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# Karl Marx's Intellectual Roots in John Locke

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## **Abstract:**

*Marx supposedly represents a radical break from liberal individualist property oriented thinking. In fact however, Marx integrates the best points of a variety of liberal individualists, notably Locke and Rousseau, but also to a lesser extent Aristotle and even Plato. Marx is an extension of, not a break from, mainstream thinkers in Western thought: all Marx's main ideas can be traced to one canonical Western scholar or another. Understanding analytical tools common to both Liberalism and Marxism contextualizes their divergences and allows one to better understand both the successes and failures of Marxism as a critique in practice of liberal state theory.*

## **Keywords:**

*Rousseau, Marx, Social Contract, marxism, marxist, liberalism, legal history, legal theory, jurisprudence*

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## Introduction

At first glance, Marx and Locke seem to have little in common. However a deeper examination of their analysis of property reveals many similarities. Interestingly, they draw very different conclusions from similar analytical perspectives.

Locke and Marx each hold to the labor theory of value. One common point among modern economists (Austrian school excepted) is the idea that value is created, and that is created by labor and the source of this idea is Locke and Marx. How does the labor theory of value relate to the origin of property?

### I. Analysis of Property

#### A. The Origins of Property

For Locke,<sup>2</sup> as well as Marx,<sup>3</sup> property in the state of nature is common. Property is communal in origin either as a gift from God (Locke) or as an historical fact based on evidence from the world (Marx). Another common point both present is the labor theory of value, the idea that work alone creates value and it gives the right of possession.

In *The German Ideology* Marx and Engels explains the idea of the progression of pre-industrial societies through several stages in the history of economic development. Economies developed generally from tribal property moving from hunting and fishing to animal husbandry and then finally agriculture reaching eventually the feudal stage of development, a movement from informal common primitive property through increasingly formalized state property to highly formalized private property.<sup>4</sup> For Marx, at certain stages of society, private property is necessary and desirable for the progress of society.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Locke, *Of Civil Government*, Livre II, Chapitre V §25-30, §42, §45

<sup>3</sup> "Labor is not the source of all wealth. Nature is just as much a source of use values (and it is surely of such that material wealth consists!) as labor which is itself only the manifestation of a force of nature, human labor power." Karl Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Programm*, ch 1. Available at:

<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1875/gotha/ch01.htm>

<sup>4</sup> *Sur les Sociétés Précapitalistes*, Paris, Editions Sociales, p. 21 (1973).

<sup>5</sup> Private property, though a function of a given mode of production, "is a mode necessary to a certain state of development of productive forces." Marx & Engels, *L'Ideologie Allemande*. Paris: Editions Sociales, p. 390.

## B. The Appropriation or Individuation of Property

For Locke, property in its origin is a gift from God for all to share. This general communal right becomes reduced to individual ownership by labor.<sup>6</sup> For Marx, property in its origins is held jointly by the tribe. Through historical development property becomes individuated, and its value is determined, again, by the work invested into the object.<sup>7</sup>

### c. Use Value and Exchange Value

The source of property and value is work, but its expression takes two forms: exchange value and use value.<sup>8</sup> Exchange value is the result of surplus wealth.<sup>9</sup> Use value is the universal value of a thing, its usefulness.<sup>10</sup> This idea that we must distinguish between value in use and value on the market is fundamental to modern economic thinking and is another common point between Locke and Marx.

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<sup>6</sup> Locke, *Of Civil Government*, Livre II, Chapitre V §25-30, §42, §45 "

<sup>7</sup> "What is the social substance common to all these goods? Labor." Nizan, P. et Duret, J. (eds.) Karl Marx, *Morceaux Choisis*, p. 263. Paris: Librairie Gallimard, (1934), citation à Karl Marx *Salaires, Prix et Profit*.

<sup>8</sup> John Locke, *Of Civil Government*, Livre II, Chapitre V §46-51 esp. §50.

<sup>9</sup> "The first natural form of wealth is the superfluous or the excess, that part of products not immediately required as use value or, again, the possession of products whose use value exceeds the frame of simple necessities. Whenever we have examined the passage from barter to money we have seen that this surplus or this excess of products constitutes, in a rudimentary state, production, the sphere properly speaking of mercantile exchange. Superfluous products become exchangeable goods or merchandise."

Karl Marx, *Contribution à la Critique de L'Economie Politique*, Paris, Editions Sociales. Aussi: "The usefulness of a thing constitutes its use value." Karl Marx *Capitale*, Paris: Presses Universitaires Français (1993) p. 40 ; "Exchange value appears at first as the quantitative relation, as the proportion in which use values ...are exchanged."

Karl Marx, *Capitale*, Paris: Presses Universitaires Français (1993).

<sup>10</sup> "But since gold and silver, being little useful to the life of man in proportion to food, raiment, and carriage, has its *value* only from the consent of men, whereof *labour* yet *makes*, in great part, *the measure*, it is plain, that men have agreed to a disproportionate and unequal *possession of the earth*, they having, by a tacit and voluntary consent, found out a way how a man may fairly possess more land than he himself can use"

John Locke, *Of Civil Government*, Livre II, Chapitre V §50 also §46-51 generally.

## II. Analysis of the State

### A. The State of Nature

The ideas of Marx and Locke on the origin of property vis-à-vis the state are also similar. Sociologically, Marx sees the origin of property in communal organization - primitive communism - as an historical fact. By contrast, Locke sees the collective origin of property in the fictitious state of nature<sup>11</sup> as a function of theology.<sup>12</sup> But the descriptive results which are nevertheless similar result in the state which defines and protects property. For Locke<sup>13</sup> and Marx<sup>14</sup> the function of the State is to defend property.

The collective origin of the state and property does not prevent class struggle. For Marx, the State is the form a class takes to be dominant, the machine which preserves the domination of an organized class: the relations of production (including property) follows from these facts. Its origin is natural in the sense that social organization is inevitable (humans are not self sufficient), but its form is a function of the relations of production in a given era.

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<sup>11</sup> "TO understand political power right, and derive it from its original, we must consider, what state all men are naturally in, and that is, a *state of perfect freedom* to order their actions, and dispose of their possessions and persons, as they think fit, within the bounds of the law of nature, without asking leave, or depending upon the will of any other man. A *state also of equality*, wherein all the power and jurisdiction is reciprocal, no one having more than another" Locke, II, II, 4).

<sup>12</sup> "But though this be a *state of liberty*, yet it is not a *state of licence*: ...The *state of nature* has a law of nature to govern it, which obliges every one: and reason, which is that law, teaches all mankind, who will but consult it, that being all *equal and independent*, no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty, or possessions" Locke, II, II, 6)

<sup>13</sup> "The great and *chief end*, therefore, of men's uniting into common-wealths, and putting themselves under government, is the *preservation of their property*. " Livre II, Chapitre IX §124)

<sup>14</sup> Marx describes the progression of society from hunters and fishers through pastoral nomadic peoples who knew "sporadic agriculture" and who grew in importance with time and played "a determinant role for landed property, collective at its origin". Centre d'Etudes et Recherches Marxistes Sur Les Sociétés Précapitalistes p. 56. Paris: Editions Sociales, (1973) citation à Karl Marx, Grundrisse, p. 36.

## **B. The Revolution**

A final parallel between Marx and Locke: For both, there is a right to rebel against a tyranny.<sup>15</sup> A difference however is that for Locke the people can rebel, and in contrast to Marx they should rebel.

If we see a certain similarity in the descriptions of the reality described by Locke and Marx, we must also be aware of their differences, including on the class struggle. Thus from similar analytical tools, they arrive at different prescriptions. This poses a problem for the idea of a science of law

## **III. The Source of Various Provisions of Marx and Locke: Their Indecidable Presumptions**

The major difference between Marx and Locke is in a similarity between Marx and Plato. For Plato, as well as Marx, society is stratified between different castes.

The determinant of the differing prescriptions of Marx, Locke, Plato is the divergence between their positions on the idea of equality (an indefinable and indemonstrable pre-supposition). For Plato, inequality is natural, inevitable and good - because it is a reflection of the different levels of wisdom and faculties of human beings, which is a function of their moral development. For Marx, in contrast, equality is evidence of our common humanity and seems to be the sine qua non of his prescriptions. Another position determined from their divergent presumptions on equality is the scope of the right to rebel and whether one has a duty to obey. For Plato, there is a duty to obey the state, but for Marx there is a right to rebel against it. Both propositions follow from their divergent views on equality. The same independent variable (equality) also determines Locke's position on individual ownership (whether property is a fundamental right). However, Marx derives a right to basic needs from his position on the value of equality. Work creates value, but the redistribution of wealth to ensure the needs of all are met is no less important. In addition, for Marx only manual labor creates

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<sup>15</sup> Locke, Livre II, Chapitre XIX, §223-226, 229.

value. The professions only redistribute wealth, they are not productive forces. So, for Marx (as Plato!) The leaders of society must relinquish their individual right of ownership to the collective in order to demonstrate their moral right to rule, which also ensures that their private interests do not divert public power.

The different prescriptions of these three thinkers seems to be a function of their different assumptions about the nature of inequality and duties of human beings among themselves. Their differing standards could be expressed in the following syllogisms:

For Marx, it seems:

- 1) Justice is to respect the moral equality of all beings
- 2) If we do not have the means necessary for life, and others have more than the necessities of life, then moral equality is not respected

Therefore, society must provide the possessions needed to sustain the lives of all. By contrast, I think Plato and Locke:

- 1) Justice is to reward in a manner proportional to the abilities of people
- 2) The capacities of people are different

Therefore, a reward for unequal capacity is just.

If prescription can be converted into a conditional description (and it can) then there is no is-ought dichotomy. Thus, it is in fact possible to imply a prescription from a description, provided one only recast the modal verbs as conditionals and express all enthymes exhaustively (to completion). Kelsen's neo-positivist project to develop a purely descriptive theory of the law is thus condemned as pointless defence of a non-issue (the supposed impossibility of normative inference). Positivism divorces law and morality, usually proposes ethical relativism and defines the law as the will to power all of which empower fascism.

Positivists can say that the fact that Plato, Locke and Marx propose different prescriptions to the same problems is a demonstration of cultural relativism. However, those different answers are consequences of different levels of development, different phases of history. Even if that were not the case and even if all prescription was inevitably flawed prescription would still be inevitable because humans



are social and seek to convince each other to adopt or reject certain courses of action. Moreover that discourse helps humans develop, helps them discover the good life. Positivism wants to deflect and eliminate this discourse. Worse, functionally, if not intentionally, positivist presuppositions will lead to, or at least support, fascism, a result of the separation of morality and law and the relativization of values.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude, Marx and Locke are each other's historical mirrors in terms of their prescriptions. For Locke, the challenge is to go from a vision of collective ownership, subject to mutual obligations, and with inherently limited accumulation to a right of unlimited ownership, such that property is unrestrained by collective consent or obligation. For Marx, the challenge is to move from the idea of collective primitive tribal ownership through individual property in the industrial system and to restore communal relations of production to avoid the domination of the collective in the industrial era whilst at the same time maintaining and improving the productive power of industry.

Locke tried to demonstrate his thesis:

1) By ignoring the classic dualism of the association of corruption inherent in the material (in origin, a Zoroastrian idea) contrasted with the pure character of the spirit. In Western terms, Locke ignores the idea of original sin.

2) By downplaying the collective nature of tribal property

3) By a broad definition of property that includes the life as a property. Locke used the sense of property more in the sense of an adjective "a property of" than a noun; that is, he was too flexible in his use of the term, going beyond common usage creating thereby the potential for confusion.

4) By seeing the function of the state as the maintenance of individual ownership rather than by defining and sustaining the general interest.

5) By defending the development of an idea of exchange value which allows the accumulation and transfer of vast fortunes - and thus an oligarchic aristocracy or bourgeois class, or some combination of these two classes.



6) By enabling the alienation of the individual labor.

7) By denying the need for communal consent to transfer of ownership of property admitted to be held in common (an internal contradiction in Locke's theory). He denies this for practical reasons. Locke states hereto:

"By making an explicit consent of every commoner, necessary to any one's appropriating to himself any part of what is given in common, children or servants could not cut the meat, which their father or master had provided for them in common, without assigning to every one his peculiar part. Though the water running in the fountain be every one's, yet who can doubt, but that in the pitcher is his only who drew it out? His *labour* hath taken it out of the hands of nature, where it was common, and belonged equally to all her children, and *hath* thereby *appropriated* it to himself."<sup>16</sup>

I critique this position:

1) argument by analogy is not as strong as deductive reasoning and moreover this analogy doesn't hold well. The global economy has nothing to do with a family's meal.

2) proverbs, while being by their simplicity, obscure the real issues and appeal to emotions, which are not rational.

3) Locke made this argument to manipulate our emotions: he seeks our pity for the hungry workers and children, and asks us to see the volunteering spirit of paternalistic aristocrats. Thus we are distracted from the central issue, the division of labor, working conditions, and the correlation between work and remuneration.

Reviewing Locke's position in its structure – proverb and analogy – it seems ill formed. A Marxist would ask for exactly that which Locke sees as a disadvantageous or impossible. Without a social right to essential goods the weak could perish according to the law over the strongest. Sharing guarantees the provision of basic necessities maintains social peace and enables social productivity. The maintenance of certain "safeguards" in a liberal economy does not necessarily mean the collectivization of the means of production. These precautions even

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<sup>16</sup> John Locke, Two Treatises, II 5 §29 [http://oll.libertyfund.org/?option=com\\_staticxt&staticfile=show.php%3Ftitle=222&chapter=16269&layout=html&Itemid=27](http://oll.libertyfund.org/?option=com_staticxt&staticfile=show.php%3Ftitle=222&chapter=16269&layout=html&Itemid=27)

appear necessary to ensure the proper functioning of the capitalist system and to prevent its excesses.

Another criticism: Locke says that reason and the Bible justifies private property. But this is not necessarily the case. One could also say that reason requires a system of communal property to ensure the needs of people with low needs or to fulfil the will of God.

Although the ideas of Locke were able to be adopted in English-speaking countries, it nevertheless appears that his vision is not entirely persuasive when critical examined. On the points discussed herein – the origin of the state, the origin of property, revolution – Locke and Marx are similar because Marx and Locke use very similar analytical tools. It is likely Marx read and was aware of Locke. The divergences then must be conscious and when Marx diverges from Locke he usually has the better view because he is a materialist. Marx theory developed out of and seriously considered the various liberal theories of the state.