

Prometheus Unbound

Karl Marx on Human Freedom

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Rumor has it that toward the end of his life Marx read through the works of Aeschylus in Greek every year. This has the feel of a biographer's exaggeration, but even if it does to some extent strain the facts, it is one of those fictions which ought to be true: many of us reading Marx are, I suspect, intrigued by the sense in which Marx is drawn to the Greeks, most obviously to Aristotle, but to Aeschylus as well. Marx is writing at a time—his time and ours—which is in some ways at the greatest possible distance from Athens, a time in which reason in the sense of the use of mind in the pursuit of the human good is in eclipse. Marx devotes his own enormous energies, culminating in his great work, *Capital*, to the formulation of the theory of this darkened period, a period in which rational man is in bondage to what Marx calls the *fetishism* of a commodity society. But out of that very theory comes the perception that the pendulum, now at the extreme of its negative swing, is destined to swing back once more, toward a restoration of the rational polity. Hence, in anticipation, Marx is already close to Aristotle. And the poignancy of the foresight of release from present suffering, out of the depths of human bondage, is an Aeschylean principle. Consider the opening line of the Oresteia trilogy, in which the Watchman, paradigmatic figure for both Marx and Aeschylus, cries out:

I pray the gods release from all this suffering. . .

θεους μεν αιτω τωνδ απαλλαγην πονων. . .

Both the burden, *πονοσ*, and the release, the reversal, *απαλλαγη*, are seen together, the one nested in the manner of the Greek genitive within the other, *τωνδ απαλλαγην πονων*. The release comes slowly,

through the long cycle of the tragic development, in the final persuasion of necessity in the Eumenides. Marx, in the same way, will see the nesting of a future release in the very laws of operation of a mindless economic order—and like that Protagonist, who is first the Watchman, but ultimately Agamemnon and Orestes, he reads the signs of an era yet to come.

But the figure who seems to me to come closest to Marx's sense of man's position is Prometheus. Prometheus is the old god, the Titan, who has been bound to a rock cliff by Zeus, as punishment for giving to mankind the symbolic gift of fire. He appears in only the one play *Prometheus Bound*, the rest of that trilogy having been almost entirely lost. In this case, then, we see only the first phase of the trilogy, that of bondage, and must envision for ourselves how Aeschylus would have composed the release: but I think it is in any case in that bondage that we best grasp, through the figure of Prometheus, Aeschylus' definition of man. And that definition, it seems to me, can be very helpful to us in attempting to understand Marx's vision of man as well—both in his bondage, and in the state of freedom which is implicit in the powers the bondage reveals. If I am not mistaken, Aeschylus and Marx are very close to one another in this vision of the Promethean spirit in history.

Let me explain before I go further the objective I have set for this discussion. I want, if I can, to formulate Marx's concept of human freedom. In a way, considering all the dimensions of Marx's concerns, this single focus on his concept of freedom would seem a very limited objective. But of course a concept of human freedom lies at the very center of any political enterprise, so that if we can understand this one concept we are well on the way to understanding the whole. Therefore, we do have, after all, a major undertaking before us. And this question may be of special interest to us, here at the nuclear center of America in these last dark decades of the twentieth century. For our major single national effort, to which our science, our technology, and our national economy are directed, is the continual preparation for ever-more-advanced nuclear warfare. And the target of all this preparation, the offense which is so terrible that we are ready at any moment to destroy life on a large part of our planet—is what we call "communism." It seems, then, that it would be well to know, before we go, what it was we were objecting to. And it is precisely be-

cause Marx is officially anathema to us, that it is probably more difficult in this country than in most to get any perspective on his writings, and in particular to grasp his concept of human freedom. I do not, of course, mean to imply that many Marxists understand Marx much better than we do, or that those societies which today call themselves “communist” represent the goals he intended for men. But there is the very real, and disturbing, possibility that some do understand something we don’t—and that if we and they understood each other better, we could at least have a more interesting conversation before we proceeded to destroy a large part of the human race, or all of it, over our differences.

Let me go back to Prometheus. I digressed because I wanted to make clear the particular sense in which I am interested in him tonight. I think he stands, both for Aeschylus and for Marx, as the figure of man himself, and that in that figure we can find a characterization of the essence of human freedom.

First, then, who is Prometheus? Prometheus is, as I have said, a Titan, which means that he is one of the oldest of the gods, older perhaps than Zeus himself. At the outset of the play, Zeus has completed a revolution against his father, Cronos, with Prometheus’ aid; but as the new tyrant of Olympus, Zeus has attempted to annihilate mankind, by denying them, or *us*, the arts by which to exist. Prometheus, as man’s friend among the gods, *philanthropos*, has thus in his turn revolted against Zeus, on our behalf. He has stolen *fire* from Hephaestus, as the principle of all the rational arts, and passed it on to us. In punishment for this transgression—that is, for insisting on the continued existence of mankind—Prometheus at the outset of the drama is being riveted by Hephaestus to a rock-face in Scythia. We, as spectators of the drama, become witnesses in effect to the crucifixion of that god who has saved us from destruction: he is the source of our rationality, and he is impaled precisely because he has dared to stand on our behalf against Olympus. The last spike is driven through his breast, but he cannot die; as a Titan, son of Earth herself, he sees beyond Zeus, both before and after, and it is his doom to endure. His is not simply the rational mind, but the historical mind: he in effect has Zeus bracketed, first having lent him reason, the secret weapon, to overthrow old force—but now knowing, as Zeus does not, the contingent fate of the new regime as well. Zeus is to be overthrown, in his turn, by a son of his

own—a potential fourth in the terrible cycle of gods which so preoccupies Aeschylus—if Zeus consummates a marriage which, unbeknownst to Zeus himself, has been proscribed by Fate. In time, over the ages, the thousands of years, Prometheus will trade that knowledge of Zeus' fate for his own freedom, and during that unimaginable span of punishment, Prometheus will all the while be fortified to unending defiance of Zeus by the knowledge that ultimately promethean mind will prevail—mind which *knows ahead, promanthanei*. It is this bold and unrelenting, principled defiance of Zeus which constitutes Prometheus' special fascination for Aeschylus. As a play, *Prometheus Bound* is a tour-de-force of the dramatic art, a drama in which the Protagonist, literally pinned to the earth, cannot so much as offer a gesture or change his position from beginning to end: action, then, is distilled to pure will. Prometheus, as mind riveted in time and space and forged by Zeus' repression to sheer will, becomes the fixed center of the world for both men and gods. He becomes, I think, a *self* in a unique way—a center of energy, willing and reasoning his way into a future which he in part foresees, and in part designs, and which will bring not only his own release, but through his defiance of tyranny, a new order in the cosmos. He will in time be released, he foreknows that. He will reveal to Zeus the secret of the forbidden marriage, and will thus in the nick of time prevent Zeus from fathering the son who would have overthrown him; and in exchange for that cosmic tip-off, Prometheus will be given his freedom. Thus in a way Prometheus becomes the surrogate for that Fourth God, successor to Zeus—the god who never was. As surrogate successor to Zeus, then, we have Prometheus himself, *unbound*.

Though Prometheus is a god, and a timeless god, a Titan, I think we must recognize that he becomes for Aeschylus not merely *philanthropos*, the *friend* of man, but *man himself*, and Prometheus Unbound is man in his full powers, free man. This is not, I think, *ho eleutheros*, the free man of Aristotle's *Politics* or the Platonic *Republic*. Aeschylus, Promethean himself, seems to have reached beyond the rational soul which contemplates eternal forms, to a new kind of soul in which *will* is primary, and in which reason does not intuit forms, but rather thrusts into an historic future in which things will be new, and of its own making. At least, I suspect it is this new definition of man, a Promethean principle of will and act, which Marx finds in Aeschylus, and identifies with his own.

When the pendulum of dialectical history swings back to rationality, then, I think Marx foresees it will be Promethean man, not the philosopher of the *Republic* or the statesman of the *Politics*, who will inherit the new era. And this succession Marx will see as a higher order of personal freedom, more radically individual and, yes, *creative*, than freedom within the Aristotelian polis.

1. SELF-ACTIVITY

With Prometheus, we seem to have foreseen a world-change: a leap out of the ancient world, into the modern, from the world of *forms*, to the world of *will*. Another figure comes forward, parallel to Prometheus, namely Faust: and indeed there is one precise moment in which Goethe permits us to watch Faust weighing that world-change, appropriately enough, as an act of translation. Faust is re-translating the opening line of the Gospel According to John: *εν αρχη ην ο λογος*—"in the beginning was the ... " what? Faust, taking on our behalf that fateful step into a new world, senses that it can no longer be translated "in the beginning was the *word*." He concludes by translating: "in the beginning was the *deed*." His German is "am Anfang war die *Tat*." *Tat* is the noun-form of the verb *tun*, to *do* or to *act*. It will help us with our study of Marx if we tentatively take that shift from *word* to *act* as the key to the new world. What will it entail?

Faust abandons his study—a library which is not merely his own, but is inherited, and full of wisdom stored in books out of the long western tradition—to commit himself to action. This is not an abandonment of his rational effort, but a thrust of restless mind into a new mode. Clearly Goethe is inviting us to a new, dramatic model of the workings of human reason—reason which works itself out not in relation to a form written with finality, but anew, through *act* itself. But perhaps, as with Prometheus, the crux of the difference is in the notion of *self*. Faust is radically a *self*, in a sense in which the rational soul for whom Aristotle writes the *Politics* and *Ethics* is not. If men are individual simply as *instances* of a species, differentiated by their "matter" as Aristotle says, but so deeply alike that in the act of understanding two minds become, as it were, fused into one undifferentiated intellect—then words reflecting forms are true vehicles of understanding: form is then first in the cosmos. But Faust is

to be understood in terms of that Creator God, the Lord, who, through Mephistopheles, in effect gives Faust his assignment in the drama, his own role, unique in history. Such a *created self* is in a different world from the *individuated soul* inhabiting the Aristotelian cosmos. This new self, radically individual, radically important, radically alone, we might say, has its own way to make in the world, and this is freedom in a new sense. It is a self with terrible options.

We have been a long while getting to Marx, but the transition through Goethe will, I believe, be helpful. The centerpiece, the keystone, of Marx's thought is a word built out of Faust's word *Tat*. Since it has no direct English counterpart, it will be worth a minute to trace the expansion of that little word *Tat* into Marx's own larger term. *Tat*, which, as we saw, means *act*, in its first expansion becomes *Tätigkeit*, the abstract noun, *activity*. A second expansion identifies that activity with the *self*, in German, *Selbst*. The result, a German mouthful, is Marx's term: *Selbstbetätigung*. The most literal translation would be *self-activity*, and that is the term the translators give us. But of course that is a manufactured term, for we have no such word in English, so that the most central of Marx's words does not convey much in our language. We have to circumnavigate it with words like *initiative*, *vitality*, *restlessness*, or *spontaneity*. I take the liberty now of suggesting that this is the very Promethean principle, that *drive* which will not let the self rest in chains, or under tyranny: thus where we lack a word, Aeschylus, looking beyond his own world, may have provided us with an image.

"Self-activity" sounds a little like Aristotle's *physis*, *nature*: an indwelling principle of motion. Marx is immensely drawn to Aristotle's terms and concepts, and indeed he calls the opposite of self-activity "accident," very much as Aristotle does, as if he were simply transcribing the *Physics*. But we must be careful, and indeed it will be instructive to contrast *physis*, *nature*, and *Selbstbetätigung*, self-activity. One way to do that will be to set Aristotle's notion of making, craftsmanship, against Marx's account of what he calls the "labor-process."

Aristotle sees art, *techne*, as a rational process in his own sense. The competent craftsman has first a form in mind. This is the *telos*, the end of the work. The artist, in short, knows in advance what he is doing; there will be a word for it—let us say he is making a *chair*—and there will be a

definition to go with the word. Form is primary, here as everywhere in the cosmos, for Aristotle. The crux of *techne*, the art, is to confront matter, the formless, with pre-existing form, and to know how to shape matter so as to bear form as fully as possible. The more complete the *techne*, the more smoothly and effortlessly this motion of *poiesis*, this making, takes place. If ships grew by nature, says Aristotle in his inimitable way, that effortless process would be like the work of a fully competent shipwright.

Some of the things Marx says about the labor-process sound very much like this, but as the account unfolds (in Chapter VII of *Capital*, a chapter which we might regard as Marx's *Physics*) we begin to recognize signs of the world-change. Form and matter suddenly reveal a certain curious symmetry: not only the object, but the workman undergoes change—*work* and *workman* develop together in the unity of the work-process. Marx says, "The work is objectified, as the object is worked." The *work* has clearly taken on a new sense, as something in its own right, something *subjective*, which finds *expression* in the *objective* result. What does this introduction of the terms "subject" and "object" do to our understanding of art? There was not such subject/object split in Aristotle's account of *techne*, or in his cosmos. Aristotle's workman was not a *subject*, but merely a rational mind going about its business in an orderly way.

Marx has turned craftsmanship into Faustian drama: what was simply *telos*, an intelligible end, has become *Zweck*, a goal, and the artist is characterized, not by the easy competence of his work, but by what Marx calls *der zweckgemässe Wille*, the goal-oriented *will*. The instruments of labor, which for Aristotle were merely rational methods of the prudent mind, are now *Leiter der Tätigkeit*, conductors, perhaps lightning rods, of the artist's activity. For Marx, then, art has become *process*, in which the goal-seeking will of a subjective *self* finds its way to objective expression, a product which is partly foreseen but at the same time something new, while in this process the artist discovers himself objectively as something he had never known, perhaps had never been, before. At the seat of this drama is *self-activity*. We need only contrast this with Aristotle's quiet remark, "Art does not deliberate," in order to sense the full measure of the world-change, which will reflect in turn upon the contrast between *physis* and self-activity. We have, incidentally, witnessed the birth of our modern word *art*, which today leans so far on the Faustian, Promethean side that

we cannot safely use it to translate *techne*, a pregnant difficulty which often troubles discussion in our seminars and tutorials. The making of the world in the *Timaeus*, for example, is a craftsman's job, not a work of Promethean art. In his account of the drama of the labor-process, Marx shows us in effect how we can understand art as *creative*, without misusing terms: something genuinely new, not an imitation of a pre-existing form, is emerging. Similarly freedom of speech is important to us today, and troubles us in our reading of the *Republic*, because free speech is vital when there is the possibility that something *new* may need to be said.

That little word "new" perhaps contains it all. Aristotle in the *Physics* argues convincingly that time does not exist (that is what he means when he says that it is nothing but the measure of motion); it is contrary to reason that there be anything new. For if it is anything at all, it must be an instance of being that always was. By contrast, one way Marx has of epitomizing the labor-process is to say that in it, *Unruhe* leads to *Sein*—out of restlessness comes being. Self-activity leads to new being. Marx is not joking—he really means this. There are forms. . . but we make them. The forms have a history. And among the forms, is the form of man. Yes, man has made man: what man is to be is a question not yet answered, a question for history.

Marx did not invent this notion, or this new world. He inherits it from many sources—from Goethe, as we have seen, and even from Aeschylus; but above all he takes it to a large extent from Hegel. Hegel, Marx says, must be stood on his feet: where Hegel sees the making as *ideal*, in man's self-consciousness, Marx sees it as *real*, in man's practice. But Hegel, while being stood right side up, remains, I suspect, to some important extent intact.

As you can see, we are now in momentous conflict with those most powerful arguments out of the Platonic dialogues. Has *being* been reduced to *becoming*? Becoming *what*? If forms *change*, how can words *mean*? What of justice, and the moral choice? If there are no unchanging standards, have we not fallen into moral chaos, slipped completely into the hands of the Ionians—is all, then, *relative*? Marx says, in effect: brace yourself! He and Hegel are not speaking of chaos, there is a way in which reason can be reconciled with history—in which the *new* can be meaningful, and in which the *moral* can be unfolding.

THESES ON FEUERBACH:¹ THESES I-IV

There is always a difficulty, of course, in lecturing about books which only Seniors have read in the course of the Program. In order that we have some common ground; I have distributed a selection from Marx's so-called "Theses on Feuerbach". Feuerbach, I should explain, was a student of Hegel, who after a couple of years became disaffected and left to try to say as completely as he could the opposite of what Hegel was saying—for Hegel's idealism, Feuerbach substitutes a thoroughgoing materialism. What Marx says in the "Theses" is essentially that Feuerbach did not go far enough. I suspect you may not have been able to make much of these Theses out of their context, but let us see now whether they will help us as a response to our concern about a mode of human reason which proposes to join *being* and *becoming*, and for which the *forms* have a history.

THESIS I.

The main trouble with "materialism"... up to the present time is that it thinks of its subject matter—namely, reality, the domain of the senses—always as an *object*, or an *observation*. It thus has not included action—tangible human activity, or *praxis*...

In this first thesis, Marx appears to be defining a new "materialism," "materialism" in a sense which he says has never before been ascribed to the term. Other materialisms have always dealt with things as objects, objects, he says, to be looked upon (*angeschaut*); this is, of course, pretty much what we mean by *objective science*. Marx's new proposition is this: our own, subjective selves take objective form in the working out of our activity—in doing things. (Marx uses the Greek word, *praxis*.) This is what we have just seen in his account of the labor-process, in *art*. In such *praxis*, the *self* makes itself objective, visible. Hence, Marx says, human activity, *Tätigkeit*, must be recognized as belonging to the domain of the senses, and in this way the active *self* becomes the concern of an inclusive materialism. All that Marx means here by "materialism" is that discipline whose subject-matter is the domain of the senses, whatever enters sensation. Evidently this one realm of reason, or science, is very far from "materialist" in any ordinary sense: it does not confine itself to inert objects, matter, bodies subject to laws of motion, but it includes all that enters the real

world, especially men, not as objects, but as subjects, selves, manifest in their actions. The subjective and the objective coalesce as the concern of one science of the real.

THESIS II.

The question whether human thought attains to objective truth is not at all a question for theory, but a practical question. We have to establish the truth of our thoughts in *praxis*: the truth, that is, the reality and the power, the this-sided-ness, of our thoughts. . . .

In the first thesis, Marx looked at reason in terms of its object. In this second thesis, he looks at the thinking process itself. Is there objective truth? This is very much like our question from the Dialogues: does dialectic have an object—do the forms exist? Marx shifts the ground of the question:

Man must establish the truth. . . of his thinking in *praxis*.

What is it to *have a thought*? Marx is suggesting here, I believe, that we *have* the thought (the German word might mean, we manifest the thought, establish it, prove it, or show it) *in praxis*. When we do so, it will be real, powerful, and as he says, “on this side”—that is, on the side of our real lives. The thought will be part of our lives; in that way we *have the thought*. Thus, the first thesis argued the significance of *praxis as object*: through his action, we see the self of the artist. This second thesis argues the significance of *praxis as the vehicle* of thought: in *praxis*, our own action, we manifest to ourselves our own thought. In this second thesis, we might say, the thought-process and the work-process, art, have coalesced. The new science does not regard human activity with detachment: its very mode of knowing is action, it is inherently *involved*.

THESIS III.

The (old) materialist doctrine of the changing of circumstances and of education forgets that circumstances are themselves changed by men, and that the educator must himself be educated: . . .

This third thesis shifts the ground again, from the individual thought process, to history. Evidently, at any given moment in history, today, for example, we live in the midst of circumstances given to us in the form of

social relations, social institutions inherited from the past. It is not clear how much we might be able to do about this, but on the whole we have to work out our lives as best we can in terms of these given conditions. A crude materialism—the old materialism—would say that they *determine* our lives. Feuerbach has said, “Man ist was man isst”—“Man is what he eats”. Marx does not say this. He reminds us that “circumstances are changed by men”—that is, that history consists of an interplay, self-activity acting through and upon conditions. When he speaks in this thesis of the “fusion of the changing of circumstances with human activity,” I understand him to be saying that *history is praxis, art, writ large*. Elsewhere he speaks of our inherited social structures as “material” or “inorganic”, and of our own activity upon them as “organic”. Hence, acting in history, we are the workman as artist, giving scope to his own purposeful will—and if we combine this insight with that of the second thesis, we see that history has become for Marx our thought process writ large. To think seriously is to act boldly, in history—that is, to seize inherited social structures as material on which to work, and to change them, to turn them to our own goals. Such action Marx calls not just *praxis*, but *revolutionary praxis*.

THESIS IV.

Feuerbach begins with the fact of religious self-alienation, the doubling of the world into one which is religious, and another which is worldly. His task is to dissolve the religious world into its worldly foundation. But the fact that this worldly foundation takes off from itself and establishes for itself an independent realm in the clouds, can only be explained in terms of the inner strife and self-contradiction of this worldly foundation itself. . . .

This fourth thesis turns to religion. Marx is not only a materialist, he is an atheist. However, just as his “materialism” embraces self and the subjective, and the *praxis* of his “materialism” becomes the medium of thought itself, so his atheism takes religion extremely seriously. Christianity suffers the same fate as Hegel: it too must be stood on its feet, but, like Hegel, to an impressive extent it is preserved as an invariant of the rotation. The Christian dream Marx sees as a transformed projection of the real world—a realm in the clouds. The Christian brotherhood of man is a wish and an idea, born of the violence and contradiction of a dark phase of the world’s

history. Christianity is thus a dialectical insight, a moment of thought, but the real task for thought is to establish that insight in *praxis*, to realize the vision of brotherhood, in our lives.

The fact that the suffering and negation of a commercial, class society generates the idea of its opposite illustrates the dialectical progress of thought, in history. As in a Platonic dialogue, thought advances through refutation. In the dialogue, Gorgias, for example, learns what he *is* by discovering, through the anguish of refutation, that he *is not what he thought he was*—he is better than he knew. In history, we make our way by discovering that the institutions we have inherited in fact deny *ourselves*. Historical *praxis* is dialectical thought. That is why Marx says that it is inherently revolutionary *praxis*: it questions, and dares to change, inherited forms.

II. ALIENATION

Thus there is, in our modern society, a general sense of frustration, dismay, and something we tend to call in a vague way “alienation”. We sense that the world of modern technology, modern finance, class-divisions (however covert), and nuclear warfare is not really a proper home for man: the self sees in the world in which it lives not its own image, but its opposite. This extreme negative swing of the pendulum, away from the valid expression of the human self, is a dialectical crisis for us. Let us leave the examination of the “Theses on Feuerbach” for a moment to consider this situation of alienation more carefully.

Although everywhere the processes of our society are devastatingly rational in detail—to say that they are “computerized” sum its up—the net result makes no sense for man: senseless and increasing devastation of the earth’s resources, escalation of poverty and hunger in the face of growing quantities and concentrations of food and wealth, the proliferation of unsought and unwanted technologies, and, most serious, most unbelievable of all, the world poised at every moment for instant nuclear destruction. We sense that we live in a world gone mad, but we sense, too, that there is nothing we can do about it. No available act of political decision will have any significant effect on it—nobody is asking our opinion about the real questions. So we are left with a sense of alienation, and

possibly a heightened will to make a better world for man if there is any way to do so.

Already in the midst of the nineteenth century, Marx experienced essentially these feelings, which he diagnosed technically as “alienation”, and he traced them to their source in the structure of society. As so often, here too Marx brings Aristotle forward as consultant, and I think it may help us to look with Marx at a passage he quotes from the first book of the *Politics*. Aristotle is here helping us to locate the art of economics by making a basic distinction between *economics* (*oikonomike*, housekeeping) properly so-called, and something else, a spurious economics, which he calls *chrematike*, “chrematistic,” from the Greek word *ta chremata*, *money*.

One kind of acquisition therefore in the order of nature is a part of the household art (*oikonomike*), in accordance with which. . . that art must procure. . . a supply of those goods, capable of accumulation, which are necessary for life and useful for the community of city or household. And it is of these goods that riches in the true sense at all events seem to consist. For the amount of such property sufficient in itself for a good life is not unlimited. . . .

But there is another kind of acquisition that is specially called wealth-getting (*chrematike*), and that is so called with justice; and to this kind it is due that there is thought to be no limit to riches and property. Owing to its affinity to the art of acquisition of which we spoke, it is supposed by many people to be one and the same as that. . .

This distinction between true economics, which is rationally limited and measured by the human good, and spurious economics, or chrematistic wealth-getting, which is uncontrolled by any rational measure, but moves only from quantity to greater quantity, already seems to point to the central fault of our society. Aristotle’s analysis continues to the fundamental distinction between two ways of appraising goods; this becomes the foundation of Marx’s analysis of our capitalist society.

With every article of property (Aristotle goes on) there is a double way of using it; *both* uses are related to the article itself, but not related to it in the same manner—one is *peculiar* to the thing, and the other

is not peculiar to it. Take for example a shoe—there is its *wearing as a shoe*, and there is its employment as an article of *exchange*. . . .

To say, then, that we live in a society which has gone chrematistic, is to say that our processes of production and distribution are ruled not by *use value* but by *exchange value*—that is to say, we make things not because they are good, but because they will sell. Our society is governed, Marx stresses, not by considerations of the good life—human use, or human purpose—but by the infinite and essentially irrational criterion of ever-increasing quantity. There is no limit to increase of quantity, since one quantity is as such exactly like another, and we are always at the same starting-point, driven by the same urge, to make another cycle of profit. What we call “economics” is therefore not the choice of effective means to achieve human ends, but that false “art or skill” of getting more, and more, and more. Progress is measured by growth in the GNP. In these terms, we already see the roots of alienation in the separation of life from human ends, and that this alienation is intimately associated with our capitalist society, a society which is “economic” only in the chrematistic, and not in the true, sense.

Beginning with this distinction out of Aristotle, Marx lays the foundation for a scientific study of the modern economic order in his book, *Capital*. *Capital* is as a scientific work in many ways strikingly analogous to Newton’s *Principia*, and I shall point out one of these ways in a moment. But we should notice also one huge difference: Newton writes of eternal natural laws; Marx writes the theory of a passing set of social relations, a moment of history, and his theory reaches to the very laws of their passage. In this sense, *Capital* belongs to the new understanding of reason: it analyzes, not timeless truth, but truth incorporated in man’s *praxis*. The *Theses* have shown us that *praxis* bears man’s self-expression, and his understanding of himself—his knowledge—so that the study of a passing social structure is in no way to be despised. Nor is it a matter of regret that, if Marx is right, his great work, *Capital*, will one day have no object. Thought belongs to history.

With this disclaimer before us we can observe that the first and fundamental likeness between the *Principia* and *Capital* is that each is built on a strict and universal mathematical quantity. Where Newton first defines *quantity of matter*, and thereafter secures all of his analyses of

the physical world on this one quantitative foundation, Marx defines *exchange value* equally quantitatively and exactly, and thereafter constructs all of his analyses of the functioning of the capitalist economy on this one fixed ground. It is ironic that our contemporary economists tend to fault Marx most for his preoccupation with this supposedly unnecessary foundation—it is as if one were to fault Newton for his insistence on a firm definition of the “quantity of matter”! We cannot, of course, deal adequately with this concept tonight, but let me say simply that Marx adopts from such radical predecessors as Adam Smith and Benjamin Franklin the postulate that the exchange value, or simply *value*, of any commodity arises from the investment of labor in it. Value is then measured in hours of labor time. To be strict, as Marx is, we must reduce energetic and lazy labor, efficient and inefficient, highly trained and simple, to one common unit: thus, more exactly, Marx defines the *value* of any commodity, such as Aristotle’s shoes, as the amount of socially necessary, socially average simple labor time which has gone into its making. Money is merely an expression of this labor value. Almost everything we can point to in our surroundings is an object of exchange in our chrematistic world, which means only that it has, or has had, its money price—and that in turn means that it has been reduced by the appraisal of the market process to equivalent labor hours. Why else do we pay for a book, or for shoes, or for a house—or an education—what we do, except that ultimately they, and the materials and machines which have gone into their making before them, have a common measure—have cost so much of human time?

Aristotle, Marx is very much interested to point out, balked at just such an analysis—pricing, Aristotle decided, was simply irrational, for he could find no common measure between a coat and a house. That historic *aporia* which Aristotle faced, Marx says, was highly significant: Aristotle was right to stop where he did. For in his time, in a society including slave labor, there was no common measure. Only when men become socially equal do their labor hours constitute a common measure. Hence our political statement that men are created equal, and our economic principle of the universal exchange of their products as commodities in one single network of markets, reflect each other, and, more deeply, correspond to our conviction of the universal worth of the human *self*. Beginning with Aristotle, we have once again taken a major step beyond him, and that step, towards a universal, quantitative chrematistic of our commodity

world, is at the same time the passage from *use value*—a society which is a home for man—to *exchange value*, and a society of total alienation.

When a man makes a product, as we found in our consideration of self-activity, his purposeful will shapes an object in which he as worker finds expression: the self knows itself, and finds satisfaction, in the product. We assumed when we spoke that way that the product was indeed the object of the worker's will—that it was for him a goal, a good thing, a use-value. If on the other hand, he makes it *as a commodity*, not because he prizes it but in order to sell at the highest price he can command, the product's significance for him is evidently eroded. And if, finally, he works not for himself but for someone else, so that the product is not even his own to exchange, the bond between the worker and the work is altogether severed. He may or may not in some distant way approve the product, but if his labor-power has been purchased and commanded, and he does not work out of free will, but from necessity, the significance of his work is lost. This is the deeper root of modern alienation, according to Marx. Still further, the man who sells his labor-power to another has himself become a commodity. Not only is the product not his own, but his very time, his energy, and his will are not his own—in short his *life* during the hours he has sold to an employer, is not his own. The ultimate analysis of alienation is not, then, that the product of man's work is not his own, but that his own activity, his life, has been alienated. That is not just a matter of hours. What is lost is the opportunity for the expression of *self*, which is at the center of Marx's concern for human freedom, and no doubt the center of our own concern as well. When we make ourselves commodities, we perform the original act of alienation, reducing what is most personal, what is most original and strictly creative, self-activity, to common coin. When we market ourselves, we do that—and every one of us who works for another, has performed that act of alienation.

We might at this point pause to correct some false impressions about Marx. It is commonly supposed that Marx is concerned with fair, or uniform, distribution of the *product* of labor. He is not unconcerned with that; however, we see that this is not the center of his concern, which is rather the free command of one's own time, one's own *life*. It is commonly supposed that Marx recommends a uniform or regimented society, in which the individual is engulfed in a mass. We see that the situation is

precisely the opposite, for Marx takes as his measure the total freedom of the creative individual. Marx, looking at us, says that the freedom we imagine we possess is to a large degree illusory, precisely because we do not freely command the hours of our working days—we alienate ourselves in a way he regards as a fundamental violation of personal freedom. Finally, readers of *Capital* often make the initial mistake of supposing that Marx *recommends* the reduction of all labor to a homogeneous measure, while, on the contrary, he describes with surgical precision what in fact he observes happening in the commodity society, our society, for which he is building the theory. Marx does not write *Capital* because he loves capitalism! He writes it to show us our own situation, to help us see where we are in history, and hence to determine where, in strict realism, we may expect to advance. We do not always reflect on the fact, but whenever we turn to the classified ads in the local paper to begin the process we call “getting a job,”—we alienate ourselves. Marx is not recommending this, but simply pointing it out.

III. HUMAN SOCIETY

In the logic of dialectic, recognition that we are alienated from our true selves in an automated, chrematistic society leads not only to a sense of human frustration, but at the same time to a growing perception of what a genuinely *free* human society might entail. That is the way we learn. It is not Marx’s manner—indeed, it would not be compatible with his account of the operation of human reason—to begin by writing down a prescription for a new society: we must find our way to it, according to Marx, in and through a commitment to new *praxis*. Readers of *Capital* who seek in that work a schema of a proposed life under socialism come away disappointed; in that respect, it would be much more useful as a handbook for readers of the *Wall Street Journal*. Yet it is possible in Marx’s writings—and out of our own experience, if Marx is right—to identify a new direction. Let us see what guidance we can get from Marx, turning back to certain of the remaining *Theses on Feuerbach*.

THESIS VI.

Feuerbach dissolves (or “resolves”) religious essence into *human* essence. But this human “essence” is no abstraction dwelling in each individual person. In real ity, it is an ensemble of social relations.

When Marx says, here, that “. . . the human essence is no abstraction dwelling within each single individual,”—what really is this proposition which he is rejecting? It is, I believe, different in an important way from Aristotle’s understanding of the form of man. Aristotle’s forms are not “abstract,” and for Aristotle the form of man draws man essentially into the community—he can be himself only in the polity. Feuerbach speaks instead of *abstract* form, a universal separately present in each individual man. Marx denies the existence of such abstract form, but he does not go back to Aristotle either. What, then, is man for Marx? Our essence (or perhaps now, we should translate, our being) is the *ensemble of our social relations*. What am I? I am not man simply: I am late twentieth-century American man, in a number of more particular social relations which are quite decisive for me. Does such a *social* definition limit me arbitrarily? No, I think Marx is saying that it is simply a realistic appraisal of the fact that I essentially have a place in society, and in history, and that to grasp that reality for what it is, is to gain new and more human power. Note in particular that it does not cut modern man off from his predecessors—it shows the way back to the ancients, for that way is part of the historical, social relation which defines us. Does man have a nature? Only in the sense that we are reshaping our nature, as we are reshaping the rest of the natural world: man is not limited by his nature; we are full of possibilities, and we cannot at any point know what they might yet be, though we can in part foresee them. In place of an eternal form, a definition of man—whether Aristotelian, or abstract, in the modern manner—we have Prometheus: the unity and direction of the rational principle, the unrelenting *self*. What keeps it on course? Not eternal forms, but one inner principle, about which Hegel and Marx seem after all not to be in such fundamental disagreement: *mind*, finding its way to new forms embodied in new modes of human society, new Republics—and with them, new possibilities for human freedom.

If we understand the term “materialism” in the very special way discussed in connection with the earlier Theses, we can give this course of striving through history the name, *dialectical materialism*.

Let us move on now, directly to the eighth Thesis:

THESIS VIII.

All social life is in its essence *practical*. All mysteries which turn theory into mysticism find their rational solution in human *praxis* and in the understanding of this *praxis*.

What does Marx mean here by “mysteries which lead theory to mysticism,” and the claim that such mysteries “find their rational solution in human practice?” I think we can illustrate this, and thereby clarify it, with a rather familiar example.

We in the United States have had a long-standing desire to bring freedom to peoples of other parts of the world. I think at our best we have, over the years, been quite sincere about that. We have given loans, sent technicians, established trade, made investments, even dispatched armies and waged fearful wars. Yet we have seen over the years a widening gap between our selves as “haves” and other nations as “have-nots;” and we have discovered that what we thought would be “development” has proved the systematic development of underdevelopment, as third-world economies have retrograded, and those nations have grown to be ever deeper in debt. The theory of freedom has thus become a *mystery*: we continue to speak of the “free world,” but we know that it is everywhere marred by political police of our own training, dictatorship, corruption, and economic distress. The idea, thus floating over reality like Laputa, becomes a *mysticism*. Marx here gives us a piece of direct and sound advice: the solution will not be in the domain of theory or abstract ideas—a *rational solution* will come in and through concrete human practice, and in the comprehension of that practice. Promethean reason will in time work its way around such mysticism. Of course it is not we, but other, revolutionary, forces which are breaking through the fetters of an ineffective, confining theory. And of course, it is not by accident that we keep finding ourselves on the wrong side of such issues.

THESIS IX.

The highest point to which observational materialism attains—that is, materialism which does not grasp the domain of the senses as practical activity—is the observation of single individuals and civil society.

We spoke earlier of the contrast between an “old” materialism, which was that of objective science, seeing reality at a distance, as an onlooker, and the “new” materialism proposed by Marx, which is involved in *praxis*, and sees human reason as moving in and through concrete activity. Marx now knits that earlier consideration of two forms of materialism—which are really simply two ideas of human reason itself—to two corresponding political ideas.

When the old materialism looks at society it will see man “objectively”: that is, it will see *abstract* man, man as an isolated individual. Of course, the social scientist will see huge numbers of such men, but their groups will be simply aggregations of isolated individuals, heaps of social atoms. By contrast, when the new reason looks at man, it sees him as an inherently social being, social in his very essence—and the new reason itself will operate dialectically, through its own involvement in these social processes. The old reason is objective, cold, distant; and it sees abstract, isolated objects—*things*. The new reason moves through involvement, and it will see man as a social being, whose groups are not accidental to him, but essential.

What society will the old mode of reason describe? It will be a society in which people relate to one another competitively, for individual gain, or group together out of convenience or necessity; this is what Marx calls “civil society.” The corresponding political motto will be, “The best government is the least government.” Each citizen will be as independent as possible of others. The highest aim of the political structure will be to guarantee equal individual *rights*, meaning the right of each individual to this independence. The political unity will thus be formal, unifying a daily reality of practical life which is as free—that is, as *atomic*—as possible. We see this as coming close to describing our own political ideals, and our own society—and of course we have seen the corresponding “old” materialism as characterizing our concept of “objective” science. Marx prizes highly such political freedoms, and the rights we enjoy under our Constitution; he suffered immensely under the denial of such rights in his own time. But they yield the alienated society we have described, and we are thus caught in a contradiction. Politically and legally, the individual self in our society is treated with great formal respect, and is set as free as possible. But the realities of civil life in the same society leave

the self alienated, without a home, and thus deny it real freedom. This very contradiction is teaching us dialectically, Marx would suggest, that our society is not yet the highest form. Any move from our present form must preserve political and legal freedoms inviolate, but it must at the same time shift from the irrationality of isolated civil life to a new rational polity—a polity *rational* in the new sense of “reason,” reason which does not merely collect statistics and turn the handles of existing mechanisms, but which is prepared to learn through dialectical commitment.

We can say very simply, in a general way, what that change would be. Man would reshape existing social structures so as to turn them to serve human purposes—but to do that would be a social effort, and could only be consequent upon man’s recognizing that he is not in essence an isolated entity, but an inherently social being, who cares not only for his private castle, but for that social home in which we all collectively live. To take such effective social action toward freedom, man must learn, Marx says, that he is both a Promethean *self* and, like Prometheus, a social being whose thinking, to be effective, must take social form. Individual freedom and social thought and action are not contradictory; they are two aspects of a single Promethean principle. Prometheus chained in isolation, gives all his thought to the future of the polity.

THESIS X.

The standpoint of the old materialism is civil society; the standpoint of the new is human society, or social mankind.

We had given a name to the old polity; now Marx names the new. Where the old society, our own, is called civil society, the new he names *human society*—one in whose structures man can recognize himself and his own purposes. When he calls the members of this society “social mankind,” he clearly does not mean *mass* society as in the caricatures of socialism. He means individuals, freer than we are, who have won that freedom by recognizing that it cannot be gained through retreat from society, but through rational social commitment.

THESIS XI.

Philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point is to *change* it.

This final claim, in the eleventh thesis, is a corollary of those which have preceded. *Objective* reason looked upon the world, and interpreted it; *real* reason, the new philosophy, which knows that theory is fused with practice, and that the object of reason is form which is evolving, will know that it can only learn by entering upon practice. Its *modus operandi* will thus be practice, dialectical practice which does not accept but questions old forms. Hence its “point will be to change the world.” Not for the sake of change, but because history is a dialectical argument, and that argument has not yet reached its end.

CONCLUSION

It might well seem that Marx is merely a dreamer, and that by insisting on a serious definition of freedom as self-activity, full command of one’s own time, and envisioning this as realized to a new extent in something called human society, he has left realistic possibility behind. There are, I think, two modes of response to this objection. One is, that the technological possibilities now in our hands are almost unlimited, and certainly at least beyond anybody’s present reckoning. It is impossible to say what might be accomplished if we turned over our *present* factories and skills to production for rational human ends. Vast quantities of unwanted products could be quickly eliminated, vast hours of time now wasted on efforts to persuade ourselves to buy things we do not want, could immediately be saved. Public transportation could be reinvented; we could rebuild our devastated cities, and restore the blessings of life to the pedestrian. The list of such rational transformations, which are *physically* within our present grasp, is virtually endless. Beyond these immediate possibilities, we have before us the almost unlimited ability to set machines to work for us, and through automation, to release ourselves from a very large part of the labor we now perform, even with respect to necessary or wanted functions. The length of the working day could certainly be cut to a fraction of the present hours. From an engineering point of view, these things are available to us. What is it which stands between us and the redirection of our society toward such rational, human ends?

The obstacles are not physical. We have all the Promethean arts at our command—except perhaps one, the real fire: the ability to reorganize our society so as to make these physical possibilities socially attainable. We

are Prometheus, fully able to foresee a new order, but pinned to a system which denies us the realization of all that lies within reason's grasp. This is perhaps the most acute form alienation takes for us, and the sharpest goad to dialectical thought. At least, so Marx might diagnose our case.

The other answer is that Marx is in much of his work a scrupulous realist, and he labored with enormous energy for years to come to grips with the realities of the system within which we live. The result is his book, *Capital*, certainly a powerful analysis of the structure and function of the capitalist system. This theory is perhaps Marx's Promethean secret. Capitalism has of course taken new forms over the century since Marx wrote—above all, the *corporation* has become the capitalist of first instance, and monopoly capital has absorbed much of the market process which Marx, like Adam Smith before him, tends to presuppose. But beneath this, his analysis may remain sound, and the laws of motion which he derived, implying secular trends to ever-increasing crises, may be holding true. The consequence that Marx drew was that capitalism is not a system which can remain viable over the very long run; it contains inner contradictions which will force a move to new social forms. In other words, Marx is not so much a dreamer as a Promethean analyst, and there may yet be reason to take his predictions into account.

He foresaw as inevitable a revolution in which the chrematistic society, capitalism founded on private ownership of the means of production, would be replaced by a use-value society, in which human reason would master rather than serve its instrument of production. How man would guide the forces of production to human purposes if he had such a chance, there is no way for Marx to say, since man has never been in that position. Man has never had command of his own time, has never been asked to decide how he would use it. Social forms of a free society would have to be developed almost from scratch, through the excruciating dialectic of praxis. But the Promethean principle is constant: Man will not accept life under conditions of contradiction and alienation forever without rebellion, and he will contrive new ways to bring reason to bear on social forms, in something like what Marx calls, "human society." Marx asks us to move from an individualistic society to a commitment to human society, and thereby to advance to a new understanding of ourselves; not as isolated beings but as what Marx calls species-beings—that is, human

beings. The free human self—the Promethean self, unbound—ends its alienation, and finds itself at last free by being in a society in which it can be at home. The individual is then both a free self, and truly a member in good standing of the human race. Only by endorsing our common life together in this way as truly our own can we be individually free, or can we achieve rational lives directed to human goals.

Marx says somewhere that Prometheus' greatest gift to man is that he showed him the way out of the darkness of the cave in which he had always lived, and gave him a "dwelling full of light." In that image, I think, we come as close as we can in this brief discussion to Marx's concept of rational human freedom.

1. To be found in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, (New York 1965), 197-199.