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### Marxist Locke<sup>1</sup>

Karl Marx and John Locke both place a great deal of importance in both labour and property in discussing their political philosophies. At first glance, the two thinkers seem to possess completely different ideas on property, its importance, and the form of society which should grow from it. The disparity in their beliefs is evident, but they share a similar approach to labour and acceptable conditions while constructing philosophies which inherently attack each other. Locke's suggestion that capitalism is a natural political progression can only be accomplished when the worker himself becomes a commodity to be traded, a transformation which Marx identifies as a major problem with capitalism. In looking at capitalism through a Marxist lens, we can see that Locke may find substantial problems with it.

At the outset of Locke's fifth chapter in the Second Treatise of Government, he sets the stage for property acquisition. "God, who hath given the world to men in common, hath also given them reason to make use of it to the best advantage of life, and convenience" (Locke 18). Locke implies that God's creation of the world ultimately serves men, for their property will come of it, and with it, the best advantages of life. As the fruits of the world ripen, men find themselves picking it off the trees and placing it under their command as part of their property. One cannot underestimate the importance of property for Locke. It is the single most important aspect of human relation. Disputes over property directly proceed to Locke's state of war, an important term which I will return to later. In Locke's mind, property plays a key role in the creation of civil society. "The only way whereby any

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<sup>1</sup> It may not be the oxy-moron we suppose it to be.

one divests himself of his natural liberty, and puts on the *bonds of civil society* is by agreeing with other men to join and unite into a community for their comfortable, safe, and peaceable living one amongst another, in a secure enjoyment of their properties..." (Locke 52). I would say that while Locke discusses the necessity for the state to protect life, liberty, and the pursuit of property, the necessity for the state follows directly from property acquisition. According to Locke, the need for protection is spurred by the idea of property. The protection of one's health and one's freedoms directly relate to the property in his possession and the threat that other people may show him in desire for that property.

Labour itself also plays a large part in Locke's analysis of property and thus, the analysis of the state. What constitutes property for Locke? "Whatsoever then he removes out of the state that nature hath provided, and left it in, he hath mixed his *labour* with, and joined to it something that is his own, and thereby makes it his *property*" (Locke 19). Locke places a great deal of emphasis on the importance of labour, and the fact that its addition to goods constitutes property. He goes so far as to say that in analyzing "what in [products] is purely owing to *nature*, and what to *labour*, we shall find that in most of them ninety-nine hundredths are wholly to be put on the account of *labour*" (Locke 25). This intrinsic value in labour is something we shall see later in Marx, and it is a characteristic of the two thinkers which relates their concepts. In a broad sense, it would seem as though Locke endorses a massive acquisition of surplus property. This is not so, as he forms a provision later in the *Second Treatise*, stating that men may only acquire "as much as any one can make use of to any advantage of life before it spoils..." (Locke 20). Locke adamantly denies the rights of a man to possess more goods than he can use before they expire. Part of the right to property for Locke is the

ability to use that property, and when it cannot be used, it freely becomes part of the common share of property.

The concept of “spoiling,” however, does not apply to money, and so Locke forms a loophole wherein men may acquire more than they can use in an effort to augment their wealth. Locke’s “endorsement” of capitalism comes in paragraphs 47 and 48 of his *Second Treatise*:

“And thus came in the use of money, some lasting thing that men might keep without spoiling, and that by mutual consent men would take in exchange for the truly useful, but perishable supports of life. And as different degrees of industry were apt to give men possessions in different proportions, so this invention of money gave them the opportunity to enlarge them...” (Locke 28-29).

The introduction of money gives Locke a loophole in which people who had previously been unable to acquire more than they could use could now acquire as much as could be laboured upon in order to trade it for monetary compensation. Unlike most interpretations of Locke, I must disagree that this is a full endorsement of capitalism. Locke is still very much talking about an *individual* man and the property which he may possess. “...by a tacit and voluntary consent, [men] found out a way how *a man* [my italics] may fairly possess more land than he can use the product of...” (Locke 29). The identification of those steps which a *single person* may take in the acquisition of labour seems to contradict capitalism, especially the *capitalist* as defined by Marx. I know that this argument is vague at this point, but it will become clearer as I move on.

As important as labour has proven to be for Locke, it seems to carry even more weight for Marx. In a characterization similar to Locke, Marx says, “...the price of a commodity... is equal to its cost of production,” (Marx 479). That is, the labour put into creating a commodity determines its worth in the same sense that labour determines the value of a product for Locke. Just as labour provides ninety-nine percent of the value of some natural commodity for Locke, the degree to

which labour is employed on another commodity determines its value for Marx. Marx's problem is not with labour inherently, but with its alienation from workers. In the opinion of Marx, the trait that makes human beings different from other animals is their capacity to produce when it is not needed. When the labour of a human being focuses on a product, or a piece of property, that is not required to sustain life, that human being is practicing the very essence of being human, he is fulfilling his role as a "species-being." Marx's concern is the transition of labour itself into a commodity to be traded. "If the product of labour does not belong to the worker, if it confronts him as an alien power, this can only be because it belongs to some *other man than the worker*" (Marx 78). Now, Locke would say that when one man applies labour to an object, it becomes his property naturally. That is, "That *labour* put a distinction between them and common: that added something to them more than nature... and so they became his private right" (Locke 19). The application of Locke to Marx shows the definitive problem with capitalism in Marx's analysis. The proletariat workers implement their labour for products which do not become theirs and in so doing, they become alienated from their labour. In fact, their labour becomes the property of some other man, because the agency of that labour, the property, transfers to someone else. Marx finds a deep problem with capitalism.

Philosophically, Marx objects to capitalism because of the manner in which a worker is alienated from his labour. "The capitalist, it seems, therefore, buys their labour with money. [The workers] sell him their labour for money" (Marx 204). Marx's critique of capitalism goes on to discuss labour power and the way in which it has become a commodity. Marx interprets the necessity for the proletariat to work for the bourgeoisie as a degradation of their humanity philosophically.

Their labour is no longer precious to them, it is no longer identified with them, for it has been sold to the capitalists. Economically, Marx objects to capitalism because of exploitation of the worker. He describes vividly that the bourgeoisie “has left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous ‘cash payment’” (Marx 475). Marx claims that the bourgeoisie has “resolved personal worth into exchange value, and... set up that single, unconscionable freedom–Free Trade... for exploitation... it has substituted naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation” (Marx 475). In a market of competition which is created by capitalism, a worker is given lower and lower wages as the capitalist tries to make more profit. Thus, the worker is exploited by being paid less and less for his own work. The more profits that are made, the lower the wages go; the vicious cycle is perpetuated by competition.

The manner in which capitalism evolved, described by Marx, is in contradiction to the accumulation of wealth which Locke advocates in his *Second Treatise*. Locke's implication is the individual acquisition of property by a single man in order to improve his monetary gain. A farmer, say, is justified in acquiring more land than he can use in order to sell the excess crop and receive money. With the money, he is justified in purchasing more things which may help his cultivation, such as a tractor, animals, etc. In order to accept full-blown capitalism, one must accept labour as a commodity which can be traded, as Marx suggests. I don't believe that this is something Locke would be ready to accept.

Locke discussing the importance of the freedom to pursue property, and the ability to apply one's labour to that object which then becomes properly his. In the capitalist system, the labourer applies his work to something which does not become his. He becomes alienated, to use Marx's words, from that which he has

created, and alienated from the purpose of his labour. More importantly, the concept of capitalism and the bourgeoisie seems to contradict Locke's very justification for the inception of a civil society. "...He seeks out, and is willing to join in society with others, who are already united, or have a mind to unite, for the mutual preservation of their lives, liberties and estates, which I call by the general name property" (Locke 66). Using a Marxist lens to analyze this statement would imply that the unification of people in a society must avoid capitalism, for it does not mutually preserve all liberties and estates, but only those of the people who can secure the most capital. More consequentially for Locke, if one is to accept Marx's characterization of the exploitation of labour, the case can be made that the proletariat enter into a state of war with bourgeoisie in providing their labour as a commodity.

Since, for Locke, labour is the means to property, and property is the most important aspect of what it means to be human, the alienation of labour in Marx's sense would be the isolation of man from his property. This carries huge ramifications for Locke. If man cannot identify himself by property, he loses nearly everything which makes him whole. In the third chapter of the *Second Treatise*, that which regards the state of war, Locke seems to attribute the beginning of the state of war to force without right, of one man upon another. In a Marxian sense, the bourgeoisie is not simply stealing property from the proletariat, but their labour, the very means by which property should be acquired. In this sense, the proletariat is under the complete rule of the bourgeoisie. Locke says that "he who attempts to get another man into his absolute power, does thereby *put himself into a state of war* with him; it being to be understood as a declaration of a design upon his life..." (Locke 14). While the bourgeois capitalists do not directly threaten

the lives of the proletariat, in his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx argues that they absolve them of their very nature, that which makes him human:

“...the fact that labour is *external* to the worker, i.e., it does not belong to his essential being; that in his work, therefore, he does not affirm himself but denies himself, does not feel content but unhappy, does not develop freely his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind” (Marx 74).

Now, one rebuttal to my application of Locke's state of war to capitalism would claim that the workers offer their labour as a commodity to be traded and in so doing, absolve the capitalists from “force without right,” i.e. the use of labour as a commodity is *right*. However, Locke makes the argument that “every man has a *property* in his own *person*: this no body has any right to but himself” (Locke 19). Applying the aforementioned Marx quotes<sup>2</sup>, one can see how a man's property rights to himself, which inherently carry the ability to labour, are violated by capitalism. While it may seem problematic to evaluate Locke through a Marxist lens in order to criticize capitalism (for surely, isn't everything a critique of capitalism through a Marxist lens?!), I would argue that it may give some insight into what Locke truly meant by the accumulation of wealth. Locke places a great deal of importance on the property of the physical body and the inherent value in labour. If he were to accept even one of the claims set forth by Marx in arguing against capitalism, Locke would intuitively accept the concept that the bourgeoisie and proletariat are in an incessant state of war. His natural inclination would be to call for a revolution in the same way that Marx does.

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Since part of the worker's person (his labour, more specifically) is being removed from his control, he is being stripped of a part of his property. This is a necessary effect of capitalism.

Through the unification of claims by both Locke and Marx, one can make the interpretation that Locke may not endorse full-blown capitalism in the form of which it has evolved to this point in world history. Marx and Locke both try to find that aspect of life which is most important to man, and which must be preserved in order to perpetuate his identity as a species-being. For Marx, the identification of an human being is directly tied to labour, for Locke, it is directly tied to his pursuit of property. These two thinkers place a great deal of worth in the same concepts, though their philosophical focuses tend to settle on different issues. Were Locke to consider his own philosophy in the sense that Marx analyzed capitalism, he may have come to different conclusions about the accumulation of wealth.



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