

[October 20, 2018]

GSOC 5101 / Fall 2018  
**Classical Sociological Theory**  
Jeff Weintraub

To: Members of GSOC 5101 - Classical Sociological Theory

From: Jeff Weintraub

Re: A few quick afterthoughts on some of Marx's arguments in *The Communist Manifesto*

Obviously, these remarks bear on only some dimensions of Marx's theory of modern society in the *Manifesto* (not to mention *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, about which I refer you again to Handout #14). But they may offer some of you useful tips and food for thought.

=> I don't know how many of you have encountered the work of the important 20th-century economist and social thinker **Joseph Schumpeter**. (More precisely, Schumpeter made the transition from the 19th to the 20th centuries, since he lived from 1883-1950. He was born in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, came of age in Vienna, was briefly the Finance Minister of the Austrian Republic set up after World War I, and after 1932 spent several decades as a professor of economics at Harvard.) I suspect that even if you haven't read parts of Schumpeter's 1942 book *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* directly, many of you have probably heard about arguments from that book at second or third hand. (The discipline of political science, for example, was heavily influenced by Schumpeter's "elite theory" of democracy.)

Unlike Marx, Schumpeter loved capitalism. But Schumpeter took Marx very seriously, and Schumpeter's own analysis of capitalism—and of modern society more generally—was influenced by Marx and drew significant elements from Marx's theory. One important example is the argument that Marx sums up so vividly in the fourth paragraph on p. 476 of the *Manifesto* (which I quoted in class on Thursday) ... and then elaborates at greater length in *Capital* and elsewhere.

The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionising the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society. [...] Constant revolutionising of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.

Here's how Schumpeter captures that dimension of Marx's theory of capitalism—and of what Schumpeter calls "the civilization of capitalism":

Part of the essence of how capitalism works as a system, Schumpeter argues in *CSD*, is that it unleashes "**a perennial gale of creative destruction**". The point is that if we want to understand the uniquely dynamic quality of capitalism as a socio-economic system, we have to recognize that the creative and the destructive aspects are inextricably connected—the first won't work without the second.

And it is not just that that the operation of capitalism "incessantly revolutionizes the economic structure from within, incessantly destroying that old one, incessantly creating a new one"—by driving less competitive firms out of business and throwing their workers back onto the labor market; reconfiguring economic structures through the boom-and-bust sequences of the business cycle; continually rendering older forms of productive technology and whole industries obsolete; and so on. Capitalism's process of creative destruction also continually, and inescapably, disrupts and transforms society as a whole—undermining not just business firms and economic institutions but the very existence of classes and other social groups and their ways of life; helping to disrupt political structures and to create or intensify new forms of social and political conflict; transforming the nature and quality of everyday social relations; promoting a corrosive and anti-traditional rationalism (and reactions against it) in culture and individual experience; etc. Responding and adapting to that continual gale of creative destruction is one of the distinctive challenges of modernity.

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Interestingly enough, that notion of capitalism as a system of "creative destruction" has become popular with a lot of pro-capitalist analysts and propagandists. One often finds that phrase in the *Wall Street Journal*, for example. (I suspect that, in many cases, the writers may not be aware that the basic idea comes originally from Marx.)

=> Regarding commodities, commoditization, and the socio-historically distinctive characteristics of a commodity economy (which help explain why Marx begins Vol. I of *Capital* with a long chapter on "The Commodity" and its mysteries): Some of you may want to review **Handout #5A**.

=> And now let me toss out a thoroughly optional point for some of you to ponder.

As you all know, the institution of slavery was abolished in the US as a result of the Civil War (1861-1865). In the southern states of the United States, slavery was bound up with a system of large-scale plantation agriculture producing certain key commodities—including tobacco and then, above all, cotton—for an international market.

(As the 19th century went on, many members of the planter elite like to give themselves aristocratic & paternalistic feudal airs. But the whole system of plantation agriculture on which their way of life was based was, in fact, embedded in an ever-expanding capitalist world market.)

In the aftermath of the Civil War, and during the period called Reconstruction, the following phrase was often used to express an aspiration or expectation of many former slaves: "**Forty acres and a mule**". We might even call it a slogan.

Do any of you happen to know what that slogan meant—and whether it was actually put into practice? If so, consider this question: How are the meaning and sociological significance of that slogan related to Marx's analysis of relations of production and how they operate in different modes of production?

Yours for theory,  
Jeff Weintraub