

## COMMENTARY

Gone Fishing: Making Sense of  
Marx's Concept of Communism

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## Introduction

In a splendid essay entitled "On Being Conservative" Michael Oakeshott writes that certain activities are eminently attractive to those of a conservative disposition. Fishing is one such activity—not fishing in order to supply the immediate sustenance of life, nor fishing as a commercial venture intended to yield a profit. Rather, what Oakeshott is describing is the activity of a trout fisherman by a mountain stream. His casting of the fly into the passing waters is not compulsory, that is, he does not have to catch fish in order to survive. Nor is it directed to any other end, or purpose, for instance, the sale of his catch. It is the activity itself that is enjoyable, the display of skill or "perhaps merely passing the time."<sup>1</sup> In sum, fishing is neither something necessitous (survival) nor externally purposive (market oriented).

Let us now draw a few inferences from Oakeshott's account of the activity of fishing. The person engaged in such an activity is not, as such, a fisherman. A fisherman is one who earns a living by means of this activity: He cannot while away his hours at that mountain stream, because his dinner or his earnings depend upon success. Displays of skill in fishing will matter to him only insofar as they yield the desired consequences, a result external to the activity, for example, nutrition or a paycheck. Time, for him, is indeed money (productivity as yield over time) not something merely to be "passed." His associates in this activity will be cooperants in a production process, helpers in maximizing his yield. And lastly, his activity will be an instrument for him—a means of ensuring his continued survival. Insofar as he must maximize his catch (to feed his community, to make a greater profit, or to win a wage-bonus), he has to make himself an "expert" fisherman, a specialized practitioner of that one set of tasks, or allocate those tasks among his associates. He is, then, an expert, not an amateur, of the activity of fishing.

Another person, someone not a fisherman but merely fishing by the side of the stream, pursues this activity as time spent pleurably. He passes his time at it and that time is not measured or determined by output. The underlying reason for the free, unbound quality of this time is that the activity that fills it is one neither compelled by natural necessity nor is it one bound to the production of surpluses. Freed from these external pressures, time can merely be passed, the activity savored for itself, not for what it may yield. One's fishing companions are presumably freely chosen friends, people who enjoy each other's company in a shared pursuit. They are not moments of a production process, cooperants in maximizing productivity. Finally, this person is an amateur of fishing; it is not his expertise (however skilled he may be), not something to which he must devote his whole life, but rather a chosen pastime.

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In Oakeshott's analysis, the activity of fishing is evidence of a nonutilitarian disposition to enjoy the present as it is, a conservative attitude toward the relations between activity and the world. I have sought to unpack Oakeshott's account of fishing, that is, to show the features that such an activity must have. These are (1) that time can be "whiled away," that is, it is not subject to the compulsion of nature (essential needs) or of the market (productivity). Where time is determined by the latter constraints, output shapes the activity as an external end and transforms it from a pastime into disciplined labor. (2) Skill is valued for itself, not for what it can produce. This is another way of formulating the idea that the activity is not driven by a purpose external to itself. (3) As a corollary of the preceding point, the skill displayed must be that of the amateur, a chosen prowess and not a functionally defined role within a rationalized production process. (4) A group or community of such persons, of the amateurs of fishing, would be voluntary because the association, like the activity, would be one chosen for its intrinsic pleasure and not for its contribution to the meeting of an external end. This analysis goes well beyond Oakeshott's few paragraphs; nevertheless it draws on his central idea and it sets a framework (activity, time, community) for understanding another political philosopher who also wrote about fishing.

Karl Marx's *German Ideology* contains what is perhaps the single most celebrated description of communism: "In communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity . . . society regulates production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, shepherd or critic."<sup>2</sup> That this passage contains a tongue-in-cheek, polemical barb directed at Marx's erstwhile philosophical allies is certain; that it suggests important features of his vision of communist society is something that I shall argue for in this essay. The question before Marx's readers is how to interpret this exceedingly elliptical description of communism. Marx himself provides us some guidance: "We do not dogmatically anticipate the world, but only want to find the new world through criticism of the old one."<sup>3</sup> What this says is that the shape of the future can best be seen in the criticism, the exposure of the faults, of the present. In the paragraphs that follow, I wish to draw on the analysis of fishing presented in these opening pages, that is, on the intertwined themes of activity, time, and community in order to sketch central elements of Marx's critique of capitalism and to derive from that critique the sense of his portrait of communism. The traditional approach, what G. A. Cohen has called the Plain Marxist Argument, focuses its normative critique of capitalism on the phenomena of exploitation, domination of society by the bourgeoisie, and domination at the point of production. From that perspective, communist society is the corrective in that it is nonexploitative and classless. What I now wish to do is to cut into these issues from a different angle, to move from a reading of Marx that turns around questions of ownership, surplus extraction, and the rule of one class over society to one whose critical locus is to be found neither in issues of distribution (ownership and exploitation) nor in the rule of some over others but in the idea of domination by an autonomous economic process. The advantage of this reading of Marx over the Plain Argument account is that it allows us to grasp more precisely what Marx considered to be the *differentia specifica* of capitalism in relation to its antecedents and thereby to come to a new appreciation of his critique of capitalism as well as of his vision of communism. More important, perhaps, it sets the stage for the consideration of the profound radicalness of Marx's project in the history of political thought: the move

away from the traditional question of justice between persons to the critique of political economy.

### I. Being a Fisherman

To be a fisherman is different from going fishing. The latter is the result of choice among possible activities, hunting, rearing cattle, reading philosophy. The former is the consequence of a life determined. To go fishing or whatever just because "I have a mind" to do so is an activity that is the efflux of my will, that is, I set the purpose and make the choice. I am distinct from this activity that I have elected to pursue: It is chosen and therefore can be put aside. In brief, I am not subordinated to fishing; I elect to do it and I can reel in my line, walk away from it, and return to my philosophical books as I see fit.

Being a fisherman is something quite different. It suggests that in some way or other, my activity, a single activity, has come to be what I am simply. I am my function and that function is determined by nature or by an economic process. In precapitalist societies where human productive powers had not yet developed sufficiently to allow society to become the effective master of nature, that function was largely determined by nature and elementary need. Capitalist society, in which people have become perhaps as much as is possible the "sovereigns of nature," also "allocates" functional roles to its members. It is the source of that "allocation" that constitutes the perverse essence of capitalism, the key characteristics that distinguish it from earlier societies.

Under capitalism, according to Marx, the labor process is absorbed into the valorization process. The valorization process is expressed by the general formula, M-C-M', in which M' or surplus value is the self-renewing and unlimited purpose or goal of a circuit that includes both production and circulation. The whole of society's metabolic interaction with nature, that is, the labor process embracing equally the human, or subjective side, and the material instruments of that interaction is subsumed under a process the goal of which is to produce constantly expanding value. This process, that is, the *movement* of the various components of value through their transformation from labor-power and the materials and instruments of production into expanded surplus value is, according to Marx, an *autonomous* process, and its "dominant subject" is not the humans involved in the process but value itself.<sup>4</sup>

Capital, as self-valorizing value, comprises class, Marx writes.<sup>5</sup> The persons who occupy various and functionally different places along capital's circuit of metamorphoses have their behavior and their purposes determined by their particular functional positions. "Real political economy," he adds elsewhere must then treat the capitalist only "as personified capital, M-C-M, agent of production."<sup>6</sup> The capitalist's purpose is, consistent with his or her functional role in the valorization process, to maximize value, that is, to accumulate and not to consume. The capitalist, in sum, is "personified" capital, its mere "functionary." Workers, for their part, are personified labor-time or labor-power.<sup>7</sup> It is thus appropriate, Marx states, that in England workers are called "hands." Proletarian and capitalist are equally subsumed under the valorization process; both are its "slaves."

The functional positions allocated by the valorization process to the various "representatives" along its circuit are duplicated, *mutatis mutandis*, in the smaller world of the factory, the "technological expression" of capital.<sup>8</sup> In the mechanized factory, a whole exists, a process, consisting of the movements of machines. The nature of each individual's work, the worker's physical location, and the work

relationship with his or her associates are determined by the structure of the mechanized operations of the factory. The worker's activity is determined through the activity of the whole, of the "iron mechanism"; the worker loses independence and is "appropriated by the process." Similarly, the capitalist's activity of superintendence arises directly from the nature of capitalist factory production itself. Thus just as in the broader circuit of capital individuals are transformed into mere "bearers," "representatives," or "functionaries" of the phases of the valorization process, so too in the microcosm of the factory, activity is determined by the needs of the "iron" process of the mechanized atelier.

What happens in the broader circuit of capital (M-C-M') as well as in its reflection-in-miniature (the factory) is "deindividualization."<sup>9</sup> The persons involved become the bearers of the functional positions they occupy within the circuit of capital. Their activities are reduced to moments in capital's metamorphosis; moments that are determined by the self-recreating valorization process, that is, are not set by conscious human agency. The naturally imposed necessity of skill or physical prowess is overcome through cooperative, mechanized production; labor becomes the expenditure of homogeneous labor time, that is, contentless work subordinated to the creation of surplus value. In Marx's account, then, being a fisherman, a capitalist, or whatever is to be subsumed under an economic process. It is to be a member of a class, a functionally defined group of persons.

The (postcapitalist) world of those who hunt in the morning and fish in the afternoon is a classless society. Though in Marx's celebrated description, only a single individual is mentioned, we can infer the community's classlessness from the fact that neither the individual nor his or her activities are characterized as functionally related to a production process. The individual is not, as one in bourgeois society is, in a "situation of being assigned."<sup>10</sup> Rather, the individual does what "he has a mind to" and not what the "representative" of capital or labor power must do according to their roles in the metamorphosis of value. One's activities, hunting, philosophizing, and so forth are under the dominion neither of another person nor of a process and hence they are not bound down by some purpose or goal other than that set by the person. The result, then, of the abolition of classes (understood as the abolition of the allocation of functional roles by an economic process beyond human control) is, according to Marx, the individualization of humans in the sense of self-determination just outlined.

### II. Whiling away the Hours

Time is the "space" (*Raum*) of human development, the forum of one's "active existence."<sup>11</sup> A person's wealth, Marx adds, does not consist in the objects he or she accumulates, but rather in the time freely available to him or her. That is, wealth is not the sum of embodied past activity, of "dead labor" as Marx calls it, but time yet to be shaped, yet to be filled with hunting, philosophizing, or whatever. Now time can be either bound down or free. Time is bound down when its use is determined not by the agents' own purposes but by forces external to them. While humankind does not have technology sufficient to allow for the mastering of nature, nature is one such force. The cycle of the seasons imposes a labor-rhythm on agrarian communities independent of their wills. Time may also be determined by the class structure of society where the leisure of one segment of society, for example, the housemaid masters of Aristotle's *Politics*, Book I, is purchased at the expense of the time of the

laboring population. Capitalist society, in which nature is less a constraint than in any preceding epoch and in which production is not intended to provide leisure and consumption goods for a few but rather aims at an ever increasing surplus for its own sake, also binds time but in a radically different manner.

In his essay on *The Condition of the Working-Class in England*, Engels, describing the time pressure on the workers referred to them as being subject to the "despotic bell." Marx, in his 1861–1863 *Notebooks*, quoted that passage and put the phrase "despotic bell" in italics.<sup>12</sup> We may speculate that what struck Marx in the words "the despotic bell" was the notion of time (under capitalism) as a dominating, alien force rather than as the "space" for the development of human capacities.

Capital has "encroached" upon time; it has "usurped" the time of society, Marx writes. To understand what Marx means by this, it is important to recall that he considers capital to be not simply a bundle of property/appropriation relations, but a process, a "circulatory" movement of value. This movement is temporally measured and it is divided into the various phases of the reproduction and expansion of value. In brief, across the entire spectrum of its economic phenomena, from the most elementary, that is, the commodity as "congealed" labor time, to the most expansive, that is, the creation of a world market, capitalism more than any previous economic order is a process concerned with time.<sup>13</sup> This time, however, is subsumed under the requirements of capital for rapid reproduction (completion of its circuit and commencement of its next cycle). In all the stages of its metamorphosis, capital seeks to compress time, to "close its pores." In other words, capital attempts to appropriate for its reproductive process all available time while also striving to reduce as far as possible the time necessary for the completion of its circuit. In this broadly formulated description, we can grasp the general import of Marx's reference to the "despotic bell" and we can also see the intimations of why Marx thought capitalism to be a liberating force.

For Marx, the consequence of this is that capitalism's greatest achievement, its historical "justification,"<sup>14</sup> the shortening of necessary labor time, does not in fact lead to a lessening of bound time for the producing population. Quite the contrary, the result of this unprecedented transformation and extension of society's productive powers is the simultaneous lengthening and intensification (closing the pores of production time) of the working day. This outcome does not depend, Marx argues, on the good or bad will of the capitalist; rather, it is determined by the laws of capitalism.

In sum, no previous epoch has seen such great time pressure on the population as is found under capitalism. Overwork, Marx claims, was not a significant problem in antiquity and, to the extent that laws dealt with additional labor, it was to try to compel more of it. It is, however, characteristic of capitalism that laws here are introduced to restrain the economic compulsion to excessive labor.<sup>15</sup> The concern for the reduction of necessary labor time (leaving aside the issue of the reduction of circulation time) is central in a process that seeks constantly to yield increasingly large surpluses (embodied surplus time); but since surplus is its purpose, not free time, the reduction of necessary labor does not alter the character of time for the living bearers of that process, except insofar as still more of their time is absorbed by the process.

We saw in the previous section that Marx observed how appropriate it was that in England laborers were called "hands," the living servants of machines, their activity subsumed under the systematic order and activity of those machines. Marx also commented on the common designation of workers as "full time" or "half time."<sup>16</sup> On the one hand, the worker is thereby shown to be mere personified labor time. On

the other hand, time itself—full or half—is revealed as something determined by the valorization circuit of wealth. This, and not the horrors of child labor or overwork in early industrial Britain, is the principal locus of Marx's understanding and critique of capitalism's impact upon time. What capital has done is to provide human beings with that temporal "space" for their development, for the exercise of their free purposiveness, and it has, in the same moment, taken that time (liberated, as it were, from natural necessity) and subordinated it to a nondesigned and, in some ways, perversely purposeful process, M-C-M'.

The recovery of that time (now not from nature but from an economic order) is a part of what is being portrayed in the *German Ideology* passage concerning hunting and fishing. Not only can I *do* what "I have a mind to" (hence the overcoming of functional roles assigned by the circuit), but I can do it *when* I wish to (the overcoming of the circuit's appropriation of surplus or free time). Nor is there a need to rush: the fishing pole lying by my side is no longer fixed capital impatiently demanding valorization, but is rather something for me to use when I choose to. That I can so while away the hours has no other significance than this, that through the subordination of economic processes to the conscious human will time is brought under one's control and not that of an external purposiveness.

### III. Fishermen All

Capital has made a world in its own image. It has, Marx argues, transformed human activity from a condition in which skill, physical prowess, age, and sex were the major determinants of one's labor into one in which an equal but contentless activity is in the service of capital generally and, within the factory (capital's portrait-in-miniature), in the service of the system of machines. We have observed, too, how capital has supplanted nature, human and inanimate both, as the force governing time and has subordinated time to its need for increased velocity of reproduction. What is more, capital determines the community, the association of persons, its creators who have also become its valets. It is this question, Marx's concept of the community under capital, that we shall now address. My concern here, then, will be less with the topic so central to Marx's early writings, that is, the illusory community of the state, than with his analysis of the community as it emerges from the mature critique of political economy.

#### III. A In the Market

What emerges in the capitalist market is the end of relations of personal dependence based on status and of the "natural bonds" of attachment of individuals to their community and their replacement by the interaction and exchanges of commodity owners. It is certain that, in Marx's view, the dissolution of the natural community and bound labor represented a genuine emancipation both of the individual worker and of society from the limits of a community that sought nothing higher than its own survival. Despite his many polemical references to wage-labor as "wage-slavery," Marx's analysis holds that there is a sharp difference between bound labor of all types and the labor power possessed as a commodity by the worker.

The existence of a pervasive labor market also presupposes what Marx calls capital's "original sin," that is, the expropriation of the producers, their separation from the means of production. This original act of expropriation leaves workers with

only labor power to sell, and sell it the workers must since they no longer have the means to produce for themselves. However, the person whom one meets in the market, the owner of the means of production, does not stand before one as master over servant or lord over vassal but as a fellow owner of commodities, as an equal.

Marx's purpose in setting out capital's "original sin" is to make clear that the market did not appear *ex nihilo*, that its beginnings are coercive, and, lastly, that they are centered on a fundamental shift of ownership of the means of production away from the direct producers, that is, their expropriation, as well as the dissolution of the old system of personal bonds within the community. In short, Marx wants to take some of the bloom from the rose of the contract theory of the origins of the market and free enterprise. But what is important for our purposes is that from the debris of the now destroyed world of the precapitalist community, there emerges a new type, the one that we encounter in the market, the universe of commodity owners, buyers, and sellers, united by a money relation with each other: the nexus of "cash payment."

In this new world, this community under capital, individuals, according to Marx, appear to be and indeed are freed of ties of personal dependence and distinctions of blood. They exist, in the market expression of their community, in a condition of reciprocal isolation connected only by the need to exchange their commodities. They have been freed of any ties other than exchange and they therefore appear to be free. Marx's account of the genesis of this arrangement suggests force, not choice, as its foundation. But what of their present condition? Recall that the market is only one of the moments of the life cycle of capital, that time in which value realizes itself as money, which in turn reappears in the market, there to buy new labor-power and materials in order to start the circuit anew. The social relations of the market are not relations between individuals, Marx argues, but rather between proletarian and capitalist. They exist for one another as the "representatives" of their commodities, bearers of the metamorphoses of their wares.<sup>17</sup>

Thus the members of this community live in a "bewitched world," one where their relations appear as relations between things. The "social character," the communal nature, of their interchange appears as something independent of them, as a moment in the valorization process.<sup>18</sup> History and their respective functions in that process have assigned them different roles (though formally, in terms of ownership status, equal) in the market. Yet the fact that the market works through voluntary agreement and not direct coercion and that the market as a whole seems to be anarchical, that is, composed of the accidental "collisions" of individuals give it the appearance of the "very Eden of the innate rights of man." What I wish to look more closely at is the notion central to Marx's analysis, that the literal anarchy of the market is not freedom at all but merely a form of external rule, the "silent compulsion" of capital: "It is not individuals who are set free by free competition; it is, rather, capital which is set free."<sup>19</sup>

This argument of Marx's can be construed in two principal, and not necessarily consistent, ways. Here I shall do no more than to sketch them. (1) Buyers and sellers in the market are compelled to act as they do. Free will is not an adequate account of their interaction. They are compelled by the external purposive process, M-C-M', of which they are mere moments, functional bearers of phases or elements of the metabolism of capital. In this version, an all-embracing process is said to express and to be determined by the general, underlying laws of capital. Anarchy is mere appearance, the seeming surface of things. (2) The individual moments of circulation are the result of the "conscious will" of individuals. But the totality of the process, the result of their individual collisions, is an "objective" process, that is, something not

under their control, an "alien social power" that generates, Marx concludes, their "objective dependency."<sup>20</sup> The idea here is that while wills and individual decisions are attributable to persons, the result of their interactions is a process that, viewed as a whole, takes on an independent existence. This is to be distinguished from the previous version in that the latter asserted an identity (and a causal relation) among the dominant, systemic purpose, accumulation or M-C-M', and the (determined) purpose of the individuals enmeshed in that process. For reasons that I have set out elsewhere, I am inclined to think that argument (1) above represents Marx's preferred position. What is important for the analysis of this article is that the community in one specific moment of the intercourse of its members, that of the market, is determined by the circuit of capital, however the latter is construed. Marx's fundamental point is that relations between individuals, the substance of their communal existence, are determined by the valorization process and not by the community itself. Those various relations are thus functionally and externally allocated by the movement of value through the phases of its life cycle.

### III.B In the Factory

Beneath the "haze" of the world of circulation lies another sphere, a second form of the community under capital. This is the production process, the other major moment in value's circuit. The "interconnections of capital," its laws, that are barely visible in the world of the marketplace, that seemingly anarchical environment of competition, buying and selling, are more readily apparent in the production sphere, to which we shall now turn.

The "real subsumption" of labor to capital begins when workers and capitalists meet not only in the labor market but when the production process itself has come under the control of capital. The nature of labor is now altered: It becomes social, directly cooperative labor, that is, the factory. A second community, that of the factory, is thus formed. But this social form of production is not the "offspring of association."<sup>21</sup> What Marx means by this is that the character of their cooperation is not determined by the community, but rather by the needs of the M-C-M' circuit. It is thus a "fate," and not the result of choice. Their combination, the new productive community under capital, appears to them as an "alien" combination, as the "subjectivity" or will of capital.<sup>22</sup> Just as the origin of the free exchanges in the labor market is to be found in the coercive act of expropriation, so here the beginnings of the production community are located in a "will" external to that community, the "will" of a purposive process, the valorization of capital.

In the marketplace, individuals appear indeed as buyers and sellers, representatives of their commodities or capital, but also as juridical persons, as owners equal and free disposing over their commodities. In the production process, they lose even the semblance of autonomy from the capital circuit. Here they become "hands" and "full timers," accessories or servants of the process. This is not merely what has come to be known as domination at the point of production, the direct control of capitalist over worker or, in other words, the "barracks-like discipline" of the factory. More central for Marx, it is that the combination of labor, the community created by capital, stands over against the individual as an alien, controlling force. It is a community that abolishes the independence and individuality of its members.<sup>23</sup>

The association of the factory is not the association or community of its members, it is a "form of existence of capital," an objective association. Marx's analysis of the factory, that is, of the real subsumption of labor under capital, is not merely an

account of what transpires within the walls of that institution. Rather, that commentary is one directed to a "form of existence of capital." Marx also uses the factory as a concretization of the entire capital relation in this sense: The subordination of living to objectified labor (man/machines = society/M-C-M') that is the heart of capitalism, that is, the nature of its metabolism (the feeding on and replenishing itself from surplus labor), is in the factory rendered more plainly visible. Marx's account of the market and production moments of the community under capital (exchange and the factory system) is clearly *not* meant to suggest that they be judged against the measure of an arcadian, precapitalist community. The stagnant world of primitive communal ownership, the violence and degradation of the community of slaves and their masters, in general, all the forms of what Marx calls the "natural" community (ones not based on exchange) are inferior stages of humankind's development. Capitalism has broken down national boundaries and prejudices, created a universal community, and unleashed the powers of social labor. It has also subordinated the community that it has called into being to the demands of its autonomous valorization process. This community does not represent the wills of its members but rather the needs of the capital cycle.

In the passage from the *German Ideology* that has set the guiding thread for our discussion, only a single individual is mentioned. Moreover, all of his activities, fishing, hunting, and philosophizing are, given the circumstances in which he conducts them (i.e., not fishing for profit, where cooperation would be necessary or primitive food-hunting where cooperation is for different reasons also required), potentially solitary activities. If this person seeks the company of his fellow human beings it will not be because he is enmeshed in an economic cycle that demands cooperation of him, nor will it be the result of the underdevelopment of his productive powers, a condition that uses humans and their cooperation where machines do not yet exist that could take over a substantial part of the task. He will, we can imagine, associate freely with his fellows. Their combined (social) efforts will not be something imposed on them from the outside; their community will be self-determined and not subject to the laws of the metabolism of capital.

There is clearly something Robinson Crusoe-like about this solitary fisherman/hunter/philosopher and Marx himself provides a corrective in Volumes One and Three of *Capital*.<sup>24</sup> Transpose him, however, to a community of others like himself and the sense of Marx's image (moderated in his later writings) becomes at least somewhat more evident. Such a community would be the expression writ large of our fisherman/hunter/philosopher's relation to his activity. Subordinated neither to nature nor to the dictates of the valorization process, this individual is not "assigned" a functional role in production; he fishes but is not a fisherman and he controls his time, rather than having it determined by capital's need for rapid reproduction. In sum, he does (as far as is possible) what he "has a mind to." So too would his community of the "freely associated" do as it has a mind to.

On one level, the idea of the community as a free association signifies, for Marx, that the cooperation of its members is not something wholly imposed on them from the outside. On a second and related level, it means that the community and its cooperation are not forces that abolish the individual, that is, rob the individual of his or her will (i.e., the community as a coercive, externally imposed power). From this element of Marx's critique, one can infer the outlines of his vision of a communist society. It is a "free association" in the sense that it sets its own ends and, presumably, the continued reduction of necessary labor time would be central among them.<sup>25</sup> It is also free inasmuch as its members are not "assigned" their cooperative situation,

nor are they related to one another as bearers of functional moments in the production process. Both of these notions rest on the underlying idea that the *summum malum* of capitalism is domination by the valorization circuit, a circuit that is autonomous in relation to the will of the community that it controls.

## Conclusion

The portrait of communist society set out in the passage from the *German Ideology* and the critique of capitalism that underpins it remained a centerpiece of Marx's project. The passage's youthful enthusiasm, especially evident in its implied claim that necessity could be overcome altogether, was in *Capital*, Volume Three, to be reined in by the recognition that material production, the "realm of necessity," would continue to be the foundation even of a postcapitalist society. Nevertheless, on those same pages of *Capital* in which the mature Marx moderated somewhat the wildly hopeful vision of his youth, the heart of that vision is still present: Material production is made as free as can be when "the associated producers govern the human metabolism with nature in a rational way, bringing it under their collective control instead of being dominated by it as a blind power. . . ."<sup>26</sup> This conscious control of the economy, the greatest achievable human autonomy in the productive interaction between human beings and nature, creates the foundation of the "true realm of freedom, the development of human powers as an end in itself. . . ." Here, as in the 1845 passage, the *summum malum* is the promise denied of autonomy, that is, the control over human affairs by forces external to their will, forces that provided humankind with the means to become the sovereign of nature. Communism cannot, in Marx's view, abolish the need for the continued interaction of human beings with nature, but it can deprive that process of its independent law-giving capacity by subordinating it to the community's conscious control.

This core of Marx's critique of capitalism is evident in one rather quiet passage from *Capital*, Volume One, in which he contrasts the legally limited working day to the "pompous catalogue of the 'inalienable rights of man.'"<sup>27</sup> To the reader steeped in the Plain Marxist Argument the importance that Marx here attaches to the limited working day must be perplexing, as also must be (for different reasons) his insistence in Volume Three that the shortening of the working day is a prerequisite of communism. The Ten Hours Act is not praised for its effects on income or asset endowments nor does it alter the fact of exploitation. Rather Marx lauds it as a "social barrier" to capital, that is, as an instance of the subordination of the economy to the purposes of the community rather than to the requirements of the valorization process. The "catalogue of the 'inalienable rights of man,'" Marx seems to suggest, has (to borrow the phrases of the *German Ideology*) freed people from the "violence of men" only to submit them to the "violence of things;" that is, the autonomous economic process. In sum, the relation of master and servant, dominator and dominated, must be rethought and supplied with a new idiom. It is that idiom that Marx sought to provide.

The exegetical consequences of this analysis for the reading of Marx can be only briefly stated here. It suggests that the Plain Marxist Argument interpretation, with its emphasis on domination of persons over persons and on exploitation as the great evil of capitalism, is seriously misguided. Domination, class, and exploitation assume a sharply different form in a society (capitalist) in which the economy has become independent of, and legislative over, society. To put the matter rather too starkly, the

reading presented in this article suggests that the principal issue for Marx is the relationship between the “blind power” of the autonomous economic process of capital and the community it governs, rather than the relationship between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, both of which are governed in different ways by laws not of their own making.

Viewed in a broader compass, the interpretation set out here shows, on the one side, Marx’s deep indebtedness to preliberal political economy, indeed to classical Greek conceptions of an embedded economy serving the leisure and cultivation of the virtue of citizens. On the other side, in its nonhierarchical, nonorganic concept of the free association of producers, Marxism draws on liberal ideas of the human community. Yet Marx’s project seeks to move beyond the tradition of political philosophy, ancient and modern. That move is evident above all in Marx’s silence about the central question of the tradition, that is, justice. Various efforts have been made to explain that silence: that Marx really had a theory of justice *malgré lui*, that Marx’s historicism prevented him from using ideas of justice for critical purposes, or that his aspiration to a scientific critique led him to shun the normative propositions of his socialist ancestors. The argument of this essay suggests a different answer: Ideas of justice, the regulative norms of affairs among persons, have little to say to society in which the new master is not a person but an economic process become autonomous, a blind power ruling society. It is that understanding of capitalism, present in an inchoate form in Marx’s early writings, that leads to the shift away from the question of justice and to the critique of political economy. And it is just that move that constitutes the most radical heart of Marx’s challenge.

One of the principal moments of this challenge can be set out in a manner that neither requires of us that we accept the viability of Marx’s counterfactual world of communism nor demands that we subscribe to the details of his analysis of capitalism. We might sketch this central point as follows: (1) liberalism grasps one form of unfreedom, coercion, or the arbitrary rule of one will over another, which was the dominant form in precapitalist societies; (2) contractarianism and the language of rights are the correctives to coercive unfreedom—power, private and public, is now made, by and large, to rest on a consensual, nonhierarchical foundation; (3) but the sources of unfreedom are not exhausted by the sea of coercion. There is another form, objective compulsion, the reduction of autonomy of persons not through the arbitrary wills of others but rather as a consequence of the independence of the process of production itself, in other words, of the fact that the economy is autonomous and, beyond the control of individuals who occupy its various stages, it comes to legislate over them. (4) The liberal concept of unfreedom as the state of being coerced is not adequate to an understanding of objective compulsion and, conversely, its idea of autonomy as exclusionary rights against others (that is, as a counter to coercion) is too limited—limitations evident in the coexistence of this autonomy with the most radical restrictions on the power of self-determination brought about by the “silent compulsion,” the “cold-blooded inevitability” of economic laws.<sup>28</sup>

Like most painters of worlds to come, Marx was less concerned with the portrait itself than with the questions thereby raised about the present order of things. It is those questions, the center of his critique of liberalism, that remain of interest, however implausible (or impalatable) we may judge his vision of communism to have been and however flawed his arguments were in their details. It is the sense of that critique that I have sought to draw out in this essay.

## Notes

1. Michael Oakeshott, “On Being Conservative,” *Rationalism and Politics* (New York: Basic Books, 1962), 168–196.
2. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology*, in *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels Collected Works* (Vol. 5) (New York: International Publishers, 1976), 47. The *Collected Works* are cited hereafter as MECW plus the volume number. A brief discussion of the irony of this passage is to be found in Frank E. Manuel, “In Memoriam: Critique of the Gotha Program, 1875–1975,” *Daedalus* (Fall 1975), 59–77. For an extended analysis of some of the issues raised in this essay, see chapter XI of G.A. Cohen, *Karl Marx’s Theory of History: A Defense* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978).
3. Marx, *Letters from the Deutsch-Franzoesische Jahrbuecher*, in MECW, 3, 142.
4. Marx, *Capital* (Vol. 2), trans. David Fernbach (New York: Vintage Books, 1981), 185–186; Marx, *Capital* (Vol. 1), trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 255. Cited hereafter, respectively, as C2 and C1. For a more detailed analysis of the method of Marx’s political economy, see my “Explaining Capitalism: The Method of Marx’s Political Economy,” *Political Studies* (forthcoming).
5. Marx, C2, 185.
6. Marx, *Theories of Surplus Value* (Part 1), trans. Emile Burns (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1963), 270.
7. Marx *Zur Kritik der politischen Okonomie*, Manuscript 1861–1863, in *Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels Gesamtausgabe II 3.6* (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1982) 2024. These manuscripts are cited hereafter as MEGA plus the volume number.
8. Marx, MEGA II 3.6, 2058.
9. Marx, MEGA II 3.6, 2024.
10. Marx, *Grundrisse*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 6.
11. Marx, MEGA II 3.6, 2026–2027.
12. Frederick Engels, *The Condition of the Working-Class in England*, MECW: 4, 467; Marx, MEGA II 3.6, 2023. In Engels’s original the phrase is not in italics.
13. Marx, MEGA II 3.6, 174–175; Marx, *Grundrisse*, 615.
14. Marx, *Theories of Surplus Value* (Part 2), no translator cited (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1968), 405. Cited hereafter as TSV2.
15. Marx, C1, 345; Marx, MEGA II 3.1, 203–204.
16. Marx, MEGA II 3.6, 2024.
17. Marx, MEGA II 3.1, 288; Marx, C1, 179.
18. Marx, *Grundrisse*, 157.
19. Marx, *Grundrisse*, 650; Marx, C1, 899.
20. Marx, *Grundrisse*, 164, 196–197.
21. Marx, *Grundrisse*, 158.
22. Marx, MEGA II 3.6, 2013; Marx, *Grundrisse*, 470.
23. Marx, C1: 638; Marx, *Grundrisse*, 700; Marx, MEGA II 3.1, 244–246.
24. Marx, C1: 171–172; Marx, *Capital* (Vol. 3), trans. David Fernbach (New York: Vintage Books, 1981), 958–959.
25. Marx, TSV2: 405; Marx, *Grundrisse*, 172–173.
26. Marx, C3: 958–959.
27. Marx, C1: 416.
28. Marx, C1: 899; Marx, “Moralising Criticism,” MECW: 6, 336. See also G. A. Cohen, “The Structure of Proletarian Unfreedom,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 12, no. 1 (1982): 3–33.