

THE CANADIAN JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY  
Volume 16, Number 4, December 1986, pp. 769-778

## *Marx's Realms of 'Freedom' and 'Necessity'*

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In 1844 Marx held that labor alienation was wholly eliminable, primarily through the abolition of private property.<sup>1</sup> Work in the context of private property was alienating because it was performed for wages and the production of exchange-value. With such purposes, work was experienced as selfish and forced. With the abolition of private property, work would be performed for the production of use-value, to satisfy human needs. With this human purpose, work would be experienced as a free and fulfilling expression of life.<sup>2</sup>

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- 1 Karl Marx, 'Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts,' in David McLellan, ed., *Karl Marx: Selected Writings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1977), especially p. 89.
  - 2 Karl Marx, 'On James Mill,' in McLellan, especially pp. 117-22. 'On James Mill' is a section from the notebooks Marx kept while he was writing the 'Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts.'

In 1864, in a well-known passage in the third volume of *Capital*, Marx describes the role of labor under communism as follows:

the realm of freedom actually begins only where labour which is determined by necessity and mundane considerations ceases; thus in the very nature of things it lies beyond the sphere of actual material production. Just as the savage must wrestle with Nature to satisfy his wants, to maintain and reproduce life, so must civilized man, and he must do so in all social formations and under all possible modes of production. With his development this realm of physical necessity expands as a result of his wants; but, at the same time, the forces of production which satisfy these wants also increase. Freedom in this field can only consist in socialised man, the associated producers, rationally regulating their interchange with Nature, bringing it under their common control, instead of being ruled by it as by the blind forces of Nature; and achieving this with the least expenditure of energy and under conditions most favourable to, and worthy of, their human nature. But it nonetheless still remains a realm of necessity. Beyond it begins that development of human energy which is an end in itself, the true realm of freedom, which, however, can blossom forth only with this realm of necessity as its basis. The shortening of the working day is its basic prerequisite.<sup>3</sup>

According to some distinguished commentators, in this passage Marx seems to have a 'dismal perception' of the materially necessary labor that would remain under communism. There would be a residual 'realm of alienation' that could only be minimized and never eliminated.<sup>4</sup> According to this pessimistic interpretation, alienation in the labor process can only be balanced out by fulfilling activities outside the labor process. The optimistic thoughts of 1844 have been forgotten or ignored.

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3 Karl Marx, *Capital* vol. III (New York: International Publishers 1977), 820; this translation is by Ernest Untermann. The passage is reprinted in McLellan, 496-7.

4 The first quoted phrase is from G.A. Cohen, 'Marx's Dialectic of Labor,' *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 3 (1973-1974) 260; the second quoted phrase is from Herbert Marcuse, 'The Realm of Freedom and the Realm of Necessity: A Reconsideration,' *Praxis* 5 (1969) 22. They have been followed in their pessimistic assessment of this passage by Peter Singer, *Marx* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1980) 64-5. It should perhaps be noted that in the closing 'Obiter Dicta' of Cohen's book, *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defense* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1978) 323-5, where Cohen analyzes this passage, he does not repeat the phrase 'dismal perception.' But his analysis of the passage is otherwise precisely the same as the analysis in 'Marx's Dialectic of Labor,' and he is still vulnerable to the criticism I make of him in footnote 9 below. His interpretation remains pessimistic.

I wish to suggest some reasons for dissatisfaction with the pessimistic interpretation of Marx's view in 1864. Although Marx identifies the realm of freedom as the place where 'begins that development of human energy which is an end in itself,' that is not thereby to identify the realm of necessity as alienating or even dismal. It is a gratuitous inference that the realm of necessity is a realm of alienation. Marx says that the shortening of the working day is the basic prerequisite of development in the realm of freedom, but it is not obviously a prerequisite of the development of all unalienating activities. There might be perfectly fulfilling unalienating activities that are not, however, ends in themselves and, hence, not part of the realm of freedom. Finally, Marx explicitly allows that, under certain conditions, there can be 'freedom in this field,' by which he must mean in the realm of necessity.<sup>5</sup>

These considerations suggest that the matter may be more complicated than the pessimists believe. Before approaching the interpretation of this passage directly, it will be helpful to consider some relevant material from the *Grundrisse*, written in 1857-1858.

In the *Grundrisse*, Marx does not provide a complete account of the communist society in respect of labor alienation, but he does discuss the all-round development of the individual, and the importance of saving time in the production process for achieving this goal. In discussing the capitalist practice of extracting increasing amounts of surplus labor from the worker, Marx claims: 'The object is to terminate this relation, so that material production can leave everyone surplus time for other activities.'<sup>6</sup> He believe that this surplus time would go to the all-round development of the individual: 'The counterpart of this reduction is that all members of society can develop their education in the arts, sciences, etc., thanks to the free time and means available to all.'<sup>7</sup> And later: 'To economize on labour time means to increase the amount of free time, i.e., time for the complete development of the individual...'<sup>8</sup> So in the *Grundrisse* Marx held that this all-round

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5 Marx's term for 'field' is *Gebiet* and his term for 'realm' is *Reich*. These are essentially synonyms, so it is not clear why Marx varied his terminology here. David Fernbach, in his translation of this passage, renders *Gebiet* as 'sphere.' See *Capital* vol. III (New York: Vintage Books 1981), 959.

6 Karl Marx, 'Grundrisse,' in McLellan, footnote on p. 369. All passages I shall cite from the *Grundrisse* come from a manuscript written in February, 1858.

7 *Ibid.*, 370

8 *Ibid.*, 383

development could only occur outside of the labor process. While elimination of the division of labor within the labor process could certainly reduce the narrowness of workers to a certain extent, it clearly would not ensure their all-round development.

Insofar as the all-round development of the individual was an end in itself for Marx, he would place this activity in the 'true realm of freedom.' That is not to say that what occurs within the realm of necessity is worthless to the individual, only that it is not an end in itself. But that much was obvious in Marx's thoughts of 1844. There it was: insofar as production satisfied human needs, it was worthwhile. The production was not an end in itself, but that did not make it any the less fulfilling.<sup>9</sup>

While, in the *Grundrisse*, Marx wishes to minimize productive activity to make room for the all-round development of the individual, he allows that productive activity may itself be free activity:

Really free labour, the composing of music for example, is at the same time damned serious and demands the greatest effort. The labour concerned with material production can only have this character if (1) it is of a social nature, (2) it has a scientific character and at the same time is general work, i.e. if it ceases to be human effort as a definite, trained natural force, gives up its purely natural, primitive aspects and becomes the activity of a subject controlling all the forces of nature in the production process.<sup>10</sup>

Marx is explicitly discussing labor that would fall within the realm of necessity, and giving conditions for it to be 'really free.' He actually only offers the two conditions as necessary conditions, but there is no indication that any other conditions would be necessary to make them jointly sufficient. Clearly he thinks that these two conditions will be

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9 Thus I disagree with Cohen's assessment in 'Marx's Dialectic of Labor,' 261. Cohen is right that 'the possibility that Marx swiftly excludes is that economic necessities might be met, at least partly, by "that development of human activity that is an end in itself."' But Cohen illegitimately conflates activities that are ends in themselves with activities that offer creative fulfillment. One might find an activity to be creatively fulfilling precisely in virtue of the fact that what one creates is fulfilling the needs of others, and in virtue of no other fact, such as the intrinsic pleasure of the activity itself. Thus Cohen unfairly attributes to Marx the 'dismal perception' that economic necessities cannot be met by activities that are creatively fulfilling.

10 Karl Marx, 'Grundrisse,' in McLellan, 368

satisfied in the communist society, and materially necessary production will be 'really free' under communism. Marx emphasizes this possibility again:

It is true that the quantity of labour to be provided seems to be conditioned by external circumstances, by the purpose to be achieved, and the obstacles to its achievement that have to be overcome by labour. But ... the overcoming of such obstacles may itself constitute an exercise in liberty, and ... these external purposes lose their character of mere natural necessities and are established as purposes which the individual himself fixes. The result is the self-realization and objectification of the subject, therefore real freedom, whose activity is precisely labour.<sup>11</sup>

This is not an insight that Marx lost sight of in his discussion in the third volume of *Capital*, several years later.<sup>12</sup> There the two conditions for free productive labor are explicitly repeated:

Freedom in this field can only consist in [1] socialized man, the associated producers, [2] rationally regulating their interchange with Nature, bringing it under their common control, instead of being ruled by it as by the blind forces of Nature; and achieving this with the least expenditure of energy and under conditions most favourable to, and worthy of, their human nature.<sup>13</sup>

Again the conditions are literally offered only as necessary, but there is no reason to doubt that they are also jointly sufficient. It is not clear why Marx speaks of freedom in this 'field,' since the rest of the discus-

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11 Ibid.

12 Contrary to what is claimed by Marcuse, 22.

13 Quoted above. I have inserted the bracketed numbers to indicate the parallel with the passage from the *Grundrisse*. The parallel between the two second conditions is not perfect. One might hold the second condition in the *Grundrisse* passage to be stronger than the second condition in the *Capital* passage. Then, from the fact that satisfaction of the two conditions in the *Grundrisse* entailed 'really free labour' it would not follow that satisfaction of the two conditions in *Capital* entailed real freedom in the realm of necessity. I find this line of objection unconvincing. If the second condition in *Capital* is weaker, what grounds are there for holding that Marx thought the stronger second condition could not be satisfied? And if there is a difference between the two second conditions, is it great enough to account for a difference between 'real freedom' in the *Grundrisse* and something less in *Capital*?

sion is phrased in terms of 'realms,'<sup>14</sup> but it cannot be doubted that he is speaking about freedom in the realm of necessity.

It might be thought that the sort of freedom Marx allows here is only *ersatz* freedom, for he says 'Freedom in this field can only consist in ...' much as one might say 'Happiness for the poor can only consist in temporary relief from misery and nothing more than that.' And Marx goes on to contrast this freedom with the 'true realm of freedom.' But this freedom is not being contrasted with a realm of *true* freedom, which might indeed imply a superior form of freedom. If anything, the phrase 'the true realm of freedom' suggests that this 'realm of freedom' is not simply a matter of freedom (as, indeed, it will turn out it is not). Furthermore, in the *Grundrisse*, Marx has said that labor that satisfies the two conditions is 'really free labour,' which does not suggest any reservations. The phrase 'can only consist' means not that the freedom is inferior, but that the freedom is available only under certain circumstances, which can in fact obtain.<sup>15</sup>

We now have all the means at hand for reinterpreting the passage from the third volume of *Capital* in a less pessimistic fashion. The realm of freedom comprises those activities that are ends in themselves, most especially activities constitutive of the all-round development of the individual. The realm of necessity comprises those productive activities necessary to sustain the material requirements of society. Materially productive activities, though necessary, can be experienced as free under, and only under, certain conditions that will obtain under a communist mode of production. The realm of necessity can never be eliminated, but it should be minimized as much as possible.

If activity in the realm of necessity can be free and creatively fulfilling, why should it be minimized? Presumably Marx is here being influenced by some perfectionistic value. Perhaps activities that are ends in themselves, which mainly consist of activities that are constitutive of the all-round development of the individual, are more suited than necessary productive activity for the development of human potential.<sup>16</sup>

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14 See footnote 5.

15 Unfortunately the German, as the English, is ambiguous on this point. The phrase 'can only consist in' is *kann nur darin bestehen*. *Nur* can mean either 'solely' or 'merely.' Fernbach translates the German phrase as 'can consist only in.'

16 The same concern to minimize labor time is present in the passages cited from the *Grundrisse*. Yet it is clear that, according to the *Grundrisse*, such labor can be really free.

This leaves us with the question of why Marx chose the terms 'freedom' and 'necessity' to label the two realms. It would have been much less misleading, though also rather less picturesque, if Marx had instead labelled them the realm of ends in themselves and the realm of means to other ends. But there is some justification for Marx's terminology. Material production is required to meet our physical needs, to provide for our physical necessities. Indeed, Marx also calls it the 'realm of physical necessity.' But it is easy to slide from conceiving of the realm in this way, to conceiving of it as something oppressive and enslaving, especially since it is being contrasted with a realm of freedom. This latter choice of labels was an especially unhappy one, as it suggests that the realm comprises all activity that is free. But Marx himself explicitly rejects the suggestion. And if the realm of freedom were simply the time for free activity, then the shortening of the working day would hardly be 'the basic prerequisite' of its blossoming forth, it would be *constitutive* of its blossoming forth. So, the 'true realm of freedom' is not the realm that comprises all free activity, but the realm that comprises certain central cases of free activity, viz., activities that are ends in themselves.

Thus, Marx's views on labor in 1864, as expressed in the third volume of *Capital*, do not represent a pessimistic break with his views presented in 1844. They represent only an elaboration and extension of those earlier views. So far as these passages go, there is no evidence for a difference between an earlier and a later Marx.

But there are some other features and developments of Marx's views on labor that leave a certain residual difficulty. In the *German Ideology* and in the *Grundrisse*<sup>17</sup> Marx holds that the all-round development of the individual can serve to increase productivity. So, in addition to being an end in itself, it also serves as a means to producing the material necessities of society. There is nothing problematic about this, since some things can be both ends in themselves and means to other ends.<sup>18</sup>

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17 See, respectively, p. 191 and pp. 383-4 in McLellan.

18 For a classic statement of this possibility, see Plato's *Republic*, 357b-d. There Plato classifies knowledge, sight and health as both ends and means. Later, justice turns out to have the same character. In the passages from *German Ideology* and *Grundrisse*, cited in footnote 16, as well as a passage from the *Critique of the Gotha Program*, to be cited below in footnote 18, Marx acknowledges the possibility that he seems swiftly to exclude in the *Capital* passage – that, as

What this shows is that the realm of freedom is not a realm of pure ends in themselves.

What is more problematic, however, for my account of Marx's views, is a later development that, in effect, makes the opposite point. In 1875, in the *Critique of the Gotha Program*, Marx writes:

In a higher phase of communist society, after the enslaving subordination of the individual to the division of labour, and therewith also the antithesis between mental and physical labour, has vanished; after labour has become not only a means of life but life's prime want; after the productive forces have also increased with the all-round development of the individual, and all the springs of co-operative wealth flow more abundantly – only then can the narrow horizon of bourgeois right be crossed in its entirety and society inscribe on its banners: from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs!<sup>19</sup>

Here Marx holds that materially necessary labor may be not only a means to life, but 'life's prime want.' I can see no other interpretation of this than that Marx is holding that materially necessary work may be an end in itself, and not only *an* end in itself, but the central or highest end in itself. Marx here, too, repeats the claim that the all-round development of the individual is a means to meeting societal needs. Presumably, though, he is not suggesting that all-round development is only a means and materially necessary labor is the only end in itself. It would seem that both are ends in themselves, as well as being means (apparently to each other). This does not fit well with my interpretation of Marx's realm of necessity, for we now seem to find ends in themselves appearing within it.

If we take this passage seriously, it must be said that Marx changed his view of labor. But it is a change between 1864 and 1875 as Marx adopts a more optimistic view of labor, and not the more pessimistic change his views were thought to have undergone between 1844 and 1864.<sup>20</sup> In 1875 Marx would seem not to wish any longer to minimize

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Cohen explains it ('Marx's Dialectic of Labor,' 261), 'economic necessities might be met, at least partly, by "that development of human activity which is an end in itself."'

19 Karl Marx, 'Critique of the Gotha Program,' in McLellan, 569. The phrase 'Life's prime want' is *erst Lebensbedürfnis*.

20 According to the pessimistic view of the *Capital* passage, Marx is represented as being optimistic (about labor under communism) in 1844, optimistic in 1858,



the realm of necessity, for it contains activity that is genuinely worthwhile – indeed, 'life's prime want.' On the other hand, it may be that in this passage Marx's rhetoric got the better of him.<sup>21</sup>

*Received December, 1984*

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pessimistic in 1864, and then very optimistic in 1875. What accounts for these two opposite swings in Marx's thinking? According to my view, Marx is equally optimistic in 1844, 1858, and 1864, and then more optimistic in 1875. Cohen and Singer both see an oddity in the contrast, as they see it, between Marx's views in 1864 and 1875. The oddity disappears if we hold, as I suggest, that there is no great contrast.

- 21 In revising this paper I have benefitted from comments of Richard Arneson and Gerald Cohen.