

Marx and Rousseau on Private Property

Karl Marx condemned the class antagonisms and resulting inequality in capitalist society. Jean Jacques Rousseau objected to the societal hierarchy that creates inequality between the elite and the poor. Marx noted that an individual in capitalist society is unhappy because he is alienated from others, from his work and from himself. Rousseau said that individuals are unhappy because they are in constant competition with others, are defined by the opinion of others and do not truly know themselves. However, despite this similar dissatisfaction with the current state of affairs, the two thinkers have starkly different views when it comes to private property. Rousseau expected his ideal state to protect private property, while Marx believed that the complete abolishment of private property is essential for a prosperous and happy society.

In this paper, I aim to argue that Rousseau's account of private property is more complete, in that it prevents exploitation the way Marx desires, but at the same time ensures something that is missing from Marx's account, i.e. the right over one's own labor. I will begin by briefly describing the two vies. I will then elaborate where exactly the disagreement between the two lies and argue that Rousseau is correct in his disagreement, because Marx, when he abolishes *all* private property, is in fact keeping people from having ownership over their own labor.

Marx's view on private property is summarized in Section 2 of the Communist Manifesto, "the theory of the Communists may be summed up in the single sentence: Abolition of private property." (CM, 22) Marx believed that private property "exploits wage-labor", i.e. it allows the owner to get the fruit of another man's labor. (22) Abolition of private property is the only way to achieve an equal society, where exploitation and extraction of value from another's labor is no longer present and where "the free development of each is the condition for the free

development of all.” (CM, 27) In the Critique of the Gotha Program, Marx summed up his vision of the economic structure of communist society: “From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs!”. (5) He emphasized that in communist society, an individual’s labor contributes to the *total social product* of society, i.e. the common proceeds of labor, from which each individual receives according to his need. In this way, Marx’s model eradicates the commodification of labor in capitalist society, by ensuring that no individual (capitalist) gains direct ownership over another man’s labor.

However, this is *different* from saying that every individual has a right *over their own labor*. Marx makes it clear that this “right, instead of being equal, would have to be unequal”. (5) Not everyone will have an *equal* right over their own labor, but instead an *equal* right over the *total social product*, regardless of how much the individual’s labor himself has contributed to the total product. This, Marx argued, is the only way to ensure that no one “will in fact receive more than another, (no) one will be richer than another” (5) despite natural differences in the productivity of individuals. Marx’s account does fix the exploitation that occurs under capitalism, i.e. no one individual has ownership over another man’s labor. However, he does not enforce the underlying ideal that drove his criticism of exploitation, i.e. an individual’s right over his own labor.

Conversely, Rousseau asserted that one of the essential roles of the sovereign (i.e. the governing association under his social contract) would be to protect the private property of individuals against foreign aggression. This protection of private property is one of the two major gains (the other being civil liberty) for an individual to agree to the social contract, in exchange for the two things he gives up (natural liberty and unrestricted right to everything he wants). (9) The right to private ownership is legitimate only if the following 3 criteria are met:

(a) not already owned by someone else (b) used for subsistence (c) possession by ‘labor and cultivation’. (10) From the third criterion we see that the purpose of this right to private property is to uphold one’s right over one’s own labor. However, Rousseau imposed restrictions on the kind of commodities that can be privately owned.

In Book 1 of the Social Contract, Rousseau wrote, “If a man or a people seize an immense territory and shut out the rest of the world, won’t this be merely a *grab* that ought to be punished? The answer is surely ‘yes’, because such an act steals from others the living-space and means of subsistence that nature gave them in common.” (10) In other words, Rousseau agreed with Marx that the *means of production (subsistence)* must not be owned privately. Still, this restriction does not exclude the right of an individual over the *product of his own labor*. Rousseau clarified that this right to private property is not the *natural right* to seize all one can - he is not advocating for the unrestricted right to *accumulate* private property. He is however proposing the *civil right* to private ownership, where the social contract ensures an individual’s “*positive*” right to ownership over one’s possessions. (10) Rousseau further clarified that this civil right of an individual “is always subordinate” to the *general will*, i.e. the *common good* of all. (11) If an individual’s private ownership of a certain product is in direct conflict to the common good of all, then the individual’s right is overruled. For example, if a scientist discovered the unique cure for a deadly epidemic, the scientist’s right over the fruit of his labor, i.e. the cure, will be overruled by the sovereign authority to use the cure for the common good of all.

There are two reasons why Rousseau’s account differs from Marx. Firstly, while the natural right over one’s own labor was important in his critique of capitalist society, Marx abandoned this positive right in his communist society in favor of ensuring absolute equality

among members of society, which destroys both political *and* natural inequality. Rousseau, however, upholds the ideal of the natural right over one's own labor, and in doing so maintains political equality, but "doesn't destroy natural inequality", rather replaces it "by an equality that is moral and legitimate" (11)

The second difference in their account is in the scope of this right over one's own labor itself, specifically when answering whether capital itself is the product of a capitalist's labor. Marx would answer no, wage labor creates no property for the laborer who actually produces it. Instead "it creates capital, the kind of property that exploits wage labor" (CM, 22) Rousseau would concede that in *most* cases, capital when understood as the common means of production, is *not* the product of an individual's labor rather a resource to be shared commonly. However, in a specific sense, certain commodities that qualify as 'capital' could be attributed to the owner's labor. In this very specific case, the owner *does* have a right over the commodity by virtue of his labor. An example of this specific case is as follows.

Alice makes an axe - she can either (a) rent it or (b) sell it to Bob. In either case, once in his possession, Bob can produce a pile of chopped wood which Alice has no right over. Bob does not sell his *labor* to Alice, rather Alice sells her *product* to Bob. In this way, the *labor* itself is not the commodity that is being sold; the *product* of labor is the commodity being sold.

This distinction is how Rousseau prevents exploitation in his ideal society. In Marx's account of exploitation, a worker's labor *produces* surplus value (greater than the wage of the worker), and this surplus value is extracted, i.e. owned, by the capitalist. In Rousseau's model, however, yes the worker's labor *produces* surplus value but this surplus value is *also* owned by the laborer. So in Rousseau's ideal society, a person's income is determined *by the value of the labor's product*. Marx's problem with capitalism (i.e. what allowed for exploitation)

was that wages are determined by the *cost of producing the worker*, not by the *value of what the worker produces*. So Marx felt abolishment of private property would allow us to discard the idea of value altogether and as much rid society of this exploitation. Rousseau's account shows that it is in fact possible to eradicate the exploitative system while at the same time ensuring a worker's positive right over what he produces. By setting the income (i.e. wage) of an individual to be the value of what a worker produces, i.e. by giving a worker full ownership over the product of their own labor, capitalist exploitation through wage labor is made impossible.

Thus Rousseau's account of private property is more convincing than Marx's. Marx focuses on eradicating the commodification and eventual exploitation of labor. In the process, he forgoes an individual's right over his own labor. Rousseau shows that this latter sacrifice is unnecessary. He upholds an individual the *positive* right over his own labor and at the same time ensures that exploitation through private ownership of means of production is eradicated.

References

Engels, Friedrich, and Karl Marx. *The communist manifesto*. Broadview Press, 2004.

Marx, Karl. *Critique of the Gotha program*. Wildside Press LLC, 2008.

Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *Rousseau: The Social Contract and other later political writings*. Cambridge University Press, 2018.

I pledge my honour that this paper represents my own work in accordance with University regulations