

18 The Matrix, Marx, and the Coppertop's Life

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The Matrix does an especially good job of dramatizing the exploitation of the average American worker in late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century America from a Marxist perspective. The film is full of allusions to numerous social and economic themes that can be traced back to Karl Marx's work.

From UPS drivers with their handheld devices that indicate their position and times between deliveries, and data-entry clerks whose every keystroke-per-minute is counted, to customer service representatives whose per-call performance is monitored, American workers are increasingly under technological surveillance, century-old trends against which Marx wrote. If, in the nineteenth century, the old-time clock at the door to the workplace was a sign of capitalist oppression, today's management software that tracks employees' every move, in and outside of the office, differs only by degree. The increasing control of the worker by machines has long been a concern of Marxists, and *The Matrix* exemplifies the dystopic implications of these ongoing trends.

One of the most intense and horrifying moments for Neo is when he realizes that his entire life has been a half-truth. Neo is desperately holding himself up against the back of a chair, staring at a television set in the meaningless white space of the loading program. Morpheus, seated comfortably, channel-surfs a series of vibrant, tantalizing images of the city from which Neo has just escaped. Morpheus states, "You've been living in a

dream world, Neo. This is the world as it exists today." On the television screen, snapshots of Neo's urban existence give way to a dark and dismal image of a burned-out city, the outcome of the war with the machines. The blinding white light in the loading program diminishes, and, a moment later, Morpheus and Neo find themselves surrounded by urban decay and misery. Morpheus announces, "Welcome to the desert of the real."

Neo is completely unprepared for Morpheus's presentation. He is overwhelmed, staggering backwards as he tries to keep his balance. Morpheus continues, answering the question that has kept Neo home alone, sitting at his computer night after night:

What is the Matrix? Control. The Matrix is a computer-generated dream-world built to keep us under control in order to change a human being into this.

Morpheus holds up a Duracell battery, the coppertop battery. In the earlier scene where Neo had stepped into the back of the Cadillac with the "suicide doors," Switch had called Neo a "coppertop."

The "Coppertop" at Work

According to Marx, workers under capitalism do not recognize the relationship between their labor and the capital that they produce, because they have become "alienated" from the realities of work. They also do not recognize that they are forced to work, believing that they are operating in a "free" market in which they sell their labor voluntarily. In fact, Marx argues, they are exploited because they cannot choose how and when they work. They must accept the terms of their employment, which are dictated by the owners of capital.

The coppertop reference can be read as an expression of Marxist concerns over the plight of the worker, who, like slaves or conscripted soldiers, provides power for the machines. In his well-known *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1848), Marx describes the exploitation of nineteenth-century factory workers in Europe, which is when and for whom he was writing:

Modern industry has converted the little workshop of the patriarchal master into the great factory of the industrial capitalist. Masses

of laborers, crowded into the factory, are organized like soldiers. Not only are they slaves of the bourgeois class, and of the bourgeois State; they are daily and hourly enslaved by the machine, by the over-looker, and, above all, by the individual bourgeois manufacturer himself.¹

For a growing number of people in the nineteenth century, work was increasingly meaningless. Workers were no longer asked to create personally meaningful products for their local constituencies, products in which they took pride. Rather, they were asked to work at tasks that were increasingly abstracted from the commodities that were ultimately sold back to them. Then as now, many jobs are still “coppertop,” leading to alienation.

While people tend to talk of alienation as an individual and psychological experience, in Marx’s work, alienation is a product of the way social relations are formed under capitalism. In other words, an individual’s alienation is a product of the system. In the scene, “The gatekeeper,” Morpheus seems to concur when he says the following to Neo:

The Matrix is a system, Neo. That system is our enemy. When you are inside, and you look around, what do you see? Businessmen. Teachers. Lawyers. Carpenters. The very minds of the people we are trying to save. But until we do, those people are still a part of that system.

For Marx, social relationships under capitalism are expressed as relations between commodities (read: the system) rather than people, and workers themselves see their own labor as commodities to be sold in a market. Marx extensively analyzed the position of workers under capitalism, and while it may not be immediately obvious, work is an important aspect of the plot of *The Matrix*.

In his essay, “Wage-Labor and Capital,” Marx explains the reason why work tends towards the status of “coppertop”:

Labor power . . . is a commodity, neither more nor less than sugar. The former is measured by the clock, the latter by the scales.²

Under capitalism, the “commodity” that many workers sell to the companies and the factories for which they work is nothing more than their power. In *The Matrix*, this “reality” is overtly dramatized by the scenes of a naked and vulnerable humanity, floating quiescently in high-rises of coffin-like cubicles, plugged in to the power plant. Presumably, the power plant is reminiscent of a corporate building, all of its workers neatly stacked in cubicles, one floor on top of the next. This would make the human race in *The Matrix* a class of workers, the agents, the guardians of capital. The shots of the power plant help illustrate Morpheus’s definition of a “coppertop” as someone who is “so hopelessly dependent on the system,” as Morpheus puts it, that he is unable to break free of its exploitative dimensions.

Dialectical Reflections

The theoretical foundations of Marx’s thought are derived, in part, from a novel reading of German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel’s “dialectical” philosophies. In Marxist thought, dialectics is a theory of evolution or progress. It is based upon the Hegelian idea that the engine that drives motion and change in human history is the struggle of opposing forces. Someone who thinks dialectically thinks of the world as a constantly evolving place, a place in which life is never still. Moreover, a dialectician thinks of the world as a space in which oppositions between everything from individual molecules of matter to complex ideas are striving to reach new levels of consciousness and organization. Marxist Leon Trotsky likens “dialectical thinking” to the silver screen in the following passage:

Dialectical thinking is related to [everyday] thinking in the same way that a motion picture is related to a still photograph. The

¹ Fredric L. Bender, ed., *The Communist Manifesto* (New York: Norton, 1988), pp. 61–62.

² Robert C. Tucker, ed., *The Marx-Engels Reader*, second edition (New York: Norton, 1978), p. 204.

motion picture does not outlaw the still photograph but combines a series of them according to the laws of motion.³

A dialectical thinker believes that a picture says a thousand words, because every picture is a reflection of a network of pictures worldwide that are simultaneously competing for meaning. A dialectical thinker never takes things at face value, because life is always evolving in and around every single picture; nothing is ever "still."

In *The Matrix*, a "motion picture within the picture," portrays Neo's dialectically evolving state of mind. This motion picture *en abyme* is developed out of a series of reflections—in sunglasses, spoons, a mirror, and, at one point, the doorknob to the Oracle's apartment. The individual reflections or "still photographs" combine to create a "motion picture" that runs on top of the actual film. It portrays Neo's dialectical growth, as he struggles to overcome his coppertop life.

In the first part of the film, the two scenes, "Down the rabbit hole" and "The real world," reflect Neo's transition from an undialectical coppertop to a dialectically aware resistance fighter. In "Down the rabbit hole," Neo is reflected back to us in Morpheus's sunglasses. Neo has not made the choice yet. The blue and the red pills are in Morpheus's outstretched hands. They appear to correspond to the two lenses in Morpheus's glasses. As if symbolizing the undialectical life that he leads as a coppertop, the same image of Neo is reflected in both lenses. Like a still photograph, Neo is the same person, from one "frame," or lens, to the next. After Neo chooses the red pill, his reflection begins to change. While he is waiting for Kansas to go "bye-bye," the mirror to his right reflects a fragmented Neo; his dialectical journey is beginning. Later, in "The real world," the dialectical split between the dream world of the Matrix and the real world is complete. Neo's "double-image" has changed. When Morpheus holds up the coppertop battery, Neo's reflection is missing from the lens in which the blue pill in "Down the rabbit hole" was reflected. Now, a coppertop battery takes its

³ Trotsky, Leon. "The ABC of Materialist Dialectics," in *The Collected Writings of Leon Trotsky: Trotsky Internet Archive*, <http://www.trotsky.net/works/1939-abc.htm>.

place. In the other lens, the "real" Neo stands alone. Neo is dialectically aware. His journey is starting.

As the movie progresses, reflections of Neo illustrate his attempt to reconcile the two opposing sides of his identity. He struggles to overcome the opposing images of his life, the one in the Matrix, and the one in the "real world." Following this train of thought, Neo's Nirvana-like transformation into "the One" can be interpreted as follows: Neo has achieved a new level of dialectical consciousness, overcoming the oppositions between his alienated and unalienated lives. Neo is one, because Neo is no longer split between two worlds. A significant difference between *The Matrix* and Marxist thought is that "the One" is simply the first of two halves in a never-ending evolution. In other words, the "rabbit hole" is bottomless.

Cypher and Commodity Fetishism

In the second half of the scene, "Dealing for bliss," Cypher is sitting at a table in a restaurant across from Agent Smith. Cypher is busily slicing into a large, juicy cut of filet mignon. The sound from his knife and fork is heard as they scrape across the fine china plate, the red wine in his glass gently sloshing. Cypher is about to defect. He is tired of his life as a resistance fighter. After nearly a decade on the *Nebuchadnezzar*, he has given up, and he is willing to sell the lives of his entire crew for a second chance as a coppertop, plugged in to the Matrix. Agent Smith asks for his final answer, but, before Cypher answers him, Cypher states,

I know this steak doesn't exist. I know that when I put it in my mouth the Matrix is telling my brain that it is juicy and delicious. After nine years, you know what I realize? Ignorance is bliss.

Cypher's last line is delivered as he bites down on a slice of the filet. As the scene ends, the vertical strings of a harp replace the vertical lines of impersonal green code that stream down the dreaded computer screens in the *Nebuchadnezzar*.

Cypher is well aware of the meaninglessness of the steak he is eating. He knows that it does not really exist. In Marxist terminology, the steak is a commodity, and the bliss that Cypher

craves is "commodity fetishism." In the chapter, "The Fetishism of Commodities," in Volume I of *Capital*, Marx writes,

A commodity . . . is a mysterious thing, simply because in it the social character of men's labor appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that labor; because the relation of producers to the sum total of their own labor is presented to them as a social relation, existing not between themselves, but between the products of their labor.⁴

In this chapter, Marx describes the typical relationship that we, the workers of the world, have with the products that we produce. Some of Marx's terminology is hard to follow: "product of labor"; "relation of producers"; "social relations." It is easier to follow when we understand one basic concept. For Marx, every commodity in the world—cars; computers; software; shoes; furniture; books—exists because someone put their personal "labor power" into its production. Even the money that we use to buy commodities is a piece of someone's labor.

The problem is that we, the workers of the world, "fetishize" the commodities that we buy. In other words, we are oftentimes blind to the following fact: the commodities that we buy are produced by people just like us. The shoes that we buy, with the money that we earn, is made *for* workers *by* workers. We hear stories about fellow workers suffering in Asian sweatshops, but we buy our favorite brands of sneakers nonetheless. We drive cars on *our* way to work, which were created by workers, and we do not recognize the system of work in which we are enveloped. Whether we ignore these relations purposefully or not, many of us practice varying degrees of "commodity fetishism."

Thinking back to the question that has driven Neo's underground ambitions, Marx would have extended Morpheus's explanations. Sure, the Matrix is a dream world whose purpose is to control us. Moreover, the Matrix is the sum total of the human "labor power" that produces it, every day and every hour. Every sight and smell in the Matrix is a product of human

⁴ See Marx's essay, "The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof" in *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* (New York: Modern Library, 1906), p. 83.

labor. But, for "mysterious" reasons, this reality is "fetishized," or, as Cypher puts it, blissfully ignored. As Marx says in the quote above, "the relation of producers to the sum total of their own labor is presented to them as a social relation, existing not between themselves, but between the products of their labor." In other words, the relationship that the global workforce shares as a class is clouded over by the "dream world" of commodities to which we relate more directly. Workers are unable to unite because their shared global experience as a class of laborers is covered over by the saccharine tastes, sounds, and views of commodities. There is nothing mysterious about the steak that Cypher is eating. He is well aware that the juiciness and the deliciousness of the steak are brought to him by the labor power in the power plant. But, he is tired of fighting against the saccharine world of the Matrix in order to eat "real" slop, and to live like a "real" pauper.

Wake up from What?

Is *The Matrix* part of a "real" capitalist Matrix? Twentieth-century Marxists Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno would say yes. In their essay, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," they argue that the mass media, which includes radio, television, and film, contribute to a new level of "commodity fetishism" in capitalist societies.⁵ The "extraterrestrial world" of Hollywood values and corporate brands is the *real* dream world—and it has enveloped us in its saccharine sweetness; which is why these Marxists want us to "wake up" from it. Paradoxically, *The Matrix* is part of the culture industry against which Horkheimer and Adorno rail. But, how is this possible? Clearly, it is a film about exploitation and grassroots resistance. Or is it?

One of Marx's most powerful insights concerning the extent to which capitalism exploits its labor forces is in his theory of surplus value. Marx wanted to find out how and where capitalists make profit. After careful analyses of all of the various aspects of the capitalist production cycle, he came to the

⁵ The essay is in Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, translated by John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1995), pp. 120–167.

following conclusion: capitalists make profit, or surplus value, by paying workers less than they have earned. It is oftentimes assumed that profit is a careful play of the rhythms of supply and demand: a capitalist sells a product when the price he can make exceeds the cost of its production. Marx realized that this happens too infrequently to be the basis of profit. He also realized that the cost of the raw materials that go in to production are essentially fixed. The only dimension that capitalists can systematically exploit is a laborer's pay. According to Marx, capitalists try to pay workers just enough to live, pocketing the rest. If a laborer works an eight-hour shift, he is basically paid the equivalent of five or six hours; the remaining two or three hours is from where the capitalist's profit is derived.

The Matrix is an unforgettable film, but it falls short of convincing its viewers to "wake up" in order to fight the exploitative powers that make the majority of us into coppers in the real world. It falls short, in part, because it does not show us what the human race is missing while they are plugged in to the Matrix. Arguably, the two species—the humans and the machines—live a symbiotic relationship, and the dream world that Cypher wants to return is not really that bad. It looks relatively hip and urban, with "really good noodles," steady work, and a cool club scene. Humanity has to work to generate BTUs, but the Matrix has unlimited bandwidth and full color! In other words, humanity works, and they are paid exactly what they are worth.

If *The Matrix* really wanted to make a "Marxist" statement from which to wake up, the dream world of the Matrix would have been shot in black and white, symbolizing the extent to which the machines exploited the value of the copper-top's labor power. If the Matrix had been shot in black and white, and the "real" world in the *Nebuchadnezzar* had been in color, perhaps then the revolutionary future for which the humans were fighting would have looked as bright and colorful as did Oz when the real Dorothy said "bye-bye" to Kansas.

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The Matrix Simulation and the Postmodern Age

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Consider the following hypothesis: Some time during the years between 1966 and 1974, the world changed. Which is to say, *our* world changed. In a big way. Though not uncontroversial, many historians and scholars believe just this: that during these years we entered a new era, leaving behind the modern age, we now find ourselves in very different circumstances. We are now in what is referred to as the postmodern age or the condition of postmodernity.

What happened? Many things. Deindustrialization, suburbanization, and a dramatic increase in the flexibility of capital accumulation leading to what we now know as globalization.¹ In the arts and in architecture, ideals of purity and depth have given way to irony and the play of surfaces while the distinction between high and low or popular art has come to seem quaint and indefensible. Think of Andy Warhol or Madonna. In philosophy, many have been led to abandon their faith in an episte-

¹ The idea of "flexible accumulation" as well as the expression "the condition of postmodernity" come from one of the best books on the subject, David Harvey's *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1990). Harvey's book also supplies a more precise date for the beginning of postmodernity. On p. 39, Harvey quotes Paul Jencks as saying that modernism ended and the postmodern age began at 3:32 p.m. CST on July 15th, 1972 in St. Louis, Missouri with the dynamiting of the modernist Pruitt-Igoe housing development.