

Self-Commoditization in the Labor Market

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Abstract: Employees are commodities to the employer. The employer purchases commodities to maximize profitability. This brief reflection essay looks at a single passage from the “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts” by Marx, Engels and Werke in discussion of what labor is and what it produces. This paper will interpret the passage and defend that interpretation as the case. Then it will look at a possible implication and suggest that it too is the case. This paper will come to argue that employees can never be happy with their work for an employer because commodities are not purchased with happiness of the commodity in mind or as a primary mission for the employer.

Introduction

Employers are in the business of maximizing profits. The prime good for any business is this. If an employer or businesses wants to be a ‘good’ business, therefore, it will focus its sights purely on profitability. This may entail keeping employees happy, of course, if an employee is not happy with the arrangement they have, they may leave employment. Turnover in business hurts profitability. So there is some incentive to keep employees happy. This, though, is only for the sake of profitability. If happiness gets in the way of this, then the decision is made in favor of profitability, over happiness.

This brief reflection essay takes a look at a single passage from Marx, Engels, and Werke’s “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts” in respect to this problem. First, we will, and have begun to, introduce the topic. Then, I will present the passage with an interpretation. Next, I will reflect more generally on the passage. Then, I will form my argument in inference form, defending its premises. Lastly, I will conclude, considering the argument given. I intend to argue that employees should not be happy with their work as an employee, this is because the

employee is a commodity, and commodities are not purchased with the happiness of the commodity in mind for the employer.

The Employee as a Commodity

In this section, I will be presenting the passage to be reflected on. The passage is by Marx, Engels and Werke in “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts.” In the passage, the topic being discussed is the ontology of an employee. They look at what an employee is, and what the employee produces. They also consider how there is a disparity between the price of labor and the price of the commodity. First I will present the passage. After this I will interpret it. I will be using this interpretation as the basis for my argument. To present the passage in question:

“The worker becomes a cheaper commodity the more commodities he produces. The increase in value of the world of things is directly proportional to the decrease in value of the human world. Labour not only produces commodities. It also produces itself and the worker as a commodity...” (Marx, Engels, Werke, “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts”)

At this point, it is important to present how this passage can be interpreted. This interpretation will form the basis of my argument and reflection going forward. This interpretation is being given for clarity of what forms this argument.

The first sentence makes the point that an employee’s gains are negatively correlated with the businesses gains. As the employee produces some commodity, the price of the commodity is much higher than the wage of the employee. This is done to ensure profitability. Over time, the distance between how much the business has made on the commodity produced by the employee, and the amount that the employee has gained through their wages increases.

Thus, the employee is cheaper the longer they stay because the profit margin over time has increased compared to the wages of the employee.

Further, labor produces commodities, but it also produces itself. By means of doing labor, the laborer produces labor. In the same way that a musician produces music by playing music. Acts, in other words, produce as they are acted out. In the case of employment, the employee, being a commodity for the employer, is a commodity that produces commodities. One of those commodities is their labor for the employer, and the other is the commodity produced by that labor.

Reflection

In this section of the paper, I will begin to reflect on the passage more thoroughly. Having thought on this passage for some time, it has come time to present my thoughts. I will be considering whether the passage, specifically my interpretation of the passage, holds merit. Then I will consider what that would imply.

I would like to say there is merit to the passage presented by Marx, Engels and Werke. It might seem odd to call an employee a commodity. It is intuitive to say that commodities are bought and sold, but employees aren't bought and sold specifically. An employee can come and go as they please. No employer is holding its' employees hostage. However, the employer is not the one buying and selling the employee. The employee is the one selling themselves, and the employer is the buyer. In other words, wage employment is not "slavery" as the old joke would have it (considering bosses as "slave-drivers") but wage employees are more akin to indentured servants. They sell *themselves* into servitude.

I would also like to agree that employees become a cheaper commodity the more they produce. It seems a little intuitive to say that at the beginning of employment, the employee hasn't produced anything for the employer, however, as they continue to work, the gap between

the price of the produced commodity and the employees wage increases. Lets say the employee produces 100 pieces a day, and gets paid 50 pieces (worth) a day. The company has already made a profit on the employee, however, the difference on this day was of 50 pieces in favor of the employer. Stretch this out to say 10 days, the employee has produced 1000 pieces, and has been paid 500 pieces (worth) in total. That is now a difference of 500 pieces, versus 50 pieces on that first day. The gap between pieces for the employer, and the pieces (worth) for the employee has widened significantly. This is why I would have to agree with the price of the laborer becoming cheaper for the employer as the laborer produces more and more.

Next I want to look at some implications of this. Surely, the wage employee won't be able to simply go out on their own with their labor expecting to produce the same amount of income as the business they worked for. It took many employees to make this happen, from the producer of the specific commodity sold, to sales people, to decision making managers, and more. The specific skill of a single employee does not translate to the skill of the whole business. So, they stay, knowing it is a better deal than trying to strike it out on their own. Though, one major implication of this is a lack of happiness for the wage employee of their work. They see the potential for the price their labor produces, but they have sold themselves as laborers to the employer as a commodity. But commodities are really only bought and sold by businesses for their utility towards profitability. The wage employee is a mere tool purchased by the employer for the benefit of the business. Anything done to keep the employee happy is purely based on the means of keeping them profitable. That is all a business can do. The business is not a living breathing entity, a business has employees, but it itself has no emotion or desire to improve the lives of its employees. Its means of survival is based entirely in its profitability. Thus, it cannot care about the wellbeing of its employees, it has no emotion to do so. The only sign of a companies health is its' profitability.

Argument from Self-Commoditization

In this section of the paper, I will present my argument in inferential form and defend its premises. I call this the Argument from Self-Commoditization because it argues that employees will never be happy with their work due to having sold themselves and their labor to a cause that is impossible to find a valuable trade with the employer. The argument is as follows:

(1) The employee sells themselves as a commodity for the explicit use of the employer.

(Marx, Engels, Werke)

(2) If the employee sells themselves a commodity for the explicit use of the employer, then the employee is in servitude of the employer. (Basic)

(3) If the employee is in servitude of the employer, then they are being used and exploited.

(Basic)

(4) Therefore, if the employee sells themselves as a commodity for the explicit use of the employer, then they are being used and exploited. (Hypothetical Syllogism 2, 3)

(5) Therefore, they [the employee] is being used and exploited. (Modus Ponens 1, 4)

(6) If they [the employee] is being used and exploited, then they should not be happy with their situation. (Basic)

(7) Therefore, they [the employee] should not be happy with their situation. (Modus Ponens 5, 6)

I think it has been fair to say I have defended (1) in my reflection above. However, to be clear, it is a mere agreement in my interpretation of Marx, Engels and Werke. While others may consider this an unfair interpretation of this passage, I have still defended (1) as the case.

In defense of (2) however, there may be some pushback in that the employee is not in servitude to the employer. They might suggest that the employee can leave at any moment in

time. They don't have to accept unfair or dangerous working conditions. This is fair, though, it seems that so long as the relationship between the employer and employee exists, the employee will be at the service of the employer, and not the other way around. This is because the employee again sells their labor to the employer. Once something is sold to another, it is out of the control of the previous owner.

As for (3) it follows from (2) in that once something is sold to another, and out of the control of the previous owner, it is used for the new owners benefit. However, when it comes to labor, the employee cannot completely separate from it. As Nozick suggests, "... mixing one's labor with something makes one the owner of it..." (Robert Nozick, "Anarchy, State and Utopia") Selling ones labor is also selling ones self. I cannot, for example, sell my labor and expect to let my labor go to work for me while I stay home writing like I would love to. I have to go with my labor, to produce my labor, which the company has purchased. The company has purchased this commodity of labor with the expressed purpose of profit. The fact that I have to go along with my labor merely complicates how the employer can retain the labor and maintain profits. This being the case, (2) and (3) lead to the conclusion (4) If the employee is in servitude of the employer, then they are being used and exploited. Subsequently, (1) and (4) together lead to the ultimate conclusion in (5) that they [the employee] is being used and exploited.

There is a last part of my argument that in (6) If they [the employee] is being used and exploited, then they should not be happy with their situation. This is a controversial premise because in regular average everyday life, employees can be happy. Employees go to parties, smile, and seem to enjoy life. While all of this is true, it is also possible that this is an example of trying to describe the color red to a blind person. That is, do we call the employed life a happy life because we don't really know the level of happiness that can really exist? Maybe we have never experienced the level of happiness that is possible, so we just call our happiest state happiness. I think this is probably the case because nobody can consider themselves 'truly'

happy if they are being used and exploited on a regular, even daily basis. This leads to the conclusion in (7) that they [the employee] should not be happy with their situation.

Conclusions

At this point in the paper, it would be beneficial to wrap up. First, I presented the topic, and passage. I also interpreted this passage from Marx, Engels and Werke. I then reflected upon this passage given my interpretation of it. Then I argued that employees should not be happy with their situation. This was due to the Argument from Self-Commodification as I presented it.

One major point to consider from this is what to do about it. Self-employment is a risky game. This risk might pose dangers even greater than selling one's labor and becoming a commodity. Financial ruin, for example, might pose a threat. Or, one might be able to argue that self-employment is no different than wage-employment because the agent in question is still selling their labor to customers, just the customer is not of an employer, but of other purchasing agents. I do not claim to know what to do about this situation, that is outside the scope of this essay and would be worth examining in further research.