

Theory and Praxis: Simone Weil and Marx on the Dignity of Labor

Robert Sparling

Abstract: Simone Weil had an ambivalent attitude toward Marx. While she thought that the young Marx's celebration of labor had "lyrical accents," she ultimately believed that Marx had neglected his own insights, embracing a blind worship of mechanization and a theory of history and revolution that was insufficiently attentive to the material conditions of workers. Marx, in her view, was insufficiently materialist and excessively wedded to a hierarchical model of science that maintained the domination of management. Weil and Marx's attitudes toward the dignity of labor and the necessary conditions for socialism are analyzed. The most significant cleavage between them is ultimately due to the differing manner in which they conceive of the relationship between thought and action. Through this comparison, the philosophical underpinnings of the two radically different conceptions of labor and its dignity as a human activity are explained.

In contrasting modernity with antiquity, Simone Weil, a philhellene of the highest order, betrays a surprising ambivalence. If the modern world exhibits an unprecedented degree of misery, where material existence is organized in a manner that prevents human flourishing, we equally live in a period that has made the most important philosophical discovery, a discovery not made by the ancients: the centrality of labor in the good life. In an uncharacteristically cheery moment, she wrote, "In sum, we can have the pride of belonging to a civilization that carries with it the presentiment of a new ideal."¹ This "presentiment" is manifest in the numerous thinkers who place labor at the center of their political analyses: Weil cites Rousseau, Tolstoy, Proudhon, and Marx.² But throughout her writing Weil remained convinced that these writers—and particularly Marx—had failed to give a thorough philosophy of labor, and her philosophical efforts can be seen as a preparatory exercise for such a future philosophy.

Were Weil alive today, she would likely conclude that the philosophy of labor has advanced little. She perceived sterility in the doctrinal battles over the "true Marxism"; she would be even more appalled by the early

¹Simone Weil, *Réflexions sur les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale*, in *Œuvres*, ed. Florence de Lussy (Paris: Gallimard, 1999), 333. Unless otherwise stated, all citations will be to the *Œuvres*. I am responsible for all translations.

²Ibid. She cites the same names in *L'enracinement*, in *Œuvres*, 1085.

twenty-first century's apparent lack of interest in the dignity of labor. If one looks at the leading journals of political philosophy over the last two decades one is hard-pressed to find anything pursuing the lines of inquiry that Weil laid out.³ This is not for lack of concern with emancipation, nor, I suspect, is it due to the very real weakening of the Left and of labor movements in the era of accelerated globalization. Rather, I suggest, it is because labor failed to figure centrally in the dominant normative political theories of the late twentieth century.

There has been a tendency in emancipatory thought to retain a classical hierarchy of goods in which labor is relegated to a secondary (or tertiary) status. Hannah Arendt was explicit in this regard, famously relegating labor (and work) to an inferior rung on the ladder of goods.⁴ Arendt's view has been attacked for aristocratic elitism; her supporters reject the charge. But these discussions are beside the point—Arendt's subordination of both "work" and "labor" to action (politics) is symptomatic of a view that is so widespread as to be almost invisible: the view that labor is essentially painful and that the good life, however defined, is that which is beyond one's work. When people boast "I work to *live*, I don't live to *work*," they are expressing a classic Aristotelian (and aristocratic) view that labor is toil, necessary but not an end in itself. It is a view that can take on alarming tones, as it does in Aristotle's or Nietzsche's insistence that a large slave population is the necessary condition for the existence of the good life. It is a view that can equally find expression in egalitarian circles: here, people champion increased automation as a means of liberating people from toil by offering them increased leisure for meaningful pursuits such as politics. Arendt is not deriding the working classes; she is decrying labor as essentially unfulfilling.

Modern celebrations of work, particularly the so-called Protestant work ethic, do not reverse this ancient hierarchy of goods. Work remains toil, but it is toil with which redemption is purchased. This ascetic creed is secularized in liberal worldviews such that work becomes self-sacrifice for the sake of self-indulgence, a hedonistic earthly salvation purchased with the pain of daily subjection to necessity. Those who see leisure as the central element of the good life do not tend to refashion labor in the mould of leisure (as Josef Pieper hints),⁵ but rather tend to celebrate increased mechanization for this liberation. Workers' movements that have laid their emphasis on the reduction of working hours and the increase of wages have tended to reinforce this tendency to see work as toil. Champions of mechanization

³Robert Chenavier might well be correct in his massive claim that Weil is "le dernier pur philosophe du travail." See Chenavier, "Justification philosophique du travail, critique sociale du travail," *Cahiers Simone Weil* 32, no. 1 (2010): 80.

⁴Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

⁵Josef Pieper, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*, trans. Alexander Dru (New York: Pantheon Books, 1952), 69.

have sought to free up people for cultural pursuits by reducing or eliminating labor (although somehow the reduction of labor promised by futurists never seems to come).

In contrast, Simone Weil offers a theory of the good life in which labor is the central element. Rather than treating labor as toil, and therefore something to be abolished, reduced, or contained, Weil suggests, through an analysis of the concrete effects of various modes of production, that labor can be made into the central element of a free life. In this article I wish to reanimate interest both in Weil and in the philosophy of labor by exploring her opposition to the primary philosophical alternative available to champions of labor's emancipation: Karl Marx. Weil presented herself as opposing Marx's optimistic technophilia, and she castigated Marx for sharing the classical scorn for labor as an activity. Most commentators on Weil have accepted this charge sympathetically or at least reported it uncritically,⁶ but I will be insisting that it is the weakest claim in her indictment of Marx. Marx, too, shared the goal of making emancipated work the basis of the good life. Indeed, on her main charges (that Marx wished to eliminate labor, that Marx had a poor understanding of "class," that Marx placed excessive hope on an unjustified historical teleology), Weil comes across as a somewhat superficial reader of Marx, and the slightest bit of hermeneutic generosity can absolve him of these crimes. But I will be arguing that while Weil was somewhat incorrect in her charges against Marx, her misreading was not due to superficiality but rather to a profound difference in the two authors' philosophical presuppositions. What is at stake in Weil's disagreement with Marx is not their different levels of respect for labor as an activity but rather their fundamentally different conceptions of what makes labor free and ennobling. I will argue that these clashing conceptions of free labor are due to an underlying disagreement on the relationship between thought and action and ultimately, to phrase it in Platonic terms, between Being and Becoming. Both their views of what confers dignity on labor and their strategies for reforming work are dependent on these differing underlying stances. And it is this contrast that

⁶Lawrence A. Blum and Victor J. Seidler, *A Truer Liberty: Simone Weil and Marxism* (New York: Routledge, 1989), esp. 30; John Hellman, *Simone Weil: An Introduction to Her Thought* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press), 29; Mary Dietz, *Between the Human and the Divine* (Totowa, NY: Rowman and Littlefield, 1988), 40. A notable exception is Franck Fischbach, "Libérer le travail, ou se libérer du travail? Simone Weil lectrice de Marx," *Cahiers Simone Weil* 32, no. 4 (2009), 453–72. Fischbach insists that what Marx wanted to do away with was abstract labor that characterized the capitalist manner of mediating between particularity and universality. A more thorough account is in Robert Chenavier's masterwork, *Simone Weil: une philosophie du travail* (Paris: CERF, 2001), which explores Weil's philosophy in much greater detail than can be done here. He places great weight on her championing of free labor over "free time" (282).

should occupy our attention in our quest to revive the philosophy of labor in contemporary political theory.

The first section of this article will discuss the nature of free labor. I will assess Weil's criticisms of Marx, pointing out that Marx, no less than Weil, sought to place free labor (rather than leisure) at the heart of a reformed society. But I will suggest that Weil was correct to argue that a society centered on free labor could not be achieved without greater attention to the material conditions on the factory floor, and in particular to the relationship between labor and technology. Weil thus charged "scientific socialism" with merely perpetuating systems of oppression inherent in capitalist modes of accumulation. Weil fleshed out a conception of free, unalienated labor whose essential basis is *intellectually engaged* interaction with the world. This novel conception of free labor calls for a reevaluation of the relationship between "science" and production, theory and practice. The second section concerns the means of attaining liberation. It pursues the inquiry into the relationship between theory and practice by looking at Weil's criticisms of Marx's account of revolution. Weil thought Marx's account of revolution incoherent. Here, I argue that her criticisms of Marx ultimately derive from her lack of sympathy for the Marxian view of philosophy as political practice. If we understand Marx's philosophy of praxis, much of the force of Weil's criticisms is undermined. But attending to her charge becomes useful when we note that it is precisely this philosophy of praxis which jars most with her thought. We will see here that Weil's conception of emancipatory thought entailed the crafting of abstract, extratemporal ideals—that very model of social thought that Marx derided. Weil's lack of revolutionary zeal—her gradualism—is essentially wedded to her intellectual method of seeking extrahistorical ideals. In short, both Weil's understanding of what constitutes free labor and her model for emancipatory social thought are informed by her classical appreciation for the contemplative life. Weil's Platonic view of the relationship between Being and Becoming clashes with the Marxian conception of philosophy as revolutionary praxis and her position on the dignity of labor is at odds with Marx's conception of unalienated labor. We will conclude by raising the question of which ontological position is most faithful to their common concern with the dignity of labor.

Weil's Oppression and Marx's Alienation

Weil is widely credited with having recognized, earlier than much of the European Left, the repressive nature of Soviet communism. Indeed, she insisted, one could not console oneself with the thought that the Soviet system was merely a way station on the path to emancipation: there were fundamental errors in the orthodox conceptions of Marxism that led to the workers being dominated by a bureaucratic and managerial elite. At times in Weil's argument, Marx himself appears to be the cause of this error—he

simply did not give sufficient attention to the spiritual and organizational dimensions of factory production; at other times, Weil suggests that Marx himself did indeed spot these problems, but that this element of his thought had been obscured by doctrinaire Marxists. Let us begin by looking at her charge and proceed to examine its basis.

In the *Réflexions sur les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale* (*Reflections on the Causes of Liberty and Social Oppression*—hereafter, *Réflexions*), Weil notes with approval Marx's condemnation of the factory system, and particularly of the division between intellectual and manual labor. But she suggests that Marx did not fully deal with the underlying cause of the problem; rather, Marx wanted to liberate the forces of production themselves from capitalism so that people would be liberated from work. In Marx's ideal, she asserts, "the subsequent development of technology should alleviate more and more the weight of material necessity ... until humanity finally achieves the paradisaical condition where the most abundant production costs an insignificant amount of effort, and where the ancient curse of work will be lifted. In short, where we will rediscover the happiness of Adam and Eve before their sin."⁷

This interpretation of Marx is not without champions.⁸ It is reinforced by statements such as the following: "the realm of freedom actually begins only where labor which is determined by necessary and mundane conditions ceases."⁹ But it is simply incorrect to see Marx as championing the escape from labor itself: the celebration of labor itself, so central to the young Marx's theory of alienation, returns repeatedly in his late writings. One of the most famous passages from the *Critique of the Gotha Programme* presents the "higher phase of communist society" as one in which "the enslaving subordination of the individual to the division of labor, and therewith also the antithesis between mental and physical labor, has vanished" and "labor has become not only a means of life but life's prime want."¹⁰ While Marx promised this condition on optimistic assumptions about the increase in

⁷*Réflexions*, 280. She links Marx to Aristotle's view on the subject on p. 303.

⁸That Marx consistently portrayed spontaneous, free labor as the highest conceivable form of human fulfillment is often challenged. Raymond Aron suggests that there are both strands, the celebration of labor (central in the youthful writings) and the championing of leisure, in Marx's thought, and these are in some tension (Raymond Aron, *Le marxisme de Marx* [Paris: Fallois, 2002], 613–14). Robert Tucker agrees with Weil that Marx celebrated "a society in which humans, liberated from labor, would realize their creative nature in lives of leisure" (Robert C. Tucker, *Philosophy and Myth in Karl Marx*, 3rd ed. [New Jersey: Transaction Books, 2001], 4; see also 236).

⁹Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 1978), 441. I find Fischbach's interpretation of this claim most satisfactory, despite the fact that it raises a host of difficult questions about Marx ("Libérer le travail").

¹⁰*The Marx-Engels Reader*, 531.

productive forces (assumptions which Weil would challenge), this passage is entirely in keeping with Weil's ideal.

Marx did believe that technological improvement was necessary for freeing people from dangerous and disagreeable drudgery (just as it was important to have material plenty such that individuals could have the liberty to choose work that they found most fulfilling), but he never championed the ideal in which production would be done, as in science fiction, at the push of a button, freeing people up to play tennis. Marx saw in labor the central element of human "species being," and *alienation* or *estrangement* was the perverse consequence of modern relationships of production: "Estranged labor reverses this relationship, so that it is just because man is a conscious being that he makes his life activity, his *essential* being, a mere means to his existence."¹¹ Marx's celebration of unalienated labor as the way in which human beings express their "species being," mixing their consciousness with the objective material world, is similar to Weil's own preoccupation with returning to the worker the experience of applying her intellect to objects and thereby seeing her intelligence manifested in the world. Peter Winch quotes an extremely Marxian passage from Weil's notebooks: "The secret of the human condition is that equilibrium between man and the surrounding forces of nature ... is only achieved in the action by which man recreates his own life: that is to say by work."¹² We are not surprised, then, to find Weil arguing, "We find in Marx, in the writings of his youth, some lines with lyrical accents concerning work."¹³ And if Weil claimed that the later Marx abandoned this thought with his delusive, messianic streak,¹⁴ she was not blind to the existence of a similar strain of thought in Marx's later writings. She insisted, for instance, that Marx himself would have agreed with her had he been faithful to his own thought "that explodes in the best pages of *Capital*."¹⁵

If Weil was incorrect to see in Marx a technophilic desire to escape labor, she was right to argue that Marx had failed to give sufficient attention to the degree to which science and technology *themselves* tend to reinforce alienation. Weil thought that Marx had correctly indicated the degree to which the division of labor is at the root of inequality but that he had failed to see that such inequality could not be got rid of through the abolition of bourgeois

¹¹Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, ed. D. J. Struik (New York: International, 1964), 113.

¹²Peter Winch, *Simone Weil: The Just Balance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 77. The passage can be found (with a slightly different translation) in Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, trans. Emma Crawford and Mario von der Ruhr (London: Routledge, 2004), 178.

¹³Simone Weil, "Sur les contradictions du marxisme," in *Œuvres*, 363.

¹⁴Simone Weil, "Y a-t-il une doctrine marxiste?," in *Oppression et liberté* (Paris: Gallimard, 1955), 224.

¹⁵*L'enracinement*, 1058.

property because it was an inherent part of technological life itself. She cited approvingly Marx's condemnation of "the degrading division of labor into manual labor and intellectual labor,"¹⁶ but she argued that this division is an essential component of modern science itself—including "scientific socialism." If Marx would not have approved of Leninist vanguards, Marx's analysis itself is blind to the degree to which science and the society of specialization make us all dependent on experts.

In the *Réflexions* Weil defined freedom as "a relation between thought and action."¹⁷ The specialization inherent in modern science and the technology to which it gives rise prevent workers—even workers in the so-called knowledge industries—from having a full intellectual investment in their own work. For Weil, one's work is alien insofar as one is reduced to a mere mechanism in a larger operation about which one has not a full knowledge. This is not to say that Weil champions complete individual autarky (although such an ideal hovers behind her early thought with Rousseauian force), but rather that all coordination must be subject to the intelligent control of each worker. That is, industry ought to be organized as much as possible cooperatively (not hierarchically), and the organization of industry should be under the direction of individuals acting collectively (and not, say, subject to the winds of market forces or the direction of bureaucratic administrators). Oppression is the result of technological development because the complexity of the task requires many hands obeying one brain. Technological automation has tended to undermine people's capacity to work in an intellectually engaged manner: "in this way one finds oneself before the strange spectacle of machines where the method is so perfectly crystallized in metal that it appears as if it is they that think, and the men attached to their service who are reduced to the state of automatons."¹⁸ Now, modern science itself makes this mistake of reducing the worker to a cog—the scientific proletariat work away on piecework, but the whole has become inaccessible to any one human mind. We add piece by piece to the general store of information, but with all this advance, we render ourselves less and less capable of taking in the whole.¹⁹ What's more, because no one has a view of the whole, modern science encourages a kind of credulity akin to that which permitted ecclesiastical hierarchy. Popular enlightenment does not solve this problem, but merely exacerbates it because it is impossible to give to the masses a full understanding of existing human knowledge (which even specialists cannot attain); thus our educational system trains us not to examine critically the findings of scientific specialists, but rather to accept them based on the faith

¹⁶*Réflexions*, 279; she attributes the same line to Marx in "Allons-nous vers la révolution prolétarienne?," in *Œuvres*, 263. In neither passage does she cite Marx's works.

¹⁷*Réflexions*, 315.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 321.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 322.

we have been taught to invest in the specialists themselves. People are thus trained to accept the intellectual authority of others.

Weil thought that the “scientific” garb of “scientific socialism” was largely intended to confer on the revolutionary scientists the type of authority people had been taught to confer on physicists and chemists. Thus she blamed the antidemocratic nature of Bolshevik technocracy and Leninist vanguardism on the antidemocratic nature of scientific socialism. Thus, even if Marx himself sought to oppose the divisions, Weil thought that his view of science would ultimately reproduce divisions that he wished to avoid.²⁰ Weil argued that any attempt to achieve worker control would have to consider in detail the way in which individual workers relate to their machines on the factory floor.

If Weil believed that modern science and technology have the tendency to undermine intellectually engaged work, she did not want them discarded out of hand. Weil did not discount the utility of technological development for eliminating the most repetitive and mind-numbing tasks. Rather, she counted on such a development. Hers was not a Gandhian praise of slowness and simple technologies. Like Marx (and unlike many twentieth-century critics of technology), the young Weil condemned traditional (or “primitive”) modes of acquisition as oppressive and limited. “Primitive” human beings, aside from being subject to natural necessity, were also subject to suffocating social customs: they did not act with free intelligence, but rather followed tradition “with a blind submission.”²¹ In modern life workers are not as subject to natural necessity or tradition, but they are subject to social oppression, social forces that remain outside of their control. Like Marx, Weil saw certain advantages in the ideal of the medieval craftsman (although Marx thought that the craftsman was ultimately a slave while Weil’s conception of freedom allowed her to romanticize the craftsman’s position somewhat).²² But ultimately Weil wanted to see technology develop. Increased technological development is essential not merely for increased production (about which Weil says little), but for the transformation of the proletariat itself. Given the importance of mixing one’s intelligence with action, free labor entails not merely that control of labor be in the hands of the laborers collectively, but that individual laborers be able to exercise their intelligence. Such a condition of work is essentially dependent on the actual machinery. Thus, a

²⁰Marx shared the ideal of worker self-management, celebrating the moment in the Paris commune when “plain working men for the first time dared to infringe upon the Governmental privilege of their ‘natural superiors’” (*Marx-Engels Reader*, 636). Marx sought to place labor at the center of social and political life: “With labor emancipated, every man becomes a working man, and productive labor ceases to be a class attribute” (*ibid.*, 635).

²¹*Réflexions*, 310.

²²Dietz highlights the distinction between the two on this point (Dietz, *Between the Human and the Divine*, 66).

single-use machine that requires repetitive movements on the part of a worker is a poor machine: “the instrument of production in its entirety ought to be as supple as possible. ... This is a factor that is favorable to joy in one’s work, because in this way one can avoid monotony.” In addition, the instrument of production “ought to correspond to the work of a qualified professional. ... This is indispensable to the dignity and the moral well-being of the workers.”²³ Liberation, then, requires not a complete abandonment of instrumental reason, but a shift in the goal from increased productivity/profit to increased satisfaction on the part of the worker. True liberation requires engineers to think first and foremost about the effects of their machines on the users, and to organize industry not with a primary view to efficiency, but with a primary view to making the individual’s work challenging and engaging. Hence her appeal to engineers in *L’Enracinement*: “it would be a reform of infinitely greater social importance than all the measures that go under the name of socialism to transform the very conception of technical research.”²⁴ Engineers must look to the effects of the work tools on the worker first; who better to do this job of engineering than the workers themselves?

Weil’s charge is thus the following: in failing to attend to the manner in which the material organization of factories prevents individual flourishing, Marx failed to identify the greatest sources of alienation. Marx might well have responded that the abolition of class distinctions would itself prove the catalyst for the technical rearrangement of the factory floor that would undermine the tendency for laborers to become the tools of the production process.²⁵ But Weil felt that in his emphasis on the questions of class society and private property rather than the hierarchical organization of the factories and the sciences, Marx had things backwards, and even proved himself to be insufficiently *materialist*. Indeed, Weil charged Marx with the same error with which Marx had charged the “German ideologists.”²⁶ The great problem for Weil—how to retain technological progress without

²³*L’enracinement*, 1061. Fred Rosen points out that Camus shared Weil’s view on this matter (Rosen, “Marxism, Mysticism, and Liberty: The Influence of Simone Weil on Albert Camus,” *Political Theory* 7, no. 3 [1979]: 307).

²⁴*L’enracinement*, 1060.

²⁵An anonymous reviewer for the *Review of Politics* suggests that Marx would have thought engineers, freed from capitalist imperatives, would move in this direction, creatively altering the workspace to undermine the stultifying specialization of the factory. I think this suggestion is largely correct, but the precise mechanism for this shift is not, to my knowledge, outlined anywhere in Marx’s corpus. If one were to attempt to reconcile Marx and Weil on this point, one would need to determine the manner in which Marx envisioned reconciling increased production with this turn away from specialization.

²⁶*Réflexions*, 283.

sacrificing individual liberty—is a problem that requires reflection on the concrete organization of industry.

Beyond her argument that scientific socialism would reproduce divisions between management and labor, Weil's opposition to Marx depended on her radically different conception of what constitutes freedom itself. A free human being, for the Weil of the *Réflexions*, exercises her intelligence in a methodical manner, working the objective world. Indeed, while Weil recognized that some work must be routine, she celebrated "*présence d'esprit*" as that which makes work free. In her later writing, this "presence of mind" takes on a more religious coloring, becoming assimilated to "attention," as in *Attente de Dieu* (usually translated as "waiting for God"). Focused concentration on work is akin to prayer or philosophical reflection, and has a spiritual importance granted both by the quality of attention and its link with a wider purpose. Weil compares the condition of two women knitting. One is knitting for her baby that will shortly be born; the other is knitting in a prison workshop. The mechanical operations are the same, as is the quality of their product, but we can see immediately that there is a vast difference between their activities. "The entire social problem consists in helping workers pass from the one to the other of these two situations."²⁷ For Simone Weil, the baby is an example of something both extraneous to yet equally tied to the work. That is, in addition to sharing Marx's conception of unalienated work as the spontaneous expression of the worker, Weil also saw in labor an expression of love for—and contemplation of—something beyond, but related to, the physical activity itself. The baby here represents the divine: "What is necessary is that this world and the other, in their double beauty, be present and mixed in the act of work, just as the child who is to be born is mixed up in the fabrication of the layette."²⁸

When we fail to link our work to a wider world in which we are essentially implicated and when we are deprived of the opportunity to exercise our intelligence fully in our productive activity, we feel ourselves cut off from that world. Work becomes degrading and oppressive (or "uprooted/deracinated," in Weil's later vocabulary) when specialization takes over: "it is inevitable that this ill should dominate wherever technology finds itself entirely or almost entirely sovereign."²⁹ One is no longer personally implicated in the work—one's affection and intelligence are not engaged; the work becomes alien.

Weil's conception of free labor is to be differentiated from Marx's view of unalienated labor as a creative, aesthetic phenomenon. Decrying as alienating the tendency to see labor purely as a means of fulfilling physical needs, the Marx of 1844 argued that "in creating a world of objects by his practical activity, in his work upon inorganic nature, man proves himself a conscious

²⁷*L'enracinement*, 1085.

²⁸*Ibid.*

²⁹*L'enracinement*, 1155.

species being."³⁰ Just as the Marxist philosopher *makes* history through his philosophical intervention (a subject to which we shall return in the following section), so does the Marxist laborer make the world around him in his own image: "he contemplates himself in a world he has created."³¹ Contemplation follows production, and it is primarily self-contemplation in the work produced. Nature becomes a human product; one makes one's environment. As we will see, for Weil, labor is not primarily an artistic or self-creative act—it is these things, but they are of secondary importance, as is the product, which is incidental to the act of intellectual engagement. What is important is not the discovery and contemplation of human universality in the product of one's work, but rather the individual experience of being intellectually engaged in the activity. This activity is a kind of contemplation of the world.

Now, to treat free labor as contemplation might at first appear at odds with the following claim from the *Réflexions*: "Man is a limited being to whom it has not been given to be, like the God of the theologians, the author of his own existence, but man would possess the human equivalent of this divine power if the material conditions that permit him to exist were exclusively the product of his thought directing the effort of his muscles. Such would be true liberty."³² Weil gives as an example the sailor facing a storm: the sailor must confront a number of material challenges, and she cannot simply break free from the crashing waves. Her liberty, then, entails employing her intelligence in her attempt to guide the ship. Through methodical application, she makes necessity an ally of the good, thereby reconciling liberty and necessity.³³ This definition of liberty might appear at first glimpse to contain a Promethean ideal fully at one with the Baconian desire to attain intelligent domination over nature.³⁴ But Weil's concern with human beings' methodical activity is not due to an extreme devotion to instrumental reason or control; rather, it is due to the fact that labor constitutes the bulk of our existence, and being intellectually engaged in the work, in the entire work, is what makes it satisfying. To locate liberty in some other realm of social interaction (such as one's speeches in the agora or one's artistic creations) is to locate liberty at the periphery of our lives. The theomorphic ideal that Weil cites—becoming the "author of one's own

³⁰Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, 113.

³¹*Ibid.*, 114.

³²*Réflexions*, 317.

³³*Ibid.*, 318.

³⁴In *Between the Human and the Divine*, Mary Dietz concluded from this passage that Weil retained an "instrumental rationality" of the most vulgar type: Weil "limits the art of thinking to the correct application of means to an end" (77). But this—as Dietz realized in her later work—is incorrect. Dietz corrects this interpretation in her 1994 article "'The Slow Boring of Hard Boards': Methodological Thinking and the Work of Politics," *American Political Science Review* 88, no. 4 (1994): 876.

existence"—means being intellectually engaged in one's work. Weil defines her novel conception of liberty as the *antithesis* of utilitarian instrumental reason, since intelligent application to a task is not at all a question of finding the quickest means to fulfill a desire—quite the opposite, given that it might well be much more efficient to attain one's ends through purely mechanical action.³⁵ Weil's ideal is rather a question of being mentally engaged in the production of one's life. *Zweckrationalität* rightly plays a part because solving problems is an important and fulfilling human activity, but the central point is that liberty entails thinking human beings' active insertion into the world of necessity. It is the antithesis of involuntary drives, and it is the antithesis of the repetitive, mechanical work, "*dénué d'intelligence*," in the modern factory.³⁶

It is the experience of intellectual engagement that counts. The younger Weil's emphasis on liberty as applied intelligence is enriched in her later reflections on the importance of love animating one's intelligence. In the example given above of the woman making a layette for her coming baby, the baby represents something that is exterior to the work itself, but for which the work is done. This element that is outside of but connected to the work is what Weil treated in her later writings as a "supernatural" realm outside of the realm of force; it is equally present in the attempt in the *Réflexions* to reconcile individuality with collective action by considering friendship rather than domination as the principle that can unite free workers in a collective act of production.³⁷ Weil was talking about attention to something that is at once part of yet separate from our immediate perception of the present. It is the type of attention that manifests itself in prayer, but equally in the serious concern for another person, particularly a person who is suffering.³⁸ Work of this sort—"spiritualized" work—transcends the standard division of contemplative and productive activities. The fact of being socially productive—indeed, necessary for others—links our work both to the material world of necessity and to the "spiritual" world, the good, which manifests itself in this world in the human soul. The tendency of modern science to treat the "facts" as extramoral things to be observed in complete detachment renders scientific inquiry devoid of human interest, and its product, technological mastery, becomes mere domination of the world—and of human beings. Weil was worried that instrumental rationality led to a self-reinforcing worship of force. For the late Weil, one errs—and fails to realize a vital need—if one exercises one's intelligence with an ulterior goal of personal advancement. In such an instance, thought becomes mere

³⁵*Réflexions*, 315.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 361.

³⁷*Réflexions*, 327. See Richard H. Bell, *Simone Weil: The Way of Justice as Compassion* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998), 25–26.

³⁸Simone Weil, *Attente de Dieu* (Paris: La Colombe, 1950), 96.

sport.³⁹ She urges, rather, to conceive of reason on the model of classical contemplation, as a seeking of wisdom born of a love for the world.

One's activity is free, then, if it entails a union between intellect and action, between the ideal and the real. In facing difficulties, in exercising one's mind methodically to achieve self-chosen ends, the world around us becomes less alien; work becomes less oppressive not because the natural world is suddenly under our control (failure to achieve one's goal is no essential impediment to happiness here), but because we have an intellectual union with it.⁴⁰ Unlike a labor that merely exists for the sake of the product to be consumed, this mentally attuned labor itself can give us a sense of "plenitude" and joy in awareness of the real. And unlike so-called pure contemplation, it is essentially linked to one's concerned existence.⁴¹ She calls for a renewal of "the original pact between mind and universe."⁴²

It might seem odd to conceive of work as akin to philosophical contemplation. Our tendency to see contemplation as a rarified activity of intellectual elites reinforces such a view. Weil, however, thought that contemplation was open to all levels of intelligence and education. She provides a meditation on this question in *Attente de Dieu*. She describes a crisis in her adolescence when she found that she was not up to her brother's level of mathematical study, something that she, with Pythagorean enthusiasm, had thought necessary to be granted entry into a higher realm of truth. Reflection on this problem led her to a comfortingly egalitarian conclusion: "Any human being, even if his natural faculties are almost worthless, can penetrate into this kingdom of truth reserved for genius if only he desires truth and makes the perpetual effort of attention in order to attain it."⁴³ That is, as with free (nonoppressive) work, what makes study an important and dignified pursuit is not one's success in a given field—it is not the attaining of some pre-defined end of producing a widget or solving a problem of geometry—but rather one's *attention* to one's task.⁴⁴ Weil underlines attention's spiritual dimension—attention entails "waiting" (*attendre*), not seeking, but making oneself attentive and open to the divine. There is a tendency to emphasize discontinuity between Weil's prereligious social writings and her later emphasis on prayer and the divine, but this should not be overstated. While she later adopted heavily Christian themes, she was grappling with the same problem of liberating people from the necessity of the material realm—a necessity that manifested itself in physical violence (particularly in war) and domination (particularly on the factory floor).

³⁹*L'enracinement*, 1186–87.

⁴⁰As Chenavier writes, "Le travail ... c'est l'activité qui permet d'entrer en contact avec le monde dans sa réalité" ("Justification philosophique du travail," 84).

⁴¹*Réflexions*, 330–31.

⁴²*Ibid.*, 347.

⁴³*Attente de Dieu*, 39.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 86.

Her ideal of *attention* is primarily receptive, and only secondarily creative. Thus we should understand the oft-cited passage from *La pesanteur et la grâce*:

The greatness of man is always to recreate his life. *To recreate that which has been given to him.* To forge that very thing that he suffers. With work he produces his own natural existence. With science, he recreates the universe in symbols. With art he recreates the alliance between his body and his soul. Note that each one of these three things is something poor, empty, and vain taken by itself, unconnected with the other two.⁴⁵

Human creativity entails attending to the given; it is active in that mind works to attune itself to reality. Both “science” and productive work are different elements of this attunement.

There is a great deal more to be said about Weil’s conception of truth as a kind of “contact with reality,” the place of divine grace in the world of material determinations, the evolution of her conception of liberty with the development of her doctrine of attention and love, and the relationship between her tireless activism and her repeated celebration of Stoic *amor fati* (including her ascetic celebration even of drudgery and misery as a path to sanctity). But such a discussion would open up a number of issues that we have not the space here to consider. What is important for our purposes is simply to note that Weil’s conception of free labor diverges from the Marxian conception of unalienated labor in that it is modeled on contemplation and receptivity, not Promethean self-creation.

Weil’s Rejection of Praxis

I have suggested that Weil was incorrect to attribute to Marx a desire to see technology eliminate work, but that she did identify an important lacuna in his lack of attention to the hierarchical elements of technological civilization and to the specific organization of factory machinery and its psychological and spiritual effects on the individual worker. The most important thing about free labor, for Weil, was that it engaged one’s intellect (and one’s love). If Marx placed too much emphasis on the question of property ownership, Weil also thought that his “scientific socialism” failed to pinpoint the necessary conditions for liberation. Once again, the real issue at stake here is the relationship between contemplation and action.

Weil rejected Marx’s prophecy of class warfare and the imminent revolution, charging Marx with inattention to the empirical data. Now Weil is hardly original in finding Marx’s concept of class ambiguous, nor is there anything novel in her charge that Marx’s theory of the revolution errs by importing an eschatological Hegelian dialectic.⁴⁶ But there is a very interesting

⁴⁵Simone Weil, *La pesanteur et la grâce* (Paris: Plon, 1950), 203. Italics mine.

⁴⁶*L’enracinement*, 1105 ; *Réflexions*, 281–82.

contrast between Weil and Marx on the question of dialectical materialism and the possibilities of revolutionary practice. Weil did not engage directly with the Marxian conception of praxis, but I would like to suggest that her disapproval of his theory of revolution rests largely on her philosophical distance from Marx's view of science as something that is realized in revolutionary practice.

In a brief article, "On the Contradictions of Marxism," Weil argued that Marx's materialist history contradicts his revolutionary hopes. At stake is the power of human beings to change history. Marx's historical account, which Weil found compelling, demonstrates that revolutions are products of the social order and the modes of production. They take place when a society's institutions no longer match the structures of production.⁴⁷ Hence, the bourgeois revolution of 1789 ultimately created the institutional structures that reflected the already-dominant bourgeois class.⁴⁸ Weil paraphrased approvingly the Marxian doctrine: "Men make their own history, but in determined conditions."⁴⁹ Human beings are not subject to a pure determinism, but their actions must take place within a material context. "Social structure can only be modified indirectly."⁵⁰ But given the domination of the workers by capital—so vividly described by Marx—how could Marx then proceed to think that a revolution was imminent? If the revolution appeared entirely distant in both democratic and fascist countries, it was equally impotent in Russia: 1917 had done nothing to alter the relationship of the worker to his industry—it was but a change in superstructure over a base that remained the same.

Elsewhere Weil compared the Marxist revolutionary ideal to Lamarck's view of how evolution proceeds: Marx's view that the revolution will come once capitalism's contradictions become manifest and economic regression starts is akin to the suggestion that animals develop organs on the basis of needs. Just as a Darwinian understanding of evolution made clear the relationship between contingent, random mutations and the physical world, so too would a proper social science explain social change in terms of numerous individual strivings within the real existing conditions.⁵¹ If Marx had interpreted properly his own insights into the relationship between the forces of production and institutional change he would have jettisoned his eschatological hope in an immediate revolution and would have opted for a gradualist approach that begins with concrete changes on the factory floor.

⁴⁷"Sur les contradictions du marxisme," 358–59.

⁴⁸Ibid., 358. See also "Y a-t-il une doctrine marxiste?," in *Oppression et liberté*, 241–42.

⁴⁹*Réflexions*, 282.

⁵⁰"Sur les contradictions du marxisme," 359.

⁵¹*Réflexions*, 293–94; "Y a-t-il une doctrine marxiste?," 243.

Weil wondered how Marx could have entertained such a glaring contradiction—"a blindingly obvious contradiction"—between his method and his revolutionary zeal. Was he, as Weil suggested, merely confusing his zeal for revolution with his empirical historical science, and thus reading into the future what he wanted to see? She thought that similar confusions underlay some of his categories. Marx famously castigated the young Hegelians—and Feuerbach particularly—for hypostasizing an abstract essence called Man, failing to note the degree to which Man is an evolving, active being whose essence is "the ensemble of social relationships."⁵² Weil applauded Marx for this insight, but she then accused Marx himself of hypostasizing collectivities in the place of the abstraction Man.⁵³ She was particularly critical of his concept of class, claiming that it is a category on which Marx's entire system rests, but one that does not receive adequate definition and study in his oeuvre.⁵⁴

To understand Marx on these matters we have to pay attention to his famous reconciliation of theory and practice, and particularly to the way in which revolution fits into this pattern. Weil's charge was that Marx, for all his "scientific" garb, was insufficiently attentive to empirical evidence when it came to establishing the conditions for emancipation. Now even if we grant Weil's view that Marx failed to attend as he should to the oppressive nature of technological industry, we should be wary of the charge that Marx was insufficiently empiricist. If one treats Marx's science as an attempt at an objective description of an external phenomenon, one misses the degree to which it is, itself, a revolutionary praxis that not merely interprets but changes the world. Science is thoroughly tied to action and political projects. When Marx wrote that in the 1871 commune "science itself [was] freed from the fetters which class prejudice and governmental force had imposed upon it,"⁵⁵ he was not contemplating a science that would be "pure" or "objective." Rather, Marxist science can never be the pure contemplation of the disinterested observer because perception itself has an essential connection to human interests and action. There is, in the younger Marx's philosophical sketches and in the older Marx's philosophical activity, a conception of truth that makes it very difficult to separate thought both from the social conditions that give rise to it and from the social conditions that it creates.

The problem of defining class—a significant difficulty that Weil identifies in Marx—is due to this aspect of Marxian science itself: science is as much a

⁵²*The Marx-Engels Reader*, 145.

⁵³Simone Weil, "Le marxisme," in *Œuvres*, 353.

⁵⁴*L'ennracinement*, 1105. She is somewhat unfair in charging that Marx never even attempted to study this phenomenon.

⁵⁵*The Marx-Engels Reader*, 632.

means of transforming existence as it is of describing it.⁵⁶ Class in Marx is as much a project as an objective fact. Just as unalienated labor, for the early Marx, entails an expression of oneself, so too is the intellectual labor of theory an expression of one's political endeavors. Revolution itself is a kind of test of truth; as the second thesis on Feuerbach has it, "Man must prove the truth, that is, the reality and power, the this-sidedness of his thinking in practice."⁵⁷ Class is such a phenomenon—classes do not merely exist as objective phenomena, but they require self-identification as a class. Hence, the peasants in 1848 do not constitute a class—we can lump them together as we would a bunch of potatoes, but we cannot consider them a class unless they see themselves as a unity in a struggle. Weil laments that Marx's only definition of classes is that they are things that struggle, but she does not examine Marx's view that it is precisely the struggle that makes them into classes. Marx wrote, "the separate individuals form a class only insofar as they have to carry on a common battle against another class."⁵⁸ The point is that in Marx's scientific socialism thought is both heavily determined by conditions of production and is itself part of a struggle (hence his deprecation of bourgeois science, which, for all its successes, was a means of reinforcing existing power structures by interpreting them as natural laws). A class is not merely an objective phenomenon (a relation to a means of production), but exists insofar as it struggles—and scientific socialism itself serves the function of creating the proletariat as a class. Hence the claim in the *Manifesto* that "the immediate aim of the Communists is ... [the] formation of the proletariat into a class."⁵⁹ Marx's scientific explanations are not simply descriptions of objectively determined material facts, they are revolutionary acts that help determine the structure of social reality as much as they describe it. In this sense, Marx's science is very much akin to Marx's labor—a self-creative activity.

Weil has some strong objections to Marx's desire to make class the focus of our allegiances—for her, class is too large a group to gain from us the kind of allegiance that is a need of the soul and a bulwark against uprootedness. Weil doubted that such a large group as a class could reasonably be expected to act spontaneously: she detected elements of vanguardism in the concept itself.⁶⁰ But her frustration that Marx had failed adequately to define the term "class" and her accusation that Marx was "reading into" the world what he wanted

⁵⁶Edward Andrew, "Marx's Theory of Classes: Science and Ideology," *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 8, no. 3 (1975): 454–66. Andrew develops this theme with a helpful interpretation of Marx on class.

⁵⁷*The Marx-Engels Reader*, 144.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, 179.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, 484.

⁶⁰"Y a-t-il une doctrine marxiste?," 252–53. She compares the force Marx attributes to the proletariat to the force hidden inside coal: just as the latter can only be set in motion with an elaborate steam engine, so too do masses require directing.

to see are both manifestations of a lack of sympathy with Marx's notion of philosophy as itself revolutionary practice. Her criticism depended on the interpretation of class in Marx as merely an objective social fact rather than as something entirely linked to thought as political action. Marx's view was not, as Weil implied, that theories were simply attempts to describe objective class structures, but rather that philosophy and political action are essentially related. The suggestion that there is some objective but occult class structure of which the Marxist claims to be uniquely aware—and that he claims to be able to stand in front of and control—runs counter to the most important aspect of Marxian praxis. For Marx, reality is dialectical, progressive, and mediated by theory. Lukács expresses well the distinction between “bourgeois” empirical science and Marxist praxis, where “the theory is essentially the intellectual expression of the revolutionary process itself.”⁶¹ The Marxist cannot separate the method of analysis from its political implications, like a disinterested observer.

This is not to say that Marx thought one could merely conjure social facts into existence with ideal constructions. Indeed, his largest objection to post-Hegelian idealism was that it appeared to think social problems could be solved if one merely abandoned misconceptions about the world. But if we should be wary of the school of interpretation that attributes excessively idealistic tendencies to Marx, we must recognize that Marx was not offering straightforward empiricist materialism: he was committed to a conception of philosophy that was equally a form of social action—arising out of material conditions, it alters and shapes those conditions. Knowing and making are brought together. As Shlomo Avineri writes, “Revolutionary praxis is an active and social epistemology; the unity of theory and practice emancipates man from the contemplative, alienated existence that was forced on him.”⁶² While there is a wide range of ontological and epistemological positions that one could plausibly infer from Marx's notion of praxis,⁶³ it suffices for our purposes to see that Weil's charge that Marx contradicted himself

⁶¹Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (New York: Merlin, 1971), 3. I am well aware that there is an entire school of Marxology denying this interpretation of Marx's praxis. I cannot enter into a defense of the interpretation here, nor am I entirely committed to Lukács's version of it. I might merely say that if Marx's method is understood in the same sense as standard scientific empiricism, with an objective, material world containing deterministic laws discovered by the socialist scientist, Weil's criticisms of Marx are fundamentally correct.

⁶²Shlomo Avineri, *The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 149.

⁶³For an attempt to distance Marx from this excessively idealist account (and for a direct attack on Avineri), see Allen Wood, *Karl Marx*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2004), 189–94. But Wood nonetheless insists on the centrality of Marx's opposition to the “contemplative attitude,” which Marx associated with alienation.

entails reading Marxian science as a pure, external observation of social phenomena. It discounts the degree to which Marxian science is not merely contemplation, but active creation.

That is not to say that Weil was unaware of Marx's doctrine of praxis. Indeed, she referred to it directly in order to reject Lenin's purely materialist account of Marxism. Marx, she insisted (citing the *Theses on Feuerbach*), had attempted to fuse materialism and idealism by noting the *reciprocal* relationship between thought and its material conditions. But Weil did not enter into a serious exploration of this doctrine, calling it "obscure."⁶⁴ In a sense, her attack on the hierarchies involved in the modern natural sciences (and their technological products) is akin to Marx's charge that modern science is bound by class fetters. There is also a parallel in Weil's charge that modern science is inspired by the same ideas of false grandeur and technological domination that animate imperialists.⁶⁵ Thus its product tends towards domination and not liberation. But if Weil thought modern science had a false objectivity and was essentially implicated in struggle, she did not propose to replace it with a science of class warfare. Rather, she conceived of liberation in terms of a transcendent, extrasubjective truth that would have struck Marx as risible.

When Weil expressed approval for the Marxian doctrine that we make our history in determined conditions, she was articulating a view of human history-making as akin to other types of human action in the world: we are thrown into a world of necessity, and our liberty entails engaging intellectually with this necessity; the creative, progressive world-shaping aspect of dialectical materialism thus appeared to her to be an incorrect attitude toward history. Many readers of Weil have pointed out that a central binary in her thought is the antithesis between necessity and liberty, force and the good, and, in her later Christian vocabulary, gravity and grace. Weil adheres to a Platonic metaphysics in which the good is ideal and external to the push and pull of material forces and temporal change: man "is subject to necessity and desires the good."⁶⁶ Hence, in stark contrast to Marx, she was very keen on constructing ideal models—both the *Réflexions* and *L'enracinement* engage in a type of model building that Marx eschewed out of principle. When Weil writes that "the social is irreducibly the domain of the devil,"⁶⁷ or when she criticizes actual institutions such as the Catholic Church (whose social nature renders it less catholic than its universal mission ought to make it), she is not manifesting an otherworldliness or indifference to political life (as should be obvious given her concrete political engagements), but rather expressing the gulf between Platonic forms and

⁶⁴ Simone Weil, "Sur le livre de Lénine," in *Oppression et liberté*, 49.

⁶⁵ *L'enracinement*, 1187–88.

⁶⁶ Simone Weil, "Fragments de Londres, 1943," in *Oppression et liberté*, 209.

⁶⁷ *Attente de Dieu*, 25.

the world of Becoming. In terms of the activity of philosophy, this entails a radically different method from that of Marx. Marx consistently condemned the crafting of extrahistorical ideals, insisting that “Communism is not ... an *ideal* to which reality [will] have to adjust. [It is] the *real* movement which abolishes the present state of things.”⁶⁸ Interpretation of history and revolutionary practice are fused. In contrast, Weil proceeded by drawing up cities in speech. The young Weil could thus write, “The notion of progress is indispensable ... but it cannot but cause the mind to lose its way when one studies the past. We must, then, take in its place the notion of a ladder of values conceived outside of time.”⁶⁹ In some periods the ideal of free action is more closely approximated than in others—and, indeed, Weil can legitimately express nostalgia for pre-industrial eras since in those periods, in spite of lesser security, comfort, and leisure, there was a greater amount of intelligent attention in people’s work.⁷⁰ Whether or not one is sympathetic to this claim, it is important to note that the extrahistorical ideal to which she appeals is discovered by the contemplative mind and employed as a guide for political reform in an imperfect world.

Conclusion

In a review of the 1973 translation of “Oppression and Liberty,” Lawrence Crocker suggests that Weil shared the position of some Western Marxists that he terms, derisively, “praxis-idealism.”⁷¹ Crocker gets this impression from Weil’s passing remark that Lenin (and the older Marx himself) was insufficiently attentive to the young Marx’s insights on human beings’ creative nature. But I have attempted to show that Weil’s conception of liberty—human beings’ intellectual engagement in the world of necessity—is the inversion of Marxist praxis. Both on the level of the philosophy of history and the philosophy of labor, Weil offers a celebration of contemplation over creation. Whereas Marx sought to turn contemplation into creative activity, transforming philosophy into praxis, a form of self-creation of a type similar to that at the heart of unalienated labor, Weil sought to transform labor into a contemplative activity. Labor’s dignity for Weil resides in its capacity to afford us this contemplative plenitude. That is to say, in Marx’s view philosophy becomes a form of creative action, while in Weil’s view labor—creative activity—becomes a form of contemplation. For Weil, labor is noble because it is a form of contemplation. For Marx, contemplation is noble because it alters reality—it is a kind of labor.

⁶⁸*The Marx-Engels Reader*, 162.

⁶⁹*Réflexions*, 327.

⁷⁰*Ibid.*

⁷¹Lawrence Crocker, “Review: Oppression and Liberty,” *Philosophical Review* 84, no. 2 (1975): 300–303.

The classical aristocratic view that labor is toil, necessary but best avoided, can only take on an emancipatory function if it is wedded to a technophilic celebration of automation; otherwise it must reconcile itself to the fact that large portions of human life (and likely large swaths of the earth's population) must be subject to drudgery. But if we are going to reinvigorate the search for a philosophy of labor that treats labor as "life's prime want," we will have to think about how to reconcile the necessity of the material world with the good. Much, then, will depend on just what it is about labor that grants it its dignity. Do we side with the young Marx in his description of alienation, or with Weil in attributing the factory worker's misery to intellectual stultification? Do we celebrate the creative, praxis-oriented view of philosophy, or do we conceive of philosophy as the contemplation of a transcendent model? Do we champion revolution or radical reform? To judge between practical proposals is premature until one has settled on a philosophical account of what constitutes labor's dignity. Much will depend on whether the good in labor and in history is perceived as primarily creative or receptive, as immanent or transcendent.