



Classical Sociological Theory and Foundations of American Sociology

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PART I
MARX AND ENGELS

I. Marx on Wages

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“Wages are the price of labor-power, not labor.”

NOTE ON SOURCE: This selection was from a book published in 1900 entitled *The People's Marx*. This book has an interesting history and has never been republished. You may be one of a handful of people on the planet who are reading this. Soon after the publication of *Capital* in 1867, many followers of Marx felt it would be helpful to have an abridged version specifically for workers to read. After his death, his son-in-law, Dr. Aveling, attempted to put together such a work. It was first published in 1883 in French by Gabriel Deville, a French Marxist. The work consisted of about 250 pages of the original 800-page *Capital*. It was then translated into English by Robert Rives La Monte and published in New York in 1900. It is from this source that the selection on Wages comes.

Introduction – Why this is important and what to look for

In the preface to The People's Marx, the translator (La Monte) refers to the first volume of Capital as “the Bible of the working class.” That appellation is particularly apt for the selection you have here, on wages. According to Marx, thinking about wages as payment like any other commodity fundamentally obscures the social relation between employer and employee. The argument is put forth here quite clearly, and can be read in conjunction with, or as a supplement to, the more complete selections from Capital.

Chapter 19. The Transformation of the Value or Price of Labor Power into Wages

If we look only on the surface of bourgeois society, the wages of the laborer seem to be the remuneration of labor – so much money paid for so much labor. Labor is then treated as a commodity, the market-price of which rises and falls above or below its value.

But what is this value? Value represents the social labor expended in the production of a commodity. And how is the magnitude of value of a commodity measured? By the quantity of labor that it contains. How then do we determine, for example, the value of twelve hours' labor? By the twelve hours' labor that it contains, which is evidently absurd.

In order to be taken to market, and sold as a commodity, the labor must, at all events, have been in existence beforehand. But if the laborer could endow it with a material existence, separate from and independent of herself, she would sell a commodity and not labor.

That which directly confronts the capitalist on the market is not labor, but the laborer. What she sells is her labor-power. As soon as she begins to exert her labor-power, to labor, as soon as her labor exists, this labor has already ceased to belong to her, and can no longer be sold by her. Labor is the substance and measure of value, but itself has no value. The expression, value of labor, is an inaccurate expression which has its source in the apparent forms of the relations of production.

Having made this error, classical political economy proceeded to inquire how the price of labor was determined. It recognized that in the case of labor, as in the case of every other commodity, the relation between supply and demand explained only the oscillations of the market price above or below a certain mean. As soon as supply and demand balance each other, the changes in the price which they had occasioned cease, but the whole effect of supply and demand also ceases at the same point. If, when they are in equilibrium, the price of labor no longer depends upon their influence, upon what then does it depend? The price of labor, like the price of every other commodity, can only be its value expressed in money, and this value, political economy determined in the last analysis, by the value of the means of subsistence necessary for the support and reproduction of the laborer. Without suspecting it, political economy thus substituted for the ostensible subject of its researches, the value of labor, the value of labor-power, a power which exists only in the person of the laborer, and is distinct from its function, labor, just as a machine is the distance from its operations. But classical political economy remained unconscious of this confusion.

The Wage-Form Conceals the Real Relation between Capital and Labor'

According to all the appearances, indeed, what the capitalist pays is the value of the utility that the laborer gives him, the value of labor. Moreover, the laborer is not paid until she has delivered her labor. Now, in its function as means of payment money only realized subsequently the value or price of the article delivered – in this case, the value or price of the labor performed. Nothing but the experience of practical life brings to light the twofold utility of labor – the property of satisfying a need, which it has in common with all commodities, and the property of creating value which differentiates it from all other commodities and makes it impossible for it, as the value-creating element, to have any value of its own.

Take a day of 8 hours producing a value of \$160, half of which is equal to the daily value of labor-power. By confounding the value of the power with the value of its function, with the labor that it performs, we get this formula: 8 hours' labor has a value of \$80; and we thus reach the absurd result that labor which creates a value of \$160 is worth only \$80. But in a capitalist society this is not apparent. There, the value of \$80 for the production of which only four hours are requisite, appears as the value of a full day's labor. By receiving a wage of \$80 a day, the laborer appears to receive all the value to which her labor entitles her, and it is precisely on this account that the excess of the value of her product over the value of her wage takes the form of a surplus value of \$80 created by capital and not by labor.

The wage-form, or direct payment of labor, therefore, extinguishes every trace of the division of the working day into necessary labor and surplus labor – into paid labor and unpaid labor – so that all the labor of the free laborer is deemed to be paid labor. In the *corvée*,¹ the labor of the serf for himself and his compulsory labor for his lord are clearly distinct from each other, being performed in different places. In the system of slavery, even that part of the day in which the slave is only replacing the value of his own means of subsistence, in which, therefore, he really works for himself, seems to be labor for the owner. All his labor wears the appearance of unpaid labor. In slavery, the property relation conceals the labor of the slave for himself. In the wage-system, the money relation conceals the gratuitous labor of the wage-worker for the capitalist.

It is now possible to understand the immense practical importance of this change of form which makes the remuneration of labor-power appear as the wages of labor – the price of labor-power as the price of its function. The apparent form renders the real relation between capital and labor invisible. From it flow all the juridical notions of the wage-laborer and the capitalist, all the mystifications of capitalist production, all the illusions regarding liberty, all the justifications rhetoric of ordinary political economy.

Questions

1. What does it mean to say that wages are the price of labor-power, not labor?
2. Why is it necessary to point out that political economy has confused labor-power with labor? How is Marx's insight here a sociological one? How does the system of "wages" work to conceal the social relationship between capital and labor?
3. Have you ever wondered why, when you go to work, you get paid *after* the completion of the work (sometimes by weeks or even a month)? Can you think of situations where the laborer is paid *in advance*? What are the social differences between these types of labor? What does this say about social relations and power in capitalist society?

Concepts

Wages

Wage-Form

Labor Power

1. In feudal times, serfs were often expected to work one day a week or one day out of three for the lord. This day was called the *corvée*. Marx is making a case that things haven't changed much for "free" laborers, just harder to see.