

Chapter 1

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ATHENIAN DEMOCRACY AND THE CRITIQUE OF POLITICAL ECONOMY



Trained in classical Greek history and philosophy from his earliest days at the Trier *Gymnasium* and at the Universities of Bonn and Berlin, Karl Marx incorporated his love for ancient history, archaeology, and philosophy throughout his writings on political and economic issues. The ancient Greeks offered him an opportunity to romanticize alternative possibilities of an emancipated society freed from the alienation, exploitation, and materialism of modern life. In their collective philosophy, art, and politics the Greeks presented him with an idealized world of spiritual harmony, sensuous beauty, political wisdom, and social justice. The Greek world reflected his hopes and aspirations for a life of noble simplicity and individual freedom within a moral economy. Instead of mind-numbing specialized labor; a fragmented community; class-divided society; and the shallow, self-interested pursuit of material wealth, Marx sought a new humanity guided by a different set of social values and moral principles.

Steeped in the works of Homer, Herodotus, Thucydides, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Plato, and Aristotle; well-versed in the ancient history and archaeology of George Grote, Carl Hermann, Johann Jakob Bachofen, August Böckh, Georg Maurer, Theodor Mommsen, and Georg Schömann; and inspired by the writings of Johann Joachim Winckelmann, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Johann Gottfried Herder, Friedrich Schiller, and Friedrich Hölderlin, Marx confronted an alien world of Manchester factories, rationalized labor, class power, and the stultifying values of utilitarianism and atomistic individualism. The way out of this world was through the dreams of the ancients. As did Aristotle many years before him, he rejected the view of freedom as a series of market choices and consumer tastes. For Marx, freedom was to be defined in terms of self-realization and rational deliberation within a moral community of mutually caring friends and active citizens. The individual was to be portrayed not in terms of how much he or she owned or consumed but in terms of human creativity, moral choices, and political participation. The ancients offered Marx an infinitely superior world of

aesthetic splendor and human dignity. From the dazzling heights of the Acropolis, he could see farther than most nineteenth-century social theorists.

The influence of classical antiquity on Marx's critique of modernity appears in five different periods of his writings. This chapter will follow these periods from his doctoral dissertation and notebooks on Greek physics and science; the classical humanism in his early ideas on alienation, species being, and human rights and emancipation; to his later ethical critique of capitalism, labor theory of value, and dialectical and teleological analysis of economic crises. As he moves from his early philosophical to his later scientific and historical writings, his ideas reveal his continuing reliance on the imagination and wisdom of Aristotle and Greek philosophy.

First, in his thesis notebooks on Greek philosophy and in his dissertation on post-Aristotelian philosophy of nature, he examines the works of Democritus and Epicurus, with special emphasis on the latter's theory of atomic and meteor movement, freedom, and happiness as *ataraxy*. Second, in his early writings of 1843–44, especially *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law*, "On the Jewish Question," and *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx focuses on Aristotle's theory of social justice, the good life, self-realization, democracy, rational dialogue, and happiness as *eudaimonia* and on the notions of beauty, art, and creativity found in the neoclassical aesthetics of Winckelmann, Goethe, and Schiller. In these early essays, he outlines his theory of species being, self-realization, and political and human emancipation. These political writings were accompanied by his critique of alienated labor, narrow utilitarian rights, and possessive individualism.

Third, in his major economic work, *Capital* (1867), Marx introduces two new methodological forms of social critique. The first method traces the development of the underlying logic and rationality (universality) of capitalism that he borrows from Aristotle's theory of formal and final causality and theory of movement in nature found in his *Metaphysics* and *Physics*. Marx then integrates this with the economic crisis theory and labor theory of value of Adam Smith and David Ricardo. The second form of critique comes directly from Aristotle's analysis of political economy and his theory of social justice, virtue, and moral knowledge in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics*. Also in *Capital*, Marx reveals the destructive effects of the market, class inequality, and unnatural commercial acquisition of wealth and profits (*chrematistike*) through his analysis of exchange value, abstract labor, surplus value, and primitive accumulation. Both the modern commodity exchange within the commercial market and the social relations within industrial production preclude the possibility of realizing the political and economic potential of a society built upon the ideals of a moral economy (*oikonomia*), political community, and democratic virtue and citizenship. In the fourth period, practical reason is made concrete and transformed into social institutions. Marx uses Aristotle's theory of the democratic polity and the Athenian constitution as a guide to outline the basic structural features of human emancipation, economic democracy, and the workers' collectives in the Paris Commune of 1871.

Finally, Marx turns to ancient history and cultural anthropology to study the historical and structural developments of the political economy of the ancient city-state. In the *Grundrisse* (1857–58) and in *The Ethnological Notebooks* (1880–82), he looks to authors on ancient history (Barthold Niebuhr and Mommsen) and cultural anthropology (Henry Lewis Morgan, Henry Sumner Main, John Budd Phear, and John Lubbock) to help examine precapitalist social formations.¹ In the *Grundrisse*, Marx analyzes the evolution of the ancient commune from a tribal and pastoral society to the classical urban polis, from a society based on communal and tribal property to one founded upon private property. By this means he is able to outline the creation of civil society and economic inequality in the ancient world. In the *Ethnological Notebooks*, he traces the evolution of the Greek political constitution from the Homeric military aristocracy through the legal and democratic reforms of Solon, Cleisthenes, Ephialtes, and Pericles, as well as through the transformation of the ancient commune by means of the growth of private property, class conflict, and specialized labor. Here he explores a question initially raised in chapter 1 of Aristotle's *Politics*: How did the ancient state and class society evolve from the archaic associations and primordial communities of the family, tribe, and village?² By discovering the commonality of interests in these five distinct periods in his writings, we can appreciate the extent to which Marx's social theory is inspired by dreams of classical social justice.

SCIENCE AND NATURE IN DEMOCRITUS AND EPICURUS

Marx's dissertation, *Difference between Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature* (1841), compares the different views of science, truth, and nature in the Greek physics of Epicurus and Democritus. His earlier preparatory notes, published as *Notebooks on Epicurean Philosophy* (1839), outline the history of philosophy dealing with post-Aristotelian physics and philosophy of nature. Taking excerpts and interpretations from the works of Diogenes Laertius, Sextus Empiricus, Plutarch, Lucretius, Seneca, and Cicero, Marx summarizes the ancient treatment of Epicurus and Democritus. In a letter to his father written in November 1837 from the University of Berlin, Marx mentions his readings in legal studies and his excitement about the works of Immanuel Kant, Johann Fichte, G. W. F. Hegel, and Friedrich Schelling. He also comments that he has translated part of Aristotle's *Rhetoric*. A casual look at the endnotes to his dissertation reveals extensive references to Aristotle. At this time Marx has even made a translation of Aristotle's *De Anima* in German, which he hopes to publish.³

There is little in the secondary literature that examines in any detail Marx's doctoral thesis. Though it is like many other dissertations, esoteric and difficult to read, the patient reader will find some interesting ideas expressed in it. Marx viewed his dissertation as an introduction to a more comprehensive monograph on Epicurean, Stoic, and Skeptic philosophy that he never wrote. The philosophical tradition from Cicero and Plutarch to Leibniz dismisses Epicurus as an

inconsistent, second-rate borrower of Democritus' philosophy of nature. But Marx sees something more creative and original in Epicurus, and this is the main thesis of his work. Marx acknowledges that the science of nature and theory of atoms and meteors that lie at the foundation of their thought are the same. Where Democritus and Epicurus differ is in their view of "truth, certainty, and application of this science, and all that refers to the relationship between thought and reality in general."⁴ Though their atomic theory is the same, their epistemologies and metaphysics are quite different.

According to Marx, their approaches to sensation (sensuous perception) and reason (self-consciousness), the ontology of phenomenal appearances and being, the validity of empiricism and universal concepts, scientific explanation and natural causes, and the nature of science in general reflect different philosophies. In his articulation of these differences lies Marx's originality, and, more importantly, lie many of the seminal ideas that will later become the foundation for his views on the science and method of his critique of political economy. As he presents the ancient philosophy of nature and science, the discussion between Democritus and Epicurus becomes a debate between empiricism and idealism, respectively. They both ask: What is the nature of science, the process of scientific inquiry, and the objective reality that science investigates? These are questions of epistemology, method, and ontology. Though his earliest writing is on Greek physics and nature and his later on political economy and the natural laws of society, they share a common conceptual framework in their critique of natural science (*Naturwissenschaft*). Finally, Marx contends that whereas Democritus merely stated his theory of nature and celestial bodies, Epicurus pushed science beyond nature into the realm of social ethics with its focus on issues of human happiness, potentiality, freedom, and self-consciousness. Thus, this early treatise represents a discourse on Greek epistemology and science that provides us with interesting insights into his later thinking. The doctoral thesis offers Marx an opportunity not only to delve into Greek physics and classical materialism but also to unpack many of the ideas of Kantian epistemology and Hegelian phenomenology with their concepts of matter and form, appearance and essence, existence and essence, and so forth. Under the guise of his exegesis of the Greeks, Marx is coming to terms with the debates within and between German Idealism and Left-Hegelianism (Ludwig Feuerbach and Bruno Bauer).

The basis for Epicurus' philosophy of nature lies in his theory of atoms and meteors. All nature is composed of self-sufficient, indivisible atoms in constant motion and the spatial void between them. Though invisible, these material atoms are characterized by size, shape, and weight; they form the substrate for all material things. In a world of constantly moving atoms, there are three forms of atomic motion: a fall in a straight line due to gravity, deviation or declination from a straight line, and the mutual repulsion of many atoms. For Epicurus, it is the deviation from the natural fall of atoms, their accidental swerving, and their combination that produce the objects of nature. According to Cicero, Democri-

tus accepted the older Aristotelian view of natural and constant motion in a straight line caused by weight and gravitation, while Epicurus introduced the idea of the swerving of atoms. As atoms repel each other, there is a new oblique motion created that is beyond the natural necessity of falling in a straight line. Each body in a straight-line motion surrenders its freedom and independence to the laws of gravity and nature, thereby surrendering its individuality and distinctiveness. Marx sees that without the declination from a straight line, new movement and alternative combinations of atoms would be impossible. He is also opposed to seeking an external and blind cause of declination outside the principle of the atom itself since he is opposed to the necessary and deterministic world of Aristotelian physics. “Thus, while the atom frees itself from its relative existence, the straight line, by abstracting from it, by swerving away from it, so the entire Epicurean philosophy swerves away from the restrictive mode of being wherever the concept of abstract individuality, self-sufficiency and negation of all relation to other things must be represented in its existence.”⁵

In this way the atom is freed from any dependence on other atoms or from any determination outside itself. It abstracts itself from other atoms as it collides and is repulsed by them and as it is attracted to and combines with many other atoms. In the process, the atom defines itself from within its own principle or concept as a distinct material entity—a particular object in nature. Repulsion from each other and natural motion give atoms their concrete form, thereby creating the determinations and particularity of objects. Epicurus rejects the deterministic universe of Democritus with its blind and necessary motion studied by natural science. The real difference between the two philosophers at this level is that Democritus’ theory of the atom begins and ends with its materiality. Epicurus, on the other hand, in more Hegelian fashion, develops a theory of substance that introduces the idea of the atom as an expression of the subject or spirit—the concept of the atom—rather than as a manifestation of a material element only. The pure concept represents the principle, the determining form, defining both individuality and potentiality, and the essence of the phenomenal world of appearances, which is expressed and realized in the actual declination, repulsion, and combination of atoms. In the very act of repulsion, the particularity and concrete determination of the material object are formed. And it is this notion of a pure concept of the atom that produces for Marx the interesting questions within Greek physics about the nature of science, its external reference in the world of material objects, and the validity of its theories.

The subjective dimension of the atom and the explanation of causes are distinguishing features of the Epicurean theory of physics. In contrast to the mechanical and necessary world viewed by Democritus, Epicurus maintains that the principle underlying the atom and nature is one of “abstract possibilities” and real freedom limited only by the power and insight of the subjective imagination. The explanation for objects in nature comes not from the material objects themselves but from the subjective principle lying within them. In fact, Epicurus has

no interest in seeking the real causes of objects. In this sense, the world of phenomenal objects is a product of the imagination and thus is a fiction; being is a manifestation of, and creation of, the spirit.⁶ The world of being is a subjective world of possible thought. Being is determined by consciousness and not by the objective reality or essence of the thing itself; the theories of the conditions, laws, and explanations of nature come from the subject and not from the object. It is the subject that permits being to appear over time. "Thus in hearing nature hears itself, in smelling it smells itself, in seeing it sees itself."⁷ The subject as thought or reason posits itself as the abstract possibility of nature. It is the human mind that makes objective reality possible by externalizing itself onto the natural world. Marx views this creative and theoretical activity as a form of self-conscious praxis. So long as any causal explanation can ultimately be tied to experience and not contradict the sensations, then any explanation is possible. Nature is represented by a plurality of causes and diversity of theoretical explanations. All that is solid melts into possibilities. Aristotle's theory of substance is transformed into Epicurus' theory of subjectivity and self-consciousness.⁸

There is no one universal explanation of causes in nature, no one particular cause that is natural and necessary. The objective and impenetrable reality of the empirical is dissolved and replaced by chance, arbitrariness, and freedom of the subject. The atom is based on a contradiction between its manifestation in nature and its conceptual possibilities reflected in the imagination, that is, between its existence and its essence, its matter and its form. It is from this contradiction and alienation of the concept as essence into material substance, which is expressed in various forms of motion, attraction, and repulsion, that nature is created. The atom is always in contradiction to itself; its particular determination contradicts its abstract possibilities. The subject is indifferent to the various explanations of the object since the explanations come from the subject and are external to the object itself. Forms are not expressions of metaphysical realities or natural laws as they are for Aristotle; they are the possibilities inherent in subjective consciousness and pure reason. Democritus argues that the proper explanation of particular events rests upon attending to the conditions and reason for them. The cause for drinking lies in thirst; the cause for digging lies in the search for buried treasure. Taking the opposite position, Epicurus maintains that there is no iron law of logic or necessity that underlies nature. "The spirit creates the world . . . which is defined as having been cut out from the infinite."⁹ Nature, as it exists in consciousness, is free and ideal.

The startling implication of this theory is that the ultimate goal of science is ethical, that is, the happiness (*ataraxy*) of self-consciousness as a tranquillity of the mind and negation of fear. Epicurus' method "seeks to destroy the reality of nature which has become independent by an explanation according to abstract possibility."¹⁰ This idea is also developed in his theory of meteors and celestial bodies. These objects have the same characteristics as atoms but on a larger scale: They are eternal, indestructible, and unchangeable; they swerve from a straight

line, and are repulsed by, and attracted to, each other. In this motion, they are also like atoms since their form (concept) is realized and made concrete in matter as independent and substantial individuality (particular objects). Breaking with the whole of Greek physics, Epicurus argues that the solar system is a construct of the human mind and that in knowing the former one also knows the latter. As a project of reason (*Vernunft*), the solar system is a reflection of the categories of the mind. In creating a world of transcendent gods and immortal divinity, the mind alienates itself onto an external other. According to Greek mythology, it is this eternal and unchangeable natural order that determines the motion and position of the meteors. For Epicurus, mythology and physics are empty superstitions and forms of alienated consciousness. Yet, however much he is critical of mythology, Epicurus believes it better to follow the myths of the gods than to accept the necessity and logic of nature and science.

In his letters to Pythocles and Herodotus, Epicurus connects physics with ethics. The purpose of explaining the rising and setting of the sun and moon, the changing of the length of night and day, is to question the immutability and divinity of the celestial sphere and to dispel any fears and terrors human beings may have in the face of the transcendent and mythical causes and universal laws of nature. Just as the atom is indifferent to the subjective explanations of repulsion and attraction, the heavens are indifferent to the various explanations of the movement of heavenly bodies. Epicurus wishes to reject traditional mythology in order to negate the gods and natural law. This is what Marx refers to as the “unity of the object” that is created by “the slavish artifices of the astrologers.” Epicurus’ ethics frees self-consciousness from obedience to alien laws and mythical gods as it reaffirms the values of the abstract possibilities of the imagination and absolute arbitrariness of nature, on the one hand, and classical humanism and individual freedom on the other hand. The heavens are multiple and diverse, and there is no immanent teleology or rational purpose in nature. There are only the meanings and concrete determinations projected onto nature by the subjective spirit. “In the theory of meteors therefore appears the soul of the Epicurean philosophy of nature. Nothing is eternal which destroys the ataraxy and freedom of individual self-consciousness.”¹¹

Science is structured not to peer into the reality of things themselves but to offer explanations for natural occurrences that protect the individual from anxiety and fear and provide theoretical resistance to mythical constructs. The transcendent is made human; the divine is made anthropomorphic. In rejecting the eternal order of nature, the divinity of the heavens, and the existence of mythical and transcendent gods, in emphasizing the primacy of the subject and individual self-consciousness, Epicurus is viewed by Marx as the “greatest representative of Greek Enlightenment.” Reason becomes the criterion by which reality is explained. Since there is no rationality or necessity in nature, there is nothing given as universally true. From Epicurus comes Marx’s rejection of natural science (*Naturwissenschaft*) and empiricism. “Epicurus has nothing but contempt

for the positive sciences. . . . He is called an enemy of science, a scorner of grammar.”¹² Observation, experimentation, and the laws of experience do not provide knowledge of nature, which can be achieved only through reason. The science of nature is used not to search for absolute truth but instead to promote individual happiness, peace of mind, personal security, and the infinite possibilities of nature. It is a theoretical construct with a priori ethical and political motives.

Marx’s dissertation sets the stage for much of his later critique of political economy and the Enlightenment that has its methodological roots in German Idealism and in Aristotle’s theory of movement and causes. Throughout his writings, Marx strives for a critical wisdom “against all heavenly and earthly gods who do not acknowledge human self-consciousness as the highest divinity.”¹³ From Epicurus he will borrow his romantic critique of religion, science, and positivism; rejection of gods (and markets) as independent entities and of a deterministic universe and belief in external transcendent laws and the natural order of things; emphasis on the priority of freedom, self-consciousness, and action; and integration of science and ethics. Marx will explain political economy in terms of reason and its search for the underlying structural concept (formal principle) and the inner logic of capital. Viewing society in terms of its internal and structural contradictions between abstract labor as the exploitation of surplus value in production and individual contract rights, he challenges the utilitarian concepts of freedom and equality in market exchange. Many of the important themes found in the *Grundrisse*, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, and *Capital* are anticipated in preliminary form in his doctoral thesis, including his critique of transcendent religious principles and laws, the internal contradictions of capitalism, and the critique of Enlightenment science and utilitarian values.

NATURE, PRAXIS, AND SOCIAL OBJECTIVITY

Marx was aware in his dissertation that Greek philosophy was missing an important dimension in its analysis of physics. It failed to consider the relevance of the social and economic determinants on the formation of nature and science within history. “Here Epicurus admits the weakness of his own and of all ancient philosophy, namely, that it knows that notions are in consciousness, but that it does not know their boundary, their principle, their necessity.”¹⁴ With Epicurus and the rise of post-Aristotelian thought, there was a movement away from materiality and substantiality toward the spirit. The subjective principle of self-consciousness that underlies nature in late Greek philosophy will reappear as the foundation of Cartesian and Kantian philosophy and the modern Enlightenment. Because the Enlightenment view of the individual and politics was mired in the necessity and universality of the state of nature and its laws, Marx’s attack on the assumptions of Democritean physics and the primacy of the objects in nature would lay the foundation for his later critique of modernity in the form of pos-

sessive individualism, natural rights theory, utilitarianism, and the natural laws of classical economics. This is what Marx refers to as alien forces of “the plastic gods in the market places.”¹⁵ Although the post-Aristotelians saw the subject as primary, it was a very abstract understanding of freedom and individuality. Marx will move beyond the principle of self-consciousness and the idealism of both Epicurus and Hegel to an examination of the subject as a social being that manifests itself both in its individuality and in its social relations within capitalist production—that is, within the history and structures of political economy. The social subject as praxis becomes the defining characteristic of his sociology of nature since humanity expresses and defines itself through work upon nature. The “boundary, principle, and necessity” that underlie nature become a socially constructed reality based on the imperatives and institutions of modern capitalism. It is not the spirit that creates nature out of itself but the social reality that transforms nature. From Epicurus we receive the idea that nature is a construct of the subject, and from Marx we arrive at the materialist conclusion that nature is a construct of social praxis, that is, work, within capitalism. From both the ancient and modern perspectives the underlying foundation of nature rests in subjectivity interpreted as either consciousness or society. Epicurus moves Greek science away from the object toward the subject; Marx turns the discussion about science and nature into a social critique of modernity.

A few years after the completion of his dissertation, Marx writes his famous *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* in which he discusses his early ideas about political economy, the modern state, private property, alienation, wage labor, and human needs and emancipation. Packed inside the essays “Alienated Labor” and “Private Property and Communism” is an unexpected and fascinating, but disappointingly brief analysis of natural science and nature. These sections continue Marx’s thought as he turns away from the abstract philosophy of nature among the Greeks to a sociological critique of the Enlightenment and natural science. This change of emphasis also represents a transition from his criticism of alienated consciousness in religion to a “criticism of the earth,” from a criticism of theology to a criticism of nature and political economy.

Nature and industry provide the material basis for the community; they are the physical bond that holds society together. Nature is the inorganic body of human beings through which the social objectivity is created—perceived objects of everyday life, physical means of subsistence (food, clothing, and housing/shelter), cultural artifacts, social institutions, and so forth. Nature provides the material foundation for market exchange and industrial production. According to Marx, the distinctive characteristic of humans is their productive and creative work as species beings (*Gattungswesen*)—praxis. In the act of making the material and spiritual elements of society, humans create not only their immediate world but realize the potential of their own essence. Praxis is the very process of the objectification of the essence of humanity as communal beings into the

world. This world is eaten as food, appreciated as art, conceptualized as science, experienced as objects of perception, and lived in as cultural and social institutions. The universal creative powers of humanity produce a world having aesthetic, political, economic, and religious meanings that are manifested in its institutions and cultural values. Nature is the basis of humanity's sense of identity and self-fulfillment in work. Through nature humans realize themselves in the process of production as they develop their potential talents and capabilities. By this means, workers live in a world that is a manifestation of their own free and self-conscious activity and an expression of their own human needs. Social objectivity is the expression of this subjective side of species being. Marx writes, "Productive life is, however, species life. It is life creating life. In the type of life activity resides the whole character of a species, its species character."¹⁶ In language reflecting the influence of Kant and Hegel, Marx characterizes praxis as a self-conscious, creative activity in which individuals are treated as ends in themselves, that is, as self-determining and autonomous moral beings.

The concept of *praxis* has a long and fascinating history from Greek philosophy to German idealism and materialism. Although Kant never used the term, he did set the stage for its application in later German philosophy through his epistemology and moral philosophy. In Kant's critique of reason, subjective consciousness constitutes the objects of experience and moral knowledge; in Hegel's phenomenology of spirit, humanity makes its own history and self-consciousness; and in Marx's theory of species being, humans create their own material and spiritual world through the social organization of work. But praxis also shares a deeper connection with a tradition farther in the past. The concept can be traced to Aristotle's belief that the ultimate end of human existence lies in political activity (*praxis*) in the polis through which we become virtuous, rational (*phronesis*), and happy (*eudaimonia*). Marx blends together its ancient and modern meanings of acting and making, and citizen and laborer, to form a picture of humanity seeking self-realization and freedom through creative work and participatory democracy.

In capitalist society, the work relations in the factory or social relations of production are forms of alienated labor because workers lose control over the products produced, the organization and process of production, their own individual selves as species beings, and their relationships with others. Because capitalism is a class society based on private property and inequality of economic power, workers do not control production and its activities; they do not set the rhythm, pattern, and priorities within the workplace because of the division of labor and specialized work; nor do they realize their individual potential as social beings. Finally, unable to form moral and productive communities based on the principles of mutual sharing and democratic citizenship, they are compelled to work in hierarchies of economic domination. The activity that is supposed to anticipate and to promote human self-realization and individual fulfillment leads

instead to lives of exploitation and suffering. Human labor binds the worker only more closely to institutions of alienation and wage slavery. Marx eloquently articulates these ideas in his lines, “The more the worker produces the less he has to consume; the more value he creates the more worthless he becomes; the more refined his product the more crude and misshapen the worker; the more civilized the product the more barbarous the worker; the more powerful the work the more feeble the worker; the more the work manifests intelligence the more the worker declines in intelligence and becomes a slave of nature.”¹⁷ Marx outlines the systematic devaluation of self-consciousness and freedom within the modern world.

Within the general framework of alienated labor, Marx views nature and science as “only particular forms of production [which] come under its general law.”¹⁸ As with religion, morality, and culture, they are not independent entities existing in some abstract and ahistorical realm of ideas, but rather, are profound expressions of alienation and loss of control over one’s life. In capitalist society, private property is the concrete and material form of alienated labor, and natural science is its theoretical expression. Science is the theoretical form of alienated consciousness that ideologically hides and conceptually distorts our relation to nature and to our physical environment. This occurs in both political economy and natural science. Science and nature are historical forms of industrial production and market relations. They are manifestations of the deeper class divisions and power relations in society. Marx concludes with the statement, “Nature, as it develops in human history, in the act of genesis of human society, is the *actual* nature of man; thus nature, as it develops through industry, though in an *alienated* form, is truly *anthropological* nature.”¹⁹

Following Epicurus’ critique of Democritus and Aristotle, Marx locates the truth of objectivity and nature in the subject and self-consciousness. No longer an abstract concept or guiding formal principle, truth is now an alienated consciousness produced within a social framework of political economy and class domination. Thus the individual is separated not only from the means of production but also from nature and truth. Many theorists have argued that these manuscripts make a strong connection between the values of humanism and positivism. But this is a mistaken position because what Marx refers to as “human science” is possible only after alienation has been overcome and a new relationship between consciousness and nature formed within a truly emancipated community.²⁰

CLASSICAL NEEDS AND NEOCLASSICAL AESTHETICS

There are two areas that give substantive, ethical content and direction to Marx’s economic and political theory. First, in his initial economic positions generated after his graduate studies, he emphasizes the notion of self-conscious activity, or praxis, in the workplace. Potentially, social individuals are capable of creating their own natural, institutional, and cultural environments toward the

satisfaction of human needs and according to the laws of beauty and human dignity. The idea of self-realization of the communal life of the species is borrowed from Aristotle's theory of needs, whereas the idea of creative praxis is taken from the neoclassical aesthetics of Winckelmann, Goethe, and Schiller. On the other hand, Marx's early political theory focuses on a search for true democracy, a critique of Hegel's theory of the liberal state, and a rejection of political abstractionism in the form of the separation of politics from civil society. Marx's theories of needs and democracy supply the economic and political cornerstone of his early critique of capitalism. Just as importantly, they also permeate his labor theory of value and economic crisis theory in *Capital*; his approach to bourgeois and socialist theories of abstract rights in the *Grundrisse* and "Critique of the Gotha Program"; and his views on citizenship, a moral community, and economic democracy in the Paris Commune. Throughout his writings the ethical or universal values that underlie his theory of political economy are derived from the texts of classical antiquity though the particular topic of discussion is precipitated by issues generated within nineteenth-century economics, German Idealism, and French socialism. There is no grand split between Marx's early philosophy and later dialectical science since both periods of his life are infused with the ancient ideals of self-realization of human potentiality and the drive to satisfy human needs in a moral economy and democratic polity.²¹

In Marx's social theory, the distinguishing characteristic of human creativity in work is that individuals shape the world according to the "laws of beauty." Schiller earlier used the same phrase to describe his aesthetic ideal for humanity as lying in the Greek view of art and beauty. Thus, the idea of work as a self-conscious activity that leads to self-realization and a democratic society also entails an aesthetic dimension of beauty, balance, order, and symmetry. By returning to the ancients, Schiller hoped to transcend the social and cultural fragmentation of eighteenth-century life, which he characterized in his work *On the Aesthetic Education of Man in a Series of Letters* (1795) as being "eternally chained to only one single little fragment of the whole. Man himself grew to be only a fragment of the whole."²² The world had become a machine in which humans were merely lifeless parts in its mechanical process. This "dismemberment of their being" in science and work was the tragedy of modernity and demanded a return to human dignity and moral autonomy; a reinvigoration of society with freedom and the good life; rejection of utilitarianism and Enlightenment ideals; and the development of a personality that cultivated higher needs, human creativity, and the potentiality of human reason. "Instead of abandoning himself to the world he will rather draw it into himself with the whole infinity of its phenomena, and subject it to the unity of his reason."²³

By reintegrating the individual back into society, sensibilities into reason, beauty into freedom, labor into pleasure, and duty into inclination, Schiller hoped to transcend the Kantian antinomies and economic dualisms of modern

society. An appreciation of the moral nobility of humanity and the beauty of created form in nature would produce an immediate harmony of matter and form, senses and intellect. A new world would emerge in which only beauty and moral freedom were perceived. His goal was to create a reconciliation and harmony between being and nature. The Greeks offered Schiller an alternative vision of “the youthfulness of fantasy with the manliness of reason in a splendid humanity.”²⁴ Winckelmann earlier expressed similar ideas in his *Reflections on the Imitation of Greek Works in Painting and Sculpture* (1755) as he examined the Greek statue of Laocoon helplessly watching the death of his two sons: “The general and most distinctive characteristics of the Greek masterpieces are, finally, a noble simplicity and quiet grandeur, both in posture and expression. Just as the depths of the sea always remain calm however much the surface may rage, so does the expression of the Greek figures reveal a great and composed soul even in the midst of passion.”²⁵

This view of the nobility, simplicity, and beauty of the Greek spirit pervades the writings of German neoclassical authors and later influences Marx’s view of praxis and self-realization. For Marx, society and labor are transformed as consciousness and sensuous activity, the mind and senses, are integrated in an aesthetic ideal of creative work and beauty. With the aesthetic humanization of nature there is an overcoming of estrangement and a general reconciliation of humanity with itself and with nature in a new moral and communal unity. Economic production no longer serves the maintenance of class inequality and power but becomes part of a creative and playful exercise that expresses true human needs and our species being as economic and political animals. Work becomes a conscious and self-determined manifestation of our physical and mental capabilities, no longer limited by the social relations of production. About this Philip Kain has written, “Marx’s ideal resembles Hegel’s view of ancient Greece, where man was neither subordinate to nature as in the Orient nor removed from it as in Christianity. It is also like Schiller’s view, in which man makes nature his object, forms it, so that it no longer rules him as a force. . . . Man produces, ideally for Marx as for Schiller, when free from compulsion.”²⁶ In production we create a material world out of nature but also a world that actualizes our true selves according to our individual purposes, cultural values, and political ideals. The world is made no longer according to the impersonal laws of the market but according to our collective dreams. For Marx, species being “sees [its] own reflection in a world which [it] has constructed.”²⁷ Art and self-consciousness, not economics, determine the landscape of our lives. The mind and body, and the individual and society, are reintegrated into a free and democratic community.

Alienation inhibits the potential in human beings for self-conscious praxis and aesthetic creativity, for the satisfaction of human needs, for the institutionalization of universal rights and human emancipation, and for the development of true participatory democracy. In these early manuscripts, the inspiration and

insight for Marx's critique of political economy, his recognition of the limits of liberalism and political freedom, and his rejection of liberal individualism and egoistic rights are based on his appropriation of Aristotle. The connection between Marx and the Hellenes has also been noticed by Richard Miller: "Marx's theory of alienated labor is, in its more abstract features, largely a description of deprivations that, in Aristotle's view, would deny people a good life. . . . Marx, like Aristotle, judges societies by the kinds of human lives they create."²⁸ Miller contends that the key to understanding Marx's theory of alienation and critique of capitalism lies in Aristotle's ideal of happiness, the good life, deliberative rationality, virtuous action, friendship, self-realization of human potential, and the critique of unnatural wealth acquisition (*chrematistics*). Classical antiquity provides Marx with the lofty and secure heights from which to develop his interpretations and criticisms of modern industrial society. What is also common to both Marx and Aristotle is their sociological stress on the relationships between values (virtue) and institutions (political constitutions), between the ideals of the community and the social institutions that inhibit and obstruct their realization. A virtuous life cannot be realized in a class-strained, commercial society in the ancient world, nor can it be realized in the alienated structures of modern capitalism.

In his major critique of political economy in the *Politics*, Aristotle presents the basic features of a moral economy based on the values of familial love and devotion in the household (*oikos*) and citizenship in the state (*polis*). He describes a self-sufficient community held together by a common bond of language, tradition, and political institutions and ideals. This community has as its goals the basic satisfaction of human needs and the development of the full potential of its members through political participation and rational discourse. It is a society in which the market is relatively marginal and is the basis for the simple exchange of goods produced in individual households. The economy is characterized by household management with distribution based on the tradition of reciprocity, mutual sharing (*metadosis*), and grace. "The technique of trade was obviously not a practice of the earliest form of association, the household; it only came in with the large forms. Members of a single household shared all the belongings of the house, but members of different households shared many of the belongings of other houses also. Mutual need of the different goods made it essential to contribute one's share."²⁹ The distribution of goods within the community is based on human needs and proportionality. Economic activity, which is grounded in the limits established by law and tradition, provides the necessary material goods that the community requires for its subsistence and continuation. But its real purpose is to ensure the realization of the function and final good of human beings within the community—happiness (*eudaimonia*) and the good life.

Aristotle holds that happiness is an "activity of the soul in accordance with virtue."³⁰ Its goal is the nurturing of human excellence by developing a virtuous character in the good and noble citizen. The polis encourages the moral virtues of moderation, courage, honor, and social justice, along with the intellectual

virtues of philosophical contemplation and rational deliberation in the public sphere. Aristotle clearly feared that moneymaking and profit acquisition (*chrematistike*) are unnatural activities that would destroy the natural values and social fabric of the community. They would break the bonds of communal solidarity and its rich traditions of mutual support and collective assistance. With a turn to the market and capitalist trade, life would become commodified and private and public relationships reified. The bonds that held society together would no longer be virtue and citizenship but greed and self-interest. Unfortunately, Marx would prove Aristotle's worst fears correct.

Other secondary authors comparing Marx and Aristotle have also stressed the latter's theory of the good life as characterized by the realization of human capacities, development of human intelligence and reason, exercise of rational deliberation and political participation within the assembly, recognition of the unnaturalness of profit seeking and wealth accumulation, and creation of a society based on virtuous activity, friendship, and mutual caring.³¹ Alienated labor and commodity exchange fail to create the social and economic conditions that make these classical ideals possible. Marx reinterprets the classical ideals of aesthetics and politics to include praxis as both physical and intellectual activity. However, in capitalist society work is not a creative, "free, conscious activity"; it does not lead to social solidarity and reinforcement of communal values; it does not encourage democracy and equality; and it does not develop human potentiality and the good life. Alienation produces the stultification of human needs, the truncation of reason, and the distortion of human capabilities. Everything that is distinctively human is reduced to a means for encouraging market activity and ensuring profit making. Needs are changed into consumer wants; capabilities and talents become mechanisms for profit maximization; friendship and citizenship are transformed into market relations and commodity exchanges; and reason is reduced to utility and pleasure calculations. By blending the ancients and moderns, Marx materializes the notions of abstract freedom found in both Greek and German political philosophy. Though his longing for a better world is inspired by the Greeks, the vantage point from which he draws upon them is modern society and economic theory.

The objectification of the human essence through social praxis in history produces a world both theoretically and practically our own with new values, institutions, and relationships. Praxis is thus an epistemological and ethical category since our experience is mediated and filtered through social institutions and cultural values, and, in a capitalist society, the world we see is alienated from us. The world we live in and understand is a world created by the logic and categories of political economy—a fetishized world of objects, laws, and mechanisms that reflect only the social relations of production in which individuals are reduced to commodities in the market and cogs in a machine. Human beings create the objects of experience through labor in history and society in the very act of production. However, in this process we perceive the world through ideological bar-

riers and distorted constructions of reality. A critical and dialectical science demands that we penetrate the phenomenal appearances of the empirical in order to delve into the hidden structures of power and the inner contradictions of modernity. We must reach beyond the immediately given world of empirical and economic facts to its essential social relationships based on class ownership and private property.

Marx argues for a new world founded not on utility, natural rights, or wealth accumulation but on the actualization of human needs. True wealth is measured by a new criterion that has its origins in Aristotle's political theory. Marx expands upon the notion of wealth by moving beyond its economic connotations and connecting it to species life and to the human potential within the individual. "The wealthy man is at the same time one who *needs* a complex of human manifestations of life, and whose own self-realization exists as an inner necessity, a *need*."³² Instead of building a society based on egoism, hedonism, money, and property accumulation, Marx turns to the development of a political community that defines and realizes human possibilities as social and spiritual needs in history. This involves our needs for creative productivity and aesthetic praxis, for human emancipation and individual freedom, for communal responsibility and economic democracy, and for self-mastery and self-determination. The world of new economic and social relationships that transcend the poverty and oppression of capitalism will liberate not only our self-consciousness but our senses and perception. As Marx expresses it, we will now see with a human eye and hear with a human ear a world that is created by self-conscious activity in nature.

The essence of natural science in an emancipated society would no longer lie in an industrial or productive knowledge with its theoretical imperative of control over nature and human activity. Rather, it would become an expression of human need. Needs mediate the relation between human beings and nature. By rejecting the values of modern political theories of utilitarianism and natural rights as providing the basis for the relationship between nature and humanity, Marx returns to the classical view of *eudaimonia*, virtue, and social justice as the fundamental expressions of human need. Patricia Springborg summarizes this relationship:

Thus Marx's theory of alienation may be seen as a full elaboration of Aristotle's distinction between *oikonomia*, economic activity geared to communal needs and the production of use values, and *chrematistike*, money-making in a society governed by *pleonexia* and oriented to the production of exchange-values. The more Marx in his later writings became preoccupied with the processes of production, exchange and circulation, the closer his concept of needs approximates that of Aristotle.³³

In the final section of his essay, "Private Property and Communism," Marx refers directly to Aristotle, for whom species being begins with the act of sexual intercourse in which physical nature and spiritual humanity, sensuousness and subject are integrated in a creative and productive synthesis. They cannot be viewed as

abstractions isolated from one another. Though nature appears in perception and thought, it is already socially mediated through commerce and production. Expanding the Kantian categories of the mind to include the language, culture, and ideology of industrial capitalism, Marx conceives of nature as preformed through theoretical science and the economy.

The emergence of nature and self-consciousness is perverted in a society based on alienated labor, class divisions, and ideology. Needs instilled are artificially stimulated by a system of private property to promote the legitimation and continuation of capitalism. The need for self-realization and human emancipation turns into a need for money, human needs become consumer wants, beauty and art become fetishes and reified commodities, and human potential is defined in terms of utility and wealth. By turning ends into means, consciousness is stupefied, leading to unhealthy and artificial appetites, a bestial savagery and shallowness of consumer choices, and a mechanical reproduction of physical existence. The human or species dimension is lost; liberty and freedom are restricted to the most primitive and underdeveloped aspects of human existence—market exchange and consumption. The notion that we are communal and moral beings—“the need for society”—is lost in an abstraction of needs from society. Lost, too, are the political ideals and ancient dreams of human potentiality, self-realization, and social rationality within the polis. Individuality is reduced to the most common denominator where material wealth and poverty of spirit are synonymous. Such a society is characterized by an “artificially produced crudeness whose spirit, therefore, is *self-stupefaction*, the *illusory* satisfaction of needs, a civilization *within* the crude barbarism of need.”³⁴ Throughout his early writings Marx longs for an emancipated society based on the classical ideals of friendship and citizenship and on the economic principles of reciprocity and mutual sharing. He refers to these ideals as the brotherhood and nobility of man.³⁵

The theory of human needs remains important throughout Marx’s works as he incorporates it into his later essay “Critique of the Gotha Program.” In 1875 he responds to the Gotha Program, a unifying statement about basic socialist principles in Germany. What he objects to in this political statement is its abstract and metaphysical language about equal rights, labor, society, fair distribution, and property. He spends much of his discussion on the issues of distributive justice and equality, rejecting what he sees as a defense of abstract bourgeois rights that simply reinforce the separation of civil society and the state. According to Marx, natural rights must be understood within the context of an overall analysis of private property, class privilege, and power relations within society. Natural rights theory is a form of ideology. To abstract political rights and freedom from their origins in economic alienation and domination is to mystify power and politics.³⁶ It depoliticizes the economy, which becomes an autonomous, almost divine, realm of natural laws. Abstract freedom must be viewed in the context of abstract labor and wage exploitation. A defense of rights becomes another ideological mechanism to hide class power from self-conscious reflection. This critique of abstrac-

tionism is a consistent theme in Marx's writings, from his early critique of egoistic rights and political emancipation in "On the Jewish Question" and *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law* to his criticism of the bourgeois ideals of equality and freedom in the *Grundrisse*. His initial critique of the religiosity of the political sphere with its pristine values and distorting dreams reinforces his rejection of the theoretical and practical separation of civil society and the state. His approach is to transcend abstractionism by articulating a theory of democracy resting upon a synthesis of economics and politics within a reintegrated moral community. Where the issue of bourgeois rights separates social institutions; treats individuals as divorced from social responsibility, justice, and the common good; and maintains ideals in contradiction to historical reality, Marx's goal is to develop a theory of democracy grounded in a concrete analysis of market exchange, industrial production, and human needs.

According to the socialist ideals articulated in the Gotha Program, the emancipation of labor requires the transformation of private property into the common property of society and the fair distribution of its social product. Marx objects to the rhetoric in this statement of socialist principles since its abstract categories are without substantive content. That is, they do not refer to the underlying structure of society. He asks: What is meant by the terms *society* and *fair distribution*? According to Marx, with the transition from capitalism to communism, there is an intervening stage of socialism in which the traditional bourgeois ideals become reality. The distribution of consumer goods is to be determined by equal rights to the products of society based on the merits and accomplishments of individual labor. This was the normative basis for commodity exchange in the capitalist market and becomes the new ethical foundation for the temporary stage of socialism. No longer ideological abstractions, the old bourgeois ideals now become the actual institutional basis for fair distribution. Labor is exchanged for its equivalent in the form of consumer goods; an equal amount of labor is exchanged for an equal amount of crystallized labor in commodities. Rights to the social product are based upon labor and contribution. The bourgeois view of meritocracy is implemented at this stage of economic development. But since individuals have different abilities and talents, equal rights turn into a defense of unequal distribution. Some individuals work harder, longer, and more efficiently than others and receive more in return. Marx calls this a continuation of the "right of inequality."

As society evolves into true communism, a fair distribution based on equal rights and unequal physical talents is replaced by a new set of priorities of social distribution based on the ethical principle of human need. As need replaces labor, formal rights are replaced by social justice. The last vestiges of capitalism with its possessive individualism and egoistic rights are gone. There exists a new basis for justice, hearkening back to both Aristotle's political theory and New Testament theology: "From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs!"³⁷ This was the underlying principle of Aristotle's theory of the *oikos* or "self-sufficient household." Marx rejects talk about individual rights as "obsolete verbal rub-

bish” and “ideological nonsense.” Some authors have seen this as a rejection by Marx of moral philosophy and social justice in general. But this judgment would seem to be unfounded since he appears to reject only bourgeois legal principles while reaffirming the fundamental ideals of classical Athenian justice. Legal formalism and political abstractionism, along with utopian moralizing, are abandoned as Marx argues that “any distribution whatever of the means of consumption is only a consequence of the distribution of the conditions of production themselves.”³⁸ Ethics must be tied to an analysis of the structures of political economy to be made politically real and morally relevant. This is the imperative behind historical materialism. The key ethical issue of just distribution moves from a question about individual talents and abilities to a consideration of the structures of power and control over production; it moves from questions of merit to issues of wealth, from distribution and consumption to the social organization of production.

Aristotle distinguished between three different types of particular justice: distributive (*dianemetikos*), rectificatory or corrective (*diorthotikos*), and reciprocal (*antipeponthos*).³⁹ Distributive justice reflects the fair distribution of the social rewards within the political community of honor, status, and money based on the standard of merit defined by the criterion of wealth, freedom, or virtue. This form of justice reflects an equality among citizens of the polis. However, who are to be counted as equal citizens and what standard of merit is to be applied depend on whether the polis is an oligarchy, democracy, or aristocracy. Rectificatory or corrective justice is found in the legal proceedings of the civil court, which attempts to reestablish the harmony that existed before a transgression of fraud, theft, or unjust exchange. The third form of justice—reciprocal—involves economic justice and fair price in the market exchange of material goods. The measurement of commensurability and exchange of goods in the market is determined not by supply and demand, by the inner dynamics of the market, or simply by money, but by the general needs of the household and polis. Need is presupposed and satisfied by the goodwill and friendship (*philia*) within the community of family members and citizens. Thus economic exchange is subservient to the physical needs and self-sufficiency of the household and polity; it overcomes the deficiencies of production within the household economy; and fulfills the broader purposes of the ancient state.⁴⁰ For Aristotle, economics is always subordinate to the demands of ethics and politics, virtue and practical wisdom; that is, economics is always subordinate to the imperatives of social justice—political and economic.

The secondary literature reveals a great deal of controversy about the meaning of these three forms of particular justice. Although Aristotle is not always clear about their definitions or applications, the placement and context of the argument do help us here. Particular justice focuses on the economic concerns for justice in wealth and power distribution, legal action, and market exchange. However, he discusses it within the framework of universal or political justice with its

emphasis on economic reciprocity, friendship, and mutual sharing within and between households; political participation and civic responsibility; and the development of practical wisdom and the virtuous life. Particular justice deals with aspects of the economy and how they relate to the more fundamental ethical and political needs of the polity for social equilibrium, fairness in exchange, just laws, and the proper distribution and reciprocity of property and material goods. The function of economic activity is to serve the fullest development of the common good, happiness, and freedom.

Political justice involves questions not only of distribution but also about the ends of human existence (needs and self-realization); the purpose of economics (building a moral community and friendship); the moral goal of society (rational deliberation and democratic discourse); and the full development of human capabilities and happiness (moral virtue, citizenship, and political wisdom). Fairness in market exchange lies in maintaining the community and family through reciprocal exchange and mutual concern for the common good of its members. Without justice in the marketplace, the community would be overwhelmed by a plague of self-interest and competition. The purpose of money is not to measure the wealth of property but the wealth of moral character and social solidarity. Money is meant to facilitate the movement of goods on the basis of social justice, reciprocity, and mutual aid within a self-sufficient political community.

Marx is able to reintegrate the economic and political elements of human need within a democratic theory of distribution. He interprets equality and freedom as political expressions of practical self-realization and the satisfaction of needs rather than as formal categories of abstract rights. Continuing a line of argument developed in the *Grundrisse* and in *Capital*, he maintains that the vulgar socialism of the Gotha Program fails to look beyond the bourgeois ideals of distribution to consider the question of the distribution of the means of private production and property.⁴¹ The whole theory of alienation and exploitation is eliminated. Dreams will always remain unfulfilled if there are no concrete institutions to give them life.⁴² A classical theory of justice must be integrated with historical materialism and a critique of political economy. To isolate consumption from production, distribution from the means of production, ultimately reduces socialism to the liberal values of market equality and consumer freedom. Inquiry into the nature of social justice is not reducible to issues of simple distribution; it must consider questions of self-actualization in production, need fulfillment, and participatory democracy. These are the very questions raised by Aristotle in his ethical and political writings and the very questions at the heart of Marx's social theory.

ANCIENT AND MODERN DEMOCRACY

Rejecting the separation of civil society and the state, rights and needs, and production and consumption, and offering a materialist interpretation of law and