**The Dialectics of Work and Leisure in Marx, Lukács and Lefebvre**

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Beyond a few pregnant paragraphs, neither Marx nor Engels wrote anything of substance on the concept of leisure. Nonetheless, their oeuvre is far from irrelevant to the subject. On the contrary, Marx, who liked to quote Terence’s maxim that “nothing human is alien to me”, made an indispensable contribution to the study of social relations that remains of the first importance to understanding leisure as a concrete historically and sociologically determined concept. Specifically, he outlined the methodological foundations for understanding leisure not simply as the antithesis of work but rather as a definite social form internally related to, but not reducible to, broader, and changing, social relations. This approach incorporates but is much wider and deeper than the common-sense conception of leisure as the simple inverse of work, and it is so in large part because Marx historicised the concept of work itself. Indeed, whereas even the most historically astute of pre-Marxist writers tended to conflate work with the specific historical form they knew as the first order mediation between human needs and the natural environment within which we produce to meet those needs, Marx was the first thinker to fully recognise and explore the distinction between work as a universal fact of human life and the numerous historically specific forms by which we have met and reconstructed our needs through history. And it is by grasping work as a historical form that he provides the intellectual tools by which we might understand leisure as a similarly specific historical form.

His method of analysis, as extended by Georg Lukács and Henri Lefebvre, thus points beyond the simplistic opposition between work and leisure to explore these practices as novel forms characterised by historically specific contradictions. Specifically, Marx’s model implies, and Lefebvre in particular makes this explicit, that leisure under conditions of capitalist alienation is best understood not as the free alternative to the necessity of work, but as an aspect of broader alienated relations: leisure time is generally experienced as a break from work that allows for the day-to-day reproduction of the labour force. This is not to suggest that Marx dismissed leisure as mere alienation, for at their most active and critical leisure activities can point beyond leisure as a mere break from work to a broader critique of existing social relations as a totality. As Lefebvre points out some leisure practices can thus contribute to a broader critique of alienated labour relations and point towards a more authentically human experience of the dialectic between necessity and freedom.

According to Marx, the complex interaction between the multifarious aspects of any particular social formation are best understood as a totality; specifically, as “the concentration of many determinations, hence unity of the diverse”. And the method of reconstructing the totality in the mind involves “rising from the abstract to the concrete”. Pointing to the economists of the seventeenth century, Marx wrote that the “scientifically correct method” began “with the living whole … but … always conclude[s] by discovering through analysis a small number of determinant, abstract, general relations such as division of labour, money, value, etc. As soon as these individual moments had been more or less firmly established and abstracted, there began the economic systems, which ascended from the simple relations, such as labour, division of labour, need, exchange value, to the level of the state, exchange between nations and the world market.” Marx similarly begun a (albeit much more complex) intellectual movement from the abstract to the concrete in *Capital* as an attempt to grasp reality in all its rich complexity as constituted through the internal relations of its many parts (Ollman 1976). He insisted that this method “is only the way in which thought appropriates the concrete, reproduces it as the concrete in the mind” (CW 28, 37-38).

Marx and Engels first outlined their approach to the study of history in *The German Ideology* where they insisted that social production functions as the anthropological starting point of their analysis because men and women “begin to distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to produce their means of subsistence”. And in so producing to meet their needs these “definite individuals . . . enter into definite social and political relations” the concrete form of which cannot be deduced *a priori* but must be ascertained through “empirical observation” (CW 5, 31; 82). Marx explored the distinction between production in general and production as a specific historical form in the *Grundrisse* where he suggested that though “all epochs of production have certain common traits”, there exist specific qualities whose “elements . . . are not general and common [but] must be separated out from the determinations valid for production as such, so that . . . their essential difference is not forgotten” (CW 28, 23). Changing forms of production underpin historical change because consumption could not occur without there first being some form of production: “production and consumption are . . . moments of one process, in which production is the real point of departure and hence also the predominant moment”. Concretely, production, distribution, exchange and consumption form parts of a “totality” within which “production predominates” (CW 28, 36).

To understand leisure from this perspective, it is thus essential first to grasp the nature of work in its concrete specificity. This is not simply because, as Chris Rojek writes, work and leisure are “interdependent” forms for Marx (Rojek 1984, 165). Rather, as Henri Lefebvre points out, Marx reckoned work and leisure to be a complex, evolving whole whose parts are internally related (Lefebvre 2014, 64). As to the nature of work itself, Rojek’s claim that for Marx, it was “axiomatic” that “individual are not free … [because] they live within a conditioning framework, ‘a real of necessity’” (Rojek 1984, 164) doesn’t satisfactorily address how the relationship between freedom and necessity in Marxist theory. For Marx and Engels these are not mutually exclusive terms but rather are dialectically related. This relationship was felicitously expressed by Engels who, drawing on Hegel, argued that “freedom is the appreciation of necessity. … [it] … consists in the control over ourselves and over external nature, a control founded on a knowledge of natural necessity” (CW 25, 105). Engels’s gloss on the issue highlights an important facet of human freedom that had been tacitly suppressed by pre-Marxist thinkers: labour is the process through which we (potentially) begin to freely realise our potential as human beings. Lefebvre points out that because pre-Marxist critics of everyday life tended to originate within privileged leisured strata their writings tended towards the “criticism of other classes, and for the most part found expression in contempt for productive labour” (Lefebvre 2014, 51). Classically expressed in Aristotle’s conception of the ideal citizen as a man of leisure (Kain 1982, 153), this contempt for productive activity finds expression even amongst those who are nominally much more sympathetic to the progress of industry. Thus Marx recognises this bias in the work of James Mill: ““When James Mill for example says: “To enable a considerable portion of the community to enjoy the advantages of *leisure,* the return to capital must evidently be large” … he means nothing other than this: The wage labourer must slave a good deal so that many people can have leisure, or the free time of one section of society depends on the ratio of the worker’s surplus labour time “to his necessary labour time.” (CW 30, 210).

This deep-seated contempt for those engaged in productive activity is both rooted in capitalist social relations – as Marx wrote in *Capital*, “In capitalist society spare time is acquired for one class by converting the whole life-time of the masses into labour-time” (Marx 1976, 667) – and informs an ongoing failure to grasp either the positive part played by work in human self-realisation or the historically evolving forms either of leisure or work. Because Marx, by contrast, recognised that the human essence is constituted through our productive engagement with nature, he was able to grasp that historical change is underpinned by the changing forms of this interaction. As Engels wrote in his unfinished minor masterpiece, *The Part Played by Labour in the Transition for Ape to Man*, social production constitutes much more than the source of wealth; it is the medium through which we create and recreate ourselves: “Labour is the source of all wealth, the political economists assert. And it really is the source – next to nature, which supplies it with the material that it converts into wealth. But it is even infinitely more than this. It is the prime basic condition for all human existence, and this to such an extent that, in a sense, we have to say that labour created man himself” (CW 25, 452). Similarly, Marx famously argued that it is “in his work upon the objective world … that man really proves himself to be a *species-being.* This production is his active species-life. Through this production, nature appears as *his* work and his reality. The object of labour is, therefore, the *objectification of man’s species-life:* for he duplicates himself not only, as in consciousness, intellectually, but also actively, in reality, and therefore he sees himself in a world that he has created” (CW 3, 276).

It is through the notion of species-being that Marx differentiates his conception of human nature from that of the political economists. Whereas they conceived work one-sidedly as a negative barrier to freedom, he insisted on its positive character: though work is a necessary chore it is also the medium through which we begin to realise our potential. Thus in the *Grundrisse* he wrote that for Adam Smith labour is simply “a curse.’ Tranquillity’ appears as the adequate state, as identical with ‘freedom’ and ‘happiness’. It seems quite far from Smith’s mind that the individual, ‘in his normal state of health, strength, activity, skill, facility’, also needs a normal portion of work, and of the suspension of tranquillity. Certainly, labour obtains its measure from the outside, through the aim to be attained and the obstacles to be overcome in attaining it. But Smith has no inkling whatever that this overcoming of obstacles is in itself a liberating activity — and that, further, the external aims become stripped of the semblance of merely external natural urgencies, and become posited as aims which the individual himself posits — hence as self-realization, objectification of the subject, hence real freedom, whose action is, precisely, labour. He is right, of course, that, in its historic forms as slave-labour, serf-labour, and wage-labour, labour always appears as repulsive, always as *external forced labour;* and not-labour, by contrast, as’ freedom, and happiness’. This holds doubly: for this contradictory labour; and, relatedly, for labour which has not yet created the subjective and objective conditions for itself (or also, in contrast to the pastoral etc. state, which it has lost), in which labour becomes attractive work, the individual’s self-realization, which in no way means that it becomes mere fun, mere amusement, as Fourier, with *grisette-*like naivete, conceives it. Really free working, e.g. composing, is at the same time precisely the most damned seriousness, the most intense exertion. The work of material production can achieve this character only (1) when its social character is posited, (2) when it is of scientific and at the same time general character, not merely human exertion as a specifically harnessed natural force, but exertion as subject, which appears in the production process not in a merely natural, spontaneous form, but as an activity regulating all the forces of nature” (CW 28, 530; See Magdoff 2006 for a discussion of this argument).

Conceived thus, labour has a fundamentally positive character at odds with the simplistic view that it merely constitutes lost time spent dealing with necessity. By supposing it to be otherwise, Smith evidences his own inability to transcend the standpoint of modern bourgeois society characterised by alienated labour. As Marx wrote in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* of 1844, whereas work could be the means to self-realisation, once we presuppose “private property, my work is an *alienation of life,* for I work *in order to live,* in order to obtain for myself the *means* of life. My work *is not* my life.”

Marx famously articulated a fourfold definition of capitalist alienation. He argued that because the labourer has control neither over what he produces or how he produces it “labour is *external* to the worker, i.e., it does not belong to his intrinsic nature; that in his work, therefore, he does not affirm himself but denies himself, does not feel content but unhappy, does not develop freely his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind.” Importantly for a theory of leisure, Marx insists that this situation entails that “The worker therefore only feels himself outside his work, and in his work feels outside himself. He feels at home when he is not working, and when he is working he does not feel at home.” This is because “his labour is … *forced labour.* It is therefore not the satisfaction of a need; it is merely a *means* to satisfy needs external to it. Its alien character emerges clearly in the fact that as soon as no physical or other compulsion exists, labour is shunned like the plague.” If this situation explains leisure in a capitalist society as an alienated form, Marx also points to the life affirming possibilities of unalienated labour. He argues that whereas man is a “species-being”, that is a “free being” who “makes all nature his *inorganic* body—both inasmuch as nature is (1) his direct means of life, and (2) the material, the object, and the instrument of his life activity … In estranging from man (1) nature, and (2) himself … estranged labour estranges the *species* from man. It changes for him the *life of the species* into a means of individual life.” So, while our essence involves freely working on nature to meet our needs, estranged labour transforms work into a mere means to an end. Consequently, through estranged labour *Man’s species-being* is transformed into “a being *alien* to him, into a *means* for his *individual existence.* It estranges from man his own body, as well as external nature and his spiritual aspect, his *human* aspect.” Lastly, and as a consequence of this alienation leads to the “*estrangement of man* from *man*”, though we are social beings who work together to meet our needs, because estranged labour alienates us from ourselves it equally alienates us from the rest of humanity (CW 3, 274-8).

The great error of the political economists, and all those who share their standpoint, is that they conflate labour with alienated wage labour. This means that they conflate not merely work but also leisure with their capitalist forms. Conversely, Marx suggested that our “authentic nature” does involve work to meet needs, but this work should not be understood one-sidedly as a purely negative phenomenon: “My work would be a *free manifestation of life,* hence an *enjoyment of life.* (CW 3, 228).

If this line perhaps underestimates the negative side of work, the fact that Marx continued to stress the positive, self-realising potential of labour in his mature works suggests that Philip Kain is mistaken to counterpose Marx’s youthful (utopian) writings on the relationship between work and leisure with the (much more orthodox) comments characteristic of his mature works (Kain 1982, pp.89; 117; 124). Indeed, the *Grundrisse’s* critique of Fourier’s idea that work could become like play is best understood as implicitly deepening rather than rejecting his earlier thoughts (Postone 1993, 138). Nonetheless, it is true that Marx does shift the emphasis of his argument to stress that real freedom is measured in time released from work.

As he wrote in *Theories of Surplus Value*: “*Labour-time*, even if exchange-value is eliminated, always remains the creative substance of wealth and the measure of the *cost* of its production. But free time, *disposable time*, is wealth itself, partly for the enjoyment of the product, partly for free activity which —unlike labour—is not dominated by the pressure of an extraneous purpose which must be fulfilled, and the fulfilment of which is regarded as a natural necessity or a social duty, according to one’s inclination” (CW 32, 391). Similarly, in the third volume of *Capital* he argues that “the realm of freedom really begins only where labour determined by necessity and external expediency ends.… The reduction of the working day is the basic prerequisite” (Marx 1981, 959).

But if true freedom begins where the necessity for work ends, our experience of freedom cannot be reduced to this: for not only do increases in the productivity of labour create the potential for people to devote more time to the development of “human powers as an end in itself”, they also lead to an expansion in human needs themselves (Marx 1981, 959). Indeed, human history can be understood, in part, as an unfolding expansion of human needs. Thus Marx’s claim in *Capital* that through labour man “acts upon nature and changes it, and in this way he simultaneously changes his own nature” (Marx 1976, 283). Kain rightly suggests that Marx’s ideal involves the emergence of humans who are rich in needs, such that our essence expands with the expansion of our needs, as at least some wants and desires are transformed through history into “directly felt needs” such that he praised capitalism for creating the potential for a “rich individuality which is as all-sided in its production as it is in its consumption” (Kain 1989, 60; 28; CW 28, 251). Leisure activities can be counted amongst the expanded rich new needs to have evolved under capitalism, thus Lefebvre’s claim that “according to Marx the development of the need for leisure and needs of leisure is deeply significant” (Lefebvre 2014, pp. 60-1).

This argument should not be read as supporting Marx and Engels’s infamous (though tellingly unpublished in their lifetimes) claim made in *The German Ideology* that, under communism, one could “do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, herdsman or critic” (CW 5, 47). Beyond (probably) being a witty gibe aimed at the Young Hegelian idealists, the rational core of this argument is the claim that Communism would remove the worst dehumanising excesses of the present division of labour. Missing from it, however, is a sense of how this might be realised in anything other than a utopian fashion. The problem, as Marx was well aware, is that our existence as social individuals presupposes some degree of division of labour as the medium through which society itself is possible (Beamish 1992, 162). While these divisions mean that it is impossible to develop *all* of our potential, it is nonetheless possible to remove most of the barriers to human self-realisation that are a consequence of what Marx latter came to call the manufacturing and subsequent Marxists the technical division of labour, while maintaining the social division of labour thus allowing people to flourish to a level that is presently denied the vast majority.

Accordingly, for Marx, the social and the manufacturing divisions of labour could be differentiated thus: whereas the former facilitated increases in the productivity of labour by occupational specialisation, the technical division involves the subdivision of jobs such that individual workers perform increasingly simple tasks for which they require only a minimum of training (Ratanssi 1982: 150). This second form of the division of labour emerged through the need to control workers by deskilling them and thus making them interchangeable (CW 30, 271; 279; cf Marx 1976, 1019-1024). In this new situation, Marx argued, “the division of labour within the workshop implies the undisputed authority of the capitalist over men” (Marx 1976, 477). Marx suggested that whilst the former process was an inevitable precondition of economic and social advance, the tendency immanent in it towards “crippling of the body and mind” by occupational specialisation was taken to the extreme in the factory for reasons that had little to do with increasing the “universal opulence”. Rather, the manufacturing system emerged to ensure capital’s control over the labour process and was an “entirely specific creation of the capitalist mode of production” (Marx 1976: 484; 480).

If the technical division of labour primarily exists to help capitalists impose their control over workers, capitalists themselves are by no means immune from the power of capital. The market imposes its logic upon them just as much as it does upon workers: while “the capitalist, by means of capital, exercises his power to command labour; . . . capital, in its turn, is able to rule the capitalist himself” (CW 3, 247). Capital, consequently acts as an ever-expanding alien power over everyone within the capitalist system. Marx expanded on the consequences of this situation in a report to the General Council of the First International in 1868: “what strikes us most is that all the consequences which were expected as the inevitable result of machinery have been reversed. Instead of diminishing the hours of labour, the working day was prolonged to sixteen and eighteen hours.” Against this tendency Marx praised the laws limiting the working day as “a step of progress, in so far as it afforded more leisure time to the work-people.” (CW 21, 382).

But, of course, these laws only mediated against the worst excesses of alienation, they did not overcome it. As István Mészáros points out, there are three aspects to Marx’s notion of freedom: humanity’s free engagement with natural necessity, our ability to realise our essential powers, and, our free relations with the rest of humanity (Mészáros 1975, 153-4). Capitalism, by expanding the productivity of labour, creates the potential to realise this third aspect of freedom by generalising free leisure time across society as a whole and not merely amongst the leisured classes. As Engels writes: “And it is precisely this industrial revolution which has raised the productive power of human labour to such a high level that—for the first time in the history of mankind—the possibility exists, given a rational division of labour among all, of producing not only enough for the plentiful consumption of all members of society and for an abundant reserve fund, but also of leaving each individual sufficient leisure so that what is really worth preserving in historically inherited culture—science, art, forms of intercourse, etc.—may not only be preserved but converted from a monopoly of the ruling class into the common property of the whole of society, and may be further developed” (CW 23, 325).

The importance of this development should not be overestimated because free “[t]ime is the room of human development. A man who has no free time to dispose of, whose whole lifetime, apart from the mere physical interruptions by sleep, meals, and so forth, is absorbed by his labour for the capitalist, is less than a beast of burden. He is a mere machine for producing Foreign Wealth, broken in body and brutalised in mind. Yet the whole history of modern industry shows that capital, if not checked, will recklessly and ruthlessly work to cast down the whole working class to the utmost state of degradation.” (CW 20, 142). Conversely, engagement in really active leisure activities enriches our very being: “Free time—which is both leisure and time for higher activity—has naturally transformed its possessor into another subject; and it is then as this other subject that he enters into the immediate production process” (CW 29, 97).

But freedom isn’t simply a question of time spent away from work. Because of its alien character, work under capitalism distorts all our activities, such that life tends to become a pseudo-praxis; contemplative rather than active in nature. Georg Lukács, for instance, argues that “In consequence of the rationalisation of the work-process the human qualities and idiosyncrasies of the worker appear increasingly as *mere sources of error* when contrasted with these abstract special laws functioning according to rational predictions. Neither objectively nor in his relation to his work does man appear as the authentic master of the process; on the contrary, he is a mechanical part incorporated into a mechanical system. He finds it already pre-existing and self-sufficient, it functions independently of him and he has to conform to its laws whether he likes it or not. As labour is progressively rationalised and mechanised his lack of will is reinforced by the way in which his activity becomes less and less active and more and more *contemplative*. The contemplative stance adopted towards a process mechanically conforming to fixed laws and enacted independently of man’s consciousness and impervious to human intervention, i.e. a perfectly closed system, must likewise transform the basic categories of man’s immediate attitude to the world: it reduces space and time to a common denominator and degrades time to the dimension of space” (Lukács 1971, 89).

In this situation, time spent away from work tends to function merely as break from work rather than a moment for free expression. Thus Lefebvre writes that “the most striking imperative as far as leisure among the masses are concerned is that it must produce a break” that is it must be “as far away from real life as possible” (Lefebvre 2014, 55-6). Indeed, capitalist alienation means that “the worker craves a sharp break with his work, a compensation. He looks for this in leisure seen as entertainment or distraction.” Leisure, from this standpoint, “appears as the non-everyday in the everyday”, an escape that is “an illusion” but which is “not entirely illusory” because the world of leisure is “both apparent and real” (Lefebvre 2014, p.62).

Lefebvre adds that whereas criticism of everyday life had previously been the monopoly of the leisured classes, with the emergence of capitalism the expansion of leisure time creates a space for a renewed critique of the everyday from within the everyday: “the man of our times carries out in his own way, spontaneously, the critique of his everyday life. And this critique of everyday plays an integral part in everyday: it is achieved in and by leisure activities” (Lefebvre 2014, 51). This is a novel situation, for whereas the work-leisure totality had always existed as a “unity”, before the advent of bourgeois society critics of the everyday “*appeared* to remain outside the social division of labour and social practice” - though in “reality they were prisoners of the separation of manual and intellectual work” (Lefebvre 2014, p. 52). So while the objective basis for leisure time under capitalism is rooted in capital’s need to reproduce labour power, and while the existence of discreet elements of work, family life and leisure is itself a characteristic of alienation (Lefebvre 2014, 54), the very fact that workers have won this right and shape its practice creates the possibility for it to become a springboard from which to criticise society as a whole. Of course, this is not true of leisure as a whole: paralleling Lukács’s distinction between contemplative and active praxis, Lefebvre points to the contradictory character of leisure. It is a phenomenon that “embraces opposing possibilities and orientations, of which some tend to impoverish through passivity while others are more enriching” (Lefebvre 2014, p. 54).

If capitalism tends continuously to reconstruct us as passive consumers of, amongst a myriad of other things, leisure time, it is never able to completely reduce our activity to the pseudo-level of the merely contemplative. Of course, much of what we do as a break from alienated work simply constitutes the rest and recuperation necessary for the daily reproduction of the labour force, and much of what is done beyond that is dominated by the pseudo-praxis of consumerist “contemplative praxis” (Jarvis 1998, 76). Nonetheless, at their most active, leisure pursuits, like many other aspects of modern life (Blackledge 2012), point to the kind of free activity that can act both as a critique of leisure as a mere break within an alienated life and consequently as a critique of that life as a totality. The more active and critical and less contemplative and uncritical forms of leisure activities can point beyond the simulacrum of freedom characteristic of capitalist social relations and towards a broader critique of alienation that recognises the profound limits of contemporary leisure relations and the fundamental importance of a revolutionary transformation of work as a necessary moment in the creation of really free leisure time (Postone 1993, 364). This Marxist perspective points to a historical conception of leisure both as a concrete capitalist and consequently alienated (unfree) form and as a form that, at its best, can occasionally point beyond this situation. So, just as modern sport is an alienated form of play that can, occasionally, point towards the real freedom of play (Blackledge 2014), so alienated leisure more generally can sometimes point beyond itself to the possibility of real freedom.

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