

# KARL MARX

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## 6

# CLASSES

### 1 Social relations, property relations

A famous passage from Marx's *Critique of Political Economy* tells us:

In the social production of their life, human beings enter into determinate relations, necessary and independent of their will, production relations which correspond to a determinate stage of development of their productive powers. The totality of these production relations forms the economic structure of society, the real basis on which a juristic and political superstructure arises, and to which determinate forms of social consciousness correspond.<sup>1</sup>

We have seen that Marx distinguishes between the social division of labor or system of work relations, and the 'form of intercourse', the system of social or economic relations (such as those between capitalist and laborer, landlord and tenant, guild master and journeyman). In the above passage, it is evident that it is social or economic relations, constituting the 'economic structure of society' which he considers to be the 'real basis' of society, and which play the primary role in determining society's legal, political and ideological 'superstructure'. Thus although Marx holds that the productive forces and the system of direct work relations constitute the 'basis of social organization', it is the system of social relations which count in his theory as the 'economic basis' from which other social phenomena are to be understood.<sup>2</sup>

But what does Marx mean by 'production relations' in this connection? How does he conceive of the general sort of relationship of which lord/serf, and capitalist/wage-laborer are examples? It is obvious that for Marx production relations are bound up with the

relationship of human beings to land, tools and other conditions of production. Marx often suggests that production relations are closely associated with ownership or property. *The German Ideology*, for instance, says that 'the different stages of development of the division of labor are only so many different forms of property, i.e. each stage of the division of labor also determines the relations of individuals to one another in reference to the materials, instruments and products of labor.'<sup>3</sup> Here the point seems to be that work relations ('the division of labor') are the foundation of society's economic structure, and this structure is to be identified with the prevailing 'form of property'. Yet in the *Critique* Marx describes 'property relations' as 'the legal expression' of production relations, implying that property relations belong to the 'superstructure' erected on the 'real basis' of production relations.<sup>4</sup> Marxists usually follow the *Critique* at this point, distinguishing production relations from the property relations which 'express' them. But some critics either do not think Marx's analyses involve such a distinction, or else deny that the distinction is a tenable one. Ralf Dahrendorf insists that Marx's 'analyses are essentially based on the narrow, legal concept of property', and regards them as faulty for this reason. John Plamenatz, on the other hand, argues that it is futile to distinguish property relations from production relations in the way the *Critique* tries to do, since

it is quite impossible to define production relations except in terms of the claims which men make on one another and recognize – except in terms of admitted rights and obligations. Where there are such rights and obligations, there are accepted rules of conduct, rules which require and forbid and are supported by sanctions, there are, in the broad sense of the word, laws.<sup>5</sup>

First, let us be clear that Dahrendorf is dead wrong. We saw in Chapter 3 that 'appropriation' for Marx is more basic than any system of property rights, which are only the 'juristic form' which may be assumed by social production relations. Marx distinguishes often enough between 'legal property' (or 'property *de jure*') and 'actual property' (or 'property *de facto*') to make it evident to anyone familiar with his writings that he does not hold the position Dahrendorf attributes to him. The distinction is especially clear in the following passage from *Capital*:

Landed property presupposes the monopoly of certain persons over determinate portions of the earth, as exclusive spheres of their private will to the exclusion of all others . . . [But] nothing is settled by the juristic power of these persons to use and misuse portions of the terrestrial globe. For the use of this power depends wholly on economic conditions, which are independent of their will.<sup>6</sup>

Here it is evident that Marx treats landed property as amounting to the effective control over land held by some persons to the exclusion of others. He regards this control as a function of 'economic conditions', of the social relations in which the owners stand to other people and to the land as a factor in production. Legal ownership, with its attendant 'juristic powers' is distinct from property, and derives its content from the social relations it expresses. For Marx, social relations are not to be understood in terms of property relations (much less in terms of legal ownership, or property rights). On the contrary (legal or moral) property relations are to be understood in terms of social ones: 'To define bourgeois property is only to provide an exposition all the social relations of bourgeois production.' Conversely, 'every social relation can be presented as an example of the property relation.'<sup>7</sup>

But Plamenatz's worry remains. *Can* Marx conceive social relations independently of the legal or juridical ones which are supposed to express them? Or must Marx define social relations in terms of 'rights and obligations', in terms of 'laws, in the broad sense of the word'?

Marx does not spell out clearly his key notion of 'social production relations'. Nor does he 'define' bourgeois property (or any other sort) in the manner suggested by the remarks just quoted. But I think the general nature of his theory indicates how Marx would respond to Plamenatz's criticism. 'Society', Marx says, 'consists not of individuals but expresses the sum of relations in which these individuals stand to one another.'<sup>8</sup> Society is a structure, made up of roles or positions which differ determinately in the kind and degree of control their occupants have over the process of social production, the kinds of claims they have on social labor or its fruits, and the kinds of claims other members of society have on them.<sup>9</sup> We can illustrate this by Engels's description of the difference between serfs and proletarians:

The serf has the use of a piece of land, that is, of an instrument of production, in return for handing over a greater or lesser

portion of the yield. The proletarian works with instruments of production which belong to someone else who, in return for his labor, hands over to him a portion, determined by competition, of the products. In the case of the serf, the share of the laborer is determined by his own labor, that is, by himself. In the case of the proletarian it is determined by competition.<sup>10</sup>

Serfs and proletarians have similar roles in production, in that both use means of production which are owned by (that is, under the effective social control of) someone else, someone who occupies a different role in the social system. For this reason, both serf and proletarian are in a position to appropriate only a certain portion of what they produce. The two roles are distinguished by the *form* taken by their occupants' shares of the product, and the *manner* in which the amount of that share is determined.

Marx obviously thinks that a given system of social roles or positions is relatively stable over time, and definable independently of the particular individuals who happen to occupy them, or the accidental manner in which these individuals may choose to exercise the powers pertaining to their roles. But he also seems to believe that the system of social relations is definable in abstraction from the kinds of motives and sanctions which insure that the occupants of social roles will meet the requirements imposed on them by the system. We might think, for instance, that a landlord can charge his tenant rent *because* he owns the land the tenant is using. His ownership of the land and the rights and moral or legal sanctions by which we might define this ownership *explains* why he has the claim on the tenant he does, and why the tenant is required to comply with this claim. Probably it is this picture which motivates Plamenatz's idea that Marx cannot define social or economic relations without referring to rights, obligations and (in the broad sense) laws.

According to Marx, however, the truth is just the reverse. 'Ground rent is only the form in which property in land is economically realized, turned into value.'<sup>11</sup> Landed property *consists* (at least partly) in the fact that one person (the proprietor or landlord) can charge another for using it. If we ask why the landlord or tenant stand in such a relation, Marx's answer will be an account of how the landlord/tenant relation fits into the economic structure of society, and how that structure serves to facilitate the employment of society's productive powers. Marx regards the explanation of rent in terms of property

rights and sanctions as superficial, since it does not make intelligible why the sanctions should exist, why anyone should be in a position to claim the rights they enforce. Even naked force, if it is to play any determinate role in the social system, must conform itself to the economic conditions under which it is exercised: 'The form of community assumed by settling conquerors must correspond to the stage of development of the productive powers they find, or else . . . alter in accordance with the productive powers.'<sup>12</sup>

On the other hand, if we treat social relations as distinct from moral, legal or other sanctions, and regard the latter as 'created in the first place by production relations', we can explain such things as property rights and the moral ideologies and legal mechanisms which sanction them.<sup>13</sup> For we can view these rights and sanctions as ways in which a society makes efficient use of its productive powers. It does not matter to the *definition* of the social relation between landlord and tenant whether the tenant's compliance with the landlord's claim on rent is elicited by appealing to the motive of duty or must be compelled at the point of a gun. Of course, it is a fact that some conceivable ways of securing the tenant's compliance will not be employed because they are ineffective, unreliable or unnecessarily costly. Such facts help us to explain the special nature of the legal and moral institutions which belong to a society, by showing their relative effectiveness as sanctions for the particular system of social relations. Recall Marx's theory holds that a society will tend to adopt the system of social relations which best facilitates the employment and development of its productive powers. By the same token, the theory holds that a society will tend to adopt the political institutions, legal forms and moral or religious ideologies which most effectively sanction its system of social relations. This is just what Marx means when he calls (legal) property relations the 'legal expression' of social relations of production, and when he speaks of the system of production relations as the 'economic basis' of a juridical, political and ideological 'superstructure'.

The Marxian reply to Plamenatz should now be plain. The definitions of social relations cannot dispense with 'obligations, rights and laws in the broad sense' if these terms refer to the actual requirements and claims which distinguish and relate the roles constituting a given society. But Marx would consider 'obligations' and 'rights' in this sense as part of the 'economic basis' of society, and not as part of its 'superstructure'. On the other hand, the definitions of social roles and relations must not mention rights, obligations and laws insofar as the latter imply specific motives or sanctions through which the

claims and requirements of social roles become effective. They *can* avoid mentioning them, because the system of claims and requirements which define social relations is logically independent of the particular sanctions which give these claims and requirements their force. And they *must* avoid mentioning them if the legal forms are to be explained on the basis of the social relations they sanction.

Although the criticisms of Marx advanced by Dahrendorf and Plamenatz are mistaken, they do point to some serious unclarities in Marx's exposition of historical materialism. Just as Marx does not always distinguish clearly between social production relations and material work relations, so he does not always distinguish clearly between social relations and property relations, understood in terms of moral or legal rights. Plamenatz is correct when he says that 'except when they are defining them, Marx and Engels nearly always speak of relations of production as if they were the same as property relations'.<sup>14</sup> And Dahrendorf's misinterpretation of Marx is rendered plausible by the fact that Marx never actually defines bourgeois property relations in terms of social relations of bourgeois production. Instead, Marx nearly always relies for his notion of bourgeois social relations on a common conception of bourgeois property relations which he could take for granted. This does not show that his theory itself is confused or untenable, but it does indicate how much more would need to be done to state it in a really rigorous manner.

## 2 History and social classes

Marx's theory holds that social relations are revolutionized when they no longer correspond to society's productive forces, or when they become fetters on the development of these forces. Yet it also holds that history is made by human beings themselves. Productive forces do not make revolutions; people make revolutions when historical circumstances provide them with the motives and opportunities for doing so.

Marx's theory holds that history is made by human individuals, acting from a wide variety of different conscious motives. But it also holds that history is not to be understood in terms of the motives and acts of particular individuals. Perhaps the best way to get at the Marxian view here is to look at a passage from Engels' *Ludwig Feuerbach*.

Human beings make their history, however it may turn out, in that each pursues his own consciously willed ends, and his-