

# The Productive Citizen: Marx, Cultural Time, and Disability

*Lauren Pass*

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**Abstract:** This paper argues for analyzing the systematic invisibility of persons living with disabilities by temporalizing their oppression within a framework of “productive time,” which I posit as a normative sense of time by which cultural products and practices appear within capitalist economies. I argue that productive time is employed in cultural evaluations of actions that render persons with disabilities as “non-productive agents” who cannot partake in historical processes. My hope is that a theory of productive time will assist social justice efforts in analyzing the oppression of particular minority groups by identifying and combating harmful social values.

When political philosophy considers historical progress, it tends to make central to its theories a conception of a historical subject with a particular kind of agency. Regardless of whether an agent’s autonomy is thought of as liberated or constrained within historical contexts, these theories usually posit a universalized subject that possesses traits constitutive of all historical agents. These accounts of personal subjectivity within history are positive ones; seldom is historical progress considered in relation to the absence of particular subjects—the ones history leaves behind. In this paper, I want to explore one such negative account of historical development. Underlying my approach is the assumption that, if historical progress is driven by the activities of politically enfranchised agents, then historical progress is likewise coupled with the oppression and invisibility of disenfranchised agents. This relationship points to the exclusion of particular identities and reveals expectations for corresponding modes of behavior that distinguish some kinds of social identities as not politically viable.

While Marx’s political economy is not explicitly a negative account of historical processes, it provides a theoretical starting point for this type of investigation when we consider what it means



to be a subject that does *not* partake in the history-driving economic relationships. What distinguishes one as a “non-productive” agent, and how do certain economic structures create the invisibility of such subjects within a state’s history? This paper employs a Marxist critique of capitalist economies by describing a normative infrastructure utilized in capitalist economies that I call “productive time” and its normative reach on the cultural capital of disenfranchised group identities. Through this conception of cultural time and historical development, I wish to illuminate some of the theoretical mechanisms involved in the systematic invisibility of persons with bodily disabilities.

Marx rejected the idea that historical processes could be explained in terms of the mental lives of historical figures.<sup>1</sup> Instead, they can be observed empirically through changes in productive practices.<sup>2</sup> Human thought processes are subsumed by a preoccupation with securing the means of one’s own subsistence. The distinctive quality of human beings is their ability to satisfy their material needs in highly organized and creative ways. Since economies are structured to facilitate the acquisition of material needs, the most fundamental human relationships are economic ones: cultural and intellectual activity result from the ways material productions are created, organized, and sustained.<sup>3</sup>

The means by which material needs are satisfied engender both the material and social forces that become embedded in the conduct of daily life. The political consequences that arise are shaped by the nature of material production and the ideals of those with the greatest stake in its implementation.<sup>4</sup> The creative and productive capacities afforded to a worker by the economy are tied inextricably with the kind of life the worker may lead. As such, the relationship a worker has to his or her work depends on the level of autonomy and ownership the worker has over the product. The natural relationship between humans and their labor is when workers are connected to their products through their labor and thus to their material and social environments.

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Marx, “The German Ideology,” in *Theories of History*, ed. Patrick L. Gardiner (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1956), 126.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

Marx argues that this kind of relationship is corrupted by the development of economic practices that alienate the workers from the product of their labor.<sup>5</sup> The means of production become monopolized by a ruling class whose ideology functions as the infrastructure of society. Because ideology itself is the “production of ideas, of concepts, of consciousness,”<sup>6</sup> the ruling class has normative control over the ideological and cultural capital of society. In this way, the ideals of the ruling class became imposed within the public sphere (falsely, but nevertheless persuasively) as normative ideals. The prevailing ideas and culture of a state are, in fact, testaments to the dominance of the ruling class.<sup>7</sup>

In modern capitalist economies, material economy is primarily an economy of time: the material resources needed to satisfy biological needs are procured by the institutional conversion of worked-time into currency. The concept of income in the form of a salary or wage presupposes an economy of time.<sup>8</sup> Time serves as both the primary object of economic activity and the social good of material commerce. The concepts of a “work day,” “full-time,” and “part-time” employment are institutional manifestations of time-spending as the means by which one secures personal livelihood. The amount of capital received through time-informed labor acts as a social gauge of both the legitimacy of a citizen’s productive efforts and his or her degree of self-sufficiency. The implication is that those who meet the economic demands put on them are valued as sufficiently productive citizens. In a time-informed economy, the ability to work and produce is not just an economic demand but a normative one, given over to moralized social discourses of what constitutes sufficient labor and who is a “good” citizen “pulling their own weight” in the economy. Labor is moralized at even an existential level as the means to justifying one’s consumption, to earning the right to one’s existence,

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<sup>5</sup> Karl Marx, “Communist Manifesto” in *Theories of History*, ed. Patrick L. Gardiner (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1956), 134.

<sup>6</sup> Marx, “The German Ideology,” 128.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

<sup>8</sup> One could reasonably argue that the legacy of capitalist industrialization includes the prevalence of jobs that require workers to spend time on labor for the sake of spending time on labor, as opposed to time spent on developing the craftsmanship of a product, as many industrialized jobs have eliminated the need for skilled or specialized labor.



and to actualizing the good in oneself, among other things. But none of this is achieved without the prior commodification of time that demands “time well spent” during the pursuit of these things.

By prioritizing time this way, capitalist systems employ a cultural sense of “productive time” by which citizens are evaluated by the extent to which they support themselves through labor and their productive practices conform to the ideals of the dominant class. Things happening within productive time are perceived by the dominant class as bearing contribution and social significance, as earning the right to existence, and as being useful or worthwhile. They are activities that generate the “right kinds” of production. Activity appears within productive time if it is congruent with socioeconomic expectations set forth by the dominant class that perceives it as pertaining to practices that facilitate economic development. Productive time shows what is relevant to the progression of material life and, in doing so, privileges some actions and agents over others. It is the culture of the dominant class (and the reproductions of that culture from subjugated groups) that happens within productive time; the material and ideological products of other cultures show up in the prevailing culture only by their approximate conformity to the ideals of the dominant class.

Productive time is more easily ascertained through absences—through the things it renders covert or implicit. If minority material and cultural productions occur outside of the culture legitimized by the dominant class, they are generally absent from the prevailing cultural consciousness. The dominant class thinks of what is absent from productive time only when they must contend with the existence of what may challenge the normative assumptions that facilitate their dominance. When this happens, the cultural products originating outside the dominant class are judged, to a greater or lesser extent, as destructive, degenerate, under-developed, unfulfilling, unprofitable, behind-the-times, irrelevant, or, when very removed from the prevailing cultural conscious, as ahistorical. These cultural products are perceived as hindering society, usually as an economic drain or as generating unnecessary expenditure of resources or capital.

Productive time creates a simultaneous revealing and covering-up of certain social realities within the prevailing cultural consciousness. In this way, particular practices and social agents either become a part of productive citizenship or are ousted from it. However, because economic relationships between classes are fundamentally unavoidable, one’s inclusion in productive time may not be wholly or

seamlessly present or absent at all times. Thus, non-dominant classes bear a complicated relationship to productive time, as they generate the confrontations that challenge the normative control of the dominant class in their day-to-day participation in economic relationships. This tension between the dominant class and non-dominant classes points to the capacity for any group's potential wholesale integration into productive time if they came to occupy the positions that were once exclusive to members of the dominant class. It makes sense that minority-rights activism often calls for, among other things, the right for inclusion and protection within an unaccommodating or hostile workforce; this maneuver demands the emergence and proliferation of possibilities for inclusion within productive time and, thus, possibilities associated with the values productive citizenship bestows. Human rights include economic rights to the privileges that productive time bestows on those who participate easily within it: (i) to be generally perceived as a productive citizen rather than mere unproductive denizen, (ii) to be perceived as in-step with the material and cultural demands of daily life rather than irrelevant and powerless, (iii) to obtain cultural capital through material and ideological production, and (iv) to have one's culture secure from erasure by the dominant class.

A theory of productive time is helpful in elucidating why some minority groups have persistently received less political visibility than others. Limiting a minority's participation in labor also denies the minority's presence in productive time. Because physical disability often impacts an individual's ability to work, persons with disabilities are especially vulnerable to exclusion from productive time. Thus, disabled culture is largely invisible within the prevailing culture.

Disability is an interesting minority perspective because it intersects all other minorities; it exists within and across all ethnic, gender, sexual, and religious identities and within all age groups in all parts of the world. Perhaps due to its ubiquity, the unfortunate normative assumption surrounding differently-abled persons is that they do not actually constitute a cultural identity of their own; that is, "disabled culture" is not a real or valid cultural identity. Sunny Taylor, a full-time artist and a person with disabilities, describes the discrimination unique to persons living with disabilities, which points to their invisibility relative to not just mainstream culture but also many cultural minorities:



Disabled people are far from enjoying the advantages of social or economic equality, but the point is that they are far from even being seen as a deserving identity group. [...] The disabled are viewed with sympathy as victims of “bad luck” who will simply have to accept disadvantage as their lot in life, not as an identity group that is systematically discriminated against. Unlike sexism and racism, which are perceived to be significant social problems, disability falls under the social radar and disablism is not recognized as a damaging or even particularly serious form of prejudice.<sup>9</sup>

Taylor points out that the social injustice directed at persons with disabilities is due, in large part, to the bodily nature of disability, which is used as grounds for naturalizing their discrimination. Taylor argues that this is achieved by society failing to make the critical distinction between *impairment* and *disability*. She defines impairment as the biological condition for which one makes accommodations and disability as the “political and social repression of impaired people” that is caused by the widespread lack of accommodations in the material world that forces differently-abled persons out of social spaces.<sup>10</sup> Impairment is created by biological circumstances, but disability is imposed through the denial of access within the physical and cultural environment. Part of the challenge facing disabled activists is to have this distinction made *socially*. However, the prevailing understanding of disability is one that reduces it primarily to its biological aspect. As long as the distinction between impairment and disability is collapsed under one conceptual framework, disability’s necessary relationship to the environment will remain obscured.

Some Marxist theorists of disability argue that disability is created by the social and economic imperatives set in place by capitalism. They point to capitalist business models that demand unconditional maximal efficiency from workers. In these models, maximum efficiency is also the minimal efficiency tolerated from

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<sup>9</sup> Sunny Taylor, “The Right Not to Work: Power and Disability,” *The Monthly Review* 10 (March 2004), accessed April 15, 2013, <http://monthlyreview.org/2004/03/01/the-right-not-to-work-power-and-disability>.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

the standpoint of the max-profit employer. Those who cannot offer maximal output at the same rate as their peers are seen as incurring unnecessary cost. Capitalist ideals have set forth a pace of daily activity that demands elastic adaptation from its citizens. However, this expectation denigrates the efforts of those who require more time than others to fulfill the same tasks. They violate the ideal of maximized efficiency and, for the sake of preventing cost, are ousted from full participation within the workforce. Consequently, they fall out of the visibility of productive time.

One of the most helpful aspects of Marx's historical materialism is that it allows the material environment to be indicative of social change. Once the productive means have been changed sufficiently, through the joint effort of legislation and practice, we can expect change in material reality to occur. Part of the advancements made in response to the efforts of disabled activists has been legislation that mandated changes to material culture that facilitate access to public places, and these changes have engendered greater prevalence of disabled subjects in politics, culture, and the workforce. By acknowledging that the social environment and the material environment are meaningful expressions of each other, Marx provides us with a theoretical means that, once extrapolated, allows us to affirm disability as a product of one's social situation.<sup>11</sup> To effectively theorize disability in Marxist terms, it cannot undermine the inextricability of material reality and the manifestations thereof from the disenfranchisement of persons with disabilities, because to do so may result in the failure to recognize the material conditions that both create disabled subjects and promote their invisibility.

If we return to the question of what it means to be a viable historical agent, the considerations I have given throughout this essay conceptualize historical agents as persons who have a substantial presence within productive time, have some measure of influential

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<sup>11</sup> This concept is extrapolated from Marx's work; Marx was not a theorist of disability and did not write for subjects of social justice beyond the framework of class struggle. Recently Marx's philosophy has been the subject of feminist and anti-ableist criticism that argues the subject of Marx's revolutionary proletariat is clearly portrayed as an able-bodied man, which problematically reproduces the concept of able-bodied persons as the only active agents of social change. Here, I do not conceptualize historical agents this way, but I deem it important to acknowledge these criticisms for locating biases in Marx's philosophy.



cultural capital, and are able to participate significantly within the processes that facilitate or engender new material production in ways congruent with the ideals of the dominant class. Because the dominant class controls the majority of material, cultural, and economic capital, gaining even partial access into these areas is difficult or impossible for many minority individuals. It is important to acknowledge that not all minority individuals have experienced or will experience the same kinds or degrees of disenfranchisement in all times and places, and individual experiences of oppression can vary widely by circumstance. The concept of productive time is meant to serve as a theoretical framework for understanding the ways dominant culture evaluates the role of minority identities as a perceived threat to their development. An analysis of a state's productive time can aid social activists' ability to improve the status of disenfranchised groups.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> I am grateful to Abraham Graber for his help in revising this essay.