

## **Marx's *Grundrisse*: "Forms which precede capitalist production"**

An introductory lecture by Ron Kelch at Niebyl-Proctor Library, February 11, 2007

### I. Introduction

The *Grundrisse* is a collection of Marx's "Notebooks" from which Marx developed *Capital*. One reason for studying them is to appreciate how Marx developed his ideas, his method of investigation in distinction from *Capital's* method of presentation. These notebooks were written from 1857 to 1858. What became *Capital* underwent many drafts and revisions before the first edition appeared in 1867 in a tightly argued form. The *Grundrisse* is Marx at the stage of investigation. Here, you get a broader picture of Marx's general approach to his topic which is to *presuppose* a concept of the "free and full development of" both the individual and society (487). At the same time you see how thoroughly empirical Marx was as he investigated the specific nature of different forms of the pre-capitalist commune--the Asiatic, the Roman, the German, etc. Some of these ideas appear in a different way in *Capital*, there are also other ideas Marx doesn't revisit until the end of his life. That is especially true of the section we selected, "Forms which precede capitalist production." In this section Marx looks at pre-capitalist forms as a way to distinguish what is specific to capitalism. Singling out what is specific to capitalism from his perspective of the "full and free development" of both the individual and society allows Marx to project a different future than either capitalism or pre-capitalism.

### II. The future as a perspective on capitalism and pre-capitalism

Marx's begins (471) with capitalism's distinctive difference from past forms:

- 1)"free labor and the exchange of this free labor for money"
- 2)"the separation of this free labor from the objective conditions of its realization"

The capital relation is one where human laborers have been "set free" from "the objective conditions of labor's realization." The capital relation starts when most people come to market with nothing to sell but their own ability to labor. Labor here becomes mere means to life, not an end-in-itself. In other words, labor becomes alienated--alienated from nature and from others through capital, which comes between the laborer and relations with others and with nature. The subject, laborer, becomes separated from the object, nature.

For the greater part of history, humanity's "metabolism with nature," which is one of Marx's definitions of labor, was set by the community in a fixed way according to customs and traditions. The good part of being connected to nature through a traditional community is that, though it is from a "limited standpoint" (488), humans were able to express their creative powers through their labor. One could comprehend the way one's labor was directly part of reproducing the life of the whole community. The bad part is that there is no way for the individual to break loose from fixed and given social relations. Social relations established by tradition also restrict access to objective conditions and the ability to fully express those creative powers. There is no concept of the full and free development of the individual as a creative agent in social production.

But contrasted with the modern world, Marx says these closed forms appear to be "lofty." One response to modern alienation is to yearn for some idealized closed form. We see this today also, partly because of a lack of an articulated alternative to capitalism. Religious fundamentalist don't challenge capitalism but pose visages of a perfect settled society. However, when experienced from within, those forms were no panacea and Marx traces how each underwent a process of dissolution, partly from objective material pressures from things like population growth, and partly from subjective pressures as when individuals went for other options, for example, running away to a city when they could, or joining a guild.

A medieval artisan in a guild still has control over his tools and, as Marx puts it, "here labour itself is still half artistic, half an end-in-itself" (497). In contrast, the fully capitalist form, which through various means sets human's "free" from their connection to nature and the tools with which they express their creative capacities, makes labor itself a commodity, creates a worker who has nothing to sell but her labor-power. Commodities existed for a long time as peoples traded on the margins of pre-capitalist societies, but only when labor-power itself becomes a commodity do you have capitalism. Capitalist "equality" of exchange turns on a total inequality where most have nothing to sell but their own labor while a few own "the objective conditions of its realization."

While capital's self-expansion tremendously expands productive capacities, for Marx, it is the ultimate self-alienation of humanity through things, commodities and capital, which transforms labor from being a human end-in-itself to serving an external end. Or, as Marx puts it, "this complete working-out of the human content appears as a complete emptying-out, this universal objectification as total alienation, and the tearing-down of all limited, one-sided aims as sacrifice of the human-end-itself to an entirely external end" (488). Labor itself becomes alienated and a mere means to life instead of conscious life affirming activity. The capital relation alienates the workers from others and from nature, including their own nature, as labor becomes part of the process of the self-expansion of capital.

In *Capital* Marx calls this process of being "set free" from fixed pre-capitalist forms one long first negation. This process is still on-going. NAFTA, for example, created huge unemployment among Mexican peasants, especially in places like Chiapas where they still had a communal land form and they resisted fiercely. They couldn't compete with U.S. agri-business. They were "set free" and left to the vicissitudes of capital as they migrated north. *Capital* traces in detail the specific form this process took in England and Western Europe a process that wasn't "natural" but was wrought with violence and legal sanction. In this section of the *Grundrisse* Marx alludes to such forced creation of a "labour market" in the actions of Henry VII, and VIII (507). Capitalist alienation is the socialization of humanity through things, a process that breaks up previous social relations, substituting "material relations between persons and social relations between things." Marx poses the new society as the negation of the negation, as freely associated humanity expropriating the objective conditions of production (means of production) for its use in a fully conscious, social, collective life.

In the *Grundrisse* Marx elaborates some on what negation of the negation, a positive notion of the new society, could mean. Marx introduces this general view of the future when he discusses how alienated labor makes past fixed forms appear as "lofty." In other words, Marx measures the past and present from the perspective of a non-capitalist future:

...when the limited bourgeois form is stripped away, what is wealth other than the universality of individual needs, capacities, pleasures, productive forces, etc., created through universal exchange? The absolute working out of his creative potentialities, with no presupposition other than the previous historic development, which makes this totality of development, i.e., the development of all human powers as such the end in itself, not as measured on a *predetermined* yardstick? Where he does not reproduce himself in one specificity, but produces his totality? Strives not to remain something he has become, but is in the absolute movement of becoming? (488)

This is Marx positive concept of a dialectical self-moving unity of objective and subjective from which he engages the present and the past. In this unity, the individual subject, the laborer, is constantly expanding and realizing her innate capacities and needs objectively in nature, including human nature. Here labor is not a means to life but an end-in-itself and is experienced as part of the development of the species--human powers. Totality is a new beginning, not fettered by tradition or the capital relation. Realizing philosophy means realizing a concept of an

unimpeded movement of becoming, not in bare thought, but in the production and reproduction of humanity in metabolism with nature.

Even as Marx holds to his concept of the unfettered development of subjective human capacities and needs in metabolism with the objective conditions of human existence in nature, he is rigorously empirical in tracing the specific process of dissolution of each previous form of human relations. Marx poses no overarching abstract uni-linear concept of development like a progression from primitive commune to slavery to feudalism to capitalism, a concept fostered by many post-Marx-Marxists, including Engels to some extent. We can't go into the detail in which Marx empirically analyses the specific differences of each form and varieties within those forms, but let's look at a couple of examples of how Marx critically engaged the past from the standpoint of the future.

### III Asiatic form

Engels never saw Marx's *Grundrisse* and its lengthy discussion of the more or less despotic Asiatic pre-capitalist form. This is emblematic of Marx's non-linear approach. Marx takes up how the Asiatic form persisted into the modern era without developing through individual proprietorship. How did this happen? To answer this Marx goes even further back into human origins than the communal property forms, which preceded capitalism. Those forms, too, were also the product of history. Before any settled landed property forms there was a spontaneously emerging pastoral and migratory clan system. Human kind is not settlement prone by nature. Marx says the natural clan community is a presupposition for the settled land community and not its results. This means that each one's relationship to the land, each one's labor, is mediated by the community, by customary life. In other words, it is through the community that each individual becomes a proprietor, a possessor (472). This unity, where "each individual conducts himself only as a link", allows for the emergence of a despotic form or a

comprehensive unity standing above all these little communities...Because this *unity* is the real proprietor and the real presupposition of communal property, it follows that this unity can appear as a particular unity above the many real particular communities, where the individual is then in fact propertyless or, property--i.e., the relation of the individual to the natural condition of labour and of reproduction as belonging to him, as the objective, nature-given inorganic body of his subjectivity--appears mediated for him through a cession, by the total unity--a unity realized in the form of a despot (473).

In other words, here the individual is never allowed to go free and establish herself as the social entity. The individual is slave to a comprehensive unity standing above the community. The degree of democracy, or despotism, in these forms depends on the level of control exercised by the despot over central functions like water systems. These self-subsisting forms persisted long into the modern era. As capital encroached, as it did in China in the 1800s, Marx saw new possibilities for liberation in the revolts engendered against these encroachments as in the Taiping Rebellion--there emerged a new form of individual cooperation vs. capitalism and their despot. At the end of his life Marx returned to study the Russian mir, a semi Asiatic form, in which he saw the possibility for a Russian Revolution that could happen ahead of western Europe and be the basis of Russian social regeneration and socialism if it was also a part of a world socialist revolution.

The "Asiatic form..." says Marx, "hangs on most tenaciously...due to its presupposition that the individual does not become independent vis-à-vis the commune" (486). While for Marx, the process of "individuation" is crucial to the development of productive forces and human capacities, he criticizes the myth of the isolated individual existing in a state of nature because "human beings become individuals only through the process of history"(496).

#### IV Roman form

Marx's standpoint is the development of the social individual who recognizes herself as such, or, as Marx puts it in *Capital*, an association of free laborers in which each one expends their labor-power in full self-awareness as a single social labor force. In all cases of pre-capitalist forms the individual doesn't stand on her own but her relation to nature is mediated by being a member of the community in a fixed way. By being a member of a community each one relates to nature "as his own inorganic being, as a condition of his production and reproduction." (490) In the Roman form each member is parceled out a given acreage from the commons. "Thus," writes Marx, "the preservation of the old community includes the destruction of the conditions on which it rests, turns into its opposite." In a general statement about this process of dissolution Marx writes: "Not only do objective conditions change in the act of reproduction, e.g., the village becomes a town, the wilderness a cleared field etc., but the producers themselves change, too, in that they bring out new qualities in themselves, develop new powers and ideas, new modes of interchange, new needs and new language" (494). However, population expansion forces colonization, conquest and enslavement of other peoples. In Rome the beginnings of independent individuality turned into a world of slavery. Because slavery became the predominant mode, proletarians, or free citizens who had no access to land or other means of production, were not central to production.

Rome produced the preconditions for capitalism but didn't develop in that direction because the prevailing mode of production was slavery. One of those preconditions is the existence of hoards of money accumulated through usury and trade. Another precondition is a class of people who have been stripped of any objective conditions of productions. But slavery, which made other peoples a part of the conditions of production through conquest in Rome, also made the mass of proletarians relatively useless. There was no conception of the capital relation taking off under these conditions. In one of Marx notebooks recently translated, he discusses the way ancient Rome kept the free landless proletarians under control by holding out to them the possibility that one day they too could become slave owners. He relates it to the way the slave-based South in the U.S. kept the loyalty of the poor whites with the same promise. U.S. slavery, however, was surrounded by a prevailing capitalist mode of production that was taking off.

#### V Conclusion

The *Grundrisse* provides a window on Marx's process of thinking, which is never to impose any overarching abstraction on historically concrete and specific forms of development. However, this is no empty headed empiricism. Marx approaches the past and the present from his perspective of a non-capitalist future. That means whatever path of dissolution Marx investigated he always singled out the dualities within it. For example: in the primitive commune each one experienced satisfaction that their labor contributed directly to the reproduction of the community but, at the same time, it restrained individuality and creative impulses; the guild artisans produced commodities but were still able to express themselves artistically in their labor; the beginnings of independent individuality in Rome was transformed into universal slavery; the despotic Asiatic commune awakened, in the Taiping Rebellion a fierce opposition to capital's encroachments and in the process created a new freely associated cooperation from below. On the one hand these were genuine human developments, especially aspects where social individuals were reaching beyond property relations and finding new productive powers and creative expressions. On the other hand, limitations arising from within hastened further transitions. In each case, Marx is looking for how the new can emerge *through* alienation, and not retreat to a closure which re-imposes society as an abstraction against the individual. Marx's concept of the "absolute movement of becoming" through the social individual's "absolute working out of his creative potentialities, with no presupposition other than the previous historic development" is a principle that never changes and is, at the same time, open to all the new. Can't that same principle be the basis from which we can engage developments in our day?