

A passage from *The German Ideology*, applying the materialist theory of history specifically to utilitarianism

[Note: I have included the entire section here, even though some parts are not helpful, just so you can see the context in the original text. This is a very small part of a very long, almost line by line, critique of a book by Max Stirner called, in English, *The Ego and His Own*. The quotations and page numbers are from that book, which was published in 1844 and advocated a form of individualistic anarchism. Engels was initially impressed by the book, but by the time he and Marx came to write *The German Ideology*, they treated Stirner's book with contempt, referring to him by a variety of derogatory nicknames, including "St Max," and, as in this passage, "Sancho." This last nickname refers to the character Sancho Panza from the novel *Don Quixote*. Sancho Panza was Don Quixote's servant. The nickname, I guess, is insulting because Marx and Engels take Stirner to imagine himself as a heroic knight (of the intellect), but they see him as a much smaller figure, more like Sancho the squire. And, of course, Don Quixote only imagined himself to be a knight (and, famously, tilted at windmills), which would make Sancho ... what?

A couple of other notes:

Marx uses the work "bourgeoisie" to refer to the class of people who derive their income mainly from owning property (mines, factories, businesses of various kinds). In a feudal society these people, if they exist at all, are a middle class, between the feudal nobility, which owns mainly land (and thereby a claim on the labor of the peasants who work the land) and are the ruling class in that sort of society, and the peasants, who are at the bottom. After the overthrow of the feudal aristocracy in modern revolutions (like the French revolution of 1789), the bourgeoisie became a ruling class.

The "petty bourgeois" is the small business-person or shopkeeper.

"Political economy" refers to what we would now call the science of economics.

Hobbes and Locke were English philosophers of the 17th century. Each developed a form of social contract theory.

Helvetius and Holbach were French philosophers of the 18th century, who could be considered early utilitarians.

The Mill referred to in this piece is not John Stuart Mill but his father James Mill, who was a colleague of Bentham's and an advocate of utilitarianism.

In keeping with their general methodology, Marx and Engels are here trying to tie specific philosophical developments to changes in the economy.

I have highlighted what seem to me to be the clearest and most central parts for our purposes.]

C. Morality, Intercourse, Theory of Exploitation

[This section begins with several quotes from the book by Max Stirner]

Page 352: "You behave egoistically when you regard one another neither as owners nor as ragamuffins or workers, but as part of your wealth, as *useful creatures*. Then you will not give anything either to the owner, the proprietor, for his property, or to the one who works, but only to him whom you can make use of. Do we need a king? the North Americans ask themselves, and they reply: 'He and his work are not worth a farthing to us',"

On the other hand, on page 229, he reproaches the "bourgeois period" for the following:

"Instead of taking me as I am. attention is paid only to my property, my qualities, and a marriage alliances is concluded with me only for the sake of what I possess. The marriage is concluded, so to speak, with what I have and not with what I am."

That is to say, attention is paid solely to what I am for others, to my usefulness, I am dealt with as a useful creature. Sancho spits into the "bourgeois period's" soup, so that in the union he alone can devour it.

If the individuals of modern society regard one another as owners, as workers and, if Sancho wishes, as ragamuffins, this only means that they treat one another as useful creatures, a fact which can only be doubted by such a useless individual as Sancho. The capitalist, who "regards" the worker "as a worker", shows consideration for him only because he needs workers; the worker treats the capitalist in the same way, and the Americans too, in Sancho's opinion (we would like him to point out the source from which he took this historic fact), have no use for a king, *because* he is useless to them *as a worker*. Sancho has chosen his example with his usual clumsiness, for it is supposed to prove exactly the opposite of what it actually proves.

Page 395: "For me, you are nothing but food, just as I am eaten up and consumed by you. We stand in only one relation to one another: that of usefulness, utility, use."

Page 416: "No one is to me a person to be held in respect, not even my fellow-man; but, like other *beings*" (!), "he is solely an *object*, for which I may or may not have sympathy, an interesting or uninteresting object, a useful or useless creature."

The relation of "usefulness", which is supposed to be the *sole* relation of the individuals to one another in the union, is at once paraphrased as "*eating*" one another. The "perfect Christians" of the union, of course, also celebrate holy communion, only not by eating together but by eating one another.

The extent to which this theory of mutual exploitation, which Bentham expounded *ad nauseam*, could already at the beginning of the present century be regarded as a phase of the previous one is shown by Hegel in his *Phänomenologie*. See there the chapter "The Struggle of Enlightenment with Superstition", where the theory of usefulness is depicted as the final result of enlightenment. The apparent absurdity of merging all the manifold relationships of people in the *one* relation of usefulness, this apparently metaphysical abstraction arises from the fact that in modern bourgeois society all relations are subordinated in practice to the one abstract monetary-commercial relation. This theory came to the

fore with Hobbes and Locke, at the same time as the first and second English revolutions, those first battles by which the bourgeoisie won political power. It is to be found even earlier, of course, among writers on political economy, as a tacit presupposition. Political economy is the real science of this theory of utility; it acquires its true content among the Physiocrats, since they were the first to treat political economy systematically. In Helvétius and Holbach one can already find an idealisation of this doctrine, which fully corresponds to the attitude of opposition adopted by the French bourgeoisie before the revolution. Holbach depicts the entire activity of individuals in their mutual intercourse, e. g., speech, love, etc., as a relation of utility and utilisation. Hence the actual relations that are presupposed here are speech, love, definite manifestations of definite qualities of individuals. Now these relations are supposed not to have the meaning *peculiar* to them but to be the expression and manifestation of some third relation attributed to them, the *relation of utility or utilisation*. This *paraphrasing* ceases to be meaningless and arbitrary only when these relations have validity for the individual not on their own account, not as spontaneous activity, but rather as disguises, though by no means disguises of the category of Utilisation, but of an actual third aim and relation which is called the relation of utility.

The verbal masquerade only has meaning when it is the unconscious or deliberate expression of an actual masquerade. In this case, the utility relation has a quite definite meaning, namely, that I derive benefit for myself by doing harm to someone else (*exploitation de l'homme par l'homme*, [exploitation of man by man.] in this case moreover the use that I derive from some relation is entirely extraneous to this relation, as we saw above in connection with ability [*Vermögen*] that from each ability a product alien to it was demanded, a relation determined by social relations — and this is precisely the relation of utility. All this is actually the case with the bourgeois. For him only one relation is valid on its own account — the relation of exploitation; all other relations have validity for him only insofar as he can include them under this one relation; and even where he encounters relations which cannot be directly subordinated to the relation of exploitation, he subordinates them to it at least in his imagination. The material expression of this use is money which represents the value of all things, people and social relations. Incidentally, one sees at a glance that the category of “utilisation” is first abstracted from the actual relations of intercourse which I have with other people (but by no means from reflection and mere will) and then these relations are made out to be the reality of the category that has been abstracted from them themselves, a wholly metaphysical method of procedure. In exactly the same way and with the same justification, Hegel depicts all relations as relations of the objective spirit. Hence Holbach's theory is the historically justified philosophical illusion about the bourgeoisie just then developing in France, whose thirst for exploitation could still be regarded as a thirst for the full development of individuals in conditions of intercourse freed from the old feudal fetters. Liberation from the standpoint of the bourgeoisie, i. e., competition, was, of course, for the eighteenth century the only possible way of offering the individuals a new career for freer development. The theoretical proclamation of the consciousness corresponding to this bourgeois practice, of the consciousness of mutual exploitation as the universal mutual relation of all individuals, was also a bold and open step forward. It was a kind of enlightenment which interpreted the political, patriarchal, religious and sentimental embellishment of exploitation under feudalism in a secular way; the embellishment corresponded to the form of exploitation existing at that time and it had been systematised especially by the theoretical writers of the absolute monarchy.

Even if Sancho had done the same thing in his “book” as Helvétius and Holbach did in the last century, the anachronism would still have made it ridiculous. But we have seen that in the place of active bourgeois egoism he put a bragging egoism in agreement with itself.

His sole service — rendered against his will and without realising it — was that he expressed the aspirations of the German petty bourgeois of today whose aim it is to become bourgeois. It was quite fitting that the petty, shy and timid behaviour of these petty bourgeois should have as its counterpart the noisy, blustering and impertinent public boasting of “the unique” among their philosophical representatives. It is quite in accordance with the situation of these petty bourgeois that they do not want to know about their theoretical loud-mouthed champion, and that he knows nothing about them; that they are at variance with one another, and he is forced to preach egoism in agreement with itself. Now, perhaps, Sancho will realise the sort of umbilical cord that connects *his* “union” with the Customs Union.^[119]

The advances made by the theory of utility and exploitation, its various phases are closely connected with the various periods of development of the bourgeoisie. In the case of Helvétius and Holbach, the actual content of the theory never went much beyond paraphrasing the mode of expression of writers belonging to the period of the absolute monarchy. It was a different method of expression which reflected the desire to reduce all relations to the relation of exploitation and to explain the intercourse of people from their material needs and the ways of satisfying them, rather than the actual realisation of this desire. The problem was set. Hobbes and Locke had before their eyes not only the earlier development of the Dutch bourgeoisie (both of them had lived for some time in Holland) but also the first political actions by which the English bourgeoisie emerged from local and provincial limitations, as well as a comparatively highly developed stage of manufacture, overseas trade and colonisation. This particularly applies to Locke, who wrote during the first period of the English economy, at the time of the rise of joint-stock companies, the Bank of England and time of England’s mastery of the seas. In their case, and particularly in that of Locke, the theory of exploitation was still directly connected with the economic content.

Helvétius and Holbach had before them, besides English theory and the preceding development of the Dutch and English bourgeoisie, also the French bourgeoisie which was still struggling for its free development. The commercial spirit, universal in the eighteenth century, had especially in France taken possession of all classes in the form of speculation. The financial difficulties of the government and the resulting disputes over taxation occupied the attention of all France even at that time. In addition, Paris in the eighteenth century was the only world city, the only city where there was personal intercourse among individuals of all nations. These premises, combined with the more universal character typical of the French in general, gave the theory of Helvétius and Holbach its peculiar universal colouring, but at the same time deprived it of the positive economic content that was still to be found among the English. The theory which for the English was still simply the registration of facts becomes for the French a philosophical system. This generality devoid of positive content, such as we find it in Helvétius and Holbach, is essentially different from the substantial comprehensive view which is first found in Bentham and [James] Mill. The former corresponds to the struggling, still undeveloped bourgeoisie, the latter to the ruling, developed bourgeoisie.

The content of the theory of exploitation that was neglected by Helvétius and Holbach was developed and systematised by the Physiocrats — who worked at the same time as Holbach — but because their basis was the undeveloped economic relations of France where feudalism, under which landownership plays the chief role, was still unshaken, they remained in thrall to the feudal outlook insofar as they declared landownership and land cultivation to be that [productive force] which determines the whole structure of society.

The theory of exploitation owes its further development in England to Godwin, and especially to Bentham. As the bourgeoisie succeeded in asserting itself more and more both in England and in France, the economic content, which the French had neglected, was gradually re-introduced by Bentham. Godwin's *Political Justice* was written during the terror, and Bentham's chief works during and after the French Revolution and the development of large-scale industry in England. The complete union of the theory of utility with political economy is to be found, finally, in Mill.

At an earlier period political economy had been the subject of inquiry either by financiers, bankers and merchants, i.e., in general by persons directly concerned with economic relations, or by persons with an all-round education like Hobbes, Locke and Hume, for whom it was of importance as a branch of encyclopaedic knowledge. Thanks to the Physiocrats, political economy for the first time was raised to the rank of a special science and has been treated as such ever since. As a special branch of science it absorbed the other relations — political, juridical, etc. — to such an extent that it reduced them to economic relations. But it regarded this subordination of all relations to itself as only one aspect of these relations, and thereby allowed them for the rest an independent significance outside political economy. The complete subordination of all existing relations to the relation of utility, and its unconditional elevation to the sole content of all other relations, occurs for the first time in Bentham's works, where, after the French Revolution and the development of large-scale industry, the bourgeoisie is no longer presented as a special class, but as the class whose conditions of existence are those of the whole society.

When the sentimental and moral paraphrases, which for the French were the entire content of the utility theory, had been exhausted, all that remained for its further development was the question how individuals and relations were to be used, to be exploited. Political economy had meanwhile already provided the answer to this question; the only possible advance consisted in the inclusion of the economic content. Bentham achieved this advance. Political economy, however, had already given expression to the fact that the chief relations of exploitation are determined by production in general, independently of the will of individuals, who find them already in existence. Hence, no other field of speculative thought remained for the utility theory than the attitude of individuals to these important relations, the private exploitation of an already existing world by individuals. On this subject Bentham and his school indulged in lengthy moral reflections. The whole criticism of the existing world by the utility theory was consequently restricted within a narrow range. Remaining within the confines of bourgeois conditions, it could criticise only those relations which had been handed down from a past epoch and were an obstacle to the development of the bourgeoisie. Hence, although the utility theory does expound the connection of all existing relations with economic relations, it does so only in a restricted way.

From the outset the utility theory had the aspect of a theory of general utility, yet this aspect only became fraught with meaning when economic relations, especially division of labour and exchange, were included. With division of labour, the private activity of the individual becomes generally useful; Bentham's general utility becomes reduced to the same general utility which is asserted in competition as a whole. By taking into account the economic relations of rent, profit and wages, the definite relations of exploitation of the various classes were introduced, since the manner of exploitation depends on the social position of the exploiter. Up to this point the theory of utility was able to base itself on definite social facts; its further account of the manner of exploitation amounts to a mere recital of catechism phrases.

The economic content gradually turned the utility theory into a mere apologia for the existing state of affairs, an attempt to prove that under existing conditions the mutual relations of people today are the most advantageous and generally useful. It has this character among all modern economists.

But whereas the utility theory had thus at least the advantage of indicating the connection of all existing relations with the economic foundations of society, in Sancho the theory has lost all positive content; it is divorced from all actual relations and is restricted to the mere illusion cherished by the isolated bourgeois about his “cleverness”, by means of which he reckons to exploit the world. Incidentally, it is only in a few passages that Sancho deals with the theory of utility even in this diluted form; almost the entire “book” is taken up, as we have seen, with egoism in agreement with itself, i.e., with an illusion about this illusion of the petty bourgeois. Even these few passages are finally reduced by Sancho to mere vapour, as we shall see.

A footnote from Marx’s book *Capital* (1867):

Bentham is a purely English phenomenon. Not even excepting our philosopher, Christian Wolff, in no time and in no country has the most homespun commonplace ever strutted about in so self-satisfied a way. The principle of utility was no discovery of Bentham. He simply reproduced in his dull way what Helvétius and other Frenchmen had said with esprit in the 18th century. To know what is useful for a dog, one must study dog-nature. This nature itself is not to be deduced from the principle of utility. Applying this to man, he that would criticise all human acts, movements, relations, etc., by the principle of utility, must first deal with human nature in general, and then with human nature as modified in each historical epoch. Bentham makes short work of it. With the driest naiveté he takes the modern shopkeeper, especially the English shopkeeper, as the normal man. Whatever is useful to this queer normal man, and to his world, is absolutely useful. This yard-measure, then, he applies to past, present, and future. The Christian religion, e.g., is “useful,” “because it forbids in the name of religion the same faults that the penal code condemns in the name of the law.” Artistic criticism is “harmful,” because it disturbs worthy people in their enjoyment of Martin Tupper, etc. With such rubbish has the brave fellow, with his motto, “nulla dies sine linea!,” piled up mountains of books. Had I the courage of my friend, Heinrich Heine, I should call Mr. Jeremy a genius in the way of bourgeois stupidity.