

# **THE DIALECTICAL IMAGINATION BY MARTIN JAY: HUMAN NATURE IS MORE THAN PRODUCING STUFF**

One crucial difference between the Frankfurt School and the vulgar Marxists of the 1920s was the rejection of what Martin Jay describes as the fetish of labor. The scholars of the Institute for Social Research recognized that human nature was not defined by or limited to mere production. According to Jay, Marx himself took a broader perspective, arguing that the only constant in human nature was its ability to invent itself over and over again.

Critical Theory deals with this difference in several ways. First, it emphasizes the role of politics as an arena for moral action. Religion and secular philosophers historically emphasized the importance of individual morality, but for the most part accepted society as they found it. Jay points to Kant as an example. By the 20th Century, politics offered a much broader opportunity for moral action, and one that included a growing part of the working class. Far from accepting a limited social role as the productive force, people in the working class insisted on acting on their own as agents, and rejected the view that they were mere subjects acted upon by powers, state or corporate, beyond their control.

When Marx wrote, the central problem facing the working class was that its role in society was dictated solely by whatever it could provide in the way of productive value. Workers had no ownership in the products of their labor, only in their wages. The problems of capitalist oppression and alienation are central to Marx. Max Horkheimer of the Frankfurt School rejected this emphasis, saying it did the work of the

capitalist class. Instead, he wrote about the importance of human sensual happiness. Jay describes one essay in which Horkheimer “discussed the the hostility to personal gratification inherent in bourgeois culture”. P. 57. Kant, considered a bourgeois philosopher, saw an absolute distinction between duty and personal happiness.

Although [Horkheimer] gave a certain weight to both, by the time capitalism had become sufficiently advanced, the precedence of duty to the totality over personal gratification had grown to such an extent that the latter was almost completely neglected. To compensate for the repression of genuine individual happiness, mass diversions had been devised to defuse discontent. P.57.

Ranking duty to the totality above personal gratification has roots in Marx. Theodore Adorno told Martin Jay in a 1969 interview that “[if] Marx had his way the entire world would be turned into a ‘giant workhouse.’” P. 57, fn. 20. This repression of individual happiness in favor of duty to society, to the totality, reaches its peak in fascism and Soviet communism. Even in its less drastic forms, this precedence of duty over personal happiness leads people to surrender their ability to pursue their own forms of happiness without even noticing the loss. It’s hard to exercise freedom when every part of society conspires to put certain ideas into your head, ideas that are useful to the capitalist class because they reinforce the importance of labor as the price of every personal pleasure or necessity.

This view of work is essentially bourgeois, and reinforces the status quo, two things the Frankfurt School rejected.

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The idea that labor is crucial to participation in society is central to capitalism, but problems are becoming obvious. Production of

material goods has become so efficient that fewer laborers are needed, and the kinds work they do is dramatically different. [This article](#) discusses the new proletariat and the rise in their recognition of their status as an actual class, with interests opposed to other classes. Outsourcing and factory relocation to countries with cheap labor have reduced the number of jobs in production in this country. Automation threatens many more jobs, and not just those of the working class but of the middle class and the professional class.

In one part of the political world, ideas are circulating about job guarantees, universal basic incomes and other possible responses for a society that has too too little socially useful work for the number of workers. In other parts of the political world, ideas are circulating for torturing those who don't have jobs so that they will accept whatever work is available just to stay alive, a modern-day version of the 19th Century argument that the workers and slaves are lazy and need the lash of hunger to get them to work. Maybe all those lazy takers will be forced back to the farms to replace the immigrants we are so busy deporting.

Or maybe we will change our minds about the glories of work. Try googling "fuck work" for a sampling. Here's a long and detailed [article in the Baffler](#) asking why left and right agree that the answer to social problems is "get a job". The writer, James Livingston, a professor at Rutgers, traces leftist support for the centrality of work in forming character back to the Left-Hegelians and Marx, just as Martin Jay does.

We're not all card-carrying Marxists now, but we're properly fellow travelers because "full employment" appears to many, left and right, a self-justifying project. Certainly the left remains the captive of the Marxist tradition, which still peddles two ideas that now threaten to distract us from the

realities of our time. These are that human nature resides in its capacity to create value through work and, consequently, that the proletariat (the “universal class”) is the appointed engine of social change and progress through class struggle.

This sounds like the vulgar Marxists Jay describes. Livingston shows that it is specifically Protestant. “Before the Reformation, almost no one believed that socially necessary labor was an ennobling activity. After the Reformation, almost everyone did.” I don’t think work is ennobling, whatever else it is or does, but I’m pretty sure this is the majority view. Everyone, left and right, seems to think work creates character, through discipline or something. I’m sure it does create a mindset, but again, how do we know what we are, how do we know how to be free, when those ideas constrain us invisibly, so that we barely know ourselves without them.

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That’s enough of Chapter 2 of *The Dialectical Imagination*; on to the chapter on the integration of psychoanalysis into *Critical Theory*. Curiously, I’m re-reading one of my favorite novels, *Possession*, by A.S. Byatt, and I am struck by synchronicity in this odd passage:

Maud considered. She said, “In every age, there must be truths people can’t fight – whether or not they want to, whether or not they will go on being truths in the future. We live in the truth of what Freud discovered. Whether or not we like it. However we’ve modified it. We aren’t really free to suppose – to imagine – he could possibly have been wrong about human nature. In particulars, surely – but not in the large plan –”

Roland wanted to ask: Do you like that?

█ P. 276.