

John Brentlinger's 'Marxism'
Final exam
Fall 1988
David Mertz

John,

I found a few of my papers, but not all of them. I am giving to you a fresh copy of all my papers along with those which I could find with comments.

Question 3:

The fourth *Thesis on Feuerbach* concerns itself with, among other matters, the nature of dialectic understanding. A proper dialectic understanding addresses itself to the immanent contradictions in the real concrete, rather than merely the contradictions between this real concrete and its ideological manifestations -- such as religion. Yes, the self as part of the system of religion is alienated from the self in concrete practical activity -- but this process of alienation is not explained by Feuerbach, only noticed. Feuerbach's critique of religious life is not truly dialectical, because his understanding is still transcendental, and not yet immanent.

Let me explain, briefly, this difference between transcendental and immanent critique. Feuerbach must pretend to take a perspective quite outside that of concrete activity in order to see the contradictions between it and religious activity -- he must treat concrete activity as one indivisible object, and religious activity as another. From his viewpoint it may be seen that these

activities contradict one another, but since nothing may be seen internal to concrete activity, no real explanation can be given for why this contradiction exists. Marx makes an immanent critique. He looks from within concrete activity, and may see the internal structure of this concrete activity. Feuerbach was materialist far enough to assume that concrete productive activity was the basic reality, of which religious life was a distorted reflection; but he was not materialist enough to examine the internal structure of this concrete productive activity. Marx actually analyzes the structure of concrete activity, and finds contradictions within it, not merely between it and ideological activity. This critique is immanent insofar as it looks within the basic material reality, rather than at this reality from the outside.

More than critique is at stake in the fourth thesis, as Marx states. As he writes in the eleventh thesis, "the philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to *change* it." After an immanent critique of concrete productive activity has been made, after its structure and contradictions may be seen, we must change this activity to eliminate its contradictions -- as Marx writes in the fourth thesis, concrete activity must be "revolutionized in practice."

Question 6:

The goal of capital is its reproduction and expansion. Nothing else is important for it; it cares not what form it takes, whether that of money, that of fixed capital, that of variable capital, or

whatnot. It cares not what human consequences this reproduction and expansion has, nor for what commodities it is realized in -- just so long as it reproduces itself and expands as rapidly as possible. But by what means may capital so expand? It does so by taking the form of one particular commodity, that of *labor-power*.

In order to understand how this commodity allows for the expansion of capital, we must first understand the notions of *value* and *surplus-value*. Value is, in the tradition of Smith and Ricardo, defined as mean long-term price. Out of this definition, and observation of the world is derived the so-called 'labor theory of value': namely, that the value of a commodity is proportional to the labor time incorporated into the commodity. Marx accepts this, though whether as an empirical hypothesis or as a definition is not altogether clear. In particular, then, the value of the commodity labor-power is the labor time necessary for its production -- i.e. the labour time necessary for the reproduction of the laborer.

The value of labor-power is, in capitalist production, less than the value produced by the labor of the laborer to whom the labor-power belongs. For example, all the commodities consumed by a given laborer in a day may have required four hours of labor for their production. However, this same laborer may be able to labor eight hours in a day (or twelve or sixteen). That labor time which exceeds the time necessary for the production of the commodities which the laborer consumes produces surplus-value. Those four hours (or eight or twelve) in which the laborer works, but are not

necessary for the reproduction of labor as a class serve to reproduce and expand capital. As long as labor-power may be purchased, and the associate labor utilized in the production of surplus value, capital may expand itself.

Perhaps the distinction between labor, labor time and labor-power should be briefly clarified. Labor is concrete activity, and activity which, at that, always assumes particular forms. Labor time is already an abstraction from labor, but an abstraction which is made not merely in thought but also in the real process of capitalism. Labor time is labor considered in abstraction from the particular form it takes, measured only in hours, minutes, or days. It is labor time, under capitalism, which creates value -- as opposed to labor which produces only *use-values*. Labor-power is the capacity or potential which a laborer has to labor, producing use-value -- and also to utilize labor time, producing value. This capacity, under capitalism, becomes a commodity; the only commodity universally owned by laborers, in fact.

Question 7:

'Appearance' and 'reality' are, as I have written, not existing opposites -- some theories or descriptions grasping the reality of the world, others only its appearances. However, theories or descriptions are usually better or worse than one another. Certainly, the descriptions given by Marx are better than those given by the vulgar economists who preceeded him. Marx describes a greater piece of the reality of capitalism than do the vulgar

economists, and he does so with greater systematicity and beauty. Inasmuch as this is so, we may say, in some sense, that Marx describes the reality of capitalism, while the vulgar economists describe only its appearance.

One particular appearance discussed in Capital is that of fetishized commodities. Marx writes, "A commodity appears, at first sight, a very trivial thing, and easily understood. Its analysis shows that it is, in reality, a very queer thing." Here is a place where Marx distinguishes appearance and reality in some way. Again, "A commodity is therefore a mysterious thing, simply because in it the social character of men's labour appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that labour." The forms of interaction which commodities enter into, i.e. exchange, disguises the full form of social interaction which lies underneath the commodity. It is not quite true that nothing is revealed by this property "value" which appears in the commodity itself --it is a reality that commodities exchange at certain ratios, and this reality is revealed by the appearance of value.

However, the appearance of value in the form of the commodity itself, while revealing something, hides still more. It hides the whole arrangement of production in which commodities are given a particular form, and in which labor time is utilized. Marx, by pointing to the realities of the production process, allows us to see, still, the reality that commodities exchange in certain ratios, but simultaneously allows us to see a great deal more about

capitalism, which had been hidden in the other appearance. Surely, something is still hidden by Marx's analysis -- for example, the social determination of use-value, which plays a key role in creating the exchange of commodities -- but insofar as less is hidden in Marx than in the vulgar economists, he may be said, in comparison to them, to reveal reality, where they see only appearance.