

The Point of Change as Interpretation: A Large and Ironic Caveat to Thesis Eleven

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Abstract Karl Marx did write, “The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways, the point is to *change* it,” which in this essay I interpret in the context of his normative thought about overcoming alienation. Reading “thesis eleven” in the light of that critical perspective, I maintain that two under-appreciated claims emerge: a central reason to pursue revolutionary change is so that more people have the freedom to engage in interpretation such as philosophy, and it is reasonable for many of us to do some mere interpretation now even if doing so will not foster the kind of change that is admittedly vital.

I. Interpreting Marx on Interpretation

In this brief analysis, I reflect on some of the significance of the young Karl Marx’s influential remark from the “Theses on Feuerbach”: “The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways, the point is to *change* it.”¹ Many of those who identify as radical philosophers resonate with this statement, construing it at the core as a rejection of the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake and as a prescription for action, with many commentators on Marx reading “thesis eleven” in essentially this

¹ Gandler, “The *Theses on Feuerbach*,” 147-148, citing the original German from Marx himself. For discussion of how Friedrich Engels’ initial publication altered the handwritten note by Marx, viz., by Engels having added the word “but” (or “however”) as well as replaced the comma with a semi-colon, see Gandler, “The *Theses on Feuerbach*,” 147-148; and Haug, “Theses on Feuerbach,” 648-650.

way.² Several maintain that it is best read, not as a prescription for change with no more interpretation at all, but instead as a call for a kind of interpretation the aim of which is change.³ Included here, in turn, are those who maintain that Marx was rejecting a certain kind of philosophy and not philosophy altogether,⁴ and others who hold that Marx was indeed rejecting philosophy altogether but favored the development of true and action-guiding theory.⁵

What all these interpretations of thesis eleven have in common is the idea that, for Marx, the proper aim is change, with the major differences between them being over whether and, if so, how interpretation might serve as a means to that end. In contrast, drawing on Marx's more normative writings from both early and later periods, particularly as they advance a critique of alienation, I provide a different interpretation making the point that, for Marx, a central point of praxis is in fact theory. Set in the larger context of Marx's *oeuvre*,⁶ I point out that he is well read as holding that one central aim of revolutionary change should be for people to have the real ability to engage in mere interpretation, a claim neglected by typical friends of thesis eleven.

As part of providing a reading of thesis eleven in the light of Marx's value system, I also draw out an implication for how we are to make decisions now, prior to revolutionary change. Many friends of thesis eleven might be inclined to share this sentiment commonly ascribed to Angela Davis: "You

² Among others cited below, see Hook, *From Hegel to Marx*, 303-307; Derrida, *Spectres of Marx*, 38-39; Bernstein, *Praxis and Action*, 55.

³ For a clear statement, see MacIntyre, "The *Theses on Feuerbach*: A Road Not Taken," 279.

⁴ E.g., Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 278-279; and Vásquez discussed in Gandler, "The *Theses on Feuerbach*," 148-149.

⁵ E.g., West, *The Ethical Dimensions of Marxist Thought*, 68-69; and Feenberg, *The Philosophy of Praxis*, esp. 1-20.

⁶ As Giles-Peters, "Objectless Activity," has done, though without the conclusions drawn here.

have to act as if it were possible to radically transform the world. And you have to do it all the time.”⁷ I argue, however, that the logic of Marx’s critique of alienation in fact counsels otherwise, such that it would be reasonable for many of us to do some mere interpretation now, at least when there is nothing else we could do that is likely to advance change.

In the following section, I sketch a reading of Marx’s argument for socializing the means of production as a way to overcome alienation, showing that, according to it and explicit statements from Marx, a key point of changing the world is to give people the real ability to interpret it (section II). As I accept in the section after it, that point hardly means that people should stop fighting for progressive social change, if not for revolution (ideally one that would reduce the working day, military conflict, and climate change) (section III). However, it does mean that they should not reject knowledge for its own sake as a waste of time or otherwise inappropriate for someone who seeks a qualitatively better society. Interpretation is instead, sensibly with Marx, one important realization of the human essence, and often is appropriate for an individual to pursue now, when the ability to make a real social difference has not yet arisen.

II. Alienation, Communism, and the Pursuit of Knowledge

It is a striking fact that Marx’s most concrete descriptions of life under communism often involve people having the freedom to interpret the world. Some might claim that Marx did not in fact believe the passages I quote below, a matter I leave for intellectual historians (but cf. some brief remarks in section III). The passages do, however, cohere with one another and are not limited to merely one text or narrow time period. What follow are three examples, after which I explain why we should expect to see them, given Marx’s value system.

First off, consider Marx’s comments about communism in the *Grundrisse*, composed in 1857-1858, but not published until 1941 (and apparently not even widely available until 1953⁸).

⁷ For just one attribution, see Gist, “WHM: Angela Davis.”

⁸ McLellan, *Karl Marx Selected Writings*, 379.

The surplus labour of the masses has ceased to be a condition for the development of wealth in general; in the same way that the non-labour of the few has ceased to be a condition for the development of the general powers of the human mind.⁹

Marx is stating that capital has developed to the point where workers need not sacrifice labor-power to such a great extent to produce wealth sufficient to meet everyone's needs, analogous to the fact that we need not rely on a massive slave class so that a parasitical elite can produce knowledge. Marx is implying here that "the development of the general powers of the human mind" is an end in itself.

However, Marx is all the more explicit about that claim in this passage, which follows the one above:

It is no longer a question of reducing the necessary labour time in order to create surplus labour, but of reducing the necessary labour of society to a minimum. The counterpart of this reduction is that all members of society can develop their education in the arts, sciences, etc., thanks to the free time and means available to all.¹⁰

Like the famous passage from the third volume of *Capital* contrasting the realm of necessity with the realm of freedom,¹¹ this one is clear that the point of socializing the means of producing is to reduce the working day and redistribute wealth and, furthermore, to do so ultimately in order to give people the temporal and material freedom needed to acquire education. With capitalism, property is concentrated in the hands of the few and the working day is long to facilitate profit-making required for a firm to survive in a competitive environment, thereby leaving a very large majority of people neither the means nor the time to pursue arts and sciences. In contrast, with socialism, people could democratically decide to ensure that workers have much more leisure time and property than they currently do, enabling them to engage in interpretation.

⁹ Marx, *Grundrisse*, 415.

¹⁰ Marx, *Grundrisse*, 415.

¹¹ Marx, "The Trinity Formula," 534-535.

Marx did not publish the *Grundrisse* during his lifetime, but the points made in it are in texts that Marx and Friedrich Engels did at least try to publish. Consider next *The German Ideology*, written in 1846 or so. According to one commentator, “In spite of strenuous efforts, Marx and Engels did not succeed in finding a publisher for their manuscript and left it ‘to the gnawing of the mice’. It was first published in 1932.”¹² In this book, Marx and Engels are explicit that in a communist society, or at least the sort they favored, the division of labor would be overcome:

(I)n communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, cowherd, or critic.¹³

What is criticism but interpretation? Of course, criticism is not the only point of abolishing capitalism, but it is one sensible end, for Marx. Similar remarks apply to aesthetic creation and apprehension, which are equally ways of interpreting the world: “In a communist society there are no painters but at most people who engage in painting among other activities....”¹⁴

Finally, consider the “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts” from 1844. Once again a plain reading of the text suggests that a major point of abolishing private ownership of the means of production is to enable people to develop their minds and to do so for its own sake.

(T)he positive supersession of private property, that is, the sensuous appropriation by and for man of human essence and human life, of objective man and his works, should not be conceived of only as direct and exclusive enjoyment, as possession and having. Man appropriates his universal being in a universal manner, as a whole man. Each of his human

¹² McLellan, *Karl Marx Selected Writings*, 175.

¹³ Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, 185.

¹⁴ Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, 206.

relationships to the world—seeing, hearing, smell, tasting, feeling, thinking, contemplating, feeling, willing, acting, loving—....are in their objective action, or their relation to the object, the appropriation of this object.¹⁵

The point of communist revolution is not merely to foster people’s enjoyment, but also to enable “thinking” and “contemplating” to become more human (where there is no suggestion that doing so must involve fomenting still more radical social change). Indeed, for Marx, one point of overcoming private property is even to develop the bodily senses in ways that would facilitate interpretation, as per the following:

The supersession of private property is therefore the complete emancipation of all human senses and qualities, but it is this emancipation precisely in that these senses and qualities have become human, both subjectively and objectively. The eye has become a human eye when its object has become a social, human object produced by man and destined for him. Thus in practice the senses have become direct theoreticians. They relate to the thing for its own sake....¹⁶

So, one central aim of praxis should be—theory! We are to overcome private ownership of the means of production so that our way of seeing the world can improve, say, by appreciating the beauty of a natural landscape or detecting patterns of interest to a scientist, instead of viewing it merely as a means to the extraction of ore. Or so a plain reading of the text suggests. Our ways of intellectually, and not merely bodily, apprehending the world are likewise meant to become humanized thereby, such that Marx deems “culture and civilization”¹⁷ to be proper ends.

Marx is not often viewed as a champion of knowledge for its own sake (although of course not only that), particularly given the great influence of thesis eleven. However, the quotations above,

¹⁵ Marx, “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts,” 99-100.

¹⁶ Marx, “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts,” 100.

¹⁷ Marx, “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts,” 96.

not as widely circulated, indicate that he was and that thesis eleven is plausibly read in the light of such a value judgment.

Furthermore, the idea that interpretation is one end in itself follows from the alienation or self-realization ethic Marx advanced in a variety of texts, ranging from “On James Mill” to the “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts” and from the *Grundrisse* to the “sixth chapter” of *Capital*.¹⁸ One of Marx’s criticisms of capitalism is that it is exploitive, but another is that it is alienating, i.e., that it fails to realize our distinctive and valuable human nature or what Marx routinely calls our “human essence,” not just in the “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts” but also in other works composed in the same time period.¹⁹ By that phrase he does not mean merely what is unique to our species, differentiating us from the animal, vegetable, and mineral kingdoms, but also what is non-instrumentally valuable or an end in itself about us. The idea is that there are certain capacities (discussed below) that we alone have to a robust degree and that are good for their own sake, with a desirable life being one in which they are actualized. That broad approach to how to live is reminiscent of the self-realization ethics of Aristotle and Hegel, whom Marx of course studied. From this perspective, bad lives are those that have an “accidental existence,”²⁰ i.e., are ones in which properties that are not part of the human essence are prominent, such that one is “alienated from his own essence.”²¹

What is the human essence, exactly? The aspect that Marx most recurrently mentions is of course our capacity for sociality, with Marx often speaking of our “communal nature.” Second and third aspects of the human essence, for Marx, include our capacity for free, creative activity, labor that is a product of the individual’s own choice and ideally undertaken “according to the laws of

¹⁸ Marx, “Results of the Immediate Process of Production.”

¹⁹ Such as “On the Jewish Question” and “On James Mill.”

²⁰ Marx, “On the Jewish Question,” 57.

²¹ Marx, “On James Mill,” 128.

beauty,"²² and also our capacity to realize ourselves in our "peculiarity"²³ and "individuality,"²⁴ that is, to be a unique or authentic self. However, there is a fourth dimension of the human essence that Marx discusses and is of most relevance to this essay, namely, our senses, where what Marx means by the term is a distinctive way that a characteristic human being can apprehend and respond to the world.

As alluded to above, Marx draws a distinction between the "physical" senses on the one hand and the "intellectual" senses on the other.²⁵ The physical ones are the five bodily senses, viz., our abilities to see, hear, smell, taste, and touch, whereas the intellectual senses include thinking and contemplating and presumably willing and acting insofar as these latter are guided by the former. Not only do these senses differ from each other and from their manifestation in animals, but also they can be refined in various ways through productive activity. "It is evident that the human eye enjoys things different from the crude, inhuman eye, the human ear differently from the crude ear....What makes each faculty distinct is just its particular essence and thus also the particular mode of objectification...."²⁶ A humanized, or encultured, eye can produce and appreciate paintings, sculptures, and other visual arts, while the human/encultured ear can create and find meaning in music.

Now, what goes for the physical goes for the intellectual; a good life is one with encultured thinking and contemplation, which might involve, on the one hand, the apprehension of poetry, novels, plays, and the like, and, on the other, the development of proper scientific enquiry.²⁷ The

²² Marx, "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts," 91.

²³ Marx, "On James Mill," 132.

²⁴ Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, 207.

²⁵ Marx, "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts," 100.

²⁶ Marx, "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts," 100, 101.

²⁷ Marx, "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts," 101-103.

failure of a person to realize his human nature, or the alienation of a person from his essence, would amount to an “abortion of his intellectual and physical faculties,”²⁸ which would of course include the inability to interpret.

Marx maintains that capitalism induces such an abortion in two major ways. For one, living in a commodified society produces personalities focused on “exploiting,” “hoarding,” and “marketing,”²⁹ with Marx remarking of the sphere of consumption that “all physical and intellectual senses have been replaced by the simple alienation of all these senses, the sense of having.”³⁰ Then, in the sphere of production, there is the enormous amount of time we spend working in ways that do not realize our human essence and merely for the sake of survival (as well as, at best, reproducing and being pleased). One way to degrade a final good is to treat it as a merely instrumental good, and especially solely as a means to an end that has a lesser worth. On this score, one finds Marx complaining of alienated labor that it “degrades....the species-life of man into a means for his physical existence”³¹ and that it makes a human being’s “essence a mere means to his existence.”³²

Whereas we should be alive so as to realize our special human powers that transcend animal life, including intellectual faculties pertaining to education in the arts and sciences, the mass of humanity gives them up merely to stay alive. A compelling normative framework from Marx grounds a powerful criticism of everyday life under capitalism, including on the ground that our capacity for interpreting the world in various ways is stunted.

²⁸ Marx, “On James Mill,” 128.

²⁹ In the words of Fromm, *Man for Himself*, esp. 64-82.

³⁰ Marx, “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts,” 100.

³¹ Marx, “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts,” 91.

³² Marx, “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts,” 90.

III. Concluding Remarks on Theory and Practice

In the previous section, I pointed out that Marx values certain ways of interpreting the world for their own sake and even thinks that a key reason to overthrow capitalism is so that people have the freedom to engage in them. I conclude by considering what the role of pursuing knowledge should be now, prior to communism, particularly in the light of thesis eleven and related claims from the “Theses on Feuerbach.”

There Marx prizes revolutionary practice, directing us to change the world and also in thesis two chiding enquiry into “a purely scholastic question.”³³ It appears that the Marx of thesis eleven is not in fact a fan of knowledge for its own sake. In addition, many readers will be inclined to hold similarly praxis-oriented views in the face of economic domination, military conflict, and the environmental crisis. The above quote from Davis might well seem apt.

One way to reconcile the tension in Marx would be to suggest that he changed his mind. Whereas the writings from 1843-1844 advance a self-realization ethic according to which a good human life is one that develops (among other things) its intellectual faculties, from about 1845 onwards Marx developed a materialist outlook that eschews any value judgements.³⁴ I do not believe that for a second, given Marx’s exhortations to overthrow capitalism, not mere predictions that it would be overthrown, and late texts where Marx does reject narrow, moral categories of individual rights, desert, and fairness, but advances certain normative principles as alternatives to them,³⁵ such as, for just one, “from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs.”³⁶

³³ Marx, “Theses on Feuerbach,” 171.

³⁴ For an influential adherent to this broad view, see Althusser, *For Marx*; cf. Giles-Peters, “Objectless Activity,” 84-85.

³⁵ E.g., Marx, *Grundrisse*, “Results of the Immediate Process of Production,” and “Critique of the Gotha Programme,”; Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*.

³⁶ Marx, “Critique of the Gotha Programme,” 615.

A more plausible reconciliation, I submit, would point out that some ways to stunt the human essence are much worse than others, where the particularly bad ones are urgent to address. Being unable to do philosophy is one thing, while having to work for 12 hours a day in a sweatshop for just enough pay to get one back to the sweatshop the next day is quite another. Even 21st century wage-labor alienation in the “developed” part of the world, along with a state of the globe in constant warfare and threatening ecological catastrophe, demand that we give them all our attention and reject the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake at this point in time. Where alienation is most severe, say, in the workplace and the battlefield, there must go our energies and resources. If so, then interpretation is for *after* the revolution, not before, so this reading of Marx and defense of Davis goes.

Perhaps that was Marx’s view, although he put a good amount of time into having children and enjoying Shakespeare to boot, not merely publishing journalism, giving speeches to workers, and manning the barricades. Setting aside that *ad hominem*, there is a principled objection to make to this rationale for devoting everything one can at the moment toward changing the world. It is that it is irrational to direct lots of time, effort, funds, and other resources toward a superlatively valuable goal that is incredibly unlikely to be realized thereby, at least in the face of less valuable goals that could readily be achieved. Although not all rational action can be captured in terms of the maximization of expected value, one needs a mighty strong argument to sacrifice substantial means toward option (A) instead of (B), where in (A) the desirability of the end is the very best at 100 and its probability is low at much less than one percent and in (B) the desirability is, say, 33 and its probability is high at 90%. That is, despite alienation being particularly severe in the workplace and the battlefield, if we cannot do anything to reduce it, then our energies and resources are sensibly directed elsewhere, perhaps toward reducing forms of alienation that are not so severe.

Unfortunately for many of us, we are indeed not in a position to overthrow capitalism and institute something better, not with our academic publications and not even with anything we could do if we left academia. The likelihood of any of our actions contributing to major positive social

change is, if not nil, then at least extraordinarily low. While I accept that there is good reason to prepare and search for strategic openings, sometimes the best we can do in respect of realizing the human essence and reducing alienation, dear reader, is to answer a purely scholastic question, perhaps of how to interpret some texts that are more than 175 years old,³⁷ as we have done in this essay.³⁸

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³⁷ “A critique seeking to go beyond the spectacle must *know how to wait*” (Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, para. 220).

³⁸ I am pleased to acknowledge that this thought piece has been improved from written comments received from Margaret McLaren and two anonymous reviewers for *Radical Philosophy Review*.

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