Introduction

Although Marx fiercely criticized the theories of justice and some Marxists understand his theory as a purely scientific one, it does seem that he based his arguments in a concrete theory of justice. It can be read between lines when he “often referred to the transaction between capitalist and worker as ‘robbery’, ‘embezzlement’ or ‘theft’ etc. This constitutes prima facie evidence that he believed capitalism to be an unjust system [...]”\(^1\). Moreover, as Cohen (The Labor Theory of Value and the Concept of Exploitation, 1979)\(^2\) points out, it can be understood that Marx considered capitalism an unjust system because he named the rate between the surplus value\(^3\) and the variable capital\(^4\) as “rate of exploitation”, which denotes a kind of injustice; he could have chosen a neutral term to define this rate. For these reasons, I strongly support the view that Karl Marx condemned capitalism based on a specific theory of distributive justice, derived from a higher principle of justice resumed in the slogan “from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs” included in his Critique of the Gotha Program (1875). However, the matter is more complex and many theorists have tried to figure out whether Marx denounced capitalism because it was unjust or for other reasons. In this essay I will first present very briefly, why I consider that Marx denounced capitalism because it is an unjust system. I will follow defending the argument that what makes capitalism unjust is the extraction. To do so, I’m going to review the theories of two important authors who have extensively contributed into this debate from different approaches. On one hand, there’s Romer’s approach presented in “Should Marxists Be Interested in Exploitation?”\(^5\), and on the other hand, there’s Cohen’s response to the previous author in “Exploitation in Marx: what makes

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3 Surplus value= time worked – time required to produce the worker. In other words, it is the difference between the value produced by workers and the variable capital that they are paid.
4 Variable capital = value of labor power, which is the time required to produce the worker
it unjust?" ⁶ which will be used to defend my argument. Finally, I will answer to why extraction is unjust and will show how we can justify this assertion.

1) Capitalism as an unjust system

In this essay I am going to understand exploitation as a moralized concept, in terms of Rawls⁷. If we understand exploitation as a purely descriptive concept, it only describes the ratio between the surplus labor and the necessary labor that exists in any society. However, Marx shows that exploitation is undesirable because the surplus is not collectively controlled by the workers and the benefits aren’t enjoyed by them, and this leads him to understand the extraction as a ‘robbery’ from the capitalist to the worker. From this assumption we can infer that the concept of exploitation is based on a conception of what is correct and incorrect. Hence, for this reason and the ones stated in the introduction, I join the authors who argue that Marx condemned capitalism as an unjust system.

Once I have seconded those authors who claim that Marx denounced capitalism as unjust, I can now present some arguments used to answer to where the injustice in capitalist systems reside.

2) The injustice resides in the extraction

The common knowledge about the Marxist Theory is that it explains (and denounces), that capitalism is unjust for diverse reasons; the most known are the fact that there’s an unequal distribution of the means of production, and that capitalists extract a surplus from the workers. However, we must go deeper into it to try to find where the injustice really resides.

According to Cohen, there are 3 logically independent features of the workers condition in which exploitation can lay. One is that, (1) workers can’t access to the

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means of production, which means that there is an unequal distribution. A second is that (2) workers are forced to work for and by others and finally, that (3) workers are forced to surplus product to others. Within a Marxist outlook, according to Cohen, what makes exploitation unjust is that “they can be true both that extraction is unjust because it reflects an unjust initial distribution and that; the asset distribution is unjust because it generates that unjust extraction”\(^8\). To understand why these 2 opposite statements can be true, he first distinguishes a double significance of the “because” that might express a normatively fundamental reason, or a casually fundamental reason and secondly, he understands the extraction as a forced and unjust flow of product from the worker to the capitalist, known as surplus.

From Cohen’s view, extraction is normatively unjust because it is wrong for what it is. However, the initial asset distribution is unjust only if it enables extraction. Thus, it is a secondary injustice, where the injustice resides in the disposition, which is an inherent tendency that can or can’t be activated. This argumentation is opposed to Roemer’s, who defends that the initial asset distribution is normatively unjust and not derivatively unjust. According to Roemer, the elimination of exploitation (understood as unequal flow) isn’t a fundamental moral requirement. Instead, what fundamentally matters is ensuring assets (including talents) are fairly distributed, because once that requirement is met, exchanges will be non-exploitative, despite that there is equal or unequal flow. We can see then that Cohen agrees with Roemer that all unjust flow requires an initial unjust distribution, but he disagrees with the idea that exploitation is not unjust when it does not reflect an unjust asset distribution, and with what consequently Roemer affirms; that the unjust asset distribution is the normatively fundamental injustice. Therefore, they disagree in the answer to where does according to Marx the injustice of exploitation lay.

I consider that Cohen’s response to Roemer is in accordance with the Marxist theory because as we have seen, Marx rejects exploitation because the surplus is not collectively controlled by the workers and the benefits aren’t enjoyed by them; so Marx is referring to the extraction, in Cohen’s terms, when he is (unconsciously) presenting his normative argument against capitalism. The unequal distribution of

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\(^8\) Ibid. Cohen, G.A. “Exploitation in Marx: what makes it unjust?”. p197
assets is a prerequisite for extraction to happen, and despite that it is also unjust, it is not what normatively funds the injustice in the capitalist system, it is what enables the injustice.

Putting aside the discussions whether this was Marx’s definition of where does the injustice reside in capitalist systems, I claim that the injustice resides in the extraction. I accept that what makes unjust an unequal distribution of assets is what it enables you to do when you are better off. The normative injustice doesn’t reside in that I am better off, but what I am able to do when I trade with the worse off. If we imagine two separate worlds, where one is better off than the other, this inequality matters, but not for what it is, but for what it leads to when these two worlds discover each other and start trading. If they didn’t ever discover each other, the inequality would only matter because it inherently could produce unjust extraction in case the two worlds would ever meet. Therefore, what is fundamentally unjust is the exchange; the initial unjust distribution is casually unjust because of the unequal flow and unjust extraction it inherently can produce.

However, there’s only one world in which capitalists and workers live altogether. As we have been seeing, for the rate of exploitation to be unjust, there must be extraction. So, if there is surplus but it is controlled by workers and they receive the benefits, there is no injustice. An example would be the extra labor done in order to pay the workers social security and public education. In this case, there is extra work but it is done for personal gain and in solidarity with the community. However, when there are capitalists, acting as such, and workers, there is injustice because capitalists take the extra value of what the workers have produced for their own benefit.

This last sentence brings me to explain what I refer by extraction. Marxists have used the LTV in order to explain how the capitalist system works and how it exploits workers. However, Cohen has also argued that this theory is not necessary to explain how extraction works. In a very brief way, what Cohen defends in “The Labor Theory of Value and the Concept of Exploitation” (1979), is that what raises a charge of exploitation is not that the capitalist appropriates some of the value the worker produces, but that he/she appropriates some of the value of what the worker produces; so, whether or not workers produce value, (which Cohen claims they don’t),
they produce the product, that has value. I accept this approach for a simple reason. If we just look around us, we will see that workers produce products such as machinery, food or services. They don’t produce and abstract value, what has value is the car or the meat they have produced. Moreover, if I decided to produce something completely useless, it wouldn’t have any value. Therefore, labor doesn’t create labor, but products which have a value according to a social system.

So, until this point I can affirm that capitalism is unjust because there is a normatively unjust extraction (of the product’s value made by the worker) done by the capitalist. This extraction can happen because of an unequal and derivatively unjust initial distribution of the assets and of the means of production.

3) Extraction is unjust because it is forced

Roemer would say, that if the initial distribution is only casually unjust because of what it can produce, then we have to justify why what is produced, the extraction, is normatively unjust. I am going to analyze Cohen’s definition of extraction, which is “forced flow of product from a worker to a capitalist”\textsuperscript{9} to find how can we justify that extraction is unjust because it is forced.

The key word in the definition is that extraction is forced. Marx would say that in opposition to feudalism, capitalist exploitation is less apparent because of our “consent” to work, which is a consequence of a lack of decent alternatives for the powerless. As John Elster (1985) puts it;

“The producers always have the option of working less to achieve the same consumption level, rather than working more in order to create a surplus. The choice of the latter rather than the former must be explained by the nature of the social relations [...]”. (1985, 169)\textsuperscript{10}

\textsuperscript{9}Ibid. Cohen. G A. “Exploitation in Marx: what makes it unjust?”

\textsuperscript{10}Ibid. Elster, J. Making sense of Marx
So, capitalists can freely choose to become producers and can also eventually renounce to this condition and hire a worker to do the same work, whereas workers haven’t got any other options but being producers.

But again, how can we justify that what makes extraction unjust is that it is forced? Cohen would say that there is a connection to theories of self-ownership. The argument would be that, as I own what I produce, I own my labor power, and for this reason, I also own myself, therefore, it is unjust that someone extracts by force the value of what I’ve produced. However, committing traditional Marxists to the thesis of self-ownership represents a challenge for the Marxist ideal of equality because it means that there is significant common basis with right-libertarian theories.

In spite of using the concept of self-ownership to justify why the forced extraction is morally unjust, we might prefer using the Under Payment Account\(^\text{11}\) theory by which we can denounce the forced extraction with the following reasoning:

“[… ] the capitalist, because of the power he (she) enjoys by owning means of production, is able to appropriate the product of the worker’s labour without having to pay the worker, in exchange, the full value of that product, and the worker must accept it to survive. This is unjust exploitation because the capitalist is not morally entitled to pay the worker less than the full value of the product of his labour.”

I prefer this reasoning to justify why forced extraction is normatively unjust for the following reasons. The Under Payment Account doesn’t lead to a conception of unlimited resources where there aren’t conflicts of interests between people, as it can be derived from the self-ownership approach. From the self-ownership approach we can infer that as we own ourselves and consequently we also own what we produce, we have an unlimited right to everything surrounding us. Yet, this conclusion is far from being an egalitarian principle and is also based on an unreal basis. So, if we are looking for a way to justify why extraction is unjust through an egalitarian distributive

just, we need a justification that does take into account (1) that there are limited resources and (2) that there are human conflicts of interests. The Under Payment Account doesn’t collide with these two requisites and is also compatible with the conclusions in point 2 (that extraction is unjust and is enabled because of an unequal distribution of assets). So, the Under Payment Account accepts that:

1. Extraction is unjust because the capitalist pays less than the real value of the product to the worker, and capitalists aren’t entitled to do so because they don’t and can’t have the real consent of the workers.

2. To get what we need/want we must exchange the products as there are limited resources. Because of this, in the exchange process, products must have a social and fair value that must be returned to the producer.

To sum up, what makes forced extraction unjust is not that a capitalist has extracted something that I own, but that I will receive a minor value in exchange of the real value of what I’ve produced. Yet, if there is still a forced extraction in which I get the full value of the product, we will not be able to speak about extraction but of exchange; there won’t be injustice. However, if we imagine an odd situation, where there is an exchange relation in where a capitalist extracts something that doesn’t belong to me, it is still unjust because the capitalist isn’t paying the real value of the product, although the worker would neither be entitled to that value.

Conclusion

In conclusion, what makes extraction unjust is that it is forced, and we can’t accept forced extraction not because we own ourselves, but because we must receive the real value of what we produce. The unequal distribution of assets inherently entails a situation where the owners will be able to unjustly extract part of the product’s value created by the non-owners.
Bibliography

- Roemer, J. “Should Marxists Be Interested in Exploitation?” Philosophy and Public Affairs. 1985