

Private Property and Labor: Seed of a New Worldview — A Textual Interpretation based on the “Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844”

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Abstract: In the “Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844,” young Marx addressed a novel issue: whereas traditional political economists regarded private property as an object opposed to the subject, adopting a metaphysical mode of thinking characterized by subject-object opposition, Adam Smith, referred to by Engels as the “Luther” of political economy, for the first time connected private property with the subject, thereby breaking away from its previous characterization as an “objective, external” dimension, implying signs of transcending Feuerbach. However, although Adam Smith and other political economists placed private property within human nature, due to their class limitations, they effectively treated profit-seeking activities as human nature, which is essentially a negation of humanity and diverges from human essence on the level of value. Marx, in critiquing their inherited ideas, not only links labor with private property but also understands labor as genuine, a return to “the essence of humanity,” as free labor rather than alienated labor, thereby laying the groundwork for the establishment of a scientific understanding of practice.

Keywords: Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, Private Property, Labor, New Worldview

1. Introduction

In the year preceding the composition of the “Theses on Feuerbach,” which contains the germ of a new worldview, Marx was writing the “Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844.” In the preface, he states: “The criticism of political economy, as well as the entire criticism of empiricism, relies entirely on Feuerbach’s discoveries to lay down its true foundation. It is only from Feuerbach onwards that the empirical, humanitarian, and naturalistic criticisms have begun” [1]. Prior to this, Marx believed that Feuerbach had completed the critique of Hegel by replacing idealism with materialism. However, he later discovered that Feuerbach’s materialism was not entirely thorough; it was a “half-baked materialism” that persisted in a natural sense but negated it in terms of social historical perspective, referred to later in the theses as “objective, sensuous” materialism. Young Marx, here, positioned himself on the materialist side opposed to Hegel’s idealism while also beginning to recognize the shortcomings of this materialism, which can be glimpsed from the discussion of “private property and labor.” In this section of argumentation, there is not only a transformation of the essence of private property from an external object to the subject of labor but also the overcoming of the value position in political economy, which deviates from the pursuit of “private property” as the essence of humanity. It ultimately points out that the return to human essence must be achieved by rejecting private property, laying the foundation for the establishment of a new worldview from the perspectives of philosophy, political economy, and scientific socialism. If the “Theses” represent the germ of a scientific practice perspective, then the arguments in the “Manuscripts” can be seen as sowing the seeds of a scientific practice perspective.

2. Philosophical and Political Economic Perspectives: From External Object to Subject Essence

The characteristic of political economy is to regard private property as a self-evident premise, without examining its origins but rather treating it as a known, supra-historical existence. So, is private property something that has always existed, or is it a historical existence? From the perspective of naive materialism, considering objects as external to the subject, it is impossible to understand the historicity of things. Just as Feuerbach materially observed the natural world, his theory of immediate reflection led him to perceive an external, objective “nature as it is,” rather than a “humanized nature” connected to the subject, thus losing the dimension of history. However, if we transcend this naive materialism and regard objective things as connected to the subject, we can examine the historical aspect of things. For instance, our history begins with humans actively transforming the natural world through practice, which marks the starting point of primitive human society. Similarly, examining private property follows the same logic. If we merely examine it from the perspective of naive materialism, viewing objects as separate from the subject, we cannot understand its historicity. However, if we consider it as an object connected to the subject, we can investigate its historical origins.

2.1. Mercantilism

Mercantilism can be divided into early and late stages, with mercantilism primarily characterized by bullionism in its early phase and industrialism in its later phase. Early mercantilism emerged during the period of feudal disintegration and capitalist development in Western Europe. This ideology reflected the pursuit of gold and silver by the emerging bourgeoisie, who, guided by this ideology, engaged in foreign trade or overseas colonization to obtain and plunder gold and silver in an attempt to accumulate wealth. Mercantilism equated wealth with gold and silver, adopting a position of naive materialism, examining private property from an objective and external perspective. As Marx pointed out, “The mercantile system knows only that gold and silver constitute wealth. The objects of wealth, the materials of wealth, immediately acquire the highest universal significance within the natural boundaries, for they are still directly objective wealth in nature” [1].

This ideological system primarily originated in regions belonging to maritime civilizations where land was scarce, and the main activity was trade. People thus concluded from experience that wealth, namely currency, originated in the realm of circulation. They further accumulated this wealth through methods such as foreign trade by acquiring gold and silver from other countries and amassing it. During the early phase of bullionism, “the rule of the commercial monetary bourgeoisie became a fetishistic phenomenon, a rule of money... Money became something everyone needed, for money in their hands was capital, capable of producing new money” [2]. This fetishistic viewpoint regarded gold and silver as the origin and supreme deity of wealth, but it failed to recognize that gold and silver were not directly wealth but rather acquired the prestige of a deity due to their attribute as a means of exchange for all other commodities. However, this theory cannot be blamed, as it was determined by the early stage of capitalism [2]. As commodity production evolved from small to large scale, the policy of “selling more and buying less” to accumulate currency control became incompatible with the new economic conditions. Consequently, attitudes towards gold and silver shifted from regarding them directly as capital to recognizing that they could become capital only in motion. The outdated theory of monetary balance, where bullionism advocated “selling more and buying less” and retaining currency domestically, was replaced by the doctrine of industrialism, which advocated “exporting more than importing” to achieve a trade balance through the movement of export trade, marking the maturity of mercantilism. However, overall, mercantilism, from an experiential perspective, understood wealth as gold and silver, objects in the realm of circulation.

2.2. Physiocracy

Physiocracy originated in France, a country known for its agriculture. Physiocrats believed that wealth did not arise from circulation; the currency pursued by mercantilism did not directly provide for necessities. Hence, currency was merely a means of circulation, and its value outside circulation was negligible. This perspective was influenced by France’s historical background, where the wealth accumulated by the industrial and commercial bourgeoisie was consumed by the upper class of nobles and clergy. People did not recognize the value of accumulated monetary wealth. Additionally, the wealth of both sectors relied on the exploitation of peasants under heavy taxation, leading to near bankruptcy. Consequently, economists demanded attention to agriculture, placing it above industry and commerce. This shift “redirected economic thought onto a new track, shifting research from the realm of circulation to the realm of production” [2]. In this context, physiocracy emerged, asserting that only agriculture was the sector that “creates pure products” and the source of wealth. According to physiocrats, only agricultural products grown on land constitute wealth, while industry is an “unproductive” sector that merely enhances existing wealth through processing and does not create new wealth. Physiocracy viewed “all wealth as being reducible to land and cultivation (agriculture)” [1]. “Land exists for humans only through labor and cultivation. Thus, the essential nature of wealth has moved into labor” [1]. This signifies a transcendence of the externality and objectivity of wealth.

However, on one hand, physiocracy still understood the essence of wealth from specific agricultural labor, without elevating it to the level of general labor. On the other hand, it linked wealth (agricultural products) with the subject, but did not consider the subject as the primary aspect of contradiction. Because “the product of labor is also understood as a specific wealth—rather than originating from labor itself, it comes from the wealth of nature” [1]. “Land... has not yet been regarded as a factor of labor itself; on the contrary, labor is manifested as a factor of land” [1]. The contribution here can be understood as considering land and labor (object and subject) as a contradictory pair, surpassing the previous defect of separating subject and object from the perspective of naive materialism. However, a problem still exists: in this contradiction, land, the object, is regarded as the primary aspect, while labor, the subject, is considered the secondary aspect. The task of further economic thought development is to reverse the position of the two, making labor the primary aspect of contradiction.

2.3. The “Luther” of Political Economy: Adam Smith

Marx largely agrees with Adam Smith’s understanding of the essence of wealth: labor. Here, it is not specific agricultural, industrial, or commercial labor but labor itself. Smith lived in an era of developed industrial capital where various types of labor were fully developed and none dominated. Transitioning from one type of labor to another was also easy, allowing for the equal treatment of labor of different natures. Thus, the abstraction of abstract labor was possible at this time. Furthermore, he truly shifted the focus to wealth from the perspective of labor, making labor the primary aspect of contradiction. Therefore, Engels referred to Adam Smith as the “Luther” of political economy because, just as Luther proclaimed that religion is the inner essence of humanity and that people must seek redemption from within, Smith shifted the focus of private property to within people themselves. In Smith’s view, the essence of private property is labor, “thus what exists outside of man and independently of him—wealth that should only be preserved and maintained in an external manner—is discarded, in other words, the external, thoughtless

objectivity of wealth is discarded” [1]. This shift from external object to subject essence is a significant contribution, breaking away from the previous understanding “from the perspective of objective, sensuous forms” and instead turning to “understand from the perspective of human sensory activity, practice, and subjectivity.” However, has this transformation been completed? While the transformation in understanding wealth as labor has been accomplished, it’s crucial to understand that the labor here is not genuine labor but “alienated labor.” By incorporating this “alienated labor” into human nature, “the principle of labor-based political economy superficially acknowledges people, but actually completely negates them” [1].

The incomplete aspect of this transformation lies in its lack of consideration for the dimension of value. “Because humans themselves are no longer in a tense relationship with the external nature of private property, but rather humans themselves have become the tense essence of private property” [1]. The tension between humans and private property, the alienation of laborers from their products, these external contradictions are nothing but the external manifestations of the internal contradictions of humans alienated from their own essence, originating from labor shifting from being “the affirmation of essential powers” to “the loss of essential powers.” Smith argued for wealth from the perspective of subject labor, yet hypocritically treated alienated labor as the object of examination. Subsequent figures in political economy after Smith, such as Say, Ricardo, and Mill, began to push the abandonment of morality, the “cynicism,” to its extreme.

3. Value, Communism Dimension: From “Profit-Driven” to “True Essence Possession”

The essence of private property is labor, as Adam Smith has acknowledged. Also, both attributed to labor, the difference between Adam Smith and Marx lies in whether the labor serving as the basis of argumentation is alienated labor or genuine labor, and whether human nature is “profit-driven labor” or “the affirmation of essential powers in a free and conscious manner.” This is the crossroads leading to capitalism or communism.

3.1. Negation of Humanity in Political Economy: Private Property Moved into the Essence of Man

“If the political economy mentioned above starts by superficially acknowledging people, their independence, and autonomous activities, and because it moves private property into the essence of man himself, it is no longer subject to the territorial, ethnic, and other regulations existing outside of man and thus can exert a kind of cosmopolitan, universal, and destructive energy that annihilates all boundaries and constraints, in order to replace these regulations with itself as the sole policy, universality, boundary, and restraint” [1]. By removing the restrictions of external objects, private property is moved into the essence of man. Consequently, the pursuit of profit or private property becomes the sole purpose of man, and human nature is reduced to “the money-making activities of Jews.” By relocating private property into the essence of man, individuals avoid the limitations imposed by external objects such as nationality and territory, becoming a universal principle of humanity. This profit-driven nature breaks free from geographical constraints, aiming to involve all individuals in the world market.

Political economy believes that the essence of man is labor because human labor is the sole means of creating wealth. However, this consideration does not stem from a positive perspective such as “labor creating the human world, creating humanity itself,” but rather from the perspective of the significance of the means of creating wealth. Since labor can create wealth, the essence of man is considered to be “labor for profit” rather than any other pleasurable activities. If machines could independently create wealth without human intervention, as Ricardo stated: “If the King of England could obtain the same income by using machines nationwide, he would not need the people of England” [3]. Thus, under this premise, “the worker has nothing except labor, the real content of his physical and mental existence is only labor. In this sense, he is ‘the full emptiness,’ and once he stops working, his physical and mental existence becomes empty talk; in reality, he no longer exists, and for society, he is ‘the absolute void’” [3].

In other words, economists do not focus on people but only on wealth. Therefore, even though private property is moved into the essence of man, it does not break free from the fetters of fetishism. The connection between private property and labor only exists because only humans can create wealth. If machines could independently create wealth, perhaps economists would also move private property into the essence of machines. Therefore, rather than stating that they move private property into the essence of man and link human labor with private property, it is more accurate to say that they move profit-driven labor into the essence of man and link alienated labor with private property. Here, humans are reduced to mere tools for making money, while the true essence of humanity is sidelined as a “useless question.” “Humanity lies beyond political economy, while non-humanity lies within it” [4].

3.2. The Restoration of Human Nature: Abandoning Private Property and Alienated Labor

Marx also believes that the essence of man is labor. However, his focus is not on wealth as the result but more on the process of labor, which he regards as the confirmation of the essential power of man. Labor as the essence of man is different from alienated labor, which is causally related to private property. The alienated form of labor is not something that has existed since ancient times but rather a specific product of social development.

Firstly, man is an objective being. Man can exert his autonomy and initiative on objects to shape them according to his needs. Man can only prove his creative power by creating tangible results through creative activities. Therefore, in labor, man not only creates objects but also creates himself through these objects. Man possesses active and autonomous selfhood, unlike any other animal. During creative activities, people inevitably demonstrate their social characteristics. On the one hand, in labor, people directly from diverse social relationships through cooperation. On the other hand, even in labor activities such as science, which

seem distant from interpersonal interactions, people indirectly establish connections with others through socialized language, knowledge, raw materials, products, and so on. Therefore, Marx believes that labor as the essence of man is voluntary and conscious labor, which not only confirms the creative autonomy of man but also serves as a vehicle for forming social relationships among people.

With the universalization of capitalist commodity production, the alienation of labor, characterized by objectification and externalization, has become evident. The labor process itself is no longer determined by individuals, and the products of labor become private property owned by others. The emergence of private property as a historical category further exacerbates alienated labor, exhibiting a characteristic of mutual interaction between the two. "Private property is not only the product of alienated labor but also the means by which labor is externalized, it is the realization of this externalization" [1]. Because private property is a historical category that interacts with alienated labor, the abandonment of private property cannot simply be limited to the abandonment of material objects; instead, it must return to the abandonment of historical processes and be linked to the labor process of the subject.

Marx's description of communism is: "Communism is the positive abolition of private property, of human self-alienation, and thus the real appropriation of human nature through and for man. It is the return of man to himself as a social, i.e., human being, a return completed, conscious, and accomplished within the entire wealth of previous development" [1]. Under capitalist conditions, people are in a state of alienation and are dominated by private property. Therefore, to abolish this alienation, it is not enough to merely abolish the external form of private property. Just as advocating "abolition of money" in Proudhonism does not change the capitalist relations of production and exchange itself, such external "abolition" is inevitably futile. To achieve communism and the restoration of human nature, one must return to the essential nature of private property and fundamentally change the alienated state of labor and social relations driven by the pursuit of profit. This is the true meaning of "the real appropriation of human nature through and for man". The so-called "through man" means transforming private ownership to redirect human labor from an alienated state to voluntary and creative activity and transforming interpersonal relationships from relationships of mutual deception under the dominance of material possessions to harmonious cooperation as members of a community. The "for man" aspect means liberating individuals from the alienated state under private ownership to achieve true restoration of human nature.

Therefore, "the abandonment of self-alienation and the path of self-alienation are one and the same." Self-alienation is not a predetermined objective reality but a product of long-term historical development. Therefore, its abandonment is also a historical process and must be approached from the perspective of the subject's essence. "Initially, private property was only examined from its objective aspect, — but labor was still considered its essence. Therefore, its form of existence is 'capital that must be abolished' (Proudhon)." [1]. Initially, private property was only examined from its objective aspect, and the proposed solution was to "abolish" objective capital; "Finally, communism is the positive manifestation of abandoned private property; initially, it appears as universal private property" [1]. Finally, it is realized that what needs to be abolished is not the objective form of private property but the historical stage of the universalization of private property, which is the capitalist stage. From the beginning to the end, the understanding of the problem finally penetrates to the level of essence and internal relations. "As long as the opposition between proletariat and bourgeoisie is not understood as the opposition between labor and capital, it is still an insignificant opposition, one that is not understood from its active relationship, its internal relationship, one that is not understood as a contradiction" [1]. From the perspective of external contradictions, the opposition between property and non-property cannot penetrate the essence of capitalist relations. Only by understanding it from the perspective of internal contradictions, namely labor and capital, can we truly find the real path to abandon alienation. "Repossessing the objective nature of man produced within the alienation regulation not only has the significance of abandoning alienation but also has the significance of abandoning objectivity" [1]. Therefore, to abandon alienation from the perspective of the subject's essence, to repossess labor and social relations as manifestations of human essence, not only has the significance of abandoning the alienated state of labor but also has the significance of abandoning the objective product of labor alienation, namely private property. If one engages in "abolition" from the objective aspect, such as distributing private property equally, the ultimate result can only be the "universalization of private property." Instead of calling this the abandonment of private property, it is more accurate to say that it completes the private property relations. Communism does not seek to continue down this path but rather to "completely break with traditional ownership relations" and to fundamentally change ownership on the basis of preserving all previous wealth, thereby changing the nature of labor, transcending the alienated state of "profit-making activities," and returning to the free and conscious labor that realizes "the essence of human power." This is the real path to abandon alienation.

4. Prelude to a New Worldview

In the subsequent "Theses on Feuerbach," Marx opens by stating, "The main defect of all previous materialism—including Feuerbach's materialism—is that the object, reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the object or contemplation, but not as human sensuous activity, practice, not subjectively" [5]. We usually consider this outline as the germ of historical materialism, while the manuscript is seen as an immature work still rooted in Feuerbach's alienation theory, evidenced by the idealized portrayal of human "generic essence" as "free conscious activity." However, in the section on "Private Property and Labor," Marx already recognizes the limitations of Feuerbach's materialism. Although it inverted speculative philosophy and restored the authority of materialism, it reverted to a standpoint of naive materialism, disregarding Hegel's dialectical principle of discerning essence through phenomena. Viewing private property from this perspective leads to an inability to penetrate the fog of fetishism. Marx keenly perceives that understanding objects solely from an external standpoint fails to grasp their essence and

find the real path to change reality. It's akin to replacing wages with labor vouchers, merely substituting a new form of currency for the old. To truly understand private property, it must not be grasped solely from an external, objective standpoint but from the perspective of labor, the subjective aspect. Only by recognizing that private property is not a self-evident premise but created by the labor of laborers, can we realize that it can also be changed by the hands of laborers. Thus, the real path to "abandoning private property" can be found. Therefore, in this section of the argument, there is already an implicit transcendence of Feuerbach's standpoint of naive materialism.

Therefore, in the preface of the manuscript, although Marx states, "The criticism of political economy, as well as the entire criticism of empiricism, relies entirely on Feuerbach's discoveries to lay down its true foundation. It is only from Feuerbach onwards that the empirical, humanitarian, and naturalistic criticisms have begun" [1], seemingly firmly standing on Feuerbach's standpoint, in the footnote of this preface, there is a deleted sentence: "'On the contrary, to what extent Feuerbach's discoveries about the nature of philosophy still— at least to prove these discoveries— make it necessary to critique and analyze dialectics, readers can see from my exposition itself.' —Editor's note" [1]. From this sentence, it can be seen that Marx has already realized the lack of dialectical elements in Feuerbach's philosophy, and therefore, "the critique and analysis of dialectics become necessary."

5. Conclusion

In Marx's understanding of private property, he no longer remains at the level of objects or intuition but has shifted to understanding it from the perspective of the subject. Instead of continuing the dichotomous thinking of subjective-objective dualism inherent in intuitive materialism, Marx employs dialectics of interaction between subject and object, which is why he reintroduces the analysis of Hegelian dialectics. The external contradiction between laborers and private property stems from the internal contradiction between the laborer's "ought to be" creative labor and the "is" alienated labor. Therefore, Marx points out the need to return to human nature by abandoning alienated labor, although the practical method of abandonment has not been clearly identified yet, nor has it progressed to the level of practice. However, labor grasped from the subjective perspective might serve as a bridge to the development of practical materialism in the future. Here, Marx's grasp of labor already hints that he does not hold a one-sided critical attitude toward Hegel's idealist dialectics nor completely accept Feuerbach's materialist standpoint. Instead, he critically inherits the rational elements of both Hegel and Feuerbach, revealing his unique materialist position. Regarding Hegel, Marx overcomes Hegel's purely spiritual understanding of labor while retaining its positive significance as the essence of human creative self-confirmation, advancing it further to the broad level of practice in his later works. Concerning Feuerbach, Marx maintains his materialist stance but also recognizes the irrationality of Feuerbach's object-oriented intuitive materialism, progressing to a materialist stance that integrates subject and object. Thus, Marx plants the seed for a new worldview, namely practical materialism.

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