

# Subverting the Orthodoxy

—Rousseau, Smith and Marx

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Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Adam Smith, and Karl Marx each wrote at a different time, yet their works share a common feature: they display a certain spirit of non-conformism and propose views that were ahead of their times. The views and beliefs that we have inherited from them and that we now take for granted were absurd to their contemporaries. These important philosophers challenged the orthodoxy of their times, and their impacts still remain. Below, I will focus on three classics, namely, *The Social Contract* (1762), *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), and “Alienated Labor” (1844). I will discuss their importance and re-examine their validity in the present age.

## **The Social Contract**

The theory of “social contract” is widely adopted nowadays and does not seem anything of an innovating idea. The Social Contract was originally published in 1762 by the great French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau. It was indeed a revolutionary idea which caused much turmoil in France and subsequently inspired the French Revolution. Even today, we live with social

institutions which embrace his beliefs, albeit in different forms. Without a doubt, Rousseau's impact is tremendous.

In Rousseau's time, Europe was far from democratic and egalitarian. Most European countries were ruled by absolute monarchy, supported by aristocrats and clergymen who enjoyed special privileges and dominated the political lives of citizens. Moreover, their powers were hereditary. The monarchical government had supreme military power. The monarch ruled with might, not consent, and the common people were subjects who owed the monarch many duties and strict obedience. Nevertheless, the situation was not questioned. Why is political power concentrated in the hands of few? Why are they rulers, and we subjects? What legitimacy is the state based on? None of the above questions were asked. Everything, even slavery, was taken for granted.<sup>1</sup>

Rousseau was not satisfied with what was happening. He challenged the legitimacy of monarchial rule. He stressed the equality of men as he famously wrote, "Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains."<sup>2</sup> There is no reason why some should be superior to the others by birth; all citizens should be free and equal. Rulers did not rule because they had the military power, as "force does not create right, and...we are obligated to obey only legitimate powers." Rulers were not superior, nor did might made them right. Rousseau argued that a ruler should rule only with the consent of the people. It is the people who form the "sovereignty," and it is their "general will" that should

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1 Rousseau challenged Aristotle's reasoning with regard to slavery: "Aristotle was right, but he took the effect for the cause." See Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, tr. G.D.H. Cole (Lexington: BN Publishing, 2007) 6.

2 *Ibid.* 4.

guide and direct the sovereignty.<sup>3</sup> No one should be above the sovereignty or disobey the sovereignty.<sup>4</sup>

Rousseau's idea was revolutionary in the history of Europe where religious leaders and monarchs had dictated European politics for long. His idea pointed to an ideal model of legitimate sovereignty which had never before existed. At the same time it undermined the legitimacy of the monarchical rule of his era. Rousseau's provoking idea eventually caused him to flee from his own country. Yet his idea did not perish. It inspired the French Revolution and almost any forms of democratic governments ever after.

## **The Wealth of Nations**

Published in 1776 by the Scottish economist Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations* created incontestable impact on the course of human history thereafter. It seems to me that its most significant impact on political economy is not how production should be carried out, but how human greed and selfishness are being legitimized as something positive.

Adam Smith argued for division of labor and a market mechanism, which laid the foundation of modern political economy. It guided the development of capitalism and shaped the industrialized, global world economy. Europe was at the beginning of agricultural revolution by the time Smith published his book. The book was anti-orthodoxy in the sense that governments and enterprises at the time were basically country-based monopolies which

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3 Rousseau 12.

4 This is similar to the idea of rule of law.

largely favored protectionism to secure special privileges of the aristocrats. The traditional mode of production was pre-industrial. Moreover, under religious doctrine and traditional ethics, trading and the merchant class did not occupy prestigious social positions. Accumulation of wealth was a selfish act and a sign of greed.<sup>5</sup>

However, Smith provided a different account and revolutionized human development. Smith argued that economic activities based on self-interest did not cause harm to society, but actually increased the overall social well-being: “Every individual . . . generally, indeed, neither intends to promote the public interest, nor knows how much he is promoting it. By preferring the support of domestic to that of foreign industry he intends only his own security; and by directing that industry in such a manner as its produce may be of the greatest value, he intends only his own gain, and he is in this, as in many other cases, led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention.”<sup>6</sup> His account of selfishness was unprecedented as he fully legitimized it. Selfishness in economic activities thereafter not only did not mean greed, but is viewed as something fundamental to human nature and as the key to economic growth which promotes the overall well-being of the entire society. That is how the economic assumption of “all human beings are selfish and profit maximizing” came into being. For Smith, that is something we should not reject, as it leads to better economic development. Although we do not care about the well-being of the others, we unintentionally benefit them. Thus all we need to do is to mind our own business and create profits

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5 Greed was considered as one of the “Seven Deadly Sins” in Catholic teachings.

6 Adam Smith, “*Wealth of Nations* [Selection].” *The Great Books and Reading and Discussion Program: Second Series*. Volume 2 (Chicago: The Great Books Foundation, 1985), Book IV, Chapter II.

for our own benefit and enjoyment. Not only is this not immoral, it is actually for the greater good. Smith provided a moral argument for capitalism and affected subsequent human history significantly.

Smith also argued that division of labor in a free market is the best way to enhance productivity and promote economic growth. Smith argues, “The greatest improvement in the productive powers of labor, and the greater part of the skill, dexterity and judgment with which it is anywhere directed, or applied, seem to have been the effects of the division of labor.”<sup>7</sup> Since then division of labor has become the world trend and shaped the production method. The laborer is assigned to a specialized task and repeats it continuously. Production is divided into numerous parts; workers only provide labor to specific steps, which add up to become a product for sale. Workers no longer own the process of production, unlike farmers in the old days. The means of production is concentrated in the hands of the capitalists, and the laborer receives wages for specializing in the steps of the production. Thanks to division of labor, productivity is enhanced, yet the process of labor becomes dull and boring. Smith’s idea inevitably gave rise to Karl Marx’s criticism.

Smith’s idea gained wide acceptance in political economy and the era of industrial revolution. Market economy became the norm. However, as such development continued, various social problems arose, such as poor working conditions, huge income gap, and exploitation. These features still exist in our time. Free market and division of labor might have delivered what it promised, namely, economic development, yet the inequality that

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7 *Ibid.*, Book I, Chapter I.

accompanied it led to discontents, especially among the working class, who worked intensively yet received little share of the fruits of their labor. Can progress override human dignity? I am doubtful about that.

## **Alienated Labor**

Karl Marx was one of the most influential figures in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and probably in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, too. In his early writing “Alienated Labor” (published as part of “The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844”), he critically assessed the negative consequences of the development of capitalism, in which Smith’s idea of division of labor played a key role. Marx’s criticism was again anti-orthodoxy, mainly because at the time the society was ruled by capitalists. The winners and losers created by the capitalist system were seen as fair outcomes. People believed in free market and the production method that enhanced productivity, at the cost of the laborers, and perhaps, human dignity. Laboring no longer brought satisfaction as production became fragmented and routine, which is the direct consequence of the division of labor. Marx was highly critical about this phenomenon.

Marx’s conception of the man was unique. He viewed labor as the special essence of human beings. Labor should bring satisfaction because it brings to whoever engaged in it a sense of self-actualization and a chance to engage in creative work. Nevertheless, division of labor destroyed the meaning of laboring. It turned human beings into meaningless creatures who worked in factories and exercised no creativity at all. Workers were thus alienated from the production process, from the product, from themselves, and above all

from humanity. Their work was being separated from them, due to division of labor.<sup>8</sup>

Marx's view caused enormous impact on the capitalist system and world order. He aim was to mobilize the workers and overthrow the bourgeoisie regime and establish a more equal society. The socialist revolutions that broke out in European countries were largely due to Marx's theories such as alienation, surplus value, and proletariat revolution. It is clear that Marx's vision against capitalism is precious, although one may not agree to his conception of man. Yet he invited us to think of what makes human beings special, and the answer is very likely to be different from what blind acceptance of division of labor may lead to.

Marx's communist idea was also aimed at defeating the prevailing capitalism which created exploitation and inequality. It was indeed extraordinary when everyone was embracing Smith's "human as selfish being" assumption. Although Marx was over-optimistic about the future technological development and resources, Marx's vision of an ideal community not based on self-interest is inspiring. Marx's slogan, "from each according to his ability, for each according to his need" is appealing. He attempted to refute the assumption that selfish economic behavior is good. He challenged Smith's saying that selfishness promotes general well-being. His argument was influential. Though revolution did not succeed in producing the community that Marx envisioned, he provided something that people living in the capitalist age must reflect upon. Today when we have experienced

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8 Marx, "Estranged Labor," in "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts," *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. Robert Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1978), 70–81.

times of financial turmoil triggered off by unrestricted human greed of those working in the finance industry, it is worth reflecting whether selfishness is truly beneficial to everyone.

## Conclusion

We live in a modern capitalist, largely democratic world of plural values. Rousseau's idea has become the foundation of any countries' constitution.<sup>9</sup> Yet it is true that his idea has not yet been fully realized. Privileged class still exists with highly concentrated power, both economic and political.<sup>10</sup> Yet it is true that in most western democracies, governments must govern with consent and legitimacy. Constitutionalism and rule of law protect individual right, prior to state interest.

Smith's idea of division of labor successfully became the norm in the modern world, which indeed creates lots of trouble, just as Marx has foreseen. Work no longer brings satisfaction. People go to work, sell their lives to capitalists, and it has become everyone's life project to make money. The special human essence is lost. Division of labor might have brought prosperity, but it has at the same time led human beings to great suffering by making life dreadful. Moreover, greed has become a recognized aspect of human nature. The negative consequences of selfish economic activities are becoming obvious, such as the climatic changes caused by pollution. The

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9 Even totalitarian regimes claim themselves to be representatives of the people, showing some degree of conformity to the universal democratic value.

10 The hereditary class might already be history, yet the upward social mobility is diminishing, and stratification is still a social problem we must address.



failure of negotiation between countries on the global warming issue is a clear warning against selfish acts. Change is definitely needed.

Marx's premises remind us of something important, something we must not ignore in the age of global capitalism. We cynically accept alienation with consent. We take facts as granted, just as those who argued for slavery in Rousseau's time. We do not have any visions other than what is happening now. As long as we do well in this system, we do not question it. Yet the society is clearly unjust, and our ways of living is also problematic. Marx's vision, if shared by enough people, could make a difference. Today, we must not become those who choose to accept unjust facts; as these three thinkers have demonstrated, facts are inter-subjective—shared cognition and consensus is essential in the shaping of our ideas and relations—, and we are capable of changing them. We are all constructors of the world. Just as Marx famously wrote, "Philosophers have only interpreted the world—the point is to change it." The three classics have given us good inspirations with which to change the world for the better, and it is up to us if we want to take action.

