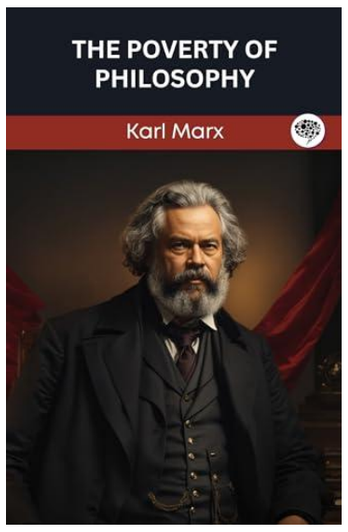

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The Poverty of Philosophy

van Karl Marx

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> The two propositions which Ricardo proclaimed in 1817 right at the beginning of his Principles, 1) that the value of any commodity is purely and solely determined by the quantity of labour required for its production, and 2) that the product of the entire social labour is divided among the three classes: landowners (rent), capitalists (profit) and workers (wages)

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> These two propositions had ever since 1821 been utilised in England for socialist conclusions , and in part with such pointedness and resolution that this literature, which had then almost been forgotten and was to a large extent only rediscovered by Marx, remained unsurpassed until the appearance of Capital. About this another time. If, therefore, in 1842 Rodbertus for his part drew socialist conclusions from the above propositions, that was certainly a very considerable step forward for a German at that time, but it could rank as a new discovery only for Germany at best. That such an application of the Ricardian theory was far from new was proved by Marx against Proudhon, who suffered from a similar conceit.

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> To sum up: Labor, being itself a commodity, is measured as such by the labor time needed to produce the labor-commodity. And what is needed to produce this labor-commodity? Just enough labor time to produce the objects indispensable to the constant maintenance of labor, that is, to keep the worker alive and in a condition to propagate his race. The natural price of labor is no other than the wage minimum. If the current rate of wages rises above this natural price, it is precisely because the law of value put as a principle by M. Proudhon happens to be counterbalanced by the consequences of the varying relations of supply and demand. But the minimum wage is nonetheless the centre towards which the current rates of wages gravitate. Thus relative value, measured by labor time, is inevitably the formula of the present enslavement of the worker, instead of being, as M. Proudhon would have it, the “revolutionary theory” of the emancipation of the proletariat.

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> Labor , inasmuch as it is bought and sold, is a commodity like any other commodity, and has, in consequence, an exchange value. But the value of labor, or labor as a commodity, produces as little as the value of wheat, or wheat as a commodity, serves as food. Labor “is worth” more or less, according to whether food commodities are more or less dear, whether the supply and demand of hands exist to such or such a degree, etc., etc. Labor is not a “vague thing”; it is always some definite labor, it is never labor in general that is bought and sold. It is not only labor that is qualitatively defined by the object; but also the object which is determined by the specific quality of labor.

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> The continual depreciation of labor is only one side, one consequence of the evaluation of commodities by labor time. The excessive raising of prices, overproduction and many other features of industrial anarchy have their explanation in this mode of evaluation. But does labor time used as a measure of value give rise at least to the proportional variety of products that so delights M. Proudhon? On the contrary, monopoly in all its monotony follows in its wake and invades the world of products, just as to everybody’s knowledge monopoly invades the world of the instruments of production. It is only in a few branches of industry, like the cotton industry, that very rapid progress can be made. The natural consequence of this progress is that the products of cotton manufacture, for instance, fall rapidly in price: but as the price of cotton goes down, the price of flax will be replaced by cotton. In this way, flax has been driven out of almost the whole of North America. And we have obtained, instead of the proportional variety of products, the dominance of cotton. What

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> Beneath the economists, since, as a philosopher who has at his elbow a magic formula, he thought he could dispense with going into purely economic details; beneath the socialists, because he has neither courage enough nor insight enough to rise, be it even speculatively, above the bourgeois horizon. He wants to be the synthesis – he is a composite error. He wants to soar as the man of science above the bourgeois and proletarians; he is merely the petty bourgeois, continually tossed back and forth between capital and labour, political economy and communism. Division of labour and Machinery The division of labour, according to M. Proudhon, opens the series of economic evolutions.

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> The division of labour is, according to M. Proudhon, an eternal law, a simple, abstract category. Therefore the abstraction, the idea, the word must suffice for him to explain the division of labour at different historical epochs. Castes, corporations, manufacture, large-scale industry, must be explained by the single word divide. First study carefully the meaning of “divide”, and you will have no need to study the numerous influences which give the division of labour a definitive character in every epoch.

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> The division of labour reduces the worker to a degrading function; to this degrading function corresponds a depraved soul; to the depravation of the soul is befitting an ever-increasing wage reduction. And to prove that this reduction is befitting to a depraved soul, M. Proudhon says, to relieve his conscience, that the universal conscience wills it thus. Is M. Proudhon’s soul to be reckoned as a part of the universal conscience? Machinery is, for M. Proudhon, “the logical antithesis of the division of labour,” and with the help of his dialectics, he begins by transforming machinery into the workshop. After presupposing the modern workshop, in order to make poverty the outcome of the division of labour, M. Proudhon presupposes poverty engendered by the division of labour, in order to come to the workshop and be able to represent it as the dialectical negation of that poverty. After striking the worker morally by a degrading function, physically by the meagreness of the wage; after putting the worker under the dependence of the foreman, and debasing his work to the labour of a mechanic’s assistant, he lays the blame again on the workshop and the machinery for degrading the worker “by giving him a master,” and he completes his abasement by making him “sink from the rank of artisan to that of common labourer.” Excellent dialectics! And if he only stopped there! But no, he has to have a new history of the division of labour, not any longer to derive the contradictions from it, but to reconstruct the workshop after his own fashion. To attain this end he finds himself compelled to forget all he has just said about division. labour is organized, is divided differently according to the instruments it disposes over. The hand-mill presupposes a different division of labour from the steam-mill. Thus, it is slapping history in the face to want to begin by the division of labour in general, in order to get subsequently to a specific instrument of production, machinery. Machinery is no more an economic category than the bullock that drags the plough. Machinery is merely a productive force. The modern workshop, which depends on the application of machinery, is a social production relation, an economic category.