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The Idea of World History in the Doctrine of Karl Marx

The author shows that Marx saw himself as the creator of a science of history rather than a philosopher, economist, or sociologist. He elucidates Marx's method as a fusion of logical and historical analysis. He explains Marx's concepts of practice and social being, alienation and freedom, and social and socioeconomic formation. Finally, he discusses Marx's ideas about free and labor time.

Whatever view we might take of the period during which Marx lived and worked, he and his contemporaries undoubtedly viewed it under the aspect not of eternity but of historical finitude. The nineteenth century, in the words of Michel Foucault, was “the age of History.” In this age, historical time with its fluidity and mobility finally displaced from theoretical consciousness any kind of reference to eternal essences and substances interpreted in religious or metaphysical terms. The transcendental lost its power. History began to be conceptualized not as a purely external—chronological—sequence of things and events, but as a mode of their being that dictates its own laws to labor, life, and language. While the eighteenth century imagined the world as “an order of identities and differences,” the nineteenth century likened it to “an order of time,” making it possible to compare differently organized worlds by the method of analogies. “For eighteenth-century thought, temporal sequences

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Translated by Stephen Shenfield.

were merely an external sign, merely a vague manifestation of the order of things. Since the nineteenth century, they have expressed—with a greater or lesser degree of directness, up to and including breaks—a specific, deeply historical mode of being of things and people.”¹

History, according to Foucault, is always the history of finite man, who lives under the constant threat of death (from hunger or other disasters) and tries by means of history to eliminate, overcome his finitude and maximize his life sustenance and personal safety. For this purpose he turns history into a mode of the existence of production, life, or language, compelling them constantly to progress, to change in the desired direction. But historical time, like any other, has its beginning and end. Man is able to overcome or diminish his finitude in two ways—either by slowing down or stopping time, turning it into an endless present, or by jumping out of the present into some other time. Both these ways signify “the end of History.” Foucault attributes the first—pessimistic—solution to Ricardo and the second—revolutionary—solution to Marx. Although Ricardo preached endless retardation and Marx a decisive break, they both proclaimed that the end of History was approaching. “*Finitude* in all its truth is given in *time*—and *time* is coming to an *end*.”² As a result, both fell into a utopia in which there exists neither time nor space.

Utopianism is the most common accusation leveled at Marx by his numerous critics. Contrary to what he thought of himself, claiming to provide a scientific explanation of history, he is often viewed not as a scientist but as a utopian, preferring prophecy of what will never be to knowledge of what was and is. Yet is it possible for historical knowledge to be not just an entertaining narration of past events or a utopian daydream of the future, but scientific knowledge with a claim to the comprehension of history in its entirety? Is it possible for an integral comprehension of history to be not metaphysics but science? This [set of] questions is still debated by historians and methodologists of science. In the nineteenth century Marx’s doctrine was one of the most ambitious attempts to create a scientific theory of history. We can debate whether he created such a theory, but we cannot ignore how he conceptualized its creation. In his own opinion, one cannot realize this project either as a philosopher or as an economist or sociologist (like Auguste Comte, for example). Who then really was Marx?

Marx as a historian: From philosophy of history to historical science

Mountains of books have been written about Marx as a philosopher and economist. For philosophers he is primarily a philosopher who was engaged in developing the logic and theory of knowledge; for economists he is an

economist who devoted himself to study of the capitalist system of relations. But none of these views fits the way Marx saw himself. In *The German Ideology*, summarizing their own (and not only their own) philosophical past, Marx and Engels wrote: “We know only a single science, the science of history. One can look at history from two sides and divide it into the history of nature and the history of men. . . . The history of nature, called natural science, does not concern us here; but we will have to examine the history of men, since almost the whole ideology amounts either to a distorted conception of this history or to a complete abstraction from it.”^{3*}

Although the authors deleted these lines from the subsequent edition of *The German Ideology*, they reveal that Marx considered himself above all a historian, but a historian of a special kind—one who lays claim to a scientific (he calls it “materialist”) conception of history. The science in which he wished to engage broke with both empirical historiography, engaged mainly in the collection and description of historical facts, and the idealist conception of history, which reduced it to “*so-called cultural histories*, which are only histories of religions and states.”^{4**} The materialist conception of history was to play a role in relation to historical science similar to the role Darwin’s theory had played in relation to biological science.

At this point Marx’s doctrine of historical materialism begins to be misunderstood, even by his followers and supporters. He continues to be considered a philosopher of history, a social philosopher, or a philosophical anthropologist. For some reason, describing his doctrine as philosophical gives Marx greater value in the eyes of sympathizers than recognizing it as a scientific theory. It would be possible to reconcile oneself to the tradition of regarding any theory (especially in history or the humanities) as philosophical were it not the persistent attempt of Marx himself to counterpose his own materialist conception of history precisely to the philosophical view of the historical process, which in his opinion is a result of pure speculation.

At the same time, historical knowledge, as was already clear to Marx, cannot be likened to knowledge of natural science because in one essential respect the history of men differs from the history of nature—it has a *subject*, who acts not by virtue of natural necessity but in accordance with a goal he has consciously chosen for himself. The presence of such a subject has given rise to endless philosophical speculations on the theme of the meaning and goal of history itself. Moreover, since Kant and Hegel it has no longer been

*While originally included in the first version of the clean copy of Part I (section A) of the work, this passage was later crossed out. That explains text discrepancies in English editions of *The German Ideology*.—Ed.

**From K. Marx, *The Grundrisse*, Introduction.—Ed.

possible to consider this subject by analogy with a natural object or extend to him the methods of cognition used in the mathematical and natural sciences. Human communities of various kinds may act as historical subjects, but in any case history is made by people, the meaning of whose activity cannot be grasped by appealing to laws similar to the laws of nature.

Long before neo-Kantianism, Marx realized that historical truth is attained not by means of generalization—bringing a special phenomenon under a general law of development—but by elucidating the individual uniqueness of each historical era and its special place in the general chain of historical evolution. However, unlike the neo-Kantians, Marx supposed that the subject of historical action exists in his historical concreteness by virtue of not simply the values shared by him but also the social relations inherited and created by him. What people believe in, what they regard as a value is determined in large measure by the system of their social relations. It is as a creator of these relations that man acts as a historical subject. In the final analysis, history takes shape as a result of the activity of men in pursuit of their sometimes highly divergent goals. The degree to which these goals are realizable is determined by the presence of forces and relations of production created earlier. As the role of the human factor in history grows, history increasingly acquires the character not of a natural but of a natural-historical process—a process that does not deny natural necessity but incorporates it into a broader social and cultural context.

Hence it is clear why history for Marx is not only the past. History that is understood only as the past reproduces the defect of the old—contemplative—materialism, for which reality exists only “in the form of the *object* or of *contemplation*, but not as *sensuous human activity, practice*, not subjectively.”^{5*} As the past, history is exclusively an object of knowledge, to which the knowing subject, living in the present, has no direct relation. In this case, our own relation to history is confined exclusively to knowledge of it. Previously there was history, and now it is no longer. There is no history even when the present is envisioned by analogy with the past. Equally, history is not prophecy of the future. History, if it does exist, is what happens with us now, in the present. The past and the future exist in relation only to the present. Without the present there is neither past nor future. To understand the present is to acquire the key to an understanding of both the past (“the anatomy of man is a key to the anatomy of the ape”^{**}) and the future.⁶

But can the present be an object of science? And what science would that

*This is the famous first thesis from K. Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach*.—Ed.

**From K. Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Introduction, Section 3: The Method of Political Economy.—Ed.

be? After all, the majority of the social sciences (from economics to law and sociology) also apparently deal with the present, but for some reason they are not regarded as historical sciences. The point is that the present for them is just a chronology, a reality designated by a certain date. It encompasses everything that exists at a given moment of time. But can everything that exists today be considered the historical present, or contemporary? What about so-called vestiges of the past? And which phenomena should we regard as such vestiges? The present is not simply a chronology; it is a special historical state. And only historical science is capable of answering the question of how it differs from the past. While living in the present, people do not just learn about history; through their activity, directly or indirectly, they make history—in conformity, of course, with the conditions and circumstances of their time. It is the task of historical science, as Marx understood it, to bring to people's attention the fact that while living in the present they are making history, participating in the historical process.

The majority of people are not aware of themselves as makers of history; they suppose that history is made not by them but by others—by outstanding figures, leaders, and heroes. Their consciousness is not adequate to their being, to who they really are in history. On this point Marx diverges from Hegel. For Hegel the problem of the inadequacy of consciousness to being is easily solved—by changing consciousness. One consciousness must be replaced by another—that is the whole problem. According to Marx, people are incapable of changing their consciousness without changing their being, which in any case is their *being-in-society, or social being*. It must be the object of history as a science to examine the process by which people create and change (produce) their social being; from this it is necessary also to deduce the change in their social consciousness. “Morality, religion, metaphysics, all the rest of ideology and their corresponding forms of consciousness, thus no longer retain the semblance of independence. They have no history, no development; but men, developing their material production and their material intercourse, alter, along with this, their real existence, their thinking and the products of their thinking. Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life.”⁷⁷ Only in appearance does consciousness have its own history, being a consequence of people's production of their social being. When the historian shifts his attention from the production of consciousness to the production of being, “there real, positive science begins: the representation of the practical activity, of the practical process of development of men. Empty talk about consciousness ceases, and real knowledge has to take its place. . . . [As a result,] history ceases to be a collection of dead facts as it is with the empiricists (themselves still abstract), or an imagined activity of imagined subjects, as with the idealists.”⁷⁸ All this is well known to anyone who is in the

least familiar with Marx's doctrine, and gives rise to no special disagreements (except perhaps on the issue of whether this doctrine belongs to philosophy or to science). The disagreements begin with the following questions. What is to be understood by social being? What distinguishes social being from any other kind of being? And what kind of science makes social being its object? Must it resemble economics, sociology, political science, or some other science? Or does it exist in its own distinct capacity?⁹

Social being as the object of historical science

The question of being was, of course, posed long before Marx—by the philosophers of ancient Greece. Modern philosophers, however, lost sight of this question as they switched their attention from ontology to epistemology, to the theory of knowledge. Reflections concerning what the world is in its objective existence gave way to diverse attempts to explain the nature of human consciousness and knowledge. In Lukács's opinion, the reason for this shift in focus from being to knowledge must be sought in the practice of bourgeois society, which tries to avoid the question of its own nature. "An attempt really to return thinking about the world to being can now be successful only through a revival of the ontology of Marxism."¹⁰

What then distinguishes Marx's ontology (doctrine of being) from all other kinds of ontology? It is, above all, his treatment of being not as a metaphysical or natural-scientific category but as a category of historical science. Being is not nature in isolation from man or man in isolation from nature, but the unity of man with nature as given in the process of man's labor activity. This activity is not simply physical or mental: it is in equal measure object-transformative (material) and conscious. The disjuncture between body and soul, between the material and the ideal, which philosophy has not yet fully overcome, is resolved in Marx by reference to the social-transformative activity of man, which contains the cause of the existence of both. Even the human body is not a gift of nature but a consequence of man's social activity or way of life, which imprints a specifically human form on the natural material. In any case, the essence of man must be sought in the aggregate ("ensemble") of social relations created by him, which arise out of his *relation to nature, other people, and himself*. "Being" for the individual means relating in a certain manner to nature, other people, and himself. Social being may therefore be defined as the active unity of man with nature, other people, and himself; this, of course, is fully revealed not at the start but in the course of the entire historical movement.

It would seem that judgments concerning social being can be made on the basis of direct observation of people's daily lives. People's social being

is how they appear in their real lives. But this is true only in part. Even at relatively high stages of social evolution, people often behave like animals and not yet as socially developed and rational beings. Rather, social being is comprehended in the process of criticism of immediately apparent being; from this it follows that it never appears in a finally fixed form. Marx's ontology is an ontology of social being that remains incomplete, that has not fully taken shape. It registers not what is already present, but what is in the process of becoming and development. In Lukács's words, "a true appeal to being itself can be successful only when its important properties are understood as elements in an essentially determined historical process of development and posited as a basis for critical examination corresponding to the specific character of historicity and to the definite kind of being in the given case."¹¹ Social being is not a static but a dynamic state that is constantly in a *process of development*, which, however, should not be equated with a naturalistically interpreted evolutionism. Unlike the evolution of natural bodies and living organisms, the development of man's social being is wholly determined, directed, and controlled by his activity.

Any historical development proceeds not from a vacuum, not from zero, but from definite premises that unlike metaphysical (speculative) premises have the character of empirically obvious statements. "The premises from which we begin are not arbitrary ones, not dogmas, but real premises from which abstraction can only be made in the imagination. They are the real individuals, their activity and the material conditions under which they live, both those that which they find already existing and those produced by their activity. These premises can thus be verified in a purely empirical way."¹² The first such premise is the very fact of the existence of living human individuals with their bodily organization and relation to the natural environment. The naturally conditioned life activity of people and those changes they cause to the environment as they produce the means of life needed by them—here is the initial basis of human history. "The writing of history must always set out from these natural bases and their modification in the course of history through the action of people."¹³ Labor as the process of transformation of the substance of nature into a product of use to man—such is the first and self-evident premise of the existence of human history. Marx does not derive this premise from anywhere, but assumes it as inherent in the very nature of man and lying at the foundation of his entire subsequent history.

However, it would be a serious error and against Marx's intention to reduce the whole of history to such labor. As an exchange of substances between nature and man, labor is "an everlasting natural condition of human life" from which no society can free itself. In any society, man is compelled to create the means of life needed by him—and on an ever-growing scale. There is

as yet nothing in this necessity that would distinguish man from an animal, which after all also performs labor (it hunts, creates reserves of food, digs burrows, builds nests, etc.). Unlike animals, however, man labors to satisfy not only his own needs and those of his direct progeny, but also the needs of others with whom he is not connected by ties of blood kinship or territorial proximity. In other words, he performs labor in response not only to an organic but also to a social requirement, which is given him in the form not of an unconscious inclination or instinct but a conscious goal. In producing for others he simultaneously produces his relations with others, although until a certain time this circumstance is hidden from his consciousness. In nothing does the social nature of man—his social being—make itself known as clearly as in his ability to produce for others. Production of the means of life therefore “presupposes the *intercourse* [*Verkehr*] of individuals with one another,”¹⁴ which at each stage of production acquires a new form. At the same time, it presupposes “the production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, [which] is at first directly interwoven with people’s material activity and the material intercourse of men, the language of real life.”¹⁵ Consequently, man is a *laboring, sociable, and conscious* being. Labor, intercourse, and consciousness are the initial premises from which his social being arises at any stage of historical development. The question is only how they are coordinated with one another at each of these stages.

Hence it is clearly incorrect to ascribe to Marx the idea of reducing social being to economic activity alone—an error made by the numerous critics who have accused him of economic determinism or, as Karl Popper called this doctrine, economic historicism. This opinion seemed to be confirmed by Marx’s own statements concerning the determining role of material production in social life, but for Marx “material” is by no means always synonymous with “economic.” We are justified in equating them when considering bourgeois society, which for Marx was contemporary, but outside its limits we cannot be so categorical. As the basis of this society, the economy provides a key to an understanding of the past and future; by no means, however, does it follow from this that the past and future can be interpreted by direct analogy with the present—that is, exclusively in economic terms. “Although it is true, therefore, that the categories of bourgeois economics possess a truth for all other forms of society, this is to be taken only with a grain of salt. They can contain them in a developed, or stunted, or caricatured form etc., but always with an essential difference.”^{16*} For the purpose of demonstrating the economic nature of all precapitalist social forms, reference is usually made to Marx’s celebrated Preface to the work *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. As

*From K. Marx, *The Grundrisse*.—Ed.

we were all taught in Soviet times, it gives a classical exposition of the materialist conception of history. There is no point in presenting it in full, but it was considered that the essence of this understanding was conveyed in the proposition that the mode of production of material life conditions the social, political, and intellectual processes of life in general, that it is not people's consciousness that determines their being but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness.¹⁷ The same opinion was held by Engels, who called this proposition a revolutionary discovery not only for political economy but also for all historical sciences.¹⁸ But is the mode of production of material life in any case an economic category?

We cannot overlook that Marx formulated this proposition primarily in the context of his analysis of civil, or bourgeois, society, whose anatomy must indeed be sought in political economy. As Marx writes, his interest was initially in Hegel's philosophy of law, but later it shifted to the field of political economy, on the supposition that here lay the key to explaining the origin and evolution of bourgeois society. It was the general result of his reflections on this theme, which gave him a guiding thread for further investigation, that he briefly formulated in the Preface. Here, in my opinion, he set out a research program not for the whole of history but only for the part corresponding to what he called "the socioeconomic formation." This part, of course, is not confined to the capitalist mode of production; nor—as became clear to him subsequently—does it encompass history in its entirety. Even the initial stages of the establishment of this formation—antiquity and feudalism—cannot be fully deduced from an economic foundation. I shall return to this point a little later.

In equal measure this concerns social consciousness. Its exclusion from social being, while justified in relation to bourgeois society, is less obviously justified outside the limits of that society. In any case, of course, people begin with production of the necessary means of life, but far from always do they do this unconsciously. It is hardly correct in relation to all forms of social life to consider that when people are engaged in labor they are not thinking or that when they are thinking they are no longer engaged in labor. Even in his simplest definitions, Marx describes labor as goal-conforming in character: it is regulated, as by law, by a goal set in advance; of necessity, therefore, it includes an element of consciousness. It is this that distinguishes human labor from the organic activity of animals: from the very start it is conscious and not instinctive in character. And only as a result of the social division of labor does consciousness acquire a relatively independent form of existence and become separated from social being.

Social being is not an abstract initially given essence of man (Marx categorically denies the presence of such an essence), but a system ("ensemble")

of social relations created by people in the process of their material and intellectual (conscious) activity. In bourgeois society, this system appears in the form of material (commodity-money) relations that function independently of the consciousness of the individuals involved in them. It is in this form that it is studied by political economy. By contrast, the task of historical science is not simply to analyze this system but to establish its historical boundaries; on the plane of theory this means “a critique of political economy” (the subtitle of *Capital*). Of course, this critique too can be subsumed under the heading of economic science, but we must not ignore the difference between it and the work that usually occupies economists. Marx did indeed assert the determining role of material production in a society, but it by no means follows that this production can be equated with economic activity under all circumstances.

In and of itself, the production of useful things or use values (material production), like the production of ideas (intellectual production), is not, according to Marx, the object of historical science. Its object is the production of social relations among people, or social production, which throughout preceding history has existed not directly but indirectly—in the form of the production of things and ideas. As the creator of these relations (the subject of social production), man is to be comprehended by means not of philosophical or economic but of scientific-historical analysis. While in philosophy he is only a thinking being (that is why philosophy is synonymous with the idealist conception of history), in political economy he is the labor power that creates the commodity. And it passes this off as the human ideal. So “under the semblance of recognizing man, the political economy whose principle is labor rather carries to its logical conclusion the denial of man.”^{19*} Consequently, the philosophy of history and political economy deal with the history of ideas and things (in the form of the commodity) but not with *the history of men*. It was the latter kind of history that occupied Marx. From this point of view, *Capital* is not so much a work of economics as a work of history, in which (as Lenin noted) Marx’s historical-materialist hypothesis obtained scientific confirmation. Only thus is it possible to understand the content of this book, or the method used in writing it.

Marx precisely described the special characteristics of this method: “Our method indicates the points where historical investigation must enter in, or where bourgeois economy as a merely historical form of the production process points beyond itself to earlier historical modes of production. . . . These indications (*Andeutung*) together with a correct grasp of the present, then also

*From K. Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscript of 1844*, Third Manuscript.—Ed.

offer the key to the understanding of the past. . . . This correct view likewise leads at the same time to the points at which the suspension of the present form of production relations gives signs of its becoming—foreshadowings of the future. Just as, on one side the pre-bourgeois phases appear as *merely historical*, i.e. suspended presuppositions, so do the contemporary conditions of production likewise appear as engaged in *suspending themselves* and hence in positing the *historic presuppositions* for a new state of society.”^{20*}

Marx’s method, used by him in *Capital*, combined theoretical analysis of an object with its historical examination—that is, the logical with the historical. This enabled him to overcome the abstract, ahistorical form of exposition of economic theory and give its categories a historically concrete character. It was this, in fact, that constituted the method of ascent from the abstract to the concrete. The attempt in theoretical investigation of an object (in this case—bourgeois economy) to abstract from its historical examination leads to the immortalization (fetishization) of this object—which was, indeed, the accusation that Marx made against economic science. When economists set about portraying real relations, history for some reason disappears. To ignore the historical character of the categories of political economy means to give the relations expressed in those categories the character of natural and eternal conditions of human life. “Economists,” wrote Marx and Engels, “have a singular method of procedure. There are only two kinds of institutions for them, artificial and natural. The institutions of feudalism are artificial institutions, those of the bourgeoisie are natural institutions. In this, they resemble the theologians, who likewise establish two kinds of religions. Every religion which is not theirs is an invention of men, while their own is an emanation from God. . . . Thus, there has been history, but there is no longer any.”^{21**} This, let it be noted, was said long before Francis Fukuyama announced the end of history.

On the other hand, historical examination of an object in the absence of any logical analysis leads either to an empirical record of its various states without any indication of their inner connection and sequence or to appraisal and criticism of this object from the vantage point of some abstract ideal. In the nineteenth century, as is well known, there was no lack of such criticism. In contrast to the uncritical positivism of empirical science, this criticism had—in Marx’s expression—a moralizing and at times openly mystical character, taking as its starting point a metaphysical interpretation of the nature of man or the postulates of transcendental and absolute reason. History was judged and held up to scorn in accordance with a standard lying outside of history.

*From K. Marx, *The Grundrisse*, Notebook IV.—Ed.

**From K. Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy*, Ch. 2.1.—Ed.

Criticism of this kind is really a variety of utopian consciousness, which counterposes to reality an ideal that cannot be found in any experience.

From this the conclusion is often drawn that all criticism is utopian, insofar as it appeals to a nonexistent reality. The task of science is not to criticize but to systematize what is given in experience, what is directly observable in reality. Such is the viewpoint of sociological and historical positivism. It would seem that between moral criticism tending toward utopianism and uncritical positivism there is no middle ground to which science can stake a claim. The historical method proposed by Marx enabled him to avoid both extremes. Applied to economic science, it was called on to demonstrate that economic categories and concepts are not valid for all times; they do not contain an explanation of history in its entirety. Science is fully compatible with criticism, provided that the logical and the historical coincide in the process of acquiring knowledge.

It must be emphasized that the object of Marx's scientific critique was not capitalism or the market economy as they can be observed in reality, but their reflection in political economy. This critique can therefore be called a critique of economic theory from the position of historical reason (analogous to Kant's critique of mathematical and physical science from the position of transcendental reason). Marx did not, of course, exclude the possibility of the further development of economic science, but he expected that it would follow the path of vulgarization, concealing the real source of capitalist accumulation, the secret of capital's origin. Is it possible, however, to have an economic science whose object is not market relations but social relations of some altogether different kind? This question can be answered only after it becomes clear what Marx understood by history as a whole.

In any case, analysis of social being in its historical universality requires a language different from that spoken by economic science. It was this language that Marx tried to develop. This language was for him the language not of economic but of historical science, the language of *practice*, which registers "the coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity, or self-change."^{22*} Practice is change not only of the object but also of the subject of activity—that is, of man himself. "The act of reproduction itself," writes Marx, "changes not only the objective conditions . . . but the producers change with it, by the emergence of new qualities, by transforming and developing themselves in production, forming new powers and new conceptions, new modes of intercourse, new needs, and new language."^{23**} Social being is therefore not economic but practical activity. "All social life

*From K. Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach*, Thesis III.—Ed.

**From K. Marx, *The Grundrisse*, Notebook V.—Ed.

is essentially *practical*.”²⁴* Marx’s historical materialism is in this sense not economic but *practical materialism*: this is what he called it, distinguishing it from all other forms of materialism. Unlike economics, practice gives being the character of activity that has as its chief result change, not simply in things and ideas but in people themselves. It is as such that practice forms the object of historical science.

History and society: Unity or opposition?

But in what sense are people able to change, develop, become different? Obviously, we are talking about change not in the physical or psychic (natural) aspect of their nature but in some altogether different aspect. As natural beings we differ little from people of past epochs. Nevertheless, without human development there can be no human history. In what then does this development consist?

According to Marx, people change in tandem with change in their relations with one another—above all, that is, as social beings. After the passage of many years, animals remain just as they were at the start (in the worst case they die out); people, by contrast, while retaining their physical and psychic state more or less unchanged, change the form of their intercourse, the very society in which they live. In the labor process they create not just things of use to themselves (food products, clothing, housing, tools of labor, etc.)—this was known long before Marx; here there was no discovery—but also their own relations with one another and, consequently, themselves as social beings. In a letter to Annenkov in 1846, containing criticism of Proudhon, Marx wrote: “Mr. Proudhon understands perfectly well that men manufacture worsted, linens and silks; and whatever credit is due for understanding such a trifle! What Mr. Proudhon does not understand is that, according to their faculties, men also produce the *social relations* in which they produce worsted and linens.”²⁵ To this Marx adds: “Still less does Mr. Proudhon understand that those who produce social relations in conformity with their material productivity also produce the *ideas, categories*, i.e. the ideal abstract expressions of those same social relations. Indeed, the categories are no more eternal than the relations they express.”²⁶

Marx therefore discovered the *social nature of labor* (or social labor), which consists in people’s ability to create not just things of use to themselves but also their social relations. Although up to a certain moment people are bound up in them against their will and consciousness, as it were, they are nonetheless created by people themselves in conformity with the level they

*From K. Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach*, Thesis VIII.—Ed.

have attained in the development of their forces of production. In producing for others they simultaneously produce their relations with others, although for objective reasons this circumstance is hidden from their consciousness until a certain moment.

But why is man, the creator of history, not master of his own fate within it but a negligible quantity completely dependent on forces and relations that rule over him? Why are most people not conscious of themselves as owners of a world that they themselves have created? “Because,” Marx replies, “what they have created belongs not to them but to someone else; thus, it is alienated from them.” Here emerges another theme important to Marx—the *alienation of labor*; together with the theme of practice, it forms the basis of his conception of history.

While practice affirms the central role of man in the world and places him in the position of a creator and master, alienation makes of him in all respects a dependent and oppressed being who sees in the world a constant threat to his existence and freedom. Practice and alienation are like life and death: practice knows no limits in its self-affirmation, while alienation confines man to the point of his complete exclusion from social life. In the latter case, the social essence of man appears in the mythologized, deified, or simply socially alienated form of the state, money (capital), ideology, and so on. It is in this form that it becomes an object of study for political economy, on the one hand, and for philosophy, on the other.

What should be the science that tries to uncover the practical character of human labor? Marx answered this question with his historical theory, which—by analogy with Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* that like classical political economy still took the point of view of alienated labor—could have been called the phenomenology of labor. In any case, we are dealing with some quite new type of historical knowledge that does not fit any of the forms of historical knowledge then known (as enumerated, for instance, in Hegel’s *Philosophy of History**). Even if the capitalist economy was the predominant object of this knowledge, it cannot be likened to purely economic knowledge (just as Marx’s ideas about nature, society, and man do not turn his doctrine into natural science, sociology, or anthropology).

The point of view of practice radically changes the entire optic of historical vision. If practice is synonymous with what man is in history, alienation is synonymous with his existence in society. The opposition between practice and alienation is in this sense an opposition *between history and society*. In Marx’s terminology this opposition is designated as a contradiction between the forces of production, which are in a process of constant change and development,

*This is a reference to Hegel’s *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*.—Ed.

and the relations of production, which turn from a form that facilitates this development into a form that impedes and fetters it. This opposition makes itself known in an acute form at the stage of capitalism.

In this sense, Marx is a critic not only of capitalism but of any society as soon as it strives to halt the course of history, like a dam across the stream of time. The societies of all preceding epochs, figuratively speaking, devoured time: each tried to bring history to a halt, regarding itself as the last society in history. And enormous efforts were needed—even revolutionary efforts—to make the breakthrough from one society into another.

But is it possible for society to be not a hermetically sealed dam that partitions the stream of history, but an open sluice that allows it to flow in the necessary direction? How can society be reconciled with history, made open to social change and innovation? Is it possible to have a society in which not only things but also the people who create them acquire the ability to live a historical life—that is, constantly change and improve themselves in conformity with changing circumstances?

A consciousness of the impossibility of man ever freeing himself from history or reducing it to some sort of concluding phase distinguishes Marx's conception of history from all preceding philosophies of history. We never understood this central motif of his theory. Marx did not set himself the task of drawing a picture of a future society that would be built some day to the joy of all. Communism for him is "not a *state of affairs* which is to be established, an *ideal* to which reality [will] have to adjust itself . . . [but] the *real* movement which abolishes the present state of things."^{27*} Any social state is not static but a movement aimed at expanding and enriching human powers and relations. Communism is synonymous with constant movement, that is, with history itself in its endlessness. The history of people does not end with its arrival, but only begins; that is, it becomes real or genuinely human history in both content and form. From this point of view, communism is not some kind of rationally constructed social system in which everything is planned and arranged once and for all, but a process constantly unfolding in history in which people produce their own powers and relations—a process that takes the sole form of their conscious and free activity. Communism proposes nothing apart from the free and conscious participation of people in this production.

The question tackled by Marx is the question of how to live in history, in historical time, and not simply in one or another socially organized space. The capacity for such a life is what most sharply distinguishes people from animals. It enables people to communicate with one another—not only in space but also in time. An imperfect society with perfect people must come in place of

*From K. Marx and F. Engels, *The German Ideology*.—Ed.

history, and history must finally put an end to any kind of social stagnation, to all attempts to impose a permanently established order on people's lives. And as there is no social form capable of incorporating within itself the whole content of the historical process, there is no science besides the science of history that might bring to light the general logic of this process.

The social formation in its historical dimension

How does this conception of history compare with the doctrine of the socioeconomic formation set out in our [Soviet] literature in the shape of the infamous five-stage theory [*piatichlenka*] of socioeconomic formations?*

This doctrine has irked many historians, leading them to accuse Marx of creating a simplified, schematic, and unilinear conception of historical development. An example is the article "The Theory of Formations and the Reality of History" [Teoriia formatsii i real'nost' istorii], by the outstanding historian of the medieval era, A.Ia. Gurevich, which appeared in the November 1990 issue of *Voprosy filosofii*. Seeing in the theory of formations a philosophical theory supposedly designed to provide guiding instructions for historical science, Gurevich attributes to Marx an intention directly opposite to what the thinker himself regarded as his task. In fact, Gurevich is criticizing not Marx but the highly distorted presentation of Marx's views in Soviet textbooks on historical materialism.

As noted earlier, Marx and Engels try to separate history as a science above all from any kind of philosophy. They formulate its task as follows: "When reality is depicted, philosophy as an independent branch of knowledge loses its medium of existence. At best, its place can only be taken by a summing-up of the most general results, abstractions which arise from the observation of the historical development of men. Viewed apart from real history, these abstractions have in themselves no value whatsoever. They can only serve to facilitate the arrangement of historical material, to indicate the sequence of its separate strata. But they by no means afford a recipe or schema, as does philosophy, for neatly trimming the epochs of history. On the contrary, our difficulties begin only when we set about the examination and the arrangement—the real depiction—of our historical material, whether of a past epoch or of the present. The removal of these difficulties is governed by premises which it is quite impossible to state here, but that only study of the actual life-process and the activity of the individuals of each epoch will make evident."²⁸ And

*The sequence of socioeconomic formations commonly presented in Soviet Marxist textbooks: primitive; slave-holding; feudal; capitalist; socialist-communist.—Trans.

what here contradicts Gurevich's own understanding of historical science? Where does Marx assert the need for "a schema that simplifies the colorful and diverse historical reality"? All the necessary components of historical science indicated by Gurevich—a theory that is not severed from historical soil; the examination, arrangement, and interpretation of empirical material; attention to the special characteristics, individuality, singularity, and uniqueness of the object under study; the intrinsic value and self-sufficiency of any social state; and so on—are also present in the passage quoted.

But what about the theory of formations? This, according to Gurevich, is where Marx gave full vent to his "formational teleology," camouflaged under a scientific theory of chiliastic eschatologism, to his desire to squeeze the entire wealth of historical reality into the Procrustean bed of the five-formation periodization of history. Gurevich has extended his irreconcilability toward the official ideology that passed itself off as Marxism to the doctrine that this ideology distorted beyond the point of recognition.

First, Marx never thought of the theory of formations as philosophical. It is another matter that like any thinking historian he did not consider it possible to confine historical science to a simple description of empirical facts without drawing from them any kind of theoretical generalization. For some reason, no historian ever thinks of berating Max Weber, for instance, for his conception of ideal types, just as no one berates historians themselves for their use of such generalized typological concepts as medieval culture or European civilization. The concept of socioeconomic formation for Marx is the same sort of historical generalization—and not at the highest level of abstraction. It is, rather, a middle-level generalization—the kind that Gurevich also advocates.

This concept registers a certain *result* of preceding historical development that in Marx's view is of decisive significance for an understanding of the present. It contains the chief thing that distinguishes the present from the past and the future. But for this reason it encompasses not the whole but only *part of history*—and not the larger part. One has only to throw away all the metaphysics that our [Soviet Marxist—Ed.] philosophers have heaped up around this concept and its clear and simple meaning will immediately be obvious.

Second, it is impossible, try as one might, to find in Marx's texts a doctrine of *five* socioeconomic formations. Marx claimed to have discovered (not even discovered, but investigated) *a single* socioeconomic formation that starts to take shape in ancient society and, passing through a series of phases, attains its full development at the stage of capitalism. He never assigned primitive society to this socioeconomic formation. Slaveholding, feudalism, and

*From K. Marx and F. Engels, *The German Ideology*.—Ed.

even capitalism, being different modes (social forms) of production, are not independent socioeconomic formations but stages in the establishment of a single integral socioeconomic formation that reaches final completion at the stage of capitalism.

As for the Asiatic mode of production, at the time when he was writing the first volume of *Capital*, Marx did indeed regard it as one of the stages in the establishment of the socioeconomic formation. Here is the well-known classic quotation on this theme from the Preface: "In broad outlines, the Asiatic, ancient, feudal, and modern bourgeois modes of production can be designated as progressive epochs of the socioeconomic formation."^{29*} Subsequently, as a result of reading the works of Lewis Henry Morgan, Johann Jakob Bachofen, Georg Ludwig von Maurer, the Russian scholar Maksim Kovalevskii, and other authors, Marx discovered another social formation that precedes the socioeconomic formation. In the famous summaries of his letter to Vera Zasulich, he called it the "archaic or primary social formation" (as distinct from the secondary economic formation). In his opinion, it encompasses both primitive society and all the civilizations of the ancient Orient, which constitute the concluding stage of this formation. This led Marx to abandon the term "Asiatic mode of production" as an adequate designation for the social nature and structure of these civilizations.³⁰ So much for Marx's "economic historicism," which supposedly leaves out the greater part of human history.

And so we end up with not five but two social formations, of which only the second is economic. Moreover, antiquity and feudalism are merely initial forms in the establishment of the socioeconomic formation, in which economic (market) relations have not yet acquired a self-sufficient role and are closely interwoven with extraeconomic (directly personal) ties and relations. The final victory of material (economic) relations over directly personal relations occurs only at the concluding—bourgeois—stage of the establishment of the socioeconomic formation.

Hence it is clearly incorrect to attribute to Marx the idea of reducing pre-capitalist social relations to economic relations alone. Marx was of course interested in how economic relations took shape in these societies, but he would not have dreamed of claiming that all their historically unique features could be deduced from those relations. Even in capitalist society, where economic relations do play a predominant role, there are things, in his opinion, that cannot be explained in economic terms—art and poetry, for instance. This is even truer of past societies. As a critic of capitalism, Marx was naturally interested in the past process of the conversion of the product of labor into the

*This passage is from the Preface to Marx's *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*.—Ed.

commodity and money, but he never reduced the entire past to this process.

What was the concrete meaning for Marx of the socioeconomic formation whose structure and mechanisms of transformation he described in the aforementioned Preface? It meant simply, what in the language of that period was called, European civilization. Like all historians of his time, Marx was interested in knowing what distinguished European civilization from all the societies that had preceded it and in what direction it was moving. Posing the question in this way does no violence to historical science. After Marx historians continued to wrack their brains over the same problem, only designating it in different ways: as the relationship between mechanical and organic solidarity (Emile Durkheim), *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* (Ferdinand Tönnies), material and formal rationality (Max Weber), traditional and modern society, or—finally—East and West. All these are different names for what Marx called the primary and secondary social formations. The distinguishing mark of the secondary social formation, according to Marx, is that economic relations gradually turn into the basis of society; this, however, comes to light not at the initial but at the concluding stage of its establishment. And this thesis cannot be refuted, because only in Europe does production based on private property and commodity exchange obtain a development incomparable with any other period of history. Is this not why economic science also arises only in the modern era, taking the place of the political science of the ancient Greeks? No, nothing dangerous for historical science flows from Marx's doctrine of the socioeconomic formation.

Third and last, Marx is not, as Gurevich claims, an apologist for the socioeconomic formation but its most radical critic, going so far as to say that until this formation ceases to exist people will still be living not in true history but in prehistory. The economy's determining role in a society is not a virtue, not an age-old feature of any society, but a sign of its historical immaturity. Not transition to a new socioeconomic formation but exit from the socioeconomic formation into a social order living by other than economic criteria and laws—such, according to Marx, is the only possible prospect of development.

This would seem to be at variance with the fact that in a number of cases Marx also attached the qualifier "economic" to the social formation that will succeed the currently existing capitalist formation. From this some commentators draw the conclusion that he understood the term "economic" in a broader sense than that used in political economy, where it refers only to the system of commodity-money, material nexus. The economic, in their opinion, encompasses any kind of activity of managing the fulfillment of daily needs, wherever and by whomever it may be carried on. From this point of view, gathering, bee-keeping, hunting, handicrafts, and all other forms of labor are also economic activity. It is of course possible to use the term in this way, but I proceed from another widely known statement of Marx, according to

which “the realm of freedom” begins “on the far side of economic necessity,” even though the former is based on the latter. The realm of freedom signifies not the termination of the production of material goods and services, which according to Marx is “a permanent natural necessity of human existence,” but the emancipation of man from the power of this necessity and his relocation to a space governed by laws other than those of economics. Labor is not abolished, but it ceases to function in that alienated form in which it was the object of economic science. And what can this science have to say about labor that has as its goal the production of social relations in the form not of things but of people themselves? To what extent is it capable of comprehending the fact of the existence of man as free individuality? Attainment of the state of individual freedom also requires certain material preconditions; it is this, apparently, that compelled Marx to speak of the transition to this state as above all an economic matter, but in no way do these preconditions in themselves explain the nature of the future social formation.

It may be doubted whether history is moving in the direction of individual freedom, whether—in Hegel’s words—it is “progress of the consciousness of freedom.” But what then is the alternative to this movement? What else moves people in their historical life? What need do they have of history at all? To see in history only a succession of dynasties, military victories and defeats, the rise and fall of empires, the birth and death of civilizations is to miss the most important aspect of people’s experience since they appeared on earth and right up to our own time. To consider that they are moved only by the striving for power over other people, for personal enrichment, or simply for expansion of the limits of their own material consumption is to turn history into a bad infinity, into a state of constant enmity and confrontation. The consequence of such a history can only be the complete exhaustion of natural and human resources, threatening mankind with self-annihilation.

To deny freedom as the chief motivating force of historical movement is in essence to deny history itself (for freedom is the only thing that does not fit fully into any one social formation). If world history is not moved by the striving of man toward freedom, how else is the fact of its existence to be explained? The history of man’s acquisition of individual freedom is, according to Marx, the only rational explanation of the essence and meaning of world history.

World history as the process of man’s acquisition of individual freedom

Freedom is one of the fundamental human values, although the *idea of freedom* has been interpreted in different ways at different times and by different authors. As Marx understands it, freedom is above all a *social category*. It

is possible for man only in society, by means of society; from this, however, it in no way follows that any society makes man free. On the contrary, in no hitherto existing society has he ever been fully free; he has always been wholly or partly dependent on other people. And is it possible, while living in society, to be free from society—that is, from other people? The obvious negative answer to this question would appear to cast doubt on any attempt to look for the source and cause of freedom within society. On first examination, rather, society is an enemy of freedom, forcing each individual to reckon with others, to suppress his own desires and impulses, to be the same as everyone else. The majority of contemporary philosophers who talk about freedom (from existentialists to postmodernists) view society as the force most hostile to it. As Sartre wrote, “hell is other people.”* Freedom is the first thing that man sacrifices for the sake of living in society. That is why he acquires freedom by leaving society and entering a sort of border zone between life and death where he is no longer under anyone’s power.

It thus turns out that man acquires freedom not in society but outside it. Society either restricts his freedom or makes it the privilege of a few. This is how many people thought before Marx, and how people still often think after Marx. However, while Marx does not deny the correctness of this view in relation to existing society, he proceeds from the assumption that freedom is intrinsic to and inseparable from the individual by virtue of his *social nature*. How are we to reconcile this thesis with the obvious fact of the absence or restriction of freedom in all previously existing societies?

Let us note that we are speaking here of societies in their historically specific existence—primitive, Oriental, Western, ancient, medieval, bourgeois society and so on. They all differ from one another, of course, in the degree to which they give man freedom, but not one of them is a model of a truly free society: each restricts freedom in its own manner. The conclusion that follows, however, is not that society and freedom are mutually exclusive concepts. While by nature a social being, man does not as yet live a truly social life: he is only in the process of creating the conditions for such a life, and this in fact has been the meaning of the whole of preceding history. This was the conclusion that Marx drew. We should not therefore make judgments regarding the social nature of man, which is consistent with his freedom, on the basis of the specific society in which people currently happen to live. The multiplicity of such societies tells us that none of them, nor even all of them taken together, fully express the social nature of man (otherwise history really would have ended).

Freedom can be defined in different ways, but in any case it presupposes the

*The famous conclusion to Sartre’s play *No Exit* (1944).—Ed.

individual's appropriation of his "species-essence"—socially developed forces and relations as they are represented in all their wealth by already created material and intellectual culture. For this essence to be appropriated, it must first be created; moreover, the two processes—creation and appropriation—take place in history over different timescales. The process of man's creation of his social essence encompasses an enormous historical period, which Marx calls "the prehistory of human society." Although during this period individuals create the entire aggregate of their social relations, they themselves do not yet live a truly social life: they find themselves in the power either of still completely primitive (natural) relations or of relations created by but existing independently of them. In the initial phase of prehistory, these are *directly personal* relations (relations of blood kinship); in its concluding phase, they are *material* (commodity-money) relations. In both cases, the freedom of each individual is a practically unattainable ideal.

For all the diversity of social forms in the period of prehistory, they are all merely successive links in the process of man's transition from directly personal (initially, as Marx says, still completely natural) to material relations. Today this same transition is called the process of modernization—the transition from traditional to modern society. The concluding phase of this process is bourgeois society, which Marx calls "the epoch of the (as yet) most highly developed social (according to this standpoint, general) relations."^{31*} This is the chief result of prehistory. Even in their material, alienated-from-man form, these relations are nonetheless a product not of nature but of human activity; they cannot be regarded as relations inseparable from the nature of man. "It is absurd to regard this merely *material nexus* as the natural one, as a relation inseparable from the nature of individuality (as opposed to reflected knowledge and will), and immanent in it. This nexus is a historical product which pertains to a particular phase of development. The alienated and independent form in which this nexus still exists in relation to individuals proves only that people are still in the process of creating the conditions for their social life and are not yet living a social life, starting off from these conditions."^{32**} The majority of studies on contemporary society do not venture beyond analysis of the evolution of social institutions within the existing system of relations; nor do they set the goal of transition to any other kind of system, supposing, apparently, that there is no alternative to the existing system. From Marx's point of view, this amounts to renunciation of the historical examination of social reality, its uncritical fetishization. But what are the grounds for regarding the

*From K. Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Introduction.—Ed.

**From K. Marx, *The Grundrisse*.—Ed.

current stage of world development as a historically transient phase?

Corresponding to the epoch of material relations that have developed to the point of universality is the point of view of the isolated individual to whom these relations appear as an external necessity, as a means for him to realize his private interests. In parallel to the development of these relations, the individual was released from all forms of his personal dependence on or direct union with any primitive collective. “Human beings become individuals only through the process of history. He appears originally as a *species being* [*Gattungswesen*], *tribal being*, *herd animal*.”^{33*} Although for Marx social development means above all the establishment of human individuality (“the social history of man is never anything else than the history of his individual development, whether he is conscious of this or not”^{34**}), at the stage of prehistory the social and the individual are mutually exclusive. Social life, losing its character as directly collective life, appears at first, however, in the form not of individual but of *private life*.

The private is by no means synonymous with the individual. The private person [*chastnik*]—the partial [*chastichnyi*] worker or private [*chastnyi*] property owner—is a person equal to a part [*chasti*], a product of the social division of labor and property. Marx called this kind of person an “abstract individual.” As individuality a person is equal not to a part but to the whole, as represented in the entire wealth of culture. The creators of culture—thinkers, artists, poets, scientists—cannot in any way be called private persons. The civilization born in the course of prehistory, with its social division of labor, divides man into parts and asserts the victory of the private principle in all spheres of life, relegating individuality, as represented in culture, to the periphery of social life. This is why civilization and culture have moved until now along different orbits, as it were, without intersecting one another. Bourgeois society takes this rupture to its logical limit. “The prehistory of human society accordingly closes with this [bourgeois] formation.”^{35***} and with it the history of the socioeconomic formation.

And so Marx sums up the entire so-called prehistory of human society in two basic social states, which he defines with all possible clarity. “The relations of personal dependence (at first quite primitive in character)—are the first social forms, in the midst of which the human productive activity develops [but] only in reduced proportions and in isolated places. Personal independence based on *material* dependence is the second great form within which is constituted a general metabolism made of universal relations, faculties and

*From K. Marx, *The Grundrisse*, Notebook V.—Ed.

**From K. Marx, *Letter to Pavel Annenkov*.—Ed.

***From K. Marx, *Critique of Political Economy*, Preface.—Ed.

needs."^{36*} It is precisely these two states that Marx will subsequently designate as the primary and secondary social formations, of which only the latter is socioeconomic. At the second stage man acquires personal independence—not, however, as a free individuality but as a private person connected with others by relations of material dependence. A very important result of this stage is that society is equated not with a collective (as at the first stage) or individual but with a private way of life. The modern era radically changes attitudes toward the private sphere of life, brings it to the fore, and makes it the basis of society.³⁷ The private, having become social, led to the birth of so-called bourgeois individualism, which equated individuality with the private [*chastnomu*] person—that is, with the person who is equal to a part [*chasti*]. Individualism of this kind must not be confused with the humanistic individualism of the Renaissance, for which the measure of a person's individual development is his equality with the whole. While the humanism of the Renaissance era was the source of the communist idea (as Marx put it, "communism is practical humanism"), the apologia for the private person that arose in the age of the Enlightenment became the source of liberalism. Unlike the liberal vision of history, which absolutized the second stage, the humanist outlook can in no way rest satisfied with this stage or view it as the culmination of all human history.

The following stage, which marks the beginning of true history, is the social state in which the already created social essence is appropriated by the individual himself. It corresponds to the existence of people as free individualities connected with one another not by relations of personal or material dependence but by their joint and direct participation in the production of their social life. "Free individuality, based on the universal development of the individuals and on conversion of their collective, social productivity into their social possession is the third stage. The second stage provides the conditions for the third."^{38**}

Only as a free individual is man a social being, and only a society that permits him to be such an individual can be considered a society in the precise meaning of this word. Before this it is possible to speak of society only in the sense of some sort of approximation to it, as its more or less remote likeness. Movement toward this kind of society is a categorical imperative of human history, if there really exists such a thing.

The transition from the second stage to the third is the most criticized and disputed part of Marx's doctrine. However, only this transition is capable of giving world history unity and wholeness; only this transition justifies the

*From K. Marx, *The Grundrisse*.—Ed.

**Ibid.—Ed.

very fact of its existence. To deny the necessity of this transition means either “the end of history” or its reduction to the mechanical sum of heterogeneous civilizations, each of which lives its own independent life and pursues its own special path. And it is a matter not even of how Marx concretely envisioned this transition (the current validity of much of what he said about its time scale and methods is indeed open to dispute), but of the cogency of his proof of its necessity. If Marx was mistaken on this point, then doubt can also be cast on his whole conception of world history.

Perhaps the most serious opponents of Marx on this point are those who follow Danilevskii and then Spengler and Toynbee in denying the possibility of the rise of a universal civilization capable of encompassing all mankind. In Marx’s conception, such a civilization already emerges at the second stage of historical development, although it acquires its human form (the form of socialized humanity) only upon transition to the third stage. Many people today completely reject this view of history. Not only conservatives and nationalists but even people with left-wing convictions consider that to see in bourgeois society at least some sort of likeness of a worldwide civilization is to make a concession to capitalism (and therefore to the West, where capitalism first emerged). In their opinion, it is possible to oppose bourgeois society only by contesting its claims to any kind of universality. Hence too their adherence to conceptions and theories that deny the presence of any universal principle in history. However, rejection of the idea of world history, which many today pass off as a model of scientific explanation of history, is worse and no more scientific than any utopia.

Marx’s criticism of capitalism certainly did not mean that he denied its world-historical significance or its civilizing influence on all countries and regions of the world. Bourgeois society for Marx—let me repeat—is the epoch of the most highly developed (and in this sense universal) social relations—and on the scale not just of a single country or nation but of the whole world. It was precisely capitalism that gave rise to an awareness of the worldwide and universal nature of the historical process and of the civilization emerging in that process. But while universal in spatial terms, capitalism is far from universal in terms of its historical existence. In the course of its development the material conditions are created for unifying people on a worldwide scale, but this unification can become a reality only as a result of individuals appropriating these conditions. The presence of conditions that have developed to the point of universality but that exist in isolation from most people dictates as a matter of necessity their appropriation by each individual, and this is equivalent to man’s passage into “the realm of freedom.” Any other prospect of development is fraught with the threat of turning the world system into a depersonalized albeit global eco-

conomic or political construction inside which human life will lose all social meaning and content.

Historical thinking is the ability to think about the world not only in spatial categories but also in the categories of historical time, in which the present is a negation of the past and also contains within itself its own negation in the form of the future. This kind of ability is demonstrated by Marx, who in this sense remains unsurpassed as a historical thinker. It is precisely in time (and not in its overcoming, as Foucault thought) that he seeks a solution to “the riddle of history” and therefore of freedom as the chief condition of its unity and wholeness. It is another matter that not every age in which man has hitherto lived guarantees him this freedom. While man’s creation of his social essence has taken place, as a rule, within the limits of *labor time*, its appropriation requires his transition to *free time*, which must become the main time of his social life.

Marx’s analysis of free time enabled him to give historical movement a clear social direction, to present it as the transition of society from labor to free time. The ideas about free time that Marx sets out in *The Grundrisse** seem to me the most important summary of all his reflections concerning world history.³⁹

Free time as the time of true history

A society in which labor time for the majority of people occupies the main part of their social life cannot be considered fully free. Hence Marx’s sharply critical attitude toward labor time. For him the criterion of social progress is not the extension but—on the contrary—the reduction of labor time to a minimum; this entails the emancipation of man not from labor in general but only from that labor whose value is measured in labor time.

Does labor exist outside of labor time? An example of such labor for Marx was always *science*. How is it possible to determine how much time is necessary in order to obtain a scientific result? The value of a product of scientific labor (a discovery, invention, new idea, or theory) cannot be measured as a quantity of labor time, and in this sense scientific labor is not abstract labor. It becomes socially productive labor thanks not to its quantitative but to its qualitative definiteness. Marx called such labor *universal*. It was precisely in universal labor that he placed his hopes for man’s emancipation from the function of labor power and, consequently, from the power of labor time. The introduction of science (universal labor) into production has the following

*This a reference to Marx’s *Outlines of the Critique of Political Economy (Grundrisse der Kritik der Politischen Ökonomie)*, written in 1857–61.—Ed.

results: first, the direct labor of manual workers is simplified; second, it is replaced by mental labor; third, labor time is reduced, and as a consequence free time increases.

The tendency toward the simplification of direct labor is already evident with the transition from the manufactory (workshop) to machine production—the highest technological achievement of Marx’s time. While the manufactory divided up the worker’s labor into very simple operations, turning it into partial labor, the machine took the function of direct maker of concrete output away from the worker altogether, reducing him to an appendage of the machine, who only checks that it is functioning properly. Labor becomes extremely mechanical, and with the transition to the assembly-line system of production is brought to a state of virtually natural automatism with its stupefying monotony and uniformity. Losing its qualitative definiteness, it really ceases to be concrete labor and is reduced—actually and not just theoretically—to abstract labor. This means not deterioration but—on the contrary—improvement in the quality of output (otherwise it could not be sold in the market), yet now responsibility for quality lies no longer on manual workers, but on representatives of mental labor, the number of whom in production steadily rises.

As a result, factory production gradually turns into scientific production,⁴⁰ in which the decisive role belongs to mental labor. Long before the rise of the postindustrial and information society, Marx discovered the really occurring process of the replacement of the direct labor of manual workers by scientific labor,⁴¹ viewing it as the chief tendency in the development of capitalist production.⁴² “In this transformation, it is neither the direct human labor he himself performs, nor the time during which he works, but rather the appropriation of his own general productive power (that is, science—V.M.), his understanding of nature and his mastery over it by virtue of his presence as a social body—it is, in a word the development of the social individual.”^{43*} Direct labor is not abolished, but it is reduced to a minimum and turns into a secondary aspect of production. “Direct labor and its quantity disappear as the determinant principle of production—of the creation of use values—and is reduced both quantitatively, to a smaller proportion, and qualitatively, as an, of course, indispensable but subordinate moment, compared to general scientific labour, technological application of natural science.”^{44**}

“There is at the same time a *separation of science*, as *science applied* to production, from *direct labor*.”^{45***} Direct labor is simplified to the extreme and deprived of all intellectual meaning. “Whereas at earlier stages of produc-

*From K. Marx, *The Grundrisse*, Notebook VII.—Ed.

**From K. Marx, *ibid.*, Notebook VII.—Ed.

***From K. Marx, *Economic Manuscript of 1861–63*, Notebook IV.—Ed.

tion the restricted measure of knowledge and experience is directly linked with labor itself, does not develop as an autonomous power separated from labour,"^{46*} the introduction of science into production is based on separation between the intellectual potentialities of this production and the knowledge, information, and skill of the individual worker⁴⁷ and coincides with the suppression of all intellectual development in the course of this process.⁴⁸ "Admittedly," Marx adds, "a small class of higher workers does take shape, but this does not stand in any proportion to the masses of 'deskilled' workers."^{49**} The simplification of direct labor decreases the quantity required of it, and this leads to a reduction in labor time. Science does not abolish direct labor, but it reduces it—and therefore the time during which it is performed—to a minimum. Savings in labor time are the most important indicator of scientific and technological progress.

The only question is how to dispose of the freed time. There exist, of course, various ways of redistributing it—the rechanneling of labor power to weakly industrialized branches of production (in the sphere of services, for instance) or to economically underdeveloped regions, its retraining, and so on. But this does not affect the general tendency. A situation in which the total volume of labor time remains unchanged cannot be regarded as economically normal.

In the pursuit of profit, capital "despite itself, [is] instrumental in creating the means of social free time, in order to reduce labor-time for the whole society to a diminishing minimum, and thus to free everyone's time for their own development."⁵⁰ This thesis requires no special proof: the progress in this field since Marx's time is obvious. In the most developed countries, free time has already long been a generally accessible benefit. But can it also become the main time of human life, the basis of society, replacing labor time in this function? This is a basic question of Marx's sociohistorical theory. In our country no one has seriously engaged with this question, although it is important for an understanding not only of Marx's texts, in which few people take an interest nowadays, but also of contemporary social development, in which free time is starting to play an increasing role.

Although capital makes possible the growth in free time, it is significant for capital only as time for surplus labor. Capital sees no other purpose in it. Therefore "its [capital's] *tendency always, on the one side, [is] to create free time, on the other, to convert it into surplus labor.*"⁵¹ And so it will be for so long as the measure of social wealth remains labor time.⁵² Man is of interest to capital only as a worker, and his free time as time for surplus labor or as time for the reproduction of labor power. For capital everything above and beyond this is superfluous.

*From K. Marx, *Economic Manuscript of 1861--663*, Notebook IV.—Ed.

**Ibid.—Ed.

In and of itself, the growth in free time changes nothing in this respect. It merely expands the limits of consumption, intensifies acquisitiveness, and gives scope to hedonistic and consumerist moods. For a person whose social life takes place mainly during labor time, free time is confined to domestic chores and concerns and to a search for entertainment and sharp sensations. The entire contemporary leisure industry promotes such pastimes. Time flies here at an accelerated speed—striving for nothing, pausing for nothing, and leaving no trace in the memory. This is time without past or future, wholly enclosed in the present. Its norm is to live one day at a time, take delight in the moment, think about nothing, worry about nothing, and enjoy life as it is.

Not only Marx but also many later observers have noted the empty, aimless, and barren quality of free time that is filled exclusively with the acquisition of new goods and services. Such time is not all that free from the market, which with the aid of advertising thrusts needed and unneeded commodities upon people. But, after all, free time can also serve other purposes—not simply the reproduction of labor power or increased consumption but more elevated activity, like that of people in the free professions. For them all time is free, and therefore they do not have enough of it. Free time can be the time of the most intensive and creative labor, but in order to be such it must belong to the laborer himself.

In the terms used by Marx, this means the appropriation of surplus labor by the workers themselves; this is equivalent to turning free time into the main time of their social life. As he put it, “the mass of workers must themselves appropriate their own surplus labor. Once they have done so—and *free time* thereby ceases to have an *antithetical* existence (that is, in the form of surplus labor—V.M.),—then, on the one hand, necessary labor time will be measured by the needs of the social individual, and, on the other, the development of the power of social production will grow so rapidly that, even though production is now calculated for the wealth of all the *free time* will grow for all.”⁵³

The turning of free time into the measure of social wealth (in the sense that the more free time there is in a society the wealthier that society is) means that man himself becomes social wealth. “For real wealth is the developed productive power of all individuals. The measure of wealth is then not any longer, in any way, labor time but rather free time.”⁵⁴ By reducing labor time, capital “despite itself, [is] instrumental in creating the means of social free time, in order to reduce labor-time for the whole society to a diminishing minimum, and thus to free everyone’s time for their own development.”⁵⁵ For free time is in its essence time for “the development of individuals’ full productive forces, hence those of society also.”⁵⁶

What guarantees that free time will be used in precisely this way? And here Hannah Arendt enters into a polemic with Marx. Passing through all the stages of Marx’s work, says Arendt, is the idea of the necessity of emancipating

man from labor. Although for Marx labor is a permanent natural necessity, a condition of existence independent of all social forms, the revolution for him nonetheless “has as its task not the emancipation of the working class but the emancipation of mankind from labor.”⁵⁷ “From all labor”—concludes Arendt. By way of proof, she cites the celebrated statement of Marx according to which “the realm of *freedom* really *begins* only where *labor* determined by necessity and *external expediency ends*,”* on the far side of necessity. Although Marx in his understanding of labor “penetrated to a deep layer never reached by any of his predecessors,” to whom individually he owed his views, or by any of his opponents, his theory contains a glaring contradiction, “which consists in the fact that at all stages of his thinking Marx proceeds from the definition of man as *animal laborans*, but then leads this working living creature into an ideal social order in which his greatest and most human capability turns out to be superfluous. For all its sweep, Marx’s work culminates in an unbearable alternative between productive slavery and unproductive freedom.”⁵⁸

“Does Marx understand,” asks Arendt, “that renouncing labor is equivalent to renouncing life, for human life, according to Marx himself, is man’s production of his own life, in the dual sense of this word—by means of labor and by means of sexual reproduction? Labor is not the curse but the joy of life: its recompense is not wealth or even property, but life itself. In this world man is above all labor power, the chief merit of which is its fruitfulness. The fact that Marx understood this shows his great insight, but the fact that he nonetheless wishes to sacrifice labor to supposed freedom testifies to the ambiguity and fundamental contradiction of his theory.” Is this argument not typical of all critics of Marx’s theory of free time as the main time of the future society?

While labor for oneself, from this point of view, being a sphere of human privacy and even intimacy (like all other bodily functions), is a necessary condition of human existence, labor for others is coerced labor, as exemplified by slavery and even by wage labor. Man can be compelled to work for others only by means of violence (the freedom of the Greeks was purchased at the price of such violence). But the emancipation of labor from oppression and exploitation cannot be equated with abolition of the necessity of labor for oneself. As history shows, any emancipation of labor only strengthens the power of this necessity. “Marx was already aware that the emancipation of labor in modernity will by no means necessarily culminate in an epoch of universal freedom and that it may with equal likelihood have the opposite consequence, now for the first time driving all people under the yoke of necessity.”⁵⁹ Is contemporary society really not a society in which everyone works? But from this, Arendt thinks, Marx drew the incorrect conclusion that the task

*Here the author refers to Marx’s famous statement from *Capital*, vol. III.—Ed.

of the coming revolution is not the emancipation of the workers, which has already taken place, but their complete liberation from labor.

Freedom from all labor, Arendt declares, will give scope only to caprice and vice and turn all human pursuits into empty pastimes like hobbies. “It will allow everyone,” Arendt quotes Marx, “to do one thing today, another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, criticize after dinner, do whatever the heart desires, but without becoming (professionally) a hunter, fisherman, shepherd, or critic.” A society free from labor will turn—and is already turning before our eyes—into a society of consumers. The sole purpose of life for people in such a society will be satisfaction of their constantly growing needs. Marx was right to say that with the development of production, especially as a result of automation, there will occur an increase in free time, but he was mistaken in thinking that the consequence of this will be a free society. The whole of history since Marx indicates the direct opposite, for “*animal laborans* never spends his spare time on anything except consumption, and the more time left to him the more satiated and dangerous his desires and appetite will become. Of course, forms of carnality are growing more refined, so that consumption is no longer confined to the necessary but—on the contrary—encompasses the superfluous; but this does not change the character of the new society and, even worse, conceals the grave threat that as a result all the world’s objects, the so-called objects of culture alongside the objects of consumption, will be devoured and consumed.”⁶⁰ The rise of mass culture, created to distract the masses, who have to fill their spare time somehow, points toward such a course of events.

As a result, society faces a dilemma. On the one hand, the emancipation of labor, by raising its productivity, frees people from excessive pressure to work arising from economic necessity. On the other hand, it does not make their lives freer (although it does make them more comfortable). True freedom, in Hannah Arendt’s opinion, is accessible not to *animal laborans*, who works in order to consume, but to *homo faber*, who creates material and intellectual culture—that is, objects that can be preserved over a long historical period—and also to those who address others by their actions, by their words or deeds. In short, freedom is a privilege of the few. Concerning the matter of freedom, she thinks, it was, after all, the ancient Greeks who were right, and not contemporary socialist theorists with their idea of emancipating mankind from all labor.

Frankly, I do not see a serious objection to Marx in this way of posing the question. By human emancipation he meant man’s freedom not from labor in general but only from labor in working time. Without denying that labor for oneself is free from violence and compulsion, he asserted that such free labor is fully compatible with labor for others. An example is the labor of the

scientist or artist, in which it is difficult to draw a dividing line between what he does for himself and what he does for others. Any kind of creative labor, expressing the need of an individual for self-realization, is embodied in a result that has universal significance. Unlike Arendt, however, Marx supposed that such creative labor is accessible not only to scientists, artists, and politicians, but also to everyone else. What does this mean in practice?

According to Marx, even if free time is time spent in consumption, it is consumption of a kind that has as its purpose the *production of man himself as "fixed capital."* In his words, "the saving of labor time [is] equivalent to an increase of free time, i.e., time for the full development of the individual, which in turn reacts back upon the productive power of labor as itself the greatest productive power. From the standpoint of the direct production process it can be regarded as the production of *fixed capital*, this fixed capital being man himself."^{61*} The chief result of consumption during free time is man himself—not, however, as labor power but as a being with richer properties and links. It is important only that this consumption should extend to the entire wealth of culture, so that this wealth should belong to him wholly and without residue—and this is in essence social property.

During free time, in Marx's view, people produce not things and not even ideas, but *themselves* in all the wealth and many-sidedness of their connections and relations with the world and with other people. Time is really free when it gives a person the freedom to choose forms of intercourse and kinds of activity, when it allows him to live by the measure of his own individuality and not by a necessity external to him. It allows a person to be himself—that is, who he is by nature, which has endowed him with certain gifts and abilities. The problem is not how to turn everyone into an outstanding personality, but how to enable everyone who is endowed with at least some sort of talent to realize himself fully. Labor in conformity with personal inclination and calling *is* free labor, and the time during which such labor is performed is free time.

This does not eliminate the sphere of necessity. No society will free man from the necessity of earning a living. But there are different ways of earning a living—by means of coerced, unthinking, and unappealing labor that demands nothing but physical exertion, or by means of labor that is full of intellectual content and creative inspiration and provides moral and esthetic satisfaction. Such [creative] labor is already both more highly valued and better paid in contemporary society. Is it accessible to many people today? Everyone knows that it is not, and for reasons that often do not depend on man. And if that is so, then it is early to speak of freedom and equality. To reduce necessary labor to a minimum, to give everyone the opportunity not only to earn good wages

*From K. Marx, *The Grundrisse*, Notebook VII.—Ed.

(this too, of course, is no small thing) but also to obtain creative satisfaction from his work—in short, to turn man from a worker into a socially productive force at the level of contemporary knowledge and culture—these are the goals that Marx associated with the necessity of a transition to free time. And this is no utopia, but an acknowledgment of what has already been placed on the agenda by the development of contemporary production.

Of course, not all of the free time that is accessible to people today falls under this definition. But this only tells us that in many ways society is still in thrall to labor time—that is, still developing under the power of economic necessity. That is why the historical prospect of social development put forward by Marx retains its relevance even for our own time.

Notes

1. M. Fuko [Foucault], *Slova i veshchi. Arkheologiya gumanitarnykh nauk* (Moscow, 1977), p. 362.

2. Fuko, *Slova i veshchi*, p. 345.

3. K. Marks [Marx] and F. Engel's [Engels], *Feierbakh. Protivopolozhnost' materialisticheskogo i idealisticheskogo vozzrenii (novaia publikatsiia pervoi glavy "Nemetskoi ideologii")* (Moscow, 1966), pp. 19–20.

4. K. Marks and F. Engel's, *Sochineniia*, vol. 46, pt. I, p. 46.

5. Marks and Engel's, *Feierbakh*, p. 105. 6. In one of his earliest articles Marx had already written: "The advantage of the new movement [lies in the fact] that we do not anticipate the the world dogmatically, but rather wish to find the new world through the criticism of the old. . . . If we have no business with the construction of the future or with organizing it for all time, there can still be no doubt about the task confronting us at present." (Karl Marx, "Letter to Ruge," *Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society*, trans. and ed. L.D. Easton and K.H. Guddat (New York, 1967), p. 212. In Russian: Marks and Engel's, *Sochineniia*, vol. 1, p. 379).

7. Marks and Engel's, *Feierbakh*, p. 30. [K. Marx and F. Engels, *The German Ideology*.—Ed.]

8. *Ibid.*, p. 30. [K. Marx and F. Engels, *The German Ideology*.—Ed.]

9. In discussing this question, we should not ignore the book by G. Lukács: D. Lukach, *K ontologii obshchestvennogo bytiia. Prolegomeny* (Moscow, 1991). Although incomplete, it is the most thorough study on this theme in the Marxist literature.

10. Lukach, *K ontologii*, p. 66.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 67.

12. Marks and Engel's, *Feierbakh*, p. 22. [K. Marx and F. Engels, *The German Ideology*.—Ed.]

13. *Ibid.*, p. 23.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 24.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 29.

16. *Ibid.*, vol. 12, p. 732.

17. *Ibid.*, vol. 13, p. 7.

18. *Ibid.*, vol. 13, p. 490.

19. Ibid., vol. 42, p. 109.
20. Ibid., vol. 46, pt. I, p. 449.
21. Ibid., vol. 4, p. 142.
22. Ibid., vol. 42, p. 262.
23. Ibid., vol. 46, pt. I, pp. 483–84.
24. Ibid., vol. 42, p. 263.
25. Ibid., vol. 27, p. 410.
26. Ibid., vol. 27, p. 410.
27. Ibid., vol. 3, p. 34.
28. Ibid., vol. 3, p. 26.
29. Ibid., vol. 13, p. 8.
30. On this theme, see M.A. Vitkin, *Vostok v filosofsko-istoricheskoi kontseptsii K. Marksa i F. Engel'sa* (Moscow, 1972).
31. Marks and Engel's, *Sochineniia*, vol. 46, pt. I, p. 18.
32. Ibid., vol. 46, pt. I, p. 105.
33. Ibid., vol. 46, pt. I, p. 486.
34. Ibid., vol. 19, p. 38.
35. Ibid., vol. 13, p. 8.
36. Ibid., vol. 46, pt. I, pp. 100–1.
37. One of the thinkers who most deeply understands and values Marx's conception of labor, Hannah Arendt, associates the conversion of the private into the social with the emergence of society in the contemporary sense of this word. In her view, this corresponds to a qualitative transformation in social knowledge: the political science of the ancients is replaced by political economy (it never entered the heads of the ancients to equate politics and society with the economy), which takes as its object "the national economy"—a new type of social community of people.
38. Marks and Engel's, *Sochineniia*, vol. 46, pt. I, p. 101.
39. As Eric Hobsbawm observes in an interview with Marcello Musto (see the journal *Al'ternativy*, 2009, no. 1, pp. 138–41), "in these manuscripts Marx raised important problems that were not examined in *Capital*." The ideas expressed in them—unknown before the 1950s, when these manuscripts were first published—were outside the field of vision of orthodox Marxism in the world of Soviet socialism and used only by "those Marxists who wanted to criticize the orthodoxy or broaden the scope of Marxist analysis." According to Musto, in another of his articles Eric Hobsbawm asserts that "*The Grundrisse* contain insights—concerning technology, for instance—that take Marx's analysis of capitalism far beyond the limits of the nineteenth century, into a society in which production no longer requires large amounts of labor, a society of automation, liberation of free time, and transformation of alienation under these conditions. This is the sole text that in a certain respect goes beyond the limits of the conceptions of the communist future expressed by Marx in *The German Ideology*." In short, it would be correct to define *The Grundrisse* as Marx's ideas in all their wealth.
40. "With the development of large-scale industry, the creation of real wealth becomes less dependent on labor time and the quantity of labor. But to the degree that large industry develops, the creation of real wealth comes to depend less on labour time and on the amount of labour employed than on the power of the agencies set in motion during labour time, whose 'powerful effectiveness' is itself in turn out of all proportion to the direct labour time spent on their production, but depends rather on the general state of science and on the progress of technology, or the application of this science to production. expended than on the power of those agents which are set

in motion during labor time and which themselves in turn (their powerful effectiveness) bear no relation to the direct labor time required for their production but depend, rather, on the general level of science and on the progress of technology or on the application of this science to production” (Marks and Engel’s, *Sochineniia*, vol. 46, pt. II, p. 213). [From K. Marx, *The Grundrisse*, Notebook VII.—Ed.]

41. “The transformation of the production process from a simple labor process into a scientific process, which subjugates the forces of nature and compels them to work in the service of human needs, appears as a quality of *fixed capital* in contrast to living labor” (ibid., vol. 46, pt. II, p. 208). [From K. Marx, *The Grundrisse*.—Ed.]

42. “[It is,] hence, the tendency of capital to give production a scientific character; direct labor is reduced to a mere moment of this process” (ibid., vol. 46, pt. II, p. 206). [From K. Marx, *The Grundrisse*, Ch. On Capital.—Ed.]

43. Ibid., vol. 46, pt. II, pp. 213–14.

44. Ibid., vol. 46, pt. II, pp. 207–8.

45. Ibid., vol. 47, p. 554.

46. Ibid., vol. 47, p. 554.

47. Ibid., vol. 47, p. 555.

48. Ibid., vol. 47, p. 555.

49. Ibid., vol. 47, p. 555.

50. Ibid., vol. 46, pt. II, p. 217. [From K. Marx, *The Grundrisse*.—Ed.]

51. Ibid., vol. 46, pt. II, p. 217.

52. “Labor time as the measure of value posits wealth itself as founded on poverty, and free time as existing in and because of the antithesis to surplus labor time; or, the positing of individual’s entire time as labor time, and his degradation therefore to mere worker, subsumption under labor” (ibid., vol. 46, pt. II, p. 217). (From K. Marx, *The Grundrisse*.—Ed.)

53. Ibid., vol. 46, pt. II, p. 217.

54. Ibid., vol. 46, pt. II, p. 217.

55. Ibid., vol. 46, pt. II, p. 217.

56. Ibid., vol. 46, pt. II, p. 217.

57. Kh. [H.] Arendt, *Vita activa, ili o deiatel’noi zhizni* (St. Petersburg, 2000), p. 134.

58. Ibid., pp. 134–35.

59. Ibid., p. 167.

60. Ibid., p. 171.

61. Marks and Engel’s, *Sochineniia*, vol. 46, pt. II, p. 221.