

Marx's critique of classical political economy



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Classical political economy was a concept that dominated social thought within the nineteenth century; the development of such a period constituted a decisive stage within the attempt to understand the economic framework that essentially became relied upon for defining the basis of society.

However Marx considered that the basis of the political economy ignored the prevalent relationship between elements of human alienation and exploitation that he argued derived from the inequalities caused by the condition of the capitalist political economy. When considering this further, Marx therefore relied upon an essential critique of the political economy in light of not only the previously mentioned relationship but similarly numerous other influential dynamics within the economy, as a consequence Marx continued to establish his critique of the economic system throughout his works in an attempt to ascertain true communism as a positive expression for the basis of society.

The main concern when considering classical political economy is the regard of society as being a composition of various classes that functioned on the basis of economic purpose. Marx however recognised that in reality the theories surrounding classical political economy were unable to understand the significance of the economic purpose of the working class and the experienced struggle that consequently rooted itself within society. Marx therefore argued that the failure of classical political economy to separate human nature from the superficial construct of the economic class system possessed a dominant influence upon the ignorance of the proletarian class and the consequent focus upon the bourgeois class prevalent within society. Marx witnessed the inhumanity and irrationality surrounding human life and

criticised it profusely in that the accepted capitalist economic system prevalent at the time considered it to be a natural occurrence with the progression of the economic system. As a consequence, Marx posited a class struggle between the proletarian and bourgeois economic classes, a struggle inherent and therefore inevitable within the capitalist, industrial society. With the increasing development of capitalism, class struggles became generalised across the economic system, Marx's critique consequently deemed class struggle as originating in the process of production and he therefore continued to argue that the conflict prevalent derives from the class antagonism of labour power.

As a consequence of the class struggle the proletarian economic class were inevitably forced to sell their labour to achieve capital to survive and as a consequence Marx criticised that the capitalists had every intention of exploiting the labourers for maximum effectiveness within the production process, "Capital is dead labor, which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labor, and lives the more, the more labor it sucks." (Marx: 1990: 257). To theorise how the aforementioned exploitation became the routine within classical political economy Marx criticised how capitalism employed a standard, recognised framework by which the bourgeois minority monopolised the labouring majority in order to gain the most efficient means of production. When considering the previous criticisms of exploitation the influence upon human nature must also be recognised; it can be philosophised that Marx recognised that humans are fundamentally natural producers as he defined labour as "man's self-confirming essence" (Marx: 1833) and Marx therefore implemented a critique towards the evident

distortion capitalism roots within human nature. It could be argued that the evident exploitation alienates the labourer from not only the act of production but similarly distances them from the products of their labour and as a consequence it has been argued that the alienation present becomes a process in which humanity progressively transforms into a stranger in a world created by labour (Swingewood: 2000).

Furthermore, Marx continued to route his critique of the classical political economy within the establishment and understanding of the capitalist division of labour and its consequent exploitation and oppression of the proletarian economic class. Marx recognised that the division of labour within the economy succeeded in the efficient formation of profit and value and essentially agreed with Smith in that labour was the only real resource that constituted a productive economy yet his fundamental criticism was based upon the consequent exploitation of the labourer and their constant struggle within the economic system. Marx recognised within Smith's understanding of the political economy that he initially instigated an analysis of the capitalist mode of production. However, Marx continued to characterise that Smith in fact pays no concern to the operation of the inner foundations of the economic system and instead criticises Smith for merely recognising the immediate external and superficial extraction of the benefits resulting from the successful implementation of the capitalist mode of production. When considering Smith's perspective further it becomes immediately evident that he accepted the proletarian struggle deriving from the economic division of labour as inconsequential and therefore argued that the exploitation was in fact the most successful method of capitalist production, consequently it

could be argued that Smith degraded labourers to an abstract commodity within the production process as opposed to a living being. Furthermore, Marx criticised that Smith accepted that the desirability of the high productivity rate within his theory of the division of labour outweighed the evident exploitative costs, “ Political economy regards the proletarian like a horse, he must receive enough to enable him to work. It does not consider him, during the time when he is not working, as a human being” (Marx: 1969), the consequent exploitation of the value of the labourers contribution represented a qualitative increase in productivity within the production process and therefore an increase in profit for the bourgeois economic class regardless of the abhorrent conditions under which labourers are forced to work. It is therefore apparent as to Marx’s justification behind his critique; Marx argued that Smith’s dominantly capitalist perspective failed to initially recognise and therefore appreciate the standard of conditions that the proletarian labourers are forced to accept as adequate.

Within the prevalence of the capitalist mode of production it can be considered that another fundamental element concerning the political economy is the recognition of the influence that the division of labour possesses upon the economic system. As a consequence of this, Ricardo proposed the Labour Theory of Value in an attempt to further understand the influence of labour value upon capitalist production techniques. The aforementioned theory proposes that the recognised value of goods is directly proportional to the extent of labour required throughout production. However, it is argued that Marx criticised that Ricardo’s thesis was essentially incomplete when considering the capitalist political economy as it

disregards the exploitive nature of the income distribution between the bourgeois and the proletariat economic classes. Marx continued to criticise the capitalist mode of production as he connotes that the exchange value of goods was in fact deserved by the worker as opposed to the autocratic rule of the capitalist, however, as a consequence Marx proposed the concept of surplus value as a critique of the capitalist political economy. For Marx, the dominant increase in productivity resulted from the competitive and exploitive nature of the capitalist's strife to obtain the maximum surplus value, or profit, possible from goods; it could therefore be argued that the surplus value obtained derives from the essentially unpaid labour appropriated by the capitalists within political economy.

When considering the presentation of the aforementioned critique philosophised by Marx, his attempt to provide a solution for the criticisms of the political economy must also be examined. It could be argued that throughout his entire critique his desire to ascertain a sense of true communism within society evidently underpinned his justification behind his arguments. Marx essentially fought for the recognition of labour as an important factor within the capitalist production process; he proposed that through the implementation of true communism society could achieve and withhold a beneficial economic system " Communism deprives no man of the ability to appropriate the fruits of his labour. The only thing it deprives him of is the ability to enslave others by means of such appropriations." (Marx: 2002) Marx continued to portray how communism would in turn regard the importance of the whole of society as opposed to the bourgeois minority. He consequently urged for the removal of the inequalities he continually

criticised throughout the political economy and continued to justify such criticisms through arguing that the complete abolition of private property would equate to the removal of inequalities and eventually the elimination of the class struggle. Furthermore, it must be recognised that the political economy was premised upon the notion of private property and material ownership and when considering this further Marx argued that private property wasn't an explanation captured within the essence of human nature but rather a superficially constructed consequence of the political economies regard for the stratification of the economic class system. Ultimately, Marx argued for the free expression of everyone within society and the consequent desirability that rooted itself within his argument for communism as it was reliant upon the recognition of human freedom within the production process.

In conclusion it is evident that the basis for Marx's critique of political economy is reliant upon the implications of the negative relationship established between the abstract regard of labour and the consequent human alienation present within the capitalist economic structure. Such critique continued through to his perspective of Smith and Ricardo and the apparent recognition Marx felt toward the evident disregard for the proletarian economic class. Ultimately it has been argued that Marx's desire for true communism, particularly when concerning the freedom of human nature, has established that the dominant criticism throughout the evaluation of classical political economy is the concept of the exploitive nature of the capitalist mode of production and the implications for

inequalities that are established within society as a consequence of such a struggle.