she finds her products to be a "torment," rather than a "delight" (Marx 1978, 78). Private property is the name given to a product, when it no longer belongs to the one who produced it.

The alienation of labor, and the *division of labor* method of capitalist production that it makes possible, has the important effect of dividing society into two main groups, or classes. These two classes, roughly speaking, are the "haves" and "have nots"—those who "own" things which they did not labor to produce, and those who labor to produce things which they do not get to keep. Different historical stages in "the mode of production of material life" have given these warring groups different names: "freeman and slave, patrician and plebian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed" (Marx 1978, 473-4). The war between these groups has waxed and waned, owing to various historical circumstances. But in Marx's time, the antagonism has strengthened and become unmistakable; as he writes, "society as a whole is more and more splitting up into two great hostile camps, into two great classes directly facing each other: Bourgeoisie and Proletariat" (Marx 1978, 474). Why did Marx think that the war between classes had come to the surface in this way?

In order to understand why this antagonism of bourgeoisie and proletariat has grown so intense—and the inequality between the classes so immense—we must say something of Marx's theory of surplus value. Surplus value, or profit, is the difference between the price of a product and the cost required to produce it. The cost required to produce a product can be divided into two parts: capital proper (the means of production), and labor (which is a part of capital, strictly speaking, but the factory worker is normally—if not analytically correctly—thought of as different from the factory in which he works).

Given this definition of surplus value, there are two main ways for a capitalist to increase her profits. The first is to increase the price she charges for a product, and the second is to reduce the cost of producing that product in the first place. Free markets make it difficult for the capitalist unilaterally to increase what she might charge for a product. So the method of choice for increasing surplus value, and therefore profits, is typically the latter—to reduce the cost of production. In capitalism, production cost can easily be reduced by squeezing extra productivity out of the worker, without paying him higher wages. (Marx also calls this increasing the "use-value" of a product, while keeping its "exchange value" constant.) As a final step, the capitalist will normally plow a portion of her profits back into capital—by building more factories, for instance, or speeding up delivery of her product. If she can help it, she will certainly not increase the wages of her workers, as this will diminish future surplus value. Marx (1978, 419) writes: "Capitalist production is not merely the production of commodities … That laborer alone is productive, who produces surplus value for the capitalist, and thus works for the self-expansion of capital."[1]

The fearsome logic of surplus value leads the capitalist to pay his workers ever less, for doing ever more. Such were the "relations of production" as Marx saw them during his lifetime. And the 19th century state, for Marx, was nothing more than an edifice resting on top of these relations—a thinly concealed tool of the of the bourgeoisie for keeping the wheels of capitalism well greased. But in fact the bourgeois state, for Marx, is simply one example of a general phenomenon: the dominant class, the class in charge of the means of production, will always control the state. (Indeed, the dominant class will replicate itself and its values everywhere that it can.) The bourgeois state exists to serve the material interests of the bourgeoisie, just as the

[1] Still more diabolically, as productivity increases, exchange-value tends to *decrease*, as goods flood the market. But of course, this only increases pressure on the capitalist to squeeze his workers for more productivity, and to pay them less for it.

feudal states of the Middle Ages existed to serve the interests of the feudal lords. Aspects of the bourgeois state will include a reckless embrace of the liberation of capital, and an inveterate antipathy toward regulating business. And all this, of course, simply hastens the downfall of the bourgeoisie, by creating a proletariat of poorly paid workers, and forcing this seething mass to recognize itself as a class with interests distinct from those of its governors.

Such is, in brief, the relationship of labor, social divisions, historical change, and the state, according to Marx. In a moment, I will say something about Hobbes' apparently very different view of things. But first, it is important to see that for Marx, the alienation of labor, despite its divisive effects on society, is not *evil.* In fact, the alienation of labor and all its children are completely necessary to his Hegelian dialectic of history. Capitalism makes possible technologically advanced means of production and *industry.* Industry—once safely in the hands of the dictatorship of the proletariat—makes possible the emancipation of humanity from never-ending, backbreaking labor. And capitalism, by creating a critical mass of urban workers, lays the groundwork for the revolution of the proletariat. There is an Hegelian dialectic here: the ability and the *need* of man to objectify his essence, his thought, in the objects of his labor, ultimately gives rise to the alienation of his labor and to capitalism. But together, the producing proletariat and capitalism make possible communism, the *aufhebung* of all. "Communism is the riddle of history solved, and it knows itself to be this solution" (Marx 1978, 84).

So what of Hobbes? And what of Marx and Hobbes together? Do they have anything to say to each other? For Hobbes, Marxist social divisions along class lines cannot exist before the state, because human society before the state is entirely atomistic. There are no groups, and indeed there is no property or time for complicated feats of labor, either. The world that Hobbes describes is not just pre-social; it is defiantly a-social. All humans are effectively equal, and in

any case, individuals can momentarily team up to defeat a stronger foe. Moreover, even people who desire peace have no choice to but to strike pre-emptively at each other, for fear that their neighbors might be the sort who take "pleasure in contemplating their own power in the acts of conquest" (Hobbes 1996, 88) Between human beings exist no natural bonds, and certainly no social bonds, strong enough to hold up in the brutally insecure world that Hobbes describes. Life, as he says, is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutal, and short." So for Hobbes, the role of the state is simply to arbitrate disputes between citizens, and of course to dispense punishment. New, truly *social* divisions may form, but, as long as the state retains absolute power, the possibility of class-based antagonism does not concern Hobbes.

In many ways Hobbes' world before the state seems utterly different from human society as Marx describes it.[2] Upon closer examination, however, Marx and Hobbes' theories of human society appear, not in opposition to one another, but in fact complimentary. After all, at least in the materials we read for class, Marx does not appear to offer a comprehensive theory simply of the transition period *between* the state of the bourgeoisie and the state of the proletariat. Rather, he appears to assume that, once bourgeois states have been overthrown by workers, the latter will be able to set up their own states without the occurrence of new problems—that is, problems unassociated with class warfare. But let us stretch our minds a bit, and consider what *really* might happen in the lacuna between bourgeois and proletarian states—in the time of uncertainty when one group has been ousted from power, and the other is waiting to take its place?

In fact, history teaches us that this transitional period can be quite messy. Struggle gives groups unity; in contemporary times, think of the GOP "Contract with America," or Ukraine's

[2] Nor would Marx agree with a reading of Hobbes' state of nature as a true-to-life portrayal of primitive human society. In the *Manuscripts* of 1844 (1978, 71), he fires a shot across Hobbes' bow, in that philosophers should not "go back to a fictitious primordial condition … [this trick] assumes in the form of fact, of an event, what he is supposed to deduce." In other words, Hobbes' humans, for Marx, behave like capitalists without a minimal state to keep them from devouring each other, and not like truly pre-state individuals.

Orange Revolution. It is when groups win that they tend to fall apart—often into Hobbesian, atomistic, power-hungry individuals or factions. This post-partum regression, indeed, is something that a dialectical theory of history—such as Marx, via Hegel, certainly holds—should have no trouble predicting. For if every thesis produces its antithesis, then how should the antithesis hold itself together, once its counterpart, its mirror image, has gone? How should the proletariat maintain its unified identity, once the bourgeoisie, its eternal enemy, has been vanquished? Perhaps what tends to happen in this lacuna, this transition time, is actually much closer to Hobbes than Marx might like to admit: in the absence of an enemy to compel unity, even proletarian individuals may start scrapping for power for themselves.

Putting Marx and Hobbes together, then, we may have a political/social theory that is greater than the sum of its parts. Marx has a theory of social division during a stable regime: labor alienation gives rise to conditions on which perch the capitalist state. But Marx lacks a real theory of how social division manifests itself in the *interregnum*—a notable oversight, given his Hegelian-dialectical view of history. Hobbes, on the other hand, has a theory of social division—atomistic society—during the interregnum: in the absence of legitimate authority, it is a war of all against all. But Hobbes lacks a real theory of how social division might wrinkle the royal robes of a bourgeois *leviathan*. The focus and lacunae of both thinkers make sense, given the contexts in which they were writing. Marx had the states of industrial Europe on his mind. Hobbes was worried about the power vacuum during the English Civil War. Neither could have foreseen the consequences of what they missed: states brought down by revolution, revolutions wrecked by greed.

References

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