

Social Contract as Bourgeois Ideology

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John Rawls

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Since the publication of John Rawls' magnum opus *A Theory of Justice* in 1971, there has been a significant resurgence of philosophical work in the tradition of contractarianism. The distinguished bourgeois political philosopher Robert Nozick has argued that *A Theory of Justice* is one of the most important works in political philosophy since the writings of John Stuart Mill. "Political philosophers," Nozick concludes, "now must either work within Rawls' theory or explain why."¹ It is not far from the truth that Rawls single-handedly not only gave life to analytical political philosophy, but also resuscitated contractarianism, a philosophical tradition that — in many respects — had been lying dormant in a philosophical coma. In fact, social contract theory has become the hegemonic tradition in liberal social and political philosophy. As the Afro-Caribbean

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¹ Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974): 183.

philosopher Charles Mills has put it, contract talk is, after all, the political lingua franca of our times.²

In this essay, we will examine the ideological character and theoretical content of contractarianism as a philosophical tradition beginning with its classic exposition in the works of Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and, finally, culminating in the work of John Rawls. Here I want to draw a distinction between the social (ideological) form and epistemological content of a philosophical doctrine. This distinction is predicated on the different subjects of inquiry in the sociology of knowledge and epistemology. As such, I will argue that social contract theory as a form of bourgeois ideology has historically served to provide a rational justification for liberal democratic capitalism as the ideal politico-economic system.

Philosophy as Ideology: A Note

An ideology is a system of social and political ideas that express in theoretical form the consciousness of a particular class or social group, and justifies its political interest. As more or less logically coherent theoretical systems, ideologies can manifest themselves in many different forms ranging from history, literature, art, religion and philosophy. Often ideologies arise directly out of the stir and strife of social conflicts, upon the battleground between different social classes.³

In class society the ruling class subjects the productive forces to itself and, by virtue of its domination of the material force, subjects all other classes to its interests. With the separation of mental from physical labor, ideologies come to be developed primarily by the intellectual representatives of definite classes, and correspond to the actual position and serve the requirements of definite classes in their political struggle. Consequently, every ideology is developed on the basis of definite (social) relations and serves definite material interests, particularly class interests. For example, the ideology of white supremacy (as a distorted form of social consciousness) has historically functioned as a justification for the oppression of non-White people (e.g., Native

² Charles Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1998): 3.

³ For a good introduction to various conceptions of ideology, see Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction*. New York: Verso, 1991.

Americans) on the grounds of their alleged racial inferiority and supposed white superiority. Consequently, racist ideology (as part of the ideological superstructure of bourgeois society) arose from and has served to reinforce the exploitative relations of capitalist production by advancing the notion that African slaves and other peoples of color were subhuman, immoral, savage and therefore deserving of their exploitation. In the United States, various slave codes, federal laws (e.g., the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850) and court rulings (such as the U. S. Supreme Court's notorious Dred Scott decision in 1859) served to reinforce these unscientific racist views.⁴ Consequently, racist ideology also functioned to render the exploitation of white workers invisible, thus dividing the working class.

As forms of social consciousness, ideologies are both a reflection of and determined by the material development of society, that is, by the development of production, of the relations of production and of classes and the class struggle. Ideologies, therefore, are not born in a vacuum.⁵ Contrary to the view that ideas are formed spontaneously in the mind or that we are born already equipped with innate ideas, we suppose that ideologies as forms of social consciousness have their source in an objective reality — a source from which they are derived and of which they are the reflection. Consciousness is never anything but a reflection of material (social) existence. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels note, “Consciousness can never be anything else than conscious being, and the being of men is their actual life-process. . . . It is not

⁴ By focusing on racist ideology, I do not mean to claim that racism is only a form of social consciousness. Racism also constitutes a determinate set of social practices and relations. From a Marxist (materialist) philosophical perspective, racism is not just an attitude or belief (social consciousness) that there exist superior and inferior races more importantly it is the social practices, relations and institutions which lend material support to such beliefs by the actual suppression of the supposed inferior group.

⁵ As the Marxist philosopher T. I. Oizerman notes, “There is no need to prove that historical events, particularly those of the time in which he lives, shape the philosopher's outlook and views, determine his attitude to philosophical tradition, and also to problems which are not in themselves philosophical but stimulate philosophical interest, suggest new philosophical ideas or lead to the regeneration and remoulding of old ones that appeared to have been consigned to oblivion. Indeed it may be said that the great philosophical doctrines are epoch-making events of world history. And not only because they constitute epochs in man's mental development. Each of these doctrines is the spiritual quintessence of its time. It authentically expresses the needs of the historical epoch, its argument with the opposing forces of past and present, its intellectual, moral and social ideal.” See “The Problem of the Scientific Philosophical World-Outlook,” in *Philosophy in the USSR: Problems of Dialectical Materialism*. Translated by Robert Daglish (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977): 27-28.

consciousness that determines being, but being that determines consciousness.”⁶ It is the real, social relations of landowners and serfs established in the feudal mode of production that are reflected in the feudal ideas of property ownership, and in feudal ideology in general. For example, in the ideology of the medieval Catholic Church, the whole world, heaven and earth, was regarded as a hierarchy in which the low members were necessarily subordinate to the higher. In the production of this ideology there was no intention of giving an account of the feudal order. Yet, the ideology was in fact a reflection of the existing feudal social relations, which were thus reproduced as a spontaneous, unintended, unconscious process. Similarly, it is the capitalist relationships that are reflected in bourgeois ideology. As society develops, the ideas which reflect the property relations of society become elaborated in the form of ideologies concerning politics, social rights and obligations, laws and the like.

Finally, all ideologies are only valid within the historical limits of their possible social application. From this standpoint all ideologies, therefore, are historically transient. Consequently, the significance of an ideology has to be seen in light of the class interests it represents and the possibilities of its further development. Therefore, the validity of Marxism rests in the fact that it is the scientific ideology of the proletariat.

Philosophy, whatever its truth value, has an ideological function. The philosophical doctrines of Heraclitus, Democritus, Plato and Aristotle, for example, clearly serve a particular ideological function. In the case of Plato, the political conditions of the Athenian city-state served as an immediate influence on his philosophical architectonic. While the *Republic* and *Laws* are most saliently political in character, Plato’s undertakings in ethics, epistemology, and metaphysics are not far removed from political aims. Platonism in many respects is a philosophical response to Athenian political and social conflicts and adjoining efforts at social transformation. It could be said that Plato was profoundly upset by the turn which Athenian democracy had taken. In particular he could not forgive a political system which made it possible for his

⁶ See Marx and Engels, *German Ideology* in *Collected Works*, Vol. 5 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1976): 36.

master, Socrates, to be executed. In Plato's judgment, such political changes proved detrimental to sustaining the traditional (aristocratic) way of life based on slave labor.⁷

Giving attention to the ideological character of philosophy means bringing to the foreground how all philosophies perform a particular ideological function and are saturated with an objective political (class) interest.⁸ Karl Marx brings this point to our attention in his investigation of political economic thought. Marx illustrates in volume one of *Capital* that both the achievements and limitations of Aristotle's economic philosophy are a reflection of his class outlook. Aristotle, in Western history, is generally considered as the first contributor to an examination of exchange-value as a politico-economic concept. Aristotle correctly understood that the exchange of commodities requires equality, and equality presupposes their commensurability. "The brilliance of Aristotle's genius is shown by this alone," Marx notes, "that he discovered, in the expression of the value of commodities, a relation of equality." Marx continues,

There was, however, an important fact which prevented Aristotle from seeing that, to attribute value to commodities, is merely a mode of expressing all labor as equal human labour, and consequently as labour of equal quality. Greek society was founded on slavery, and had, therefore, its natural basis, the inequality of men and their labour-powers.⁹

Aristotle's stumbling block was that he could not discern, from the natural composition of commodities, how commodities, which were not alike, shared a common substance.

⁷ See A. S. Bogomolov, *History of Ancient Philosophy* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1985): 172-206; See also I. F. Stone, *The Trial of Socrates*. Anchor, 1989.

⁸ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology in Collected Works*, Vol. 5 (New York: International Publishers, 1976): 36, 59. Marxism in contradistinction to bourgeois ideology is a scientific ideology. "Marx and Engels, in evaluating the system of views they established, proceeded from the point of departure that the objective interests of the proletariat give rise to the need for scientific knowledge of social reality and a scientific system of ideas. Unlike all previous social movements, the revolutionary struggle of the proletariat consists of a level of development of social practice at which practice can no longer do without science, in a manner analogous to that in which machine industry is impossible without natural science." See V. Zh. Kelle, "The Leninist Conception of Scientific Ideology and its Critics," *Soviet Studies in Philosophy* Fall 1970 9(2): 102-3.

⁹ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Vol. 1 — The Process of Capitalist Production* (New York: International Publishers, 1987): 65-66. Ann Cudd argues that Aristotle was the progenitor of utility theory thus preceding Bentham and the Utilitarian school of thought. See Ann Cudd, "Game Theory and the History of Ideas About Rationality," *Economics and Philosophy* 9 (1993): 103.

Human labor as the substance of value escaped Aristotle's attention. Aristotle's conceptualization of value as a politico-economic category (as reflected in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics*) Marx suggests is fettered by Aristotle's philosophical perspective which is materially anchored in and a reflection of the Athenian slave mode of production and slavocratic class interests. Slavery as a mode of production, which Aristotle explicitly affirms, assumes the inequality of labor-power. This assessment of the actual content of Aristotle's ideological conception and its class limitations, by Marx, is by no means a outright rejection of the content of Aristotle's philosophy, a denial of its progressive historical character or his contribution to the scientific understanding of value as a political economic category. In his historical research of political economy, Marx, however, consistently sought to unmask the link between the epistemological and social basis of various political economic theorists.¹⁰

Following along the lines of Marx, we will embark upon a similar approach to Charles Mills' doctrine of the Racial Contract. Moreover, despite the progressive character of Mills' political philosophy, I will argue in the forthcoming article, "Contractarianism as Method: Rawls contra Mills," that despite Mills' critique of white supremacy, his embrace of contractarianism ultimately means his adoption of a liberal reformist ideology.

Social Contract Theory as a Philosophical Tradition

I.

Recent commentators such as David Boucher and Paul Kelly have argued against the common assumption "that there is a single unified tradition or a single model or definition of the contract".¹¹ Yet, in this section, our expressed aim is to present the *essential* characteristics that tie together contract theory as a politico-philosophical tradition.

¹⁰ In *Theories of Surplus Value*, we find Marx's dialectical (critical) evaluation of Adam Smith. The focal point of Marx's critique is a class analysis of Smith's theoretical positions, which highlights both his scientific contribution to political economy and his corresponding deficiencies. Both Smith's contribution to the scientific cognition of political economy as well as his limitations are materially due to his accompanying bourgeois ideological perspective. See Marx, *Theories of Surplus Value*, Part I (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1969): 69-151.

¹¹ David Boucher and Paul Kelly, *The Social Contract from Hobbes to Rawls* (New York: Routledge, 1994): 1.

There are five essential characteristics of contractarianism as a school of thought: (1) social contract theorists offer justification for political obligation that rest upon the voluntary consent, assent, choice, agreement, and promises of individuals;¹² (2) contract theorists start from the same reflective starting-point, namely, an original state or position; (3) contractarianism is grounded on methodological individualism, which argues for an atomistic social ontology such that the laws governing the behavior of people in social interaction can be inferred from the laws which govern the behavior of individuals apart from society.¹³ Consequently, the individual is seen as prior to and the ultimate constituent of society; (4) civil society is a human convention; not divinely ordained or naturally determined, but conventionally generated; (5) Contractarianism as a philosophical *tradition* has historically been a liberal democratic political philosophy.

I do not want, however, to imply that there are no determinate differences among contract theorists. There are a host of dissimilarities in the views of social contract theorists concerning how to understand what actions constitute consent, what the conditions of the pre-political state which motivate individuals to form a political order would be like, and the freedom, equality and rationality of individuals. Even when we look at the issue of methodological individualism, it is can be argued that not all contract theorists uphold this principle. Now, it is clear when we look at Hobbes, Locke, Kant and Rawls that the establishment of civil society and the state (or what Rawls refers to as the basic structure of society) is only legitimate if it is the outcome of a collective agreement of free, equal and rational individuals. But, this is arguably not the case when we look at Rousseau. In stark contrast to Locke and Hobbes, as Carole Pateman has argued, “Rousseau discusses individuals in the context of actual social relationships. He argues that individual characteristics and social relations are interrelated and mutually reinforcing, and that both develop together through the same historical process”.¹⁴

The only point that I want to make with the example of methodological individualism is that, to borrow Hegelian language, the existence of a philosophical

¹² Carole Pateman, for example, makes the stronger claim that all social relations, for the contract theorists, take on a contractual form. See, Pateman, *The Sexual Contract*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988.

¹³ J. W. N. Watkins, “Historical Explanations in the Social Sciences,” in *Readings in the Philosophy of Social Science*. Edited Michael Martin and Lee C. McIntyre (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1994): 441-450.

¹⁴ Carole Pateman, *The Problem of Political Obligation: A Critical Analysis of Liberal Theory* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1979): 143.

tradition necessarily implies both identity and difference in combination, not the abstract separation of them. Hence, *identity* necessarily involves *difference*, that is, identity in difference.¹⁵ In other words, the existence of differences within contractarianism as a philosophical tradition presupposes an essential conceptual identity.

Given the diversity within the social contract theory as a philosophical tradition, naturally there have been a host of different conceptual frameworks proposed to understand the various uses of the contractarian approach. For example, Jean Hampton has suggested that there are two dominant tendencies in consent-based theories of authority: Lockean agency contract theories and Hobbesian alienation contract theories.¹⁶ Michael Lessnoff has recently refined the distinction between governmental (*Herrschaftsvertrag*) and social contracts (*Gesellschaftsvertrag*), a distinction that had served as the organizing idea behind J. W. Gough's standard history of the subject.¹⁷ We could also mention David Gauthier, who has identified four different kinds of contract theories: original contractarianism, explicit contractarianism, tacit contractarianism and hypothetical contractarianism. In a newly published anthology on social contract theory, David Boucher and Paul Kelly have suggested that social contract theories fall into three broad categories: moral, civil and constitutional.¹⁸ And, lastly, Charles Mills has distinguished between a demystificatory domination (or exclusionary) contract and a mainstream consensual (or inclusivist) contract.¹⁹

While all of these different typologies are useful, for our purposes, we will divide contractarianism into two main traditions: *classical* and *modern*. Here Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Immanuel Kant would represent the classical tradition. And the modern tradition would embody the works of John Rawls and David Gauthier, among others. While both tendencies within contract theory are committed to

¹⁵ See G. W. F. Hegel, *The Encyclopaedia Logic*. Translated by T. F. Geraets, W. A. Suchting and H. S. Harris. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1991; particularly the Doctrine of Essence.

¹⁶ Agency contract theories claims "political authority is granted by the people to the ruler as a loan." Alienation social contracts argues that "political authority is given as an irrevocable grant." See Jean Hampton, *Political Philosophy* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press 1997): 41. See also Jean Hampton, *Hobbes and the Social Contract Tradition*.

¹⁷ Michael Lessnoff, *The Social Contract*. London: Macmillan, 1986. See also J. W. Gould, *The Social Contract: A Critical Study of its Development* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957): 2-3.

¹⁸ David Boucher and Paul Kelly, *The Social Contract from Hobbes to Rawls* (New York: Routledge, 1994): 1-34.

¹⁹ Mills, *The Racial Contract*, 9-10.

bourgeois liberalism, the difference between these two forms of contractarianism is reflective of the emergence and development of capitalism as a mode of production.

The classical form of contractarianism emerges in conjunction with the rise of capitalism from the ashes of feudalism — what Marx refers to as the “rosy dawn” of the era of capitalist production. This age of merchant capital (or nascent capitalism) covers the 16th and 17th centuries. This was an era of major transformations in the economic life of Western Europe, with the extensive development of seafaring trade and the emerging predominance of commercial capital. Classical contract theory functions as the ideological justification for the rising bourgeoisie (particularly the merchant, manufacturing and non-feudal landowning interest) and their claim to a share in political power in the struggle against the absolutist feudal monarchy. In this respect, contractarian political theory emerges in a period in which it has not quite won its spurs in the struggle against the religious apology for the feudal system and capitalism was in its formative stage of development. In contrast to political theorists such as Robert Filmer, who supported the doctrine of the divine origin of power, without limitation, the adherents of social contract theory (such as Thomas Hobbes, John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau) asserted on the basis of natural law that the state, formed by the will of free, rational and atomic individuals, was obligated to ensure the observance of the inalienable rights of individuals. The theory was subsequently dethroned with the criticisms of David Hume and Jeremy Bentham in the eighteenth century and, later, G. W. F. Hegel and Karl Marx in the nineteenth century. For these philosophers, the ahistorical approach of contractarianism was an inadequate methodological tool for understanding bourgeois civil society.

Modern contractarianism originates with John Rawls and has its social basis in the material transformation of capitalism from an ascendant to a dominant position as a mode of production, that is, from industrial to monopoly capitalism. During the last quarter of the nineteenth century, in the “Age of Robber Barons,” United States capitalism witnessed a rapid movement toward the concentration and centralization of industrial and finance capital, combined with economic crisis, magnified class struggles, imperialist expansion and increased domestic racism and sexism.

Three important changes occur at the level of the ideological superstructure corresponding to this period in the development of U. S. Capitalism. First, we witness the emergence of welfare state capitalism as witnessed in the New Deal programs of the 1930s and the Great Society programs of the 1960s. As a result of ever-increasing economic crises, the bourgeois state moves to active and comprehensive intervention in economic and social policy. The foundations were laid in the late 19th century by the introduction of laws controlling the activities of the trusts, for example, the Sherman Antitrust Act of 1890, and it was further developed during the World War, when economic reserves had to be mobilized to meet the needs of the army and when state control over production and distribution had to be organized. But a much more powerful stimulant was the economic crisis of 1929-33 and the stagnation that followed it.

Second, in the realm of bourgeois political economy, the general crisis of capitalism and the great economic crisis of 1929-33 undermined Say's law. According to Say's law, the capitalist economic system has automatic, self-adjusting powers. Therefore, a free market will always adjust automatically to an equilibrium in which all resources, including labor, were fully utilized — that is, to an equilibrium with full employment of both labor and industrial capacity. But with the Great Depression and the visible failure of automatic market forces to guarantee equilibrium, stability and accumulation, bourgeois political economy turned to the concept of state-monopoly regulation of the capitalist economy, the brainchild of John Maynard Keynes. The leitmotif of Keynesianism is the realization that mature capitalism is inevitably doomed to crises and stagnation, which can be ameliorated only by public expenditure. Without attacking neoclassical theory, Keynes recognized that the capitalist economy tends to “unemployment equilibrium” rather than full-employment equilibrium. This inherent crisis dictated the need for state intervention, which became a virtual principle of economic management.²⁰

Third, the content of liberalism was transformed such that New Deal liberals no longer demanded a free market and limitation of government intervention. Rather

²⁰ Howard Selsam and Harry K. Wells, “The Philosophy of John Maynard Keynes,” *Political Affairs* (February 1949): 82-92; See also, V. Afanasyev, *Bourgeois Economic Thought 1930s-1970s*. Translated from Russian by James Riordan. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1983; Eward Mckenna, Maurice Wade, and Diane Zannoni, “Keynes, Rawls, Uncertainty, and the Liberal Theory of the State,” *Economics and Philosophy* 4 (1988): 221-41.

modern liberals (as opposed to classical liberal) called for an increase in state intervention and regulation of the market. In this context, Rawls's political liberalism articulates a philosophical justification for the transformation of liberalism from its classical form. Rawls' political philosophy, therefore, not only attempts to address the structural crisis of world capitalism, but the ideological crisis of liberal democratic constitutionalism.²¹

The Poverty of Contractarianism: A Marxist-Leninist Perspective

Social contract theory, from a Marxist-Leninist perspective, is a form of bourgeois ideology which functions to justify liberal democratic political philosophy and, more specifically, liberal democratic capitalism. There are three dimensions to a Marxist-Leninist critique of contractarianism. First, the idea of an atomic individual coming into society as a contracting agent is seen as ahistorical. Closely related to this is the second aspect, the abstract individual posited by contract theory is dismissed as a methodological flaw. And, lastly, the juridical equality postulated by contract theorists is grounded on substantive inequality rooted in bourgeois relations of production.

Although contract theory — whether in its classical or modern form — is presented as an explanation for the formation of the state and/or civil society, it is necessarily ahistorical in character. The point is not simply that contractarianism is a historical implausibility or absurdity. In this respect there is a great deal of truth to David Hume's statement against contractarianism: "It is in vain to say, that all governments are, or should be, at first, founded on popular consent, as much as the necessity of human affairs will admit. This favours entirely my pretension. I maintain, that human affairs will never admit of this consent, seldom of the appearance of it; but that conquest or usurpation, that is, in plain terms, force, by dissolving the ancient governments, is the origin of almost all the new ones which were ever established in the world".²² However, I want to make a more specific point than Hume. In analyzing the ways and conditions of attaining political legitimacy and authority, all contract theorists have assumed that

²¹ See William A. Williams, *Americans in a Changing World* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978): 55-77.

²² David Hume, "Of the Original Contract," in *Social Contract: Essays by Locke, Hume and Rousseau*. Edited by Sir Ernest Barker (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962): 154.

capitalism is the only natural form of civil society. The social contract doctrine is predicated on viewing bourgeois social relations as absolute rather than transitory. In other words, contract theorists treat capitalism as a mode of production as if it is “the absolutely final form of social production” and “eternally fixed by Nature for every state of society.”²³ As such, it assumes private property is natural and, therefore, sees no need to justify the private ownership of the means of production implicit in bourgeois social relations.²⁴

Contractarian political theory is universally associated with the rights of individual persons, with consent as the basis of government, and with democratic, republican or constitutional institutions. Contractarianism is grounded on a theory of abstract individualism, that is, a conception of society as no more than an aggregate of individuals (social atomism). C. B. MacPherson points out that the accent on individualism is tied to a view of the individual as essentially “the proprietor of his own person or capacities, owing nothing to society.”²⁵ The emphasis on individualism is a necessary component of a conception of social life which endorses private property as constitutive of human liberty. MacPherson astutely notes, “Society becomes a lot of free equal individuals related to each other as proprietors of their own capacities and of what they have acquired by their exercise. Society consists of relations of exchange between proprietors.”²⁶ All individuals are, therefore, naturally free and equal to each other. The distinctiveness of the contractarian approach is precisely that it appears to be universal, that is, to include everyone who is to be incorporated into the new civil order. Each individual who enters into civil society, therefore, acquires the political status of equality before the law.

²³ Karl Marx, *Capital, Vol. 1. — The Process of Capitalist Production* (New York: International Publishers, 1987): 85.

²⁴ Arguably one could make the case that this is not true for Rawls. Rawls, in fact, argues that his theory of justice is compatible with various modes of production and social formations. Yet, Rawls argues (in both *A Theory of Justice* and *Justice as Fairness*) that property-owning democracy, which rests on the private ownership of the means of production, is the best candidate for a well-ordered democratic regime. See Rawls, *Justice as Fairness* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2001): 135-140; also Richard Krouse and Michael McPherson, “Capitalism, ‘Property-Owning Democracy,’ and the Welfare State,” in *Democracy and the Welfare State*. Edited by Amy Gutman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988): 79-105.

²⁵ C. B. MacPherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962): 3.

²⁶ MacPherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism*, 3.

On the basis of dialectical materialism, Marx refused to accept the view that the individual can be studied scientifically abstracted from social relations. Criticizing the German philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach, Marx remarks, “But the essence of man is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of the social relations.”²⁷ Individuals, for Marx, are by necessity social beings. By viewing the individual as a social being, Marx does not negate our individuality. Rather (unlike the aggregate theories of Thomas Hobbes, John Locke and Adam Smith) a scientific materialist approach begins with social relations as explanans and individuality as explanandum.²⁸ Who we are, as individuals, is derivative and explained by the character of social relations in which we are enmeshed. In this connection, Marx comments

The more deeply we go back in history, the more does the individual, and hence also the producing individual, appear as dependent, as belonging to a greater whole. . . . The human being is in the most literal sense a political animal, not merely a gregarious animal, but an animal which can individuate itself only in the midst of society.²⁹

Criticizing the abstract individualism grounding liberal political theory, Marx further comments

²⁷ Karl Marx, “Theses on Feuerbach,” in *Collected Works*, Vol. 5 (New York: International Publishers, 1976): 4.

²⁸ See Russell Keat and John Urry, *Social Theory as Science*. Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975.

²⁹ Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*. Translated by Martin Nicolaus (New York: Vintage Books, 1973): 84.

Individuals producing in a society, and hence the socially determined production of individuals, is of course the point of departure. The solitary and isolated hunter or fisherman, who serves Adam Smith and Ricardo as a starting-point, is one of the unimaginative conceits of eighteenth-century Robinsonades; and despite the assertion of social historians, these by no means signify simply a reaction against over-refinement and reversion to a misconceived natural life. As little as Rousseau's *contrat social*, which brings naturally independent, autonomous subjects into relations and contract, rests on such naturalism . . . [t]his is . . . nothing but the aesthetic illusion of the small and big Robinsonades. It is, on the contrary, the anticipation of 'civil society', which began to evolve in the sixteenth century and in the eighteenth century made giant strides toward maturity.³⁰

What becomes central in defining the individual as a social being is the ensemble of social relations which the individual is a part of. Material existence (being) is social existence, an ensemble of social relations where the primary relation is the material relations of production. Social being as social relations in addition to determining consciousness molds it in its own image, i.e. consciousness is social consciousness. The assertion that consciousness is social consciousness and existence is social existence does not negate the reality of individual existence and consciousness; however, the social sets an enclosure, a limit, a finity for being and consciousness as determinate individuality. This determinate individuality is a category dependent on and determined by the social.

Social relations represent the multifarious ties that arise between social groups, classes, and nations, and also within these groups in the context of their economic, social, political and cultural activities. Individuals, from Marx's standpoint, enter into social relations precisely as representatives of one or another social community or group. According to Marx, all of the various social relations — economic, political, legal, moral and so forth — are divided into primary relations, which are material and pertain to the base, and secondary relations, which are ideological and pertain to the superstructure. Marx further concludes that in a society of class antagonism, different social groups occupy antagonistic positions in the given system of social relations: slaveholder and

³⁰ Marx, *Grundrisse*, 83.

slave, feudal lord and serf, capitalist and worker. In general, Marx argues that the individual is

[a] personification of economic categories, embodiments of particular class-relations and class-interests. My standpoint, from which the evolution of the economic formation of society is viewed as a process of natural history, can less than any other make the individual responsible for relations whose creature he socially remains, however much he may subjectively raise himself above them.³¹

Now, Hobbes — caught between the decline of feudal absolutism and the rise of bourgeois parliamentarianism — has traditionally been seen as an awkward transitional writer who uses contract theory now classically associated with the emergence of liberalism to defend absolute monarchy. It is argued on this basis that Hobbes — by advocating an absolute monarchy — falls outside of the social contract tradition. To put it quite simply, I disagree with this conclusion. The social basis for Hobbes’s justification of the absolute monarchy as the only legitimate form of state power has to be sought in the fact that commodity-money relations had not yet become the dominant social relations that they were to become later with the development of industrial capitalism in England. While Hobbes did not see liberal democracy as the perfect commonwealth, his political philosophy is the necessary basis for the development of contract theory in the writings of Locke and Rousseau and, subsequently, bourgeois liberalism. By rejecting the principle of natural law as representing God’s will and its corollary that the laws of the state, and the state itself, derive their legitimacy from their harmony with this divine natural law, Hobbes laid the groundwork for bourgeois liberalism. Contrary to most commentators and scholars, I agree with the political theorist C. B. MacPherson that Hobbes’s political philosophy is a form of nascent bourgeois ideology. Although Hobbes’s political thought supports absolute monarchy, this should not obscure the fact that Hobbes brilliantly understood “bourgeois man” better than most of his contemporaries and many of his successors. The premises from

³¹ Karl Marx, “Preface to First German Edition,” in *Capital*, Vol. 1 (New York: International Publishers, 1987): 21.

which Hobbes deduces his psychology and his view of the state are drawn from a philosophical anthropology shaped by bourgeois social relations. C. B. MacPherson explains:

The desires for glory and gain . . . lead directly to the famous proposition that the first general inclination of all mankind is ‘a perpetual and restless desire of power after power, that ceaseth only in death.’ From them too may be deduced the proposition of the universality of fear where there is no power to overawe all men, although Hobbes sometimes presents this as the result of a fixed aversion to violent death. From these propositions, and from the premise that man is rational to the extent that he can calculate the consequences of his actions, the whole of Hobbes’s political structure is in turn deduced. . . . Thus the bourgeois assumptions which are found in the premises of Hobbes’s thought lead to the erection of the sovereign state.³²

Hobbes’s magnum opus *Leviathan* describes as well as anyone what Marx and Engels characterized as the anarchy of capitalism which is based on the contradiction between social production and private appropriation.³³

Over and against the doctrine of the divine right of kings, social contract theorists such as Hobbes and Locke posit a secular contractual basis for civil society and the state. Central to the worldview of contract theorists was the equality of all persons, regardless of social status. This equality was reflected in all three of the epoch-making codifications of contract theory — the English Bill of Rights (1689), the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen (1789) and the Bill of Rights appended as the first ten amendments to the Constitution of the United States (1791). The juridical (formal) equality captured by contract theorists was a reflection of the growing dominance of capitalism as a mode of production. Juridical equality is an abstraction from the material

³² C. B. MacPherson, “Hobbes’s Bourgeois Man,” in *Hobbes Studies*. Edited by K. C. Brown (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1965): 176-77.

³³ For an argument that Hobbes’s political philosophy is a form of nascent bourgeois ideology, see C. B. MacPherson, “Hobbes’s Bourgeois Man,” in *Hobbes Studies*. Edited by K. C. Brown (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1965): 169-183. See also, Jesus M. Zaratiegui Labiano, “A Reading of Hobbes’ *Leviathan* with economist glasses,” *International Journal of Social Economics* 27(2) (2000): 134-146.

inequality rooted in the private ownership of the means of production. By abstracting away the real material and historical process of the capitalist mode of production, the formal (juridical) equality reflected in contractarianism is allowed to overshadow and, therefore, obscure the material inequality rooted in the private ownership of the means of production. So, although, the social contract tradition from Hobbes to Rawls presupposes the formal equality of all individuals, social and economic inequality are seen as natural and continue after the formation of civil society and the state. Consequently, the social contract doctrine only offers a semblance of freedom.

Bourgeois equality of rights and the corresponding democratic institutions are the general political expression of the most simple and abstract aspect of capitalist commodity production. All the conceptions and ideas of freedom, equality, justice and humanism are based on the declaration of the equality of every person as commodity owner, which blurs the exploitation of labor by capital. Bourgeois democracy is the legal replica of the commodity form of the capitalist economic system. When Marx examines capitalism as a mode of production at the level of the circulation of commodities, he finds that it is essentially an exchange of equivalents. Since the magnitude of commodities dictates an equal exchange, with reference to their socially necessary labor-time, the presence of the appearance is no simple chimera. In fact, workers and capitalists “meet in the market, and deal with each other as on the basis of equal rights, with this difference alone, that one is buyer, the other seller; both, therefore, equal in the eyes of the law.”³⁴

The capitalist meets the worker in the market as a free laborer in the double sense that (1) the laborer is unencumbered by relations of legal ownership (as in slavery) or obligation (as in serfdom) to an individual capitalist and is therefore free to sell his or her labor-power for a time to any buyer, and (2) the laborer is freed or separated from ownership of the means of production, and therefore has nothing to sell but his or her labor-power. In this sense, labor-power is a commodity freely exchanged in the market like all other commodities. Consequently, freedom and equality reign within the sphere of the exchange of commodities. Each seller of a commodity confronts as equal every buyer, each equal as seller or buyer before the laws of the market which dictate that

³⁴ Marx, *Capital*, Vol. I, 165.

equivalent is exchanged for equivalent, value is exchanged for equal value. Marx ironically writes,

This sphere [of simple circulation or of exchange of commodities] . . . within whose boundaries the sale and purchase of labour-power goes on, is in fact a very Eden of the innate rights of man. There alone rule Freedom, Equality, Property and Bentham. Freedom, because both buyer and seller of a commodity, say of labour-power, are constrained only by their own free will. They contract as free agents, and the agreement they come to, is but the form in which they give legal expression to their common will. Equality, because each enters into relation with the other, as with a simple owner of commodities, and they exchange equivalent for equivalent. Property, because each disposes only of what is his own. And Bentham, because each looks only to himself. The only force that brings them together and puts them in relation with each other, is the selfishness, the gain and private interests of each. Each looks to himself only, and no one troubles himself about the rest, and just because they do so, do they all, in accordance with the pre-established harmony of things, or under the auspices of an all-shrewd providence, work together to their mutual advantage, for the common weal and in the interest of all.³⁵

So, the semblance of equality at the level of the market (or what Marx refers to as the circulation of commodities) acts as a façade concealing the exploitation which occurs in the sphere of production. By developing the law of value beyond the limitations of Adam Smith and David Ricardo, Marx was able to explain the relationship between the proletariat and bourgeoisie according to this law. By distinguishing labor from labor-power, Marx revealed that bourgeois class relations are grounded in the exploitation of labor during the productive process.

At the level of production, the worker sells labor-power to the capitalist at its value and the capitalist then uses it in the production of a commodity which becomes the property of the capitalist. The use of labor-power in production produces more value than is paid to the laborer. It produces surplus value. This surplus value (of which profit

³⁵ Marx, *Capital*, Vol. I, 172.

is a derivative category) becomes the property of the capitalist (the nonproducers) and not of the workers (the direct producers) because the capitalists own the means of production and control the process of production. Capitalism as a mode of production combines within it, on the one hand, a relation of equality in the sphere of exchange and, on the other hand, a relation of dominance in sphere of production, allowing thereby the appropriation by capitalists of a part of the product of labor through the mechanism of the apparently free market. Likewise bourgeois (liberal) democracy (as the political superstructure) combines within it, on the one hand, the recognition of the equality of political rights among all citizens and, on the other hand, the inequality of all citizens as reflected in the differential ownership of the means of production. So, under bourgeois democracy, the exploitation of labor is buttressed by the condition of inequality in the nature of production; which ultimately rests on the private ownership of the means of production. Hence, the juridical forms of bourgeois relations, e.g. equality before the law, both reflect and mask the contradictory character of capitalism. The formal equality espoused by contract theorist is undermined by the acceptance of the inequality in bourgeois (civil) society, which ultimately is founded on the private ownership of the means of production. With social contract theory, the naked fact that the capitalist appropriates the values produced by the workers' unpaid labor is disguised by the abstract ideas of property ownership, contract and equality of rights.