

Know Your Enemy

How to Defeat Capitalism



Michael A. Lebowitz

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Citations and extended arguments may be found in Michael A. Lebowitz, *Between Capitalism and Community* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2020). The concept of “The Double Deformation” is developed explicitly here.

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“Anyone Can Succeed”

In a capitalist society, there is always a good explanation for your poverty, your meaningless job (if you have a job), your difficulties and your general unhappiness. *You* are to blame. It is your failure. After all, look at other people who do succeed. If only you had worked a little harder, studied a little more, made those sacrifices.

After all, we are told that anybody who works hard can become a success. Anyone can save up and become your own boss, a boss with employees. And there is some truth to this. Often, any one person *can* do these things – but we can’t conclude from this that *every* person can. It is a basic fallacy to conclude that because one person can do something therefore *everyone* can. One person can see better in the theater if he stands, but if everyone stands no one can see better. Anyone can get the last seat on the plane but everyone can’t. Any country can cut its costs and become more competitive but *every* country cannot become more competitive by cutting costs.

The Lessons They Want You to Learn

So, what does this focus upon the individual tell you? It tells you that it’s your own fault, that you are your own worst enemy. But maybe you don’t accept that. Maybe what’s holding you back is those *other* people. The problem is those people of colour, the immigrants, indeed everyone willing to work for less who is taking a job away from you. *They* are the enemy because they compete with you. They’re the ones who force you to take a job for much less than you deserve if you are to get a job at all.

The Prison

Think about what’s known as “The Prisoners’ Dilemma.” Two people have been arrested for a crime, and each is separately made an offer: if you confess and the other prisoner doesn’t, you will get a very short sentence. But if the other confesses and *you* don’t, you will be in jail for a long time. So, each separately decides to confess. That’s a lot like your situation. The Workers’ Dilemma is: do I take the low wage job with little security or do I stay unemployed? “If everything were left to isolated, individual bargaining,” argued the General Council of the International Workingman’s Association (in which Karl Marx was a central figure), competition if unchecked would “reduce the producers of all wealth to a starvation level.” Of course, if the prisoners were able to cooperate, they would be much better off. And so are workers.

Immigrants, people of colour, people in other countries are not inherently enemies. The other prisoners are not the enemy. Something, though, wants you to see each other as enemies. That something is the prison – the structure in which we all exist. That is the enemy, capitalism.

The Secret

The separation of workers in capitalism is not an accident. Capitalism, which emerged historically in a time of slavery, extermination of indigenous peoples and patriarchy, has always searched actively for ways to prevent workers from cooperating and combining. How better than to foster differences (real and imagined) such as race, ethnicity, nation and gender and to convert difference into antagonism! Marx certainly understood how capital thrives upon divisions within the working class. That, he argued, is the secret of capital's rule. Describing the antagonism in England at the time between English and Irish workers, he explained that this was the secret of the weakness of the English working class – “the secret by which the capitalist class maintains its power. And that class is fully aware of it.” It's not hard to imagine what he would have said about antagonisms between white and black workers in the US; further, the effect of divisions between workers in different countries should not be a secret for workers.

To understand why separation of workers is so central for capitalists, we need to consider the characteristics of capitalism.

Capitalist Relations of Production

All production begins with “the original sources of all wealth” – human beings and Nature, according to Karl Marx; and it is a process of activity [labour] involving the use of the products of past labour [means of production including that drawn directly from Nature] to achieve a particular purpose envisioned at the outset. But production under capitalist relations has particular characteristics. By considering the relation between the capitalist class and the working class, we can analyze it as a system and can show the connection between many patterns.

Capitalist relations of production are characterized by the relation between the side of capitalists and the side of workers. On the one hand, there are capitalists – the owners of wealth, the owners of the physical and material means of production. And their orientation is toward the growth of their wealth. Beginning with capital of a certain

value in the form of money, capitalists purchase commodities with the goal of gaining *more* money, additional value, surplus value. And that's the point, profits. As capitalists, all that matters for them is the growth of their capital.

On the other hand, we have workers – people who have neither material goods they can sell nor the material means of producing the things they need for themselves. Without those means of production, they can't produce commodities to sell in the market to exchange. So, how do they get the things they need? By selling the only thing they do have available to sell, their ability to work. They can sell it to whomever they choose, but they cannot choose *whether or not* to sell their power to perform labour... if they are to survive. In short, workers need money to buy the things they need to maintain themselves and their families.

The Logic of Capital

But why does the capitalist want to hire workers? Because by doing so, he gains control over the worker's capacity in the workplace. Marx commented that once the worker agrees to sell his capacity to the capitalist, "He who was previously the money-owner now strides out in front as a capitalist; the possessor of labour-power follows as his worker." Through his command over the worker, the capitalist is able to compel the extraction of more labour from the worker's capacity than the labour he is paying for; or stated another way, he can get more value from the employment of the worker than he pays in the form of wages. A coercive relationship of "supremacy and subordination" of capital over workers is the basis for exploitation – surplus labour and surplus value.



Since the capitalist's goal is the growth of his wealth, he is always searching for ways to achieve this. Nothing is fixed for him. So, he can try to increase exploitation of the worker by extracting more labour from her – e.g., by extending the workday. Similarly, the pores of the given workday when the worker pauses or takes a bathroom break are a waste for the capitalist, so he does what he can to intensify the pace of work (“speed-up”). Every moment workers rest is time they are not working for capital.

Further, for workers to be able to rest away from work allows capital more room to intensify the pace of work. Similarly, the existence of unpaid labour within the household reduces the amount of the wage that must be spent upon necessities and facilitates the driving down of the wage. In this way, capitalism supports the maintenance of patriarchy and exploitation within the household.

Both by intensification of work and by driving wages downward, surplus labour and surplus value are increased. Accordingly, it's easy to understand why Marx commented that “the capitalist [is] constantly tending to reduce wages to their physical minimum and extend the working day to its physical maximum.” He *continued*, however, saying “while the working man constantly presses in the opposite direction.”

Class Struggle

In other words, within the framework of capitalist relations, while capital pushes to increase the workday both in length and intensity and to drive down wages, workers struggle to reduce the workday and to increase wages. Just as there is struggle from the side of capital, so also is there class struggle from the side of the worker. Why? Take the struggle over the workday, for example. Why do the workers want



more time for themselves? Time, Marx noted, 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.” And the same is true if all your energy is consumed by the pace of work so all you can do is collapse at home.

What about the struggle for higher wages? Of course, workers have physical requirements to survive that must be obtained. But they need much more than this. The worker’s social needs, Marx commented at the time, include “the worker’s participation in the higher, even cultural satisfactions, the agitation for his own interests, newspaper subscriptions, attending lectures, educating his children, developing his taste, etc.” Of course, our social needs now are different. We live in society and our needs are formed by that. While we struggle to satisfy those needs through higher wages, capital resists because it means lower profits.

What determines the outcome of this struggle between the capitalist and worker? We already have seen what determines the relative power of the combatants – the degree of separation of workers. The more workers are separated and competing against each other, the longer and more intense the workday and the lower the wages they get. In particular, the more unemployment there is, the more workers find themselves competing for part-time and precarious work in order to survive.

Remember, though, that Marx pointed out that “the working man constantly presses in the opposite direction.” Workers press in the opposite direction to capital by struggling to reduce the separation among them. For workers in capitalism to make gains in terms of their workdays, their wages and their ability to satisfy their needs, they need to unite against capital; they need to overcome their divisions and competition among workers. That was and is the point of trade unions – to strengthen workers in their struggle within capitalism.

Of course, capital doesn’t bow down and give up when workers organize. It does everything it can to weaken and evade trade unions. How does capital respond? By using racism and sexism to divide workers. It brings in people to compete for work by working for less – e.g., immigrants, impoverished people from the countryside. It subcontracts and outsources so organized workers can be replaced. It uses the state [its state] to regulate, outlaw and destroy unions; it shuts down operations and moves to parts of the world where people are poor and unions are banned. Even *threatening* to shut down and move

is a powerful weapon because of the fear that workers have of losing their jobs. All this is logical from the perspective of capital. The logic of capital is to do everything possible to pit workers against each other because that increases the rate of exploitation.

Why Capital Reorganizes Production

The struggle between capitalists and workers, thus, is a struggle over the degree of separation among workers. Precisely because workers do resist wages being driven to an absolute minimum and the workday to an absolute maximum, capitalists look for other ways for capital to grow. Accordingly, they are driven to revolutionize the production process: where possible, they introduce machinery and organize the workplace to displace workers. By doing so, the same number of workers can produce more – increased productivity. In itself, that's not bad. The effect of the incorporation of science and the products of the social brain into production offers the obvious potential to eliminate poverty in the world and to make possible a substantially reduced workday. (Time, after all, is room for human development.) Yet, remember, those are not the goals of the capitalist. That is not why capital introduces these changes in the mode of production. Rather than a reduced total workday, what capital wants is the reduction in the portion of the workday that workers work for themselves, the reduction of “necessary labour”; it wants to maximize *surplus* labour and the rate of exploitation.

But what prevents *workers* from being the beneficiaries of increased productivity – through rising real wages as the costs of production of commodities fall? There are two reasons why these changes in the workplace tend to benefit capitalists rather than workers. One is the bias of those changes, and the other is the general effect upon the working class.

The Bias of Productive Forces Introduced by Capital

Remember that the technology and techniques of production that capital introduces is oriented to only one thing – profits. The logic of capital points to the selection of techniques that will divide workers from one another and permit easier surveillance and monitoring of their performance. Further, the changes may permit the displacement of particular skilled workers by relatively unskilled (and less costly) workers. The specific productive forces introduced by capital, in short, are not neutral: capital has no intention of introducing changes that reduce the separation of workers in the workplace. They are also not

neutral in another way – they divide mental and manual labour and separate “the intellectual faculties of the production process from manual labour.” Indeed, “all means for the development of production,” Marx stressed about capitalism, “distort the worker into a fragment of a man, they degrade him” and “alienate from him the intellectual potentialities of the labour process.”

But that’s not capital’s concern. Capital isn’t interested in whether the technology chosen permits producers to grow or to find any pleasure and satisfaction in their work. Nor about what happens to people who are displaced when new technology and new machines are introduced. If your skills are destroyed, if your job disappears, so be it. Capital gains, you lose. Marx’s comment was that “within the capitalist system all methods for raising the social productivity of labour are put into effect at the cost of the individual worker.”

The Reserve Army of Labour

There is another way that capital gains by the changes it introduces in the workplace. Every worker displaced by the substitution of machinery and technology adds to the reserve army of labour. Not only does the existence of this body of unemployed workers permit capital to exert discipline within the workplace but it also keeps wages within limits consistent with profitable capitalist production. And that’s the point – in capitalism, unemployment, the existence of a reserve army, is not an accident. If there’s full employment, wages tend to rise and capital faces difficulty in imposing subordination within the workplace. That’s unacceptable for capital, and it’s why capital moves to displace workers. The simultaneous existence of unmet needs and unemployment of workers may seem irrational but it is perfectly rational for capital because all that matters for capital is profits.

Capital achieves the same result when it moves to other countries or regions to escape workers who are organized – it replenishes the reserve army and ensures that even those workers who do organize and struggle do not succeed in keeping real wages rising as rapidly as productivity. The value produced by workers rises relative to what they are paid because capital increases the separation of workers. Even with rising real wages, Marx argued that the rate of exploitation would increase: the “abyss between the life-situation of the worker and that of the capitalist would keep widening.”

In the absence of extraordinary successes on the part of workers, capital has the upper hand in the sphere of production. Through its control of production and over the nature and direction of investment,

it can increase the degree of exploitation of workers and expand the production of surplus value. Yet, there is an inherent contradiction in capitalism: capital cannot remain in the sphere of production but must return to the sphere of circulation and *sell* the commodities that have been produced under these conditions.

The Logic of Capitalist Circulation

Capitalists do not want these commodities containing surplus value. Their goal isn't to consume those commodities. What they want is to *sell* those commodities and to make real the surplus value latent within them. They want the money.

Exploitation in the Sphere of Circulation

To turn commodities containing surplus value into money, capitalists need people to work in the sphere of circulation. Of course, they want to spend as little as possible in their circulation costs because those lower the potential profits generated in the sphere of production. So, the logic of capital dictates that it should exploit workers involved in selling these commodities as much as possible. The lower the wages and the higher the intensity of work, the lower capital's costs and the higher the profits after sale. Thus, for distribution outlets and commodity delivery, capitalists have introduced elaborate methods of surveillance and punishment, paralleling what Lenin called early in the last century the scientific extraction of sweat in the sphere of production. Further, wherever possible, capital will use casual labour, part-time labour, precarious workers – this is how it can exploit workers in the sphere of circulation the most.



And it's not simply the workers in the formal sphere of capitalist circulation that capital exploits. When there is very high unemployment, capital can take great advantage of this – it can transfer the risk of selling to workers. In some countries, a large reserve army of the unemployed makes it possible for capital to use what is called the informal sector to complete the circuit of capital. (The commodities sold in the informal sector don't drop from the sky – for the most part, they are produced within capitalist relations.) These workers are part of the circuit of capitalist production and circulation, but they have none of the benefits and relative security of workers formally employed by capital. They look like independent operators but they depend upon the capitalist, and the capitalist depends upon them to sell those commodities containing surplus value. Like unorganized workers everywhere, they compete against each other – and capital benefits by how little the sale of commodities is costing it.

Capital's Need for an Expanding Market

Of course, the proof of the pudding is whether those commodities that contain surplus value can be sold. They must be sold not in some abstract market but in a specific market – one marked by the specific conditions of capitalist production (i.e., exploitation). In the sphere of circulation, capitalists face a barrier to their growth – the extent of the market. In the same way, then, that the logic of capital drives capitalists to increase surplus value within the sphere of production, it also compels them to increase the size of market in order to *realize* that surplus value. Once you understand the nature of capitalism, you can see why capital is necessarily driven to expand the sphere of circulation.

Creating New Needs to Consume

How does capital expand the market? One way is by “the production of new needs.” The capitalist, Marx pointed out, does everything he can to convince people to consume more, “to give his wares new charms, to inspire them with new needs by constant chatter, etc.” It was only in the 20th Century, however, that the expansion of output due to the development of the specifically capitalist mode of production made the complementary sales effort so essential.

Advertising to create new needs now was everywhere. The enormous expenditures in modern capitalism upon advertising, the astronomical salaries offered to professional athletes whose presence

can increase the advertising revenues which can be captured by mass media – what else is this (and so much like it) but testimony to capital’s successes in the sphere of production? Those commodities must be sold – the market must be expanded by creating new needs. There is, in short, an organic link between the poverty wages paid to workers who produce sports equipment and the million-dollar contracts of star athletes.

Globalization of Needs

There’s another way that capital expands the market – by propagating existing needs in a wider circle. Whatever the size of market, capitalists are always attempting to expand it. Faced with limits in the existing sphere of circulation, capital drives to widen that sphere. “The tendency to create the *world market* is directly given in the concept of capital itself. Every limit appears as a barrier to be overcome,” Marx commented. Thus, capital strives “to tear down every spatial barrier” to exchange and to “conquer the whole earth for its market.”

In this process, the mass media play a central role. The specific characteristics of national cultures and histories mean nothing to capital – through the mass media, capital’s logic tends to conquer the world through the homogenization of standards and needs everywhere. Everywhere the same commercials, the same commodities, the same culture – unique cultures and histories are a barrier to capital in the sphere of circulation.

The Accumulation of Capital

Inherent in the nature of capital is the overwhelming tendency to grow. We see capital constantly attempting to increase exploitation by extending and intensifying the workday and by lowering the wage absolutely and relatively. When it comes up against barriers to growth [as in the case of worker resistance], we see capital drives beyond those barriers by investing in labour-saving machinery and by relocating to areas where workers accept lower wages. Similarly, when it comes up against barriers in terms of the limits of existing markets, capital does not accept the prospect of no-growth but drives beyond those barriers by investing in advertising to generate new needs and by creating new markets for its commodities. With the profits it realizes through the successful sale of commodities, it expands its operations in order to generate more growth in the future. The history of capitalism is a story of the growth of large, powerful corporations.

Growth Interruptus

Capital's growth, however, is not consistent. It goes through booms and slumps, periods of acceleration and periods of crisis. Crises are inherent in the system itself. They flow from imbalances generated by the process of capital accumulation.

Consider what Marx described as "overproduction, the fundamental contradiction of developed capitalism." He did not mean overproduction relative to peoples' needs; rather, it was overproduction of commodities containing surplus value relative to the ability to realize that surplus value through sale of those commodities. But why did this happen periodically? Simply because there are inner structural requirements for the balance of production and realization of surplus value given by the rate of exploitation. However, those balance conditions tend to be violated by the actions of capitalists who act as if no such conditions exist. Since capitalist production takes place, Marx pointed out, "without any consideration for the actual limits of the market or needs backed by the ability to pay," there is a "constant tension between the restricted dimensions of consumption on the capitalist basis, and a production that is constantly striving to overcome these immanent barriers."

In particular, capital's success in driving up the rate of exploitation in order to grow tends to come back to haunt it when it comes to selling commodities. Sooner or later, the violation of the balance conditions produces a reckoning in which that apparent indifference to

those conditions produces a crisis. Commodities containing surplus value cannot be sold; and if they cannot be sold, they will not be produced and thus the crisis spreads. However, "transitory overabundance of capital, over-production and crises," Marx stressed, do not bring capitalism to an end. Rather, they produce "violent eruptions that reestablish the disturbed balance for the time being." The effect of the crisis is "to restore the correct

relation between necessary and surplus labour, on which, in the last analysis, everything depends." Until the next time. Such crises are inevitable, but they are not permanent.

There is a second systemic imbalance that interrupts the growth of capital. When capital tied up in means of production rises relative to that used for the purchase of the labour-power that is the source of

LABOUR-POWER
SURPLUS VALUE
RATE OF PROFIT

surplus value, the rate of profit falls, dampening the accumulation of capital. This tends to occur when productivity in the production of means of production lags behind productivity gains in general. Marx, however, explicitly argued that there would be *no* tendency for the rate of profit to fall if productivity increases were equal in all sectors. So, why that productivity lag in the sector producing means of production? Although random patterns are always possible, there is no *systemic reason* for productivity change in that portion of means of production represented by machinery to fall behind; however, Marx identified an obvious reason for lags in productivity in the *raw material* portion of means of production.

After all, when it comes to agriculture and extractive industries, natural conditions as well as social forces play a role in productivity growth. Indeed, Marx argued that it is “unavoidable when capitalist production is fully developed, that the production and increase in the portion of constant capital that consists of fixed capital, machinery, etc. may run significantly ahead of the portion consisting of organic raw materials, so that the demand for those raw materials grows more rapidly than their supply and their price therefore rises.” Especially in boom periods, relative underproduction of raw materials and overproduction of fixed capital is predictable. Developed capital, he declared, “acquires an elasticity, a capacity for sudden extension by leaps and bounds, which comes up against no barriers but those presented by the availability of raw materials and the extent of sales outlets.” With relative underproduction of raw materials, the rate of profit falls; “the general law [is] that, with other things being equal, the rate of profit varies inversely as the value of the raw material.” And, as noted, falling profit rates bring accumulation to an end. These barriers explain why capitalism is characterized by booms, crisis and stagnation.

But barriers are not limits. They can be transcended. In particular, capital is not passive when faced by relative underproduction of raw materials. Marx noted that among the effects of rising raw material prices are that (1) these raw materials are supplied from a greater distance; (2) their production is expanded; (3) substitutes are now employed that were previously unused; and (4) there is more economical use of waste products. Precisely because relative underproduction of raw materials produces rising prices and relatively rising profit rates in those sectors, capital inevitably flows to those sectors. Indeed, “a condition of production founded on capital,” Marx stressed, is “exploration of the earth in all directions” and of all of

Nature to discover new raw materials. Capital, in short, responds to this barrier by seeking ways to posit its growth again; and, to the extent it is successful, it enters a phase characterized by relatively declining raw material values and a rising rate of profit – ie. there are cycles or long waves.

Precisely because capital is an actor, left to itself it has a tendency to restore the disturbed balances. While economic crises are inevitable, that does not mean (as some believe) that capitalism will collapse. Again, every apparent limit to capitalism is a barrier to be overcome. Crises produce interruptions but growth continues.

The Tendency for Capitalist Globalization

We have already seen the underlying basis for imperialism. Capital's drive for profits leads it to search for new, cheaper sources of raw materials and new markets in which to sell commodities. Further, we've seen that capital will move in order to find workers who can be exploited more – workers who are unorganized and weak, workers willing to work for low wages and under poor working conditions and, in particular, separated from organized workers. When you understand the logic of capital, you understand that global capitalism is inherent in capital itself – that it drives “to tear down every spatial barrier” to its goal of profits.

Wherever possible, capital will try to get what it needs through the market – e.g., as the result of the competition of primary producing countries to sell or the availability of a large pool of workers to exploit in production. However, capital follows the motto of “as much market as possible, as much state as necessary.” If necessary, it draws heavily upon the coercive power of the state.

Capital's State

The State is not neutral. It reflects the dominant forces in society, and within capitalism (except in extraordinary circumstances) it belongs to capital. Accordingly, it functions to support capitalist exploitation and the production and realization of surplus value. Thus, its institutions will foster scientific and technical development at public expense that can increase profits. And, when needed to support its rule, capital will use the power of the state to enact “bloody legislation” and “grotesquely terroristic laws” that keep workers in the capitalist prison. That state will use its police and judicial powers to keep the working class at the desired level of dependence. It will act to alleviate economic crises, will accept reforms that do not threaten capital and

will remove those that do. Thus, it will put an end to what at some point may seem to be a social compact when conditions change so it no longer needs that appearance. As long as the state belongs to capital, that state is your enemy.

Capital's State and Globalization

Capital's state plays a central role in the process of globalization. For one, capital uses its state to create institutions which ensure that the market will work to achieve its desired goals: international institutions such as the IMF (the International Monetary Fund), the World Bank, the World Trade Organization and so-called "free trade agreements" (which are really "freedom for capitalists" agreements) all have been created to enforce the logic of capital internationally. By itself, though, this would not be enough – given the desires of people around the world for their own self-development. In particular, once capital has decided to generate surplus value directly in the periphery, it demands the assurance that its investments will be protected. Thus, capital uses the imperialist state to intervene militarily and to support, both by subversion and by financial and military resources, colonial states which act to produce conditions for the reproduction of the capitalist world order.

Imperialism and the Colonial State

With the support of local oligarchies and elites, these colonial states are assigned the function of creating the framework in which the market serves capital best. By separating agricultural producers from the land and providing special economic zones for capital to function freely, these instruments of global capital make available the reserve army of labour that capital wants. Further, they are there to *police* – to use their coercive power to outlaw or otherwise prevent independent trade unions and to apply grotesquely terroristic laws to support conditions for the growth of capital within their regimes. And, although capitalists speak much about "democracy," support for undemocratic and authoritarian regimes that will make life (and profits) easier for capital is no accident. Of course, if these colonial states are unable to carry out this function, capital is always prepared to intervene internationally for "humanitarian" purposes. It is not a mere coincidence, for example, that so many US foreign military bases are located near sources of energy and other raw material supplies.

Imperialism, in short, will stop at nothing. Its history of barbarism demonstrates this over and over again. As Che Guevara pointed out, it

is a bestiality that knows no limits – one that tries to crush under its boots anyone who fights for freedom.

What Keeps Capitalism Going?

Think about capitalism – a system in which the needs of capital stand opposite the needs of human beings. The picture is that of an expanding system which both tries to deny human beings the satisfaction of their needs and also constantly conjures up new, artificial needs to seduce them into a pattern of consumerism. A system which both leaves people always wanting more and at the same time threatens life on this planet. It is a Leviathan which devours the working lives of human beings in pursuit of profits, which destroys the skills of people overnight, which fosters imperialist domination of the world and uses the coercive power of the state to attack every effort of people to support their own need for development.

What other economic system can you imagine that could generate the simultaneous existence of unused resources, unemployed people, and people with unmet needs for what could be produced? What other economic system would allow people to starve in one part of the world while elsewhere there is an abundance of food and where the complaint is “too much food is being produced”?

If it is possible to see the social irrationality of capitalism, why is this abomination still around?

The Mystification of Capital

Capital continues to rule because people come to view capital as *necessary*. Because it looks like capital makes the major contribution to society, that without capital – no jobs, no income, no life. Every aspect of the social productivity of workers necessarily appears as the social productivity of *capital*. Even when capital simply combines workers in production, the resulting increase in their social productivity is like a “*free gift*” to capital. Further, as the result of generations of workers having sold their labour-power to the capitalist, “the social productivity of labour” has been transposed “into the material attributes of capital”; the result is that “the advantages of machinery, the use of science, invention, etc... are deemed to be the *attributes of capital*.”

But why does the productivity of workers necessarily look like the productivity of capital? Simply because capital purchased labour-power from the worker and thus owns everything the worker produces. We lose sight of the fact that productivity is the social productivity of



the collective producers because of the way the sale of labour-power *looks*. This act, this central characteristic of capitalism, where the worker surrenders her creative power to the capitalist for a mess of pottage, necessarily disguises what really happens.

When the worker sells the right to use her capacity to the capitalist, the contract doesn't say – this is the portion of the day necessary for you to maintain yourself at the existing standard and this is the portion the capitalists are getting. Rather, on the surface, it necessarily looks like workers sell a certain quantity of labour, their *entire* workday, and get a wage which is (more or less) a fair return for their contribution – that they are paid, in short, for *all* the labour they perform. *How else could it possibly look?* In short, it necessarily appears as if the worker is *not* exploited – that no surplus labour has been performed.

If that's true, profits must come from the contribution of the capitalist. It's not only workers, the story goes – the capitalist *also* makes a contribution; he provides "machinery, the use of science, invention, etc," the results of the social productivity of labour over time that appear as "the *attributes of capital*." Thus, we all get what we (and our assets) deserve. (Some people just happen to make so much more of a contribution and so deserve that much more!) In short, exploitation of workers is hidden because the buying and selling of the worker's capacity appears to be a free transaction between equals and ignores the "supremacy and subordination" in the capitalist workplace. This apparent disappearance of exploitation is so significant that Marx called it the source of "all the notions of justice held by both worker

and capitalist, all the mystifications of the capitalist mode of production, all capitalism's illusions about freedom."

The exploitation of workers is at the core of capitalism. It explains capital's drive to divide workers in order to grow. Exploitation is the source of the inequality characteristic of capitalism. To fight inequality, we must fight capitalist exploitation. However, inequality is only one aspect of capitalism. In and by itself, exploitation is inadequate to grasp the effects of capital's drive and thus the products of capitalism. *Focus upon exploitation is one-sided because you do not know the enemy unless you understand the double deformation inherent in capitalism.*

The Double Deformation

Recall that human beings and Nature are the ultimate inputs into production. In capitalist production, they serve specifically as means for the purpose of the growth of capital. The result is deformation – capitalistically-transformed Nature and capitalistically-transformed human beings. Capitalist production, Marx stressed, "only develops the technique and the degree of combination of the social process of production by simultaneously undermining the original sources of all wealth – the soil and the worker." But why?

The Deformation of Nature

By itself, Nature is characterized by a metabolic process through which it converts various inputs and transforms these into the basis for its reproduction. In his discussion of the production of wheat, for example, Marx identified a "vegetative or physiological process" involving the seeds and "various chemical ingredients supplied by the manure, salts contained in the soil, water, air, light." Through this process, inorganic components are "assimilated by the organic components and transformed into organic material." Their form is changed in this metabolic process, from inorganic to organic through what Marx called "the expenditure of nature." Also part of the "universal metabolism of nature" is the further transformation of organic components, their deterioration and dying through their "consumption by elemental forces." In this way, the conditions for rebirth (for example, the "vitality of the soil") are themselves products of this metabolic process. "The seed becomes the unfolded plant, the blossom fades, and so forth": birth, death, renewal are moments characteristic of the "metabolism prescribed by the natural laws of life itself."

This universal metabolism of Nature, however, must be distinguished from the relation in which a human being “mediates, regulates and controls the metabolism between himself and nature.” That labour process involves the “appropriation of what exists in nature for the requirements of man. It is the universal condition for the metabolic interaction between man and nature.” This “ever-lasting nature-imposed condition of human existence,” Marx pointed out, is “common to all forms of society in which human beings live.”

As we have indicated, however, under capitalist relations of production, the preconceived goal of production is the growth of capital. The particular metabolic process that occurs in this case is one in which human labour and Nature are converted into surplus value, the basis for that growth. Accordingly, rather than a process that begins with “man and his labour on one side, nature and its materials on the other,” in capitalist relations the starting point is capital, and “the labour process is a process between things the capitalist has purchased, things which belong to him.” It is “appropriation of what exists in nature for the requirements” not of man but of capital. There is, as noted, “exploration of the earth in all directions” for a single purpose – to find new sources of raw materials to ensure the generation of profits. Nature, “the universal material for labour,” the “original larder” for human existence, is here a means not for human existence but for capital’s existence.

As we have seen, while capital’s tendency to grow by leaps and bounds comes up against a barrier insofar as plant and animal products are “subject to certain organic laws involving naturally determined periods of time,” capital constantly drives beyond each barrier it faces. However, there is a barrier it does not escape. Marx noted, for example, that “the entire spirit of capitalist production, which is oriented toward the most immediate monetary profit – stands in contradiction to agriculture, which has to concern itself with the whole gamut of permanent conditions of life required by the chain of human generations.” Indeed, the very nature of production under capitalist relations violates “the metabolic interaction between man and the earth”; it produces “an irreparable rift in the interdependent process of social metabolism, a metabolism prescribed by the natural laws of life itself.”

That “irreparable” metabolic rift that Marx described is neither a short-term disturbance nor unique to agriculture. The “squandering of the vitality of the soil” is a paradigm for the way in which the “metabolism prescribed by the natural laws of life itself” is violated

under capitalist relations of production. In fact, there is nothing inherent in agricultural production that leads to that “squandering of the vitality of the soil.” On the contrary, Marx pointed out that a society can bequeath the earth “in an improved state to succeeding generations.” But this requires an understanding that “agriculture forms a mode of production *sui generis*, because the organic process is involved, in addition to the mechanical and chemical process, and the natural reproduction process is merely controlled and guided”; the same is true, too, in the case of fishing, hunting, and forestry. Maintenance and improvement of the vitality of the soil and of other sectors dependent upon organic conditions requires the recognition of the necessity for “systematic restoration as a regulative law of social production.”

With every increase in capitalist production, there are growing demands upon the natural environment, and the tendency to exhaust Nature’s larder and to generate unabsorbed and unutilizable waste is not at all limited to the metabolic rift that Marx described with respect to capitalist agriculture. Thus, Marx indicated that “extractive industry (mining is the most important) is likewise an industry *sui generis*, because no reproduction process whatever takes place in it, at least not one under our control or known to us,” and, he noted as well “the exhaustion of forests, coal and iron mines, and so on.” Given its preoccupation with its need to grow, capital has no interest in the contradiction between its logic and the “natural laws of life itself.” The contradiction between its drive for infinite growth and a finite, limited earth is not a concern because for capital there is always another source of growth to be found. Like a vampire, it seeks the last possible drop of blood and does not worry about keeping its host alive.

Accordingly, since capital does not worry about “simultaneously undermining the original sources of all wealth – the soil and the worker,” sooner or later it destroys both. Marx’s comment with respect to capital’s drive to drain every ounce of energy from the worker describes capital’s relation to the natural world precisely:

Après moi le deluge! is the watchword of every capitalist and every capitalist nation. Capital therefore takes no account of the health and the length of life of the worker, unless society forces it to do so.

We are seeing the signs of that approaching deluge. Devastating wildfires, droughts, powerful hurricanes, warming oceans, floods,

rising sea levels, pollution, pandemics, disappearing species, etc are becoming commonplace – but there is nothing in capital's metabolic process that would check that. If, for example, certain materials become scarce and costly, capital will not scale back and accept less or no growth; rather, it will scour the earth to search for new sources and substitutes.

Can society prevent the crisis of the earth system, the deluge? Not currently. The ultimate deformation of Nature-is the prospect because the *second* deformation makes it easier to envision the end of the world than the end of capitalism.

The Deformation of Human Beings

Human beings are not static and fixed. Rather, they are a work in process because they develop as the result of their activity. They change themselves as they act in and upon the world. In this respect there are always two products of human activity – the change in circumstances and the change in the human being. In the very act of producing, Marx commented, “the producers change, too, in that they bring out new qualities in themselves, develop themselves in production, transform themselves, develop new powers and new ideas, new modes of intercourse, new needs and new language.” In the process of producing, the worker “acts upon external nature and changes it, and in this way he simultaneously changes his own nature.”

In this “self-creation of man as a process,” the character of that human product flows from the nature of that productive activity. Under particular circumstances, that process can be one in which people are able to develop their capacities in an all-rounded way. As Marx put it, “when the worker co-operates in a planned way with others, he strips off the fetters of his individuality, and develops the capabilities of his species.” In such a situation, associated producers may expend “their many different forms of labour-power in full self-awareness as one single social labour force,” and the means of production are “there to satisfy the worker's own need for development.”

For example, if workers democratically decide upon a plan, work together to achieve its realization, solve problems which emerge and shift in this process from activity to activity, they engage in a constant succession of acts which expand their capacities. For workers in this situation, there is the “absolute working-out of his creative potentialities,” the “complete working out of the human content,” the “development of all human powers as such the end in itself.”

Collective activity under these relations produces “free individuality, based on the universal development of individuals and on their subordination of their communal, social productivity as their social wealth.” In the society of the future, Marx concluded, the productive forces of people will have “increased with the all-round development of the individual, and all the springs of co-operative wealth flow more abundantly.”

But that’s not the character of activity under capitalist relations of production, where “it is not the worker who employs the conditions of his work, but rather the reverse, the conditions of work employ the worker.” While we know how central exploitation is from the perspective of capital, consider the effects upon workers of what capital does to ensure that exploitation. We’ve seen how capital constantly attempts to separate workers and, indeed, fosters antagonism among them (the “secret” of its success); how capital introduces changes in production that divides them further, intensifies the production process and expands the reserve army that fosters competition. What’s the effect? Marx pointed out that “all means for the development of production” under capitalism “distort the worker into ah fragment of a man,” degrade him and “alienate him from the intellectual potentialities of the labour process.” In *Capital*, he described the mutilation, the impoverishment, the “crippling of body and mind” of the worker “bound hand and foot for life to a single specialized operation” that occurs in the division of labour characteristic of the capitalist process of manufacturing. But did the subsequent development of machinery end that crippling of workers? Marx’s response was that under capitalist relations such developments *complete* the “separation of the intellectual faculties of the production process from manual labour.” Thinking and doing become separate and hostile, and “every atom of freedom, both in bodily and in intellectual activity” is lost.

In short, a particular type of person is produced in capitalism. Producing within capitalist relations is what Marx called a process of a “complete emptying-out,” “total alienation,” the “sacrifice of the human end-in-itself to an entirely external end.” Indeed, the worker is so alienated that, though working with others, he “actually treats the social character of his work, its combination with the work of others for a common goal, as a power that is alien to him.” In this situation, in order to fill the vacuum of our lives, we need things – we are driven to consume. In addition to producing commodities and capital itself, thus, capitalism produces a fragmented, crippled human being, whose

enjoyment consists in possessing and consuming things. More and more things. Capital constantly generates new needs for workers, and it is upon this, Marx noted, that “the contemporary power of capital rests”; in short, every new need for capitalist commodities is a new link in the golden chain that links workers to capital.

Accordingly, rather than producing a working class that wants to put an end to capitalism, capital tends to produce the working class it needs, workers who treat capitalism as common sense. As Marx concluded:

The advance of capitalist production develops a working class which by education, tradition and habit looks upon the requirements of that mode of production as self-evident natural laws. The organization of the capitalist process of production, once it is fully developed, breaks down all resistance.

To this, he added that capital’s generation of a reserve army of the unemployed “sets the seal on the domination of the capitalist over the worker.” That constant generation of a relative surplus population of workers means, Marx argued, that wages are “confined within limits satisfactory to capitalist exploitation, and lastly, the social dependence of the worker on the capitalist, which is indispensable, is secured.” Accordingly, Marx concluded that the capitalist can rely upon the worker’s “dependence on capital, which springs from the conditions of production themselves, and is guaranteed in perpetuity by them.”

However, while it is possible that workers may remain socially dependent upon capital in perpetuity, that doesn’t mean that capital’s incessant growth can continue in perpetuity. In fact, given that workers deformed by capital accept capital’s requirement to grow “as self-evident natural laws,” *their deformation supports the deformation of Nature*. In turn, the increase in flooding, drought and other extreme climate changes and resulting mass migrations which are the product of the deformation of Nature intensify divisions and antagonism among workers. The crisis of the earth system and the crisis of humanity are one.

If We Don’t Know Our Enemy

To put an end to that double deformation, we must put an end to capitalism. To do that, we must know the enemy – capital. We will never defeat that enemy if we do not understand it – its effects, its

strengths and weaknesses. If, for example, we don't know capital as our enemy, then crises within capitalism due to overaccumulation of capital or the destruction of the environment will be viewed as crises of the "economy" or of industrialization – calling for us *all* to sacrifice.

The nature of capital comes to the surface many times. In recurring capitalist crises, for example, it is obvious that profits – rather than the needs of people as socially developed human beings – determine the nature and extent of production within capitalism. However, there's nothing at all about a crisis which necessarily leads people to question the system itself. People may struggle against specific aspects of capitalism – they may struggle over the workday, the level of wages and working conditions, against the unemployment brought about by a crisis of overaccumulation, over capital's destruction of the environment, over capital's destruction of national cultures and sovereignty, against neoliberalism, etc., but unless they understand the nature of the system, they are struggling merely for a *nicer* capitalism, a capitalism with a human face. If we don't understand the nature of capital, then every attempt to make life better ultimately will end up being what Marx called "a guerrilla war against the effects of the existing system."

Indeed, so long as workers do not see capital as their own product and continue instead to think of the need for healthy capitalists as common sense (and as in their own interest), they will hold back from actions that place capital in crisis. Even if we are successful in struggling to gain control of the state, even if we manage to take government away from capital, we'll continue to think of capital as *necessary* if we don't understand it.

For this reason, faced with threats by capital, we will always *give in* rather than *move in*. That is the sad history of social democracy. While it presents itself as proceeding from a logic in which the needs and potentialities of human beings take priority over the needs of capital, social democracy always ends up by reinforcing the logic of capital. It does because it does not know the enemy.

Knowing your enemy, though, is no guarantee that you will be prepared to go beyond capital.

Know Yourself

Consider this picture of you. It's a picture of you against the world. You are separated from everyone else, and you are all that matters. You'll lie, cheat and steal as long as you can do that without being caught.

Do you recognize yourself? Certainly, it's the you that capital constantly tries to produce – the separated, atomistic, selfish maximizer. It's the way the economic theorists of capital picture you as well.

But that's not really you (or, at least, all of you). Something stops you from always lying, cheating and stealing even if you can get away with it. It's not *fair*. Not fair to other people. You don't do that to members of your family. And you don't do that to your neighbors because you have to live with them. In fact, if they need your help, you will gladly help them because some day you may need their help. And if there is a threat (like floods, fire, predators) to the neighborhood, you'll join with them because you know that people need each other.

It's the same at work. You enjoy seeing and joking with the people you work with. And you know that if you are facing the same problems like low wages and horrible working conditions (like no time for bathroom breaks), you're not going to solve them by yourself. In fact, when you join together to fight for what is fair, you feel strong. That is why capital is always trying to divide you. It doesn't want to face workers who are strong. And it's not only in the workplace. Capital wants to be able to continue to produce profits without fear that people will organize against the pollution and destruction of the earth it generates. It wants you separate, prepared to turn away if you're not yourself directly affected – and that, even if you are affected, you won't act. Why? Because you feel that you are too weak by yourself to fight.

Capital counts on you deciding that there's nothing you can do. It takes your lack of action as proof that you really are what it wants – a separated, selfish maximizer. But it's not that you are acting selfishly; rather, it's because you lack confidence that others will join with you to do what is right. Holding you back is not that you are separate but that you are *afraid* that you will be alone.

There's a saying, "You can't fight City Hall." As well, you may think you can't fight capital and the capitalist state. It's true – you can't fight them and win if you are alone. But you can fight and win if you are not alone. The Prisoner's Dilemma is only a dilemma if the prisoners are kept separate. When you join together with other people, it's quite different.

Something important happens when you struggle along with others. You win sometimes, and you learn the importance of uniting. But it's not only that your prospect for victory improves. Also, you

change. You begin the process of shedding those sides of yourself that capital has produced. You are changing your social relations: in place of separation, there is solidarity. You know yourself as part of a community and you come to recognize others as part of that community too.

You change in another way in the process. You develop new capacities. It's what Marx called "revolutionary practice" – the simultaneous changing of circumstances and human activity or self-change. And, that process of increasing your capacity through practice is not limited to any specific sphere. When you change, the changed you can enter into new spheres of struggle. Whether you struggle collectively against exploitation in the workplace, against racism, against sexism and patriarchy – against all the divisions among people that capital fosters, against inequality and injustice, against the deformation of Nature both locally and globally, you remake yourself in the process (in Marx's words) to be someone fit to build a new world. Through your protagonism, you come to know yourselves as the person you want to be.

You learn to recognize the importance of community and solidarity. That's part of the "secret" capital doesn't want you to know. That concept of community is always there – it's why you think about what is fair. It's why you are bothered by injustice, why you enjoy cooperating and take pleasure in helping others. Fully developed, the system of communality is one, Marx proposed, where "instead of a division of labour... there would take place an organization of labour" – one where "working with means of production held in common," the



activities undertaken by associated producers are “determined by communal needs and purposes.” In short, production for social needs, organized by associated producers, based upon social ownership of the means of production (three sides of what Hugo Chavez called “the elementary triangle of socialism”) corresponds to the developed system of community.

This goal of communality is, we understand, largely subordinated by capitalism with its emphasis upon individual self-interest. Nevertheless, you may begin to get glimpses of community in the process of collective struggle. There are many possibilities, for example, within municipalities and cities: struggles for tenant rights, free public transit, support for public and co-op housing, increasing city-wide minimum wages, initiating community gardens, climate action at the neighborhood and community level, immigrant support, and opposition to racial profiling and police oppression – all have the potential for people to develop our capacities and a sense of our strength.

By learning to work together, we strip off (in Marx’s words) the “fetters” of our individuality. We begin to envision the possibility of a better society, one in which people can develop all their potential. The possibility of a society (in the words of the *Communist Manifesto*) where the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all – a society based upon solidarity and community.

That won’t happen overnight. Building the new human being is a process, and it takes more than good ideas. To develop that potential, practice can make those ideas real. Institutions based upon democratic, participatory and protagonistic practice and solidarity are an important part of that process. Neighborhood government, communal councils, workers councils and cooperative forms of production are examples of what Hugo Chavez called “the cells” of a new socialist state, where you change both circumstances and yourselves.

Local institutions by their very nature, of course, do not directly address problems at regional, national and international levels. However, local activity is the form that allows for the combination of nationwide struggles with the process of building capacities. Thus, struggles to end capitalist ownership of particular sectors or to end the destruction of the environment, for examples, are strengthened by being rooted in local organization that simultaneously builds a basis for further advances. In the process, you develop further, too, by knowing yourself as part of a larger community.

Know Your Enemy and Know Yourself

If we don't know ourselves, we are disarmed: we will never grasp our collective strength nor the possibility of a better world, that of community. If we know ourselves but not capital, we will not understand why capitalism seems like common sense and we will at best create barriers to capital that it transcends and grows beyond. In both cases, it will appear that capitalism is "guaranteed in perpetuity." In both cases, we will be unable to take advantage of capital's inevitable crises and, most significantly, will not prevent the ultimate crisis of the earth system.

To know capital is to understand its strengths and the effects of its activity. To know ourselves is to know our strengths and the effects of our activity. To know both is to recognize the necessity for taking the state away from capital and to build the new state from below through which we develop our capacity. We need, in short, to learn to walk on two legs to transform the state from one over and above us into one that Marx called for, "the self-government of the producers."

But we will never learn this spontaneously. Rather than discovering all secrets overnight, knowing our enemy and ourselves is a process. Understanding the links between all struggles, too, is an important part of that process. Given the mystification of capital and the divisions that capital has fostered, it's important to have a body of people who can teach and guide us (while learning from us at the same time). It means that we need to think seriously about building a political instrument that can help us all to learn to walk on two legs, to help us to know the enemy and ourselves. Once we do, as Sun Tzu taught, we will win every battle and the war. In place of capitalism, we will build community. •

About the Socialist Project

The SP is a Toronto-based organization that supports the rebuilding of the socialist Left in Canada and around the world. Committed to the development of a more free, democratic, humane and sustainable society than the one we live in, the SP opposes capitalism out of necessity and supports the struggles of others out of solidarity. We support struggles aligned with working class emancipation, anti-oppression, democratic self-determination, planetary sustainability, and peace.

You may contact us at info@socialistproject.ca or visit our website at socialistproject.ca.



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