



Marx and Human Nature

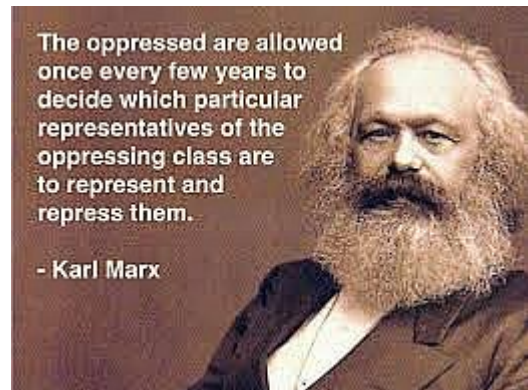
“In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness.”

“The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness.”

Karl Marx, Preface to the Critique of Political Economy (1859)

Human ‘nature’ versus the Human ‘condition’

Some people believe, for example, that humans are naturally selfish - Immanuel Kant and Thomas Hobbes, for example. (Both Hobbes and Kant thought that it was necessary to constrain our human nature in order to achieve a good society - Kant thought we should use rationality, Hobbes thought we should use the force of the state - Marx, as we shall see, thought that the good society was one which allows our human nature its full expression.) Most Marxists will argue that this view is an ideological illusion and the effect of commodity fetishism: the fact that people act selfishly is held to be a product of scarcity and capitalism, not an immutable human characteristic.



For confirmation of this view, we can see how, in *The Holy Family* Marx argues that capitalists are not motivated by any essential viciousness, but by the drive toward the bare '*semblance of a human existence*'. (Marx says '*semblance*' because he believes that capitalists are as alienated from their human nature under capitalism as the proletariat, even though their basic needs are better met.)

Needs and drives

In the 1844 Manuscripts the young Marx wrote:

Man is directly a natural being. As a natural being and as a living natural being he is on the one hand endowed with natural powers, vital powers – he is an active natural being. These forces exist in him as tendencies and abilities – as instincts. On the other hand, as a natural, corporeal, sensuous objective being he is a suffering, conditioned and limited creature, like animals and plants. That is to say, the objects of his instincts exist outside him, as objects independent of him; yet these objects are objects that he needs – essential objects, indispensable to the manifestation and confirmation of his essential powers.

In the Grundrisse Marx says his nature is a 'totality of needs and drives'. In The German Ideology he uses the formulation: 'their needs, consequently their nature'. For Marx then, an explanation of human nature is an explanation of the needs of humans, together with the assertion that they will act to fulfil those needs. Norman Geras gives a schedule of some of the needs which Marx says are characteristic of humans:

...for other human beings, for sexual relations, for food, water, clothing, shelter, rest and, more generally, for circumstances that are conducive to health rather than disease. There is another one ... the need of people for a breadth and diversity of pursuit and hence of personal development, as Marx himself expresses these, 'all-round activity', 'all-round development of individuals', 'free development of individuals', 'the means of cultivating [one's] gifts in all directions', and so on.

Marx says 'It is true that eating, drinking, and procreating, etc., are ... genuine human functions. However, when abstracted from other aspects of human activity, and turned into final and exclusive ends, they are animal.'

Humans as free, purposive producers

In several passages throughout his work, Marx shows how he believes humans to be essentially different from other animals. 'Men can be distinguished from animals by consciousness, by religion or anything else you like. They themselves begin to distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to produce their means of subsistence, a step which is conditioned by their physical organisation.' In this passage from The German Ideology, Marx alludes to one difference: that **humans produce their physical environments**. But do not a few other animals also produce aspects of their environment as well? The previous year, Marx had already acknowledged:

It is true that animals also produce. They build nests and dwellings, like the bee, the beaver, the ant, etc. But they produce only their own immediate needs or those of their young; they produce only when immediate physical need compels them to do so, while man produces even when he is free from physical need and truly produces only in freedom from such need; they produce only themselves, while man reproduces the whole of nature; their products belong immediately to their physical bodies, while man freely confronts his own product. Animals produce only according to the standards and needs of the species to which they belong, while man is capable of producing according to the standards of every species and of applying to each object its inherent standard; hence, man also produces in accordance with the laws of beauty.

In the same work, Marx writes:

The animal is immediately one with its life activity. It is not distinct from that activity; it is that activity. Man makes his life activity itself an object of his will and consciousness. He has conscious life activity. It is not a determination with which he directly merges. Conscious life activity directly distinguishes man from animal life activity. Only because of that is he a species-being. Or, rather, he is a conscious being – i.e., his own life is an object for him, only because he is a species-being. Only because of that is his activity free activity. Estranged labour reverses the relationship so that man, just because he is a conscious being, makes his life activity, his essential being, a mere means for his existence.

Also in the segment on Estranged Labour:

Man is a species-being, not only because he practically and theoretically makes the species – both his own and those of other things – his object, but also – and this is simply another way of saying the same thing – because he looks upon himself as the present, living species, because he looks upon himself as a universal and therefore free being.

More than twenty years later, in Capital, he came to muse on a similar subject:

A spider conducts operations that resemble those of a weaver, and a bee puts to shame many an architect in the construction of her cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality. At the end of every labour-process, we get a result that already existed in the imagination of the labourer at its commencement. He not only effects a change of form in the material on which he works, but he also realises a purpose of his own that gives the law to his modus operandi, and to which he must subordinate his will. And this subordination is no mere momentary act.

From these passages we can observe something of Marx's beliefs about humans. That they characteristically produce their environments, and that they would do so, even were they not under the burden of 'physical need' - indeed, they will produce the 'whole of [their] nature', and may even create 'in accordance with the laws of beauty'. Perhaps most importantly, though, their creativity, their production is purposive and planned. Humans, then, make plans for their future activity, and attempt to exercise their production (even lives) according to them. Perhaps most importantly, and most cryptically, Marx says that humans make both their 'life activity' and 'species' the 'object' of their will.

Human nature and historical materialism

Marx's theory of history attempts to describe the way in which humans change their environments and (in dialectical relation) their environments change them as well. That is:

Not only do the objective conditions change in the act of reproduction, e.g. the village becomes a town, the wilderness a cleared field etc., but the producers change, too, in that they bring out new qualities in themselves, develop themselves in production, transform themselves, develop new powers and ideas, new modes of intercourse, new needs and new language.

Further Marx sets out his '*materialist conception of history*' in opposition to 'idealist' conceptions of history; that of Hegel, for instance. 'The first premise of all human history is, of course, the existence of living human individuals. Thus the first fact to be established is the physical organisation of these individuals and their consequent relation to the rest of nature.' Thus 'History does nothing, it "*possesses no immense wealth*", it "*wages no battles*". It is man, real, living man who does all that, who possesses and fights; "history" is not, as it were, a person apart, using man as a means to achieve its own aims; history is nothing but the activity of man pursuing his aims'. So we can see that, even before we begin to consider the precise character of human nature, 'real, living' humans, '*the activity of man pursuing his aims*' is the very building block of Marx's theory of history. Humans act upon the world, changing it and themselves; and in doing so they 'make history'. However, even beyond this, human nature plays two key roles. In the first place, it is part of the explanation for the growth of the productive forces, which Marx conceives of as the driving force of history. Secondly, the particular needs and drives of humans explain the class antagonism which is generated under capitalism.

Alienation

Alienation, for Marx, is the estrangement of humans from aspects of their human nature. Since - as we have seen - human nature consists in a particular set of vital drives and tendencies, whose exercise constitutes flourishing, alienation is a condition wherein these drives and tendencies are stunted. For essential powers, alienation substitutes disempowerment; for making one's own life one's object, one's life becoming an object of capital. Marx believes that alienation will be a feature of all society before communism. The opposite of, alienation is 'actualisation' or 'self-activity' - the activity of the self, controlled by and for the self.



“Nature is man’s inorganic body -- that is to say, nature insofar as it is not the human body. Man lives from nature -- i.e., nature is his body -- and he must maintain a continuing dialogue with it is he is not to die. To say that man’s physical and mental life is linked to nature simply means that nature is linked to itself, for man is a part of nature.”

~KARL MARX