

Marx's Social and Economic Theory

Work and the Human Condition: Winter 2009

I. Marxism: Scientific and Utopian

II. Alienation

III. Political Economy

I. Marxism: What Kind of Theory?

Is Marxism...

... a theory of social science that is intended to describe how societies work and how they develop through history?

— or —

... an ethical/political theory that is intended to prescribe for us how to judge societies as good or bad, policies as right or wrong, and how to guide our own actions?

Marxism can be considered in both ways, yet they are distinct. These two are often confused.

In this lecture, I will treat Marxism as a descriptive theory of social science.

Marxism as a Scientific Theory

Purpose: To *explain* social phenomena by developing **laws** of social science (history).

Compare: Newtonian law of gravity

Marxist laws are intended to be ***deterministic***.

People are caused to act according to strict laws that admit of no exception — no individual freedom.

According to scientific Marxism, concepts and principles of ethics and politics are illusions.

Marxist laws are intended to be ***organicist***.

Condition of society as a whole determines the condition of the individuals within it.

Opposite of ***reductionist***: A *reductionist* theory explains the condition of the whole (society) by referring to the conditions of the parts (individuals).

Marxist laws are ***materialist***.

Material conditions determine all other social conditions (religion, ideology, culture); other social conditions do not determine material conditions.

Individuals' subjective reports are to be critiqued by appeal to the theory. (In common with all social theories: Freudianism, structuralism, etc.)

II. Alienation

Alienation concerns **the present** — no claims about:

- how people are *naturally*
- how people are *necessarily*
- a “state of nature”
- cf. Marx, *Selected Writings* 59

Workers are alienated in two ways:

1. Workers **make things** they don't own
2. Workers **work in ways** that aren't their own

Alienation:

- **results** from workers' material circumstances
 - “means of production” = how they make things
 - “means of reproduction” = how they survive, procreate
- **shapes** workers' attitudes, beliefs, preferences, ideology

“But *I'm* not alienated!”

Response: Subjective reports are open to critique — not the final basis of evidence

III. Political Economy

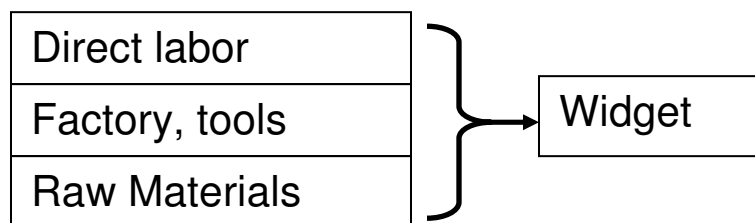
Economic and political conflicts are intertwined

- People's political interests and positions *reflect* their economic interests (material conditions)
- Economic conflicts are replicated in political conflicts

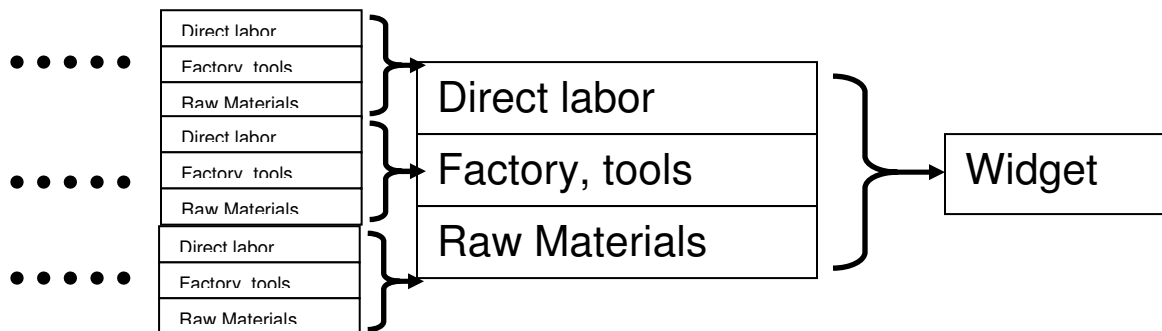
Economic Thesis: Labor Theory of Value

The value of a commodity is the sum total of the labor that it took to produce it (more precisely: that it *would take* currently to produce it).

Factors of Production:

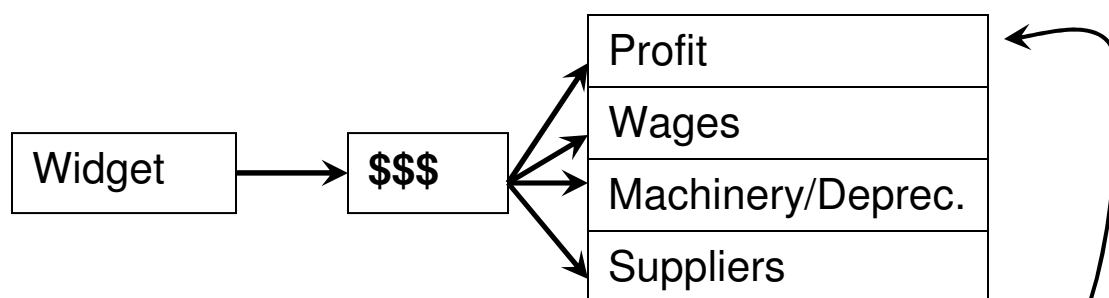


Factors of Production, Expanded



Factors terminate in labor (raw materials are necessary but contribute no value by themselves)

What Happens After Production?



Where did this come from?

Surplus Value and Exploitation

Profit is forcibly extracted from workers by paying them less than their labor is worth.

Capitalists (owners of the means of production) can do this because they have greater economic (and political) power.

Exploitation: The forcible extraction of surplus value of labor from workers.

Capital Accumulation

Exploitation is essential because...

- ... it allows for capitalists to earn a profit from owning the means of production,
- ... this profit exceeds what the capitalist needs in order to live and reproduce,
- ... the profits can then accumulate so that the capitalist can reinvest in more equipment, innovations, factories, and so forth.

Marx's Formula: $C \rightarrow M \rightarrow C'$

Workshop Groups

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