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Marc on Marx on the Determination of Consciousness

This paper will be an inquiry into the following quote by Marx:

But even if this theory, theology, philosophy, ethics, etc., comes into contradiction with the existing relations, this can only occur because existing social relations have come into contradiction with the existing forces of production. (159)¹

The only goal of our inquiry is understanding. In other words, we will not critique the passage.

This is due to the constraint of time.

Let's start with the first half of the passage: "But even if this theory, theology...comes into contradiction with the existing relations." Before we identify what it means to *come into contradiction with the existing relations*, we must get a grip on what is meant by "this theory, theology, philosophy, ethics, etc." Marx alludes to its meaning in the previous sentence: "From now on consciousness is in a position to emancipate itself from the world and to proceed to the formation of 'pure' theory, theology, philosophy, ethics, etc." Thus, to the question, "what is *this theory, theology, philosophy, ethics, etc.* to which Marx refers," we receive the following answer: a formation, or a *product*, of consciousness when consciousness is in a position to emancipate itself from the world. In other words, when consciousness is in a certain position—namely, the position in which it can emancipate itself from the world—it has the capacity to form "pure" theory, theology, etc.

At this point we should notice at least three necessary points of clarification: (1) what is meant by *consciousness*, (2) what is *the position* from which consciousness can emancipate itself from the world; (3) why is it that from *that position* consciousness can form "pure" theory, theology, etc.

¹ All references will be page numbers from the following text: Robert Tucker, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd edition (Norton, 1978).

First, what is meant by *consciousness*? We can find the beginnings of an answer in the following passage:

Consciousness is at first...merely the consciousness concerning the *immediate* sensuous environment and consciousness of the limited connection with other persons and living things outside the individual who is growing self-conscious. (158)

We should notice immediately that Marx conceives of consciousness as something that *develops*, hence the qualification, “consciousness is *at first*.” Keeping that in mind, we can think of this passage as identifying two things: (i) the *domain* of consciousness in its first stage of development, and (ii) the *focal point* of consciousness within that domain.

The *domain* of consciousness (in the “first stage”) is that which concerns the “immediate sensuous environment.” Let’s assume by “immediate sensuous environment,” Marx means the environment that we perceive immediately through our senses, e.g., the land, trees, animals, etc. The *focal point* of consciousness within this domain—i.e., what we are *conscious of*—is the following: “the limited connection with other persons and living things outside the individual who is growing self-conscious.” We should understand this focus as follows: first, in the first stage, consciousness is the consciousness of a certain type of individual—namely, an individual that is *growing self-conscious* (exactly what Marx means by *growing self-conscious* has yet to be determined); second, Marx explains what we are conscious of in terms of the individual: the individual is conscious of a certain limited connection with two things outside of itself—namely, *other persons and things*.

At this point we should recognize that consciousness has the following characteristics: (i) it develops; (ii) it develops within individuals that are *growing self-conscious*; (iii) it first concerns itself with things that fall within immediate sense-perception; (iv) the relevant entities

that fall within that immediate perception are *other people* and *things*; (v) the individual is conscious of those entities in terms of its limited connection to them.

If we consider each characteristic separately, some seem clear, but others raise questions:

- (i) All we know about the development of consciousness is that it develops from lower to higher stages. It's not clear what constitutes a movement from a lower to a higher stage; i.e., it's not clear by what we measure the degree of development of consciousness.
- (ii) It's not clear what it means for consciousness to develop within individuals that are *growing self-conscious*.
- (iii) That consciousness first concerns itself with that which falls within immediate sense-perception seems correct. If we think of consciousness as our faculty of thinking about, and drawing our attention to something, then it seems correct that we will only first concern ourselves with what is immediately perceptible by our senses.
- (iv) We shouldn't be surprised by consciousness being concerned with *other beings* and *things*, because, other than itself, *other beings* and *things* seem to be exhaustive of the *immediately perceivable* to consciousness.
- (v) It's not clear what is meant by consciousness' *limited connection* to other beings and things.

It seems our best chance at understanding these former confusions is to determine what consciousness does. If we figure out the role of consciousness, then, perhaps, we can determine what it takes for consciousness to develop. And, maybe in understanding the latter we can clear up the rest of our present confusions.

Marx tells us “consciousness...only arises from the need, the necessity of intercourse with other men” (158). This seems clear: humans need to interact (i.e., *intercourse*) with one another to survive. This interaction can only occur if we have some form of consciousness of each other and the world around us. Marx further alludes to this idea as follows: “it is consciousness of nature, which first appears to men as a completely alien, all-powerful and unassailable force” (158). Thus, for consciousness to develop must mean that we improve our capacity to interact with one another and the world; nature becomes less and less alien and powerful, and evermore assailable. This also clarifies why, when consciousness is in its early stage of development, it is conscious of its *limited connection* to other beings and things: a low level of consciousness must correspond to a low level of interaction with other people and the world; a *low level of interaction* with other people and the world is synonymous with a *limited connection to other people and things*.

In summary, consciousness develops in direct proportion to the development of interaction between one another and the world. Marx succinctly states this point as follows: “the identity of nature and man appears in such a way that the restricted relation of men to nature determines their restricted relation to one another, and [vice versa]” (158). In other words, people and nature are connected in the following way: the degree to which we interact (i.e., *relate*) with the world around us (i.e., *nature*) determines the degree to which we interact with one another; and, the degree to which we interact with one another determines the degree to which we interact with the world around us.

It may be helpful to think of this in terms of organization and control: the more control we have over nature, the more organized we are with one another; and the more organized we are with one another, the more control we have over nature. Simply put: better social organization

enables the production of better tools with which we can better control nature; and further, the more we can control nature, the more we can produce tools that enable better social organization. Consider, for example, the emergence of the production of agriculture: when our control of nature and our social organization reached a certain point, we were able to implement agricultural production; this implementation enabled the further organization of people—more and more people working together to produce and distribute the agricultural products; in short, social interaction affected our control of nature, which in turn, affected our social interaction, and so on.

Moreover, it is this concept of “the identity of nature and man” that accounts for what is meant by the development of consciousness occurring in an individual that is *growing self-conscious*. Self-consciousness is being conscious of the self, conscious of *what you are*; and, *what you are* is an individual that exists within a certain relationship to other people and nature. Thus, to *grow* self-conscious is to further understand that relationship; as consciousness develops, so does self-consciousness, i.e., the individual *grows self-conscious*.

We now understand the first point of clarification: *what is consciousness*. Now we must proceed to the second point of clarification: what is *the position* from which consciousness can emancipate itself from the world. This point is explained in the following passage:

From this moment onwards consciousness *can* really flatter itself that it is something other than consciousness of existing practice, that it *really* represents something without representing something real. (159)

Before we proceed to understand this passage we must clarify from *what* moment onwards the passage is referring to. Marx provides this clarification in the previous sentence: It is “from the moment when a division of material and mental labor appears” (159); in other words, it is from the moment when mental labor is freed from the burden of material labor. I state it the latter way

because there is always *some sort* of division between mental and material labor. Think, for example, of some early hunters: they listen for sounds of animals, keep their eyes focused on the ground for tracks, trot through the forest with a spear in hand, but simultaneously they are contemplating which way to move, what type of track they see, what type of sound they've heard. The former can be thought of as material labor and the latter as mental labor. But this is mental labor that is not *freed* from material labor; this mental labor is connected to the material labor in an essential way. Thus, we should understand the *division of material and mental labor* to which Marx refers as a division that is complete, i.e., a division in which the mental labor is completely freed from the material labor.

To understand this more fully, consider the production of a new machine for an assembly line: first, there is the completely isolated mental labor of the mathematics and the physics involved in the functioning of the machine; then there is the mental labor of the design of the machine; and so on until we reach the individual material laborer, standing in front of the machine, ten hours a day, pulling a lever. When humanity has reached this type of social organization, we see individuals, who have been freed from burdensome material labor, who begin to engage in complete mental labor, e.g., philosophers, astronomers, mathematicians, etc.

Thus, in understanding the former passage, we must keep in mind that it is from this type of division of material and mental labor to which Marx refers—namely, one that is complete. According to the passage, then, once humanity establishes this type of division of labor, consciousness acquires two characteristics: (i) it thinks that it is something other than consciousness of existing practice; (ii) it thinks that it *really* represents something without representing something real. We shouldn't think of these as two distinct, "new"² characteristics

² I put "new" in scare quotes because I don't want to overemphasize its newness. It is very important to recognize that a qualitative change takes place when the division of labor reaches the relevant stage we are discussing, but it is

of consciousness. Rather, we should think of them as two ways of expressing one “new” characteristic of consciousness.

First, consciousness thinks it is being conscious of something new. Prior to this specific division of labor, all there was to be conscious of was nature, i.e., the world around us, and our interaction with it—in short, *existing practice*. But now, once this new division of labor has been established, consciousness thinks it is conscious of things that are separate from this existing practice. (As far as what those new sorts of things are, we shall wait and see.)

Another way to express this characteristic of consciousness is as being conscious of a new type of representation, or a new realm of representation. No longer is consciousness limited to the original realm of immediate sensuousness, but now consciousness thinks it can represent things that are outside this realm, i.e., outside the realm of *real*.

Thus, from this position consciousness can engage in complete mental labor; it can start to conceive of things that are seemingly not in existing practice, that are not in the realm of the real—in short, consciousness believes it can *emancipate itself from the world*. What we still must clarify is what sort of things consciousness produces when it is in this position. The answer to this lies in the third clarification: why is it that from *this* position consciousness can form “pure” theory, theology, etc.

From its seeming emancipated position, consciousness can produce things like “pure” theory, theology, philosophy, ethics, etc. Because some people become freed from the burdens of material labor, they can engage in thought about things that appear to be removed from the real world. This is complex. Let’s try and understand it through an example.

also important to recognize that different degrees of this type of consciousness have always existed—whether in the form of religion, or some individuals belief on why a certain phenomenon is the way it is. Nothing substantive hangs on this point, but it is nonetheless worthy of pointing out.

Consider the character of Socrates in the *Republic* trying to figure out what justice is. Socrates is a person that is freed from the burdens of material labor: he has to wake up, get dressed, feed himself, perhaps tend to any plants or animals he has, but most of his labor is not material. Most of his labor is completely mental; i.e., in his attempt to identify what justice is he is engaged in mental labor that is freed from material labor. He doesn't focus on what people are doing in their daily lives, the number of slaves supporting the Greek society, the ways in which people contribute to the sustenance of peoples' lives—in short, the world, the “real,” the existing practice. Instead, he spends his time thinking about an idea—justice. He wants to know what justice is, what are the qualities of justice, what it takes to be justice, how many things can have the property of justice, how we might recognize examples of justice when we see them, etc. He thinks he's talking about something that exists over and above people's lives, that is more than simply the desires and beliefs of groups of people; he thinks justice is something that can be discovered merely by thinking about it.

This is what Marx means by consciousness, from its seeming emancipated position, producing things like pure theory, theology, philosophy—producing things that are no longer viewed as parts of the world, like trees, people, desires, and beliefs.

Let's summarize where we are thus far: we understand that consciousness is something that develops along with the development of the division of labor, which corresponds to the development of people's control over nature and their social organization. At a certain point in the development of people's control over nature and their social organization, the division of labor is such that there is a separation between material and mental labor. At this point, those that can engage in complete mental labor can, to a degree, disregard what is immediately perceivable by the senses, and begin to contemplate things as if those things were removed from reality. This

is what Marx means when he writes, “From now on consciousness is in a position to emancipate itself from the world and to proceed to the formation of “pure” theory, theology, philosophy, ethics, etc.” The reason we attempted to understand this passage is because it elucidates Marx’s characterization of “theory, theology, philosophy, ethics, etc.” that the original passage contains. Thus, we may return to where we started.

We are trying to understand the following (which is the first half of the original passage): “But even if this theory, theology, philosophy, ethics, etc. comes into contradiction with the existing relations.” At this point we should be clear on what is meant by “this theory, theology, philosophy, ethics, etc.” And, though we should have the beginnings of an understanding of “the existing social relations,” it can be useful to develop that understanding more fully. Marx explains this in detail a few pages earlier (I have inserted numbers to make it easier to discuss):

(i) The way in which men produce their means of subsistence depends...on the nature of the actual means of subsistence they find in existence and have to reproduce... (ii) This mode of production...is a definite form of activity of these individuals...a definite *mode of life*... (iii) What they [i.e., these individuals] are, therefore, coincides...with *what* they produce and with *how* they produce... (iv) [This] presupposes the *intercourse* of individuals with one another...[which] is again determined by production. (150)

We shall go through all four points one at a time:

(i) “The way in which men produce their means of subsistence depends...on the nature of the actual means of subsistence they find in existence and have to reproduce.” This sentence explains a constraint to our survival. In order to live we must survive. In order to survive we must produce the things we need to survive, i.e., *the means of subsistence*. But our *method for producing* our means of subsistence is determined by what means of subsistence we find available to us. Suppose the only means of subsistence we can think of that are available to us are the following: for eating—roots, berries, insects, and some non-domesticated animals; for shelter—sticks and leaves; for clothing—leaves and vines; and for tools—baskets, bows and

arrows, and spears (made from sticks, stones, and plants). In this case our methods for producing these things are going to be determined by what it takes to acquire these means of subsistence: roots, berries and insects can be gathered into baskets; animals can be hunted with the bows and arrows and spears; clothing can be assembled by threading the vines through the leaves; and so on. In this example there are no firearms, no cotton, and no machinery. Thus, our means of producing what we need is determined by what we have available to us.

(ii) “This mode of production...is a definite form of activity of these individuals...a definite *mode of life*.” This means that the mode of production of a particular group of individuals is not merely a way they satisfy their needs, but a specific way in which they live, a *mode of life*; it constitutes and determines their entire lives.³

(iii) “What they [i.e., these individuals] are, therefore, coincides...with *what* they produce and with *how* they produce.” This is merely a further elucidation of (ii). You might think that what we are are just human beings; but we’re more than that. We are human beings that have certain needs that we satisfy with certain means of subsistence that require a certain mode of production. Thus what we are is determined by *what* we produce (i.e., means of subsistence) and *how* we produce (i.e., mode of production).

(iv) “[This] presupposes the *intercourse* of individuals with one another...[which] is again determined by production.” Again, by “intercourse” Marx merely means the interaction among people. Thus, this sentence points out that the mode of production—which is determined by what means of subsistence are available to us—determines the ways in which we interact with one another. Let’s return to our example. The mode of production for our available means of subsistence is hunting and gathering. Thus, some people must perform these tasks. Additionally,

³ All that is meant by “determines their entire lives” is sets the boundaries and requirements of the activities of their lives.

we need shelter and clothing—we must construct our shelter and produce our clothing. If the food runs out in a certain area, then we must move to a different area. Where and when we move must be decided upon. The organization and execution of all these tasks constitutes the interaction of people, the *intercourse of individuals*, which is determined by production.

All of the above (i-iv) encompass what is meant by “the existing relations,” namely, the means of subsistence and the mode of production—and the latter includes the intercourse of individuals. Now we can proceed to understand the first half of our original passage: “But even if this theory, theology, philosophy, ethics, etc. comes into contradiction with the existing relations.”

What does it mean for theory, theology, philosophy, ethics—in short, the products of complete mental labor—to come into contradiction with the existing relations. Prima facie, it seems this means that the ideas produced by this mental labor don’t accurately describe the real way the existing (i.e., at a specific time) society functions, i.e., the way it produces its means of subsistence. But it seems Marx can’t mean this. Another way of stating that *ideas don’t accurately describe reality* is simply to claim that *the ideas are false*.

Thus, it seems Marx doesn’t mean that the ideas of mental labor are merely inaccurate—if so, he could have just written, “but if this theory, theology...*were false*; but he didn’t—he wrote: *comes into contradiction*. Thus, we should understand this as follows: complete mental labor produces some ideas; these ideas are about what humans are, how they should interact, how they should produce, etc. For these ideas to come into contradiction with the existing relations must mean that the ideas are not and cannot be actualized in the existing relations; in other words, the existing (i.e., at a specific time) ideas of how humans *should* be are incompatible with how humans currently *are*—i.e., they are in *contradiction*.

At this point we can return to the entire original passage:

But even if this theory, theology, philosophy, ethics, etc., comes into contradiction with the existing relations, this can only occur because existing social relations have come into contradiction with the existing forces of production.

What we should understand about this passage is the following: the only way the ideas of complete mental labor (i.e., theory, theology, etc.) can come into contradiction with the existing relations is if some specific type of contradiction within the existing relations has already occurred. The specific type of contradiction is a contradiction between the *social relations* and the *forces of production*, at a given time. We must understand what this type of contradiction involves. Before we proceed, however, in order to avoid a potential confusion, we must articulate two distinctions: (i) the difference between *existing relations* and *existing social relations*; and (ii) the difference between the *mode of production* and the *forces of production*.

Distinction (i): *Existing relations* is a general term; it refers to all the relations within society, namely, all the necessary intercourse of individuals that corresponds to a specific mode of production, which is determined by the available means of subsistence—in short, all the necessary ways in which society is organized to produce what it needs to live. More simply put: the *existing relations* really just are the mode of production, i.e., the method of producing what individuals of a particular society need; this includes all the tools of production, the organization around using the tools, etc.

Social relations is a more specific term; it simply refers to one aspect of the *existing relations*, namely, the organization of the intercourse of individuals—e.g., the different conventions for production, who does what production, how decisions are made, how the products are distributed, etc. Simply put: it doesn't refer to the tools used for production, but simply the organization around using those tools.

Distinction (ii): The *mode of production* is what was just explained. The *forces of production* are one aspect of the *mode of production*, namely the tools and materials used for production. In an early farming society, for example, the forces of production might be the land, a shovel, a human, etc.

Given this distinction we can return to understanding the former contradiction between the social relations and the forces of production; or in other words: the contradiction between the organization of production and the tools used in production. For this type of contradiction to exist means the way people are organized around production is incompatible with the tools used in production.

We can use an oversimplified example to make this clear. Suppose we are a hunting society and our only tools are three-foot long spears. The social organization corresponding to this type of tool is rather simple: in order to use a spear each hunter carries it in his or her hand; i.e., all the hunters carry their own weapons; even if they hunt in groups, they still each carry their own weapons. Suppose further that an elder in the community, who hunts less, and hence has more free time, develops a new weapon—a catapult. Suppose this weapon can only be useful with two people.⁴ In this case the old method of social organization—namely, one individual handling one weapon—is in contradiction (or is incompatible) with the new forces of production—namely, the catapult, which requires two people.⁵

Thus, according to the passage, the only way the ideas of complete mental labor can come into contradiction with some aspect of the existing relations is if the organization of production comes into contradiction with the tools of production. So this is what Marx means

⁴ Perhaps it can be used by one person, but it is extremely inefficient.

⁵ There are plenty of examples. Consider the shift from a foraging society to a sedentary society. In the former society people are constantly moving from place to place, because hunting and gathering requires that type of organization. But consider what happens once they discover producing agriculture: packing up and leaving is no longer compatible—that would leave the crop to rot.

when he writes the passage under consideration. The question for us now is “*why* does he believe this?”

Let’s review what things are foundational to Marx’s view. First, every existing group of individuals must produce its own means of subsistence. This production will correspond to a specific mode of production, which consists of specific forces of production and social organization around those forces. Thus, in every social group of individuals there exists the necessary ingredients for the contradiction Marx refers to, namely, the contradiction between the *social organization* and the *forces of production*. Thus, at least the *potential* for the contradiction is always present: either the forces of production develop in such a way they are no longer compatible with the existing social organization, in which case the social organization must adapt accordingly; or the social organization develops in such a way that it is no longer compatible with the existing forces of production, in which case the forces of production must adapt accordingly.

Second, what is also foundational to Marx’s view is the way in which consciousness develops. We said earlier that consciousness arises out of the need for humans to engage in intercourse. Thus, our experience within that intercourse not only *necessitates* consciousness, but it also *determines* consciousness; and our experience is itself determined by our behavior in the world—which, again, is determined by the mode of production of existing society. Thus, in the last analysis, consciousness develops as that behavior develops.

Thus, within Marx’s view, there is a definite limit to consciousness—namely, the experience of individuals in a given social organization. Marx explains this concisely in the following sentence: “Conceiving, thinking, the mental intercourse of men, appear...as the direct efflux of their material behavior” (154). This is a simple point: conceiving, thinking, the mental

intercourse of people—in a word, *consciousness*—flows out of their material behavior, i.e., out of their experience in a given social organization. Thus consciousness is merely the product of this experience.⁶ Moreover, as the product of this experience, consciousness can only represent that which is grounded in experience; i.e., every idea of consciousness has its root in this experience. Because of this Marx writes the following: “Consciousness can never be anything else than conscious existence, and the existence of men is their actual life-process” (154). This simply means that consciousness is only consciousness of existence—namely, experience.

In short, all ideas of consciousness correspond to something real in experience. Moreover, if there is a contradiction between some product of consciousness and something in the existing relations, then that product of consciousness must be the result of something within the existing relations. Thus, if a product of consciousness is contradictory to something in the world, then there must be some contradiction in the world that engendered such a product of consciousness. Otherwise, we would have a product of consciousness that was something other than the consciousness of experience; if it is not in experience, then it is not in consciousness, because “life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life” (155).

At this point we should be clear that when a contradiction occurs between consciousness and the existing relations—i.e., “experience” understood in this specific way—it could only be because of a contradiction within that experience. What should not be clear, however, is why that contradiction within experience must be a contradiction between the *existing social relations* and the *existing forces of production*. Marx does not address this explicitly. But it seems to be implied in what we have discussed thus far.

⁶ Again, this is not just unqualified experience—in fact, unqualified *anything* has no place in Marx’s view. Rather, this is experience within a certain social organization, namely, the production of the means of subsistence.

We should recognize that the relevant contradiction must, in general, originate in experience. Further, this experience is experience within existing relations, i.e., a specific social organization. That specific social organization ultimately consists of two characteristics—the *social relations* and the *forces of production*. In order for a contradiction to take place at all, it must be a contradiction between two things.⁷ Thus, the only potential contradiction that could engender a contradiction between consciousness and the existing relations is a contradiction between two things within the existing relations. The only potential two things within the existing relations are the two characteristics of the existing relations, namely, the *social relations* and the *forces of production*. Thus, a contradiction between consciousness and the existing relations can only come from a contradiction between the *social relations* and the *forces of production*.

At this point we have successfully completed what we set out to accomplish—an understanding of the passage in question. In this paper we will not undertake a critique of the idea within this passage. We will, however, briefly sketch the strategies for such a critique.

In order to reject this specific idea of Marx, there seem to be two strategies: (i) we must deny that consciousness is determined by life, and allow consciousness to somehow originate from things that are not experienced; or (ii) we must claim that, within the existing relations, there are other contradictions that can engender the contradiction between consciousness and the existing relations.⁸

The problem with the first strategy is that it seems a bit absurd. It requires a realm that is other than the material world. This is not something that most people can get a strong grip on.

⁷ “Things” is meant in the most general sense.

⁸ Perhaps there are several other ways to reply. These two seem the most obvious.

The problem with the second strategy is that it is not much of an objection, but rather only a nit-picking about how to demarcate the characteristics of the existing relations.

Nonetheless, the outcome of these strategies, and any others, must be taken up elsewhere.