Marx's Critique as Both Methodology and Source of Prescription for Action

While Marx is perhaps best known today for his methodology of historical-materialism, which argues that the mode of production in each historical epoch determines the social and cultural forms of the society under question, this is not the only method he employs in his writings. Rejecting the prevailing positivism of his time, Marx instead employed anti-positivist method of critique, which asserts that theorists cannot trust sensory perception and instead must pierce those illusions to find the truth beneath them. Generally, critique as a method avers that what we see is probably not how things actually are and that we must dig beneath the "self-evident" to find true reality. Marx's method is intertwined with his prescriptions for collective action, for only when we know the real causes our economic and political situations can effective ways of ending oppression and inequality be found. As he asserts in his eleventh thesis on Feuerbach, "The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point is to *change* it" (italics in original, "Theses" 145).

His method of critique is best developed in his final work *Capital*, where he argues that the divide between appearance and reality is analogous to the divide between the realms of exchange and production and thus we must change the relations of production and not just the relations of exchange to create a just society. He develops this idea through the concept of commodity fetishism, which refers to the way in which the exchange on commodities on the market focuses our attention on the "money-form of the world of commodities" and conceals "the social character of private labor, and the social relations between the individual producers" (*Capital* 324). This mystification is what allows liberal political economists such as John Locke and Adam Smith to ignore the relations of exploitation inherent in both private property and the production processes and instead characterize humans as free laborers whose ability to dispose of

their labor as they wishes is the apotheosis of a rational and just society. In piercing this particular illusion, Marx can thus suggest that man's labor power should be used to make his and society's life better rather than enrich the parasitic capitalists.

Complementing Marx's critique of capital are the various other critiques he makes in his corpus, all of which attempt to overturn the "common sense" assumptions of classical political economy and reveal how man's emancipation will come only through a refiguring of social and productive relations based on the true knowledge derived from said critiques. These critiques range from the challenge to the efficacy of political freedom in "The Jewish Question" to the attack on private property in the *1844 Manuscripts* to the *Communist Manifesto's* challenge to bourgeois notions of freedom. Despite the different topics under consideration in each instance and the lesser attention of Marx in each of these texts to detailing his method of critique, they all employ the same general method to show how freedom will not come by following the dictates of classical political economy.

"The Jewish Question" employs Marx's method of critique in the most submerged way, using his criticisms of the Jewish quest for political liberty to show how such efforts ignore the need for human emancipation more generally. The divide between appearance and reality is figured in this text as the difference between the particularism of the desire for political freedom within extant civil society and "universal human emancipation" (30). Marx condemns the Jewish quest for political freedoms as delusional, because it accepts at face-value bourgeois conceptions of liberty that permit "every man [to be] equally regarded as a self-sufficient monad" (42). Similarly, speaking again of bourgeois freedom, Marx avers, humanity "was not liberated from property; he received the liberty to own property" (45). In large part an attack on Hegel's belief that the "true community" could coexist with the egotistical realm of civil society,

Marx argues that "human emancipation will only be complete when the real, individual man has absorbed into himself the abstract citizen" and the egoistic man of civil society is supplanted by cooperation and the realization of our interdependence (46). Overall, Marx's effect in "The Jewish Question" is to reject the prevailing discourses in his time of the importance of political rights and show instead how the quest for these rights obscures the real battle against capitalism that needs fought.

In contrast to "The Jewish Question," we find in the *1844 Manuscripts* a more direct attack on the tenets of classical political economy, especially their unquestioned acceptance of private property as a fact of nature. Marx takes theorists such as Locke and Smith to task for assuming "in the form of fact … what he is supposed to deduce" and taking as natural law what are actually the product of historical material processes (70-71). The political economists' recourse to theories on the state of nature is regarded as "fictitious" (71). Marx avers instead that we must "proceed from an actual economic fact," stating more clearly than he did in "The Jewish Question" that the material and not the ideological is the appropriate level of investigation (71). By detailing the laborers' alienation from their selves, the products of their labor, their fellow humans, and their species-being under capitalism, Marx can argue "that though private property appears to be the source, the cause of alienated labor, it is really its consequence" (79). Thus, he shows that what Locke and Smith regard as benign facts of human existence, especially the laborer's commodification within the capitalist labor market, are instead deleterious social arrangements produced by man. Having revealed the falsehood of these accepted theories, he can then suggest that labor should be the end and not the means of man's existence. Abolishing this estrangement of man from his species-being as *Homo faber* will also be the abolition of private property. While he does not provide his readers with any specific courses of action, the

ideas developed in the *1844 Manuscripts* are still very important as a step in Marx's development of the nuanced critique eventually found in *Capital*. By rejecting theoretical speculation in favor investigations centered on humanity's sensuous activity and the economic, Marx takes another step in illuminating "reality" for his readers.

Illuminating reality and suggesting what should be done is the goal of *The Communist Manifesto* as well. Not only does he attack private property and bourgeois notions of freedom and independence as he did in his earlier works, but he also produces a reading of the bourgeois as the harbingers of revolution at odds with common understandings of them as solely the enemies of the laborers' emancipation. While many readers are surprised at his valorization of the bourgeois, situating his remarks about their essential importance to the coming of communism within his method of critique makes the praise he showers on the bourgeois far more comprehensible. Because Marx held to a type of modernization theory that assumed history as having a telos, he valued the bourgeois for their role in setting the stage for the working class's eventual revolution.

In his critique, the bourgeoisie are (rightfully) condemned for their maltreatment of the working class; this, however, is only the level of appearance. Investigating the bourgeoisie at the level of reality shows that "not only has the bourgeoisie forged the weapons that bring death to itself; it has also called into existence the men who are to wield those weapons – the modern working class – the proletarians" (478). The fight of the proletariat against the bourgeoisie requires a clear understanding of this paradoxical nature of the bourgeoisies' ascent so that "workers may straightway use, as so many weapons against the bourgeoisie, the social and political conditions that the bourgeoisie must necessarily introduce along with its supremacy" (500). Thus, unlike his critiques of private property or political freedoms, his critique of the

bourgeoisie is not intended to reveal its falsity generally but to provide a more nuanced understanding of their role in the development of communism.

In the end, the critiques Marx develops in his early works are not radically different from his efforts "to take leave for a time of this noisy sphere, where everything takes place on the surface and in view of all men, and follow them into the hidden abode of production" in *Capital* (343). From "The Jewish Question" to the *1844 Manuscripts* to the *Communist Manifesto* to *Capital*, Marx makes use of critique to not only disabuse the classical political economists of the self-evident nature of their claims but also to provide evidence for how best the working class and its sympathizers can go about overturning existing social relations. What varies in this works, however, is just how clearly he identifies the mode of production as the reality that needs changed. "The Jewish Question" speaks in vague generalities about the split between the material and the ideological while *Capital* spells out most clearly the need to focus on the realm of production. *The 1844 Manuscripts* begins the demystification of private property and bourgeois notions of freedom that find their fullest flowering in *Capital*. Similarly, *The Communist Manifesto* revisits Marx's attacks on private property and bourgeois freedom while producing an innovative reading of the value of the bourgeoisie for the development of communism. Ultimately, Marx's use of the method of critique in *Capital* is not wholly unique as we find both this method and its efficacy for illuminating the real sites of intervention in most of his works. *Capital* is only distinctive for the level of completeness and coherence his method of critique achieves.