

## Digging Walden's Soil with Marxist Tools: A Study on Thoreau's Walden

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### Abstract

The nineteenth century saw industrialization become a significant force in the United States of America, just as in much of the developed world, and with these new developments, the so-called new Eden started to face the corruption of modern life. With mechanization came the speed-up associated with capitalist production, and alongside this speed-up came ideas of the corruption of society with the evils it bears: wealth and avarice, degradation of human values, and general indifference to nature and one's self. Some movements of the century, such as philosophical Transcendentalism and the Utopian Societies, can be understood as nascent reactions to this increasingly corrupted system. Henry David Thoreau, one of the most prominent writers of Transcendentalism, was also a very influential figure and critic in terms of social life and politics. He rebelled against institutions of every kind: church, state, social convention, inherited tradition, and indeed even eschewed society itself, turning his back on it to spend two years in the natural isolation of a wood-built cabin by Walden Pond. Like his contemporary, philosopher, economist, journalist, and revolutionary socialist Karl Marx, Thoreau believed that there was a connection between social justice and political economy. He was a daring fighter against particular modes of capitalism, religious organizations he saw as oppressive, and the coercive actions of an unfair state; he was also an ardent advocate for the abolition of slavery and for the emancipation of African Americans. This article argues that, to a great extent, even though Thoreau cannot be called a Marxist, Walden was an experiment in building an idealistic world in which with no class division, no religion, no ownership similar to a Marxist utopia in microcosm. Thus, Thoreau emerges as a revolutionist, and in his microcosm; Thoreau had no rules, no social division, or no private property. Much as the language they use is quite different and Thoreau does not use Marxist terms, the similar themes they explore in their works cannot be underestimated. Hence, the aim, here, is to cultivate Walden's soil and unearth the connections between Marxist philosophy, in particular, *The Communist Manifesto* and Thoreau's Walden. While the paper considers Walden as a whole, the focus is primarily on the first chapter of the book, "Economy" and the ideas presented in this chapter are compared with those in the pithiest expression of Marx's political program *The Communist Manifesto*.

**Keywords:** Transcendentalism, The Communist Manifesto, Walden, Marx, Thoreau.

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### ***Walden'ı Marksist Gereçlerle Yorumlamak: Thoreau'nun Walden Adlı Eseri Üzerine Bir Çalışma***

#### **Öz**

On dokuzuncu yüzyıl, gelişmiş dünyanın birçok bölgesinde olduğu gibi, Amerika Birleşik Devletleri'nde de sanayileşmenin önemli bir güce dönüşmesine şahit olmuş ve yaşanan yeni gelişmeler akabinde, sözde Yeni Cennet Bahçesi de çürüten modern yaşam ile yüzleşmeye başlamıştır. Makineleşme, kapitalist üretimdeki artışı da beraberinde getirmiş ve bu artışa, toplumsal çürüme ile içinde barındırdığı zenginlik ve tamahkârlık, yozlaşmış insani değerler ve doğaya ve kişinin kendisine duyduğu genel kayıtsızlık hissi gibi olumsuzluklar eşlik etmiştir. Transandantalizm ve Ütopyacı Toplular gibi o yüzyıldaki belli başlı hareketler, gittikçe çürüyen bu sisteme cevaben gelişen tepkiler olarak anlaşılabilir. Transandantalizm hareketinin önde gelen yazarlarından biri olan Henry David Thoreau, toplumsal yaşam ve siyaset alanlarında da etkili bir kişi ve eleştirmendir. İki yıl boyunca Walden Gölü'nün kenarındaki tahta kulübesinde doğal bir tecrit hayatı sürerek topluma sırt çeviren Thoreau, kilise, devlet, gelenekler ve hatta toplumun bizzat kendisi de dâhil olmak üzere her türlü kuruma başkaldırmıştır. Kendisiyle aynı çağda yaşayan düşünür, ekonomist, gazeteci ve devrimci sosyalist Karl Marx gibi, Thoreau da toplumsal adalet ve siyasal ekonomi arasında bir ilişki olduğuna inanmıştır. Adil davranmayan bir devletin zorba ve baskıcı eylemleri olarak gördüğü belli kapitalizm türlerine ve dini kurumlara karşı meydan okumuş; köleliğe son verilmesi ve Afrika kökenli Amerikalıların özgürleştirilmesini coşkuyla savunmuştur. Denilebilir ki Thoreau, yaşamış olduğu topluma göre, bir devrimci kimliğiyle ortaya çıkmakta ve toplumsal kuralları, sınıfları ve özel mülkiyeti reddetmektedir. Bu makalenin amacı, deyim yerindeyse, Walden'in topraklarını işlemek ve Thoreau'nun düşünceleri ve Marksist dünya görüşü arasındaki ilişkiyi gün yüzüne çıkarmaktır. Çalışmanın genelinde Walden'in bir bütün olarak ele almasına karşın, büyük oranda kitabın ilk bölümüne odaklanılmaktadır. Bu bölümde sunulan "Ekonomi" ve diğer düşünceler, Marx'ın siyasi planı olan Komünist Manifesto'da şiddetle savunulan fikirler ile karşılaştırılmaktadır.

**Keywords:** Transandantalizm, Komünist Manifesto, Walden, Marx, Thoreau.

## Geniřletilmiş Özet

On dokuzuncu yüzyıl, gelişmiş dünyanın birçok bölgesinde olduđu gibi, Amerika Birleşik Devletleri'nde de sanayileşmenin önemli bir güce dönüşmesine şahit olmuş ve yaşanan yeni gelişmeler akabinde, sözde Yeni Cennet Bahçesi de çürüten modern yaşam ile yüzleşmeye başlamıştır. Makineleşme, kapitalist üretimdeki artışı da beraberinde getirmiş ve bu artışa, toplumsal çürüme ile içinde barındırdığı zenginlik ve tamahkârlık, yozlaşmış insani değerler ve doğaya ve kişinin kendisine duyduğu genel kayıtsızlık hissi gibi olumsuzluklar eşlik etmiştir. Transandantalizm ve Ütopacı Toplumlar gibi o yüzyıldaki belli başlı hareketler, gittikçe çürüten bu sisteme cevaben gelişen tepkiler olarak anlaşılabilir. Transandantalizm felsefesinin önde gelen yazarlarından biri olan Henry David Thoreau, toplumsal yaşam ve siyaset alanlarında da etkili bir kişi ve eleştirmendir. Kariyerinin başı sayılabilecek bir dönemde, Ralph Waldo Emerson'un arazisinde kendi inşa ettiği tahta bir kulübede bir tür deney gerçekleştirmiştir. İki yıl boyunca Walden Gölü'nün kenarındaki kulübesinde doğal hayat sürerek bir nevi topluma sırt çeviren Thoreau, kilise, devlet, görgü kuralları, gelenekler ve hatta toplumun bizzat kendisi de dâhil olmak üzere her türlü kuruma başkaldırmıştır. Bu süre içerisinde tuttuđu detaylı günlük notları ve iki yılın sonunda farklı mekanlarda yaptığı konuşmaları bir araya getirerek Walden kitabını yayımlamıştır. Kendisiyle aynı çağda yaşayan düşünür, ekonomist, gazeteci ve devrimci sosyalist Karl Marx gibi, Thoreau da toplumsal adalet ve siyasal ekonomi arasında bir ilişki olduğuna inanmıştır. Adil davranmayan bir devletin zorba ve baskıcı eylemleri olarak gördüğü belli kapitalizm türlerine ve dini kurumlara karşı bir nevi meydan okumuş; köleliğe son verilmesi ve Afrika kökenli Amerikalıların özgürleştirilmesini coşkuyla savunmuştur. Marx ve Thoreau aynı dönemlerde yaşamış ve üretmiş iki yazardır. Bir Harvard mezunu olan Thoreau'nun akıcı bir şekilde Fransızca konuşmanın yanı sıra Latince, Almanca, Yunanca, İtalyanca ve İspanyolca okuyabildiği ifade edilir (Sarnborn, 1917: 260). Thoreau'nun çalıştığı gazete vasıtasıyla Marx'ın eserlerini okumuş olma ihtimali bulunmaktadır. Ancak bunlar, Thoreau'nun bir Marksist olduğunu ifade etmez. Hatta John D. Diggins Thoreau ve Marx'ın burjuva toplumun ahlaki çöküşüne karşı durarak benzer sorunları dile getirdiklerini ancak karşıt çözümler ürettiklerini dile getirmiştir (Diggins, 1972: 572). Denilebilir ki Thoreau, yaşamış olduğu topluma

göre, bir devrimci kimliğiyle ortaya çıkmakta ve toplumsal kuralları, sınıfları ve özel mülkiyeti reddetmektedir. Bahsi geçen kulübeyi inşa ettiği ve içinde yaşamaya başladığı andan itibaren toplumdan uzaklaşıp doğaya dönen Thoreau aslında toplumun dayattığı sınıflardan sıyrılıp ve kendi kurtuluşu için harekete geçmiştir. Bu kurtuluş işçi sınıfının zincirlerinden kurtulup birleşerek bir devrim gerçekleştirmesine benzemese de zihinsel bir kurtuluş ve bağımsızlık ifade eder. Marx, Feurbach üzerine tezlerinde “Filozoflar dünyayı yalnızca çeşitli biçimlerde yorumlamışlardır; oysa sorun onu değiştirmektir” der (Engels, 1976: 65). Benzer bir şekilde Thoreau da filozofların amacının sorunları “sadece teorik olarak değil, pratikte de çözmek” olduğunu dile getirmiştir (Thoreau, 2008: 13). Kendi deneyimi bu yolda atılmış bir adım olarak okunabilir çünkü temsilcisi olduğu Amerikan Transandantalizminin temel iletilerinden biri doğayla iç içe olmak, onunla bir harmoni içerisinde kalarak kendini bulmak, kendini aşmaktır. Leo Marx’ın da ifade ettiği gibi Thoreau diğer temsilcilerin aksine sadece çağrıda bulunmamış, kendisi bunu aktif olarak deneyimlemiştir (Marx, 2008: 452). Bu deneyimi esnasında Marx’ın da üzerinde durduğu mülkiyet ve yabancılaşma gibi kapitalizmin temel kavramları üzerinde düşünmüş, Walden’da bu fikirlerini açıkça beyan etmiştir. İlaveten, dünyadaki gelir dengesizliğinden, adaletsizlikten bahsetmiş ve sistemin azınlığı koruduğuna vurgu yapmıştır. Thoreau’nun bu gözlem ve eleştirileri yaparken kullandığı dil Marksist teorinin terimlerini barındırmaz ancak özellikle kitabın ilk bölümünde kullanılan dil ve kitabın tamamında var olan temalar, Komünist Manifesto ile azımsanmayacak ölçüde benzerlik göstermektedir. Bu makalenin amacı, deyim yerindeyse, Walden’ın topraklarını işlemek ve Thoreau’nun düşünceleri ve Marksist dünya görüşü arasındaki ilişkiyi gün yüzüne çıkarmaktır. Bu çalışma, Walden’ı bir bütün olarak ele almasına karşın, burada büyük oranda kitabın ilk bölümüne odaklanılmaktadır. Bu bölümde sunulan “Ekonomi” ve diğer düşünceler, Marx’ın siyasi planı olan Komünist Manifesto’da şiddetle savunulan fikirler ile karşılaştırılmaktadır.

*“But lo! men have become the tools of their tools.”*

Thoreau, *Walden*, 29

The nineteenth century saw industrialization become a significant force in America, just as in much of the developed world, and with these new developments, the so-called new Eden started to face the corruption of modern life. Instead of working in the fields and traveling on horses, Americans started to use machines and began traveling by steamboats, and the railways were newly operational throughout the country. These were the first examples of “the machine in the garden”, as Leo Marx perfectly captured these changes in his title of the article (Marx, 2008: 450). However, with mechanization came the speed-up associated with capitalist production, and alongside this speed-up came ideas of the corruption of society with the evils it bears; wealth and avarice, degradation of human values, and general indifference to nature and one’s self. Some movements of the century, such as philosophical Transcendentalism and the Utopian Societies, can be understood as nascent reactions to this increasingly corrupted system.

Transcendentalism emerged as an important philosophical movement focused on the relationship between nature and man, in which nature is valued as well as man, and both are assumed to have the characteristics of integrity. Ralph Waldo Emerson, being the chief figure of American Transcendentalism, along with others such as Henry David Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, and Amos Bronson Alcott, believed that the self was only realized through its relationship with nature. As R.B. W. Lewis asserts in *American Adam* “They had to be washed away, like sin, so that the nature could reveal itself again and could be permitted to create its organic conventions. They had to be renounced, as the first phase of the ritual; and if renunciation was, as Emily Dickinson thought,

a piercing virtue, it was not because it made possible an experience of God in an infusion of grace, but because it made possible an experience of self in a bath of nature” (Lewis, 1987: 23).

Henry David Thoreau, one of the most prominent writers of Transcendentalism, was a very influential figure and critic in terms of social life and politics. He rebelled against institutions of every kind: church, state, social convention, inherited tradition, and indeed even eschewed society itself, turning his back on it to spend two years in the natural isolation of a wood-built cabin by Walden Pond, Concord MA. The results of this venture were famously recounted in *Walden*, a key text of the transcendentalist movement, in which his celebration of a life lived in nature serves to confirm his skepticism towards consumerism and capitalism. While Thoreau was frequently criticized as behaving “egoistically” and like a “hermit” in his own time, in fact, he did not cut himself off from society, even during the Walden period, and maintained relations with friends and colleagues; indeed, his mentor Emerson understood his “stoic” individualism to be firmly at one with his social radicalism, characterizing him as an “idealist..., standing for abolition of slavery, abolition of tariffs, almost for abolition of government” (Emerson, 2008: 398, “Thoreau”). In the twentieth century, *Walden* came to be read as a key American text, but its importance was not understood in his time. Nevertheless, Thoreau was praised on account of his fearless language on the political, racial, and social issues of the day with some recognition that there was a connection between his relationship to nature and the power of his social critique. Thus, Professor Julian W. Abernethy writes of Thoreau that “[He] was as obstinately independent in his actions and convictions as Nature herself. Opposition stimulated him, and toughened the fiber of his nature, as the wind strengthens a tree” (Abernethy, 1902:187). Similarly, François Specq contends that Thoreau was a “professional surveyor” (Specq, 2012: 391) and Walden was “a call for the preservation of nature” (Specq, 2012: 389).

Like his contemporary philosopher, economist, journalist, and revolutionary socialist Karl Marx, Thoreau believed that there was a connection between social justice and political economy. He was a daring fighter against particular modes of capitalism, religious organizations he saw as oppressive, and the coercive actions of an unfair state; he was also an ardent advocate for the abolition of slavery and the emancipation of African Americans. John P. Diggins contents that “Both the American poet and the German philosopher were revolted by the moral sickness and self-delusion of bourgeois society. Yet while Marx and Thoreau addressed themselves to the same problems, they drew diametrically opposed conclusions” (Diggins, 1972: 572). Though they drew different almost opposing conclusions, it is argued here that the resemblances and links between them cannot and should not be underestimated; thus, in this article, the aim is to cultivate *Walden*’s soil and unearth these connections between Marxist philosophy, in particular, *The Communist Manifesto* and Thoreau’s. While the article considers *Walden* as a whole, the focus is primarily on the first chapter of the book, “Economy” and the ideas presented in this chapter are compared with those in the pithiest expression of Marx’s political program *The Communist Manifesto*. As we shall see, “Economy” constitutes a serious critique of the capitalist system along with a vast vocabulary that he uses to describe its operations. As Stanley Cavell comments “‘Economy’ turns into a nightmare maze of terms about money and possessions and work, each turning toward and joining the others. No summary of this chapter will capture the number of economic terms the writer sets in motion” (Cavell, 2008: 476). This article argues that, to a great extent, *Walden* was just like an experiment in building a Marxist utopia in microcosm, an idealistic world in which no class division, no religion, no ownership exists. Thus, Thoreau emerges as a revolutionist and a definite “doer, seer, namer”, which his mentor Ralph Waldo Emerson yearned to be (Emerson, 1844, “Essays”).

Thoreau was born in 1817 in a very humble family but “the poverty of his family did not prevent him from getting a good start in the classics at the

local academy” (Bradley et al., 1978: 1214). As a Harvard graduate, he was fluent in French and able to read several languages including Latin, German, Greek, Italian, and Spanish (Sanborn, 1917: 260). German was a particular interest for Thoreau, as Robert D. Richardson points out in his book *Henry Thoreau: A Life of the Mind*: he took four German courses during his time at Harvard and continued to study in his spare time before long managing to read and quote from Friedrich Schlegel (Richardson, 1986: 27). This interest in German is suggestive for our purposes, as it increases the likelihood of Thoreau being familiar with Marx’s ideas. Nevertheless, *Walden* itself was an entirely American affair, the result of his two-year experience in the woods by Walden Pond, land that belonged to Emerson. Thoreau claimed that he started his experience “by accident” on Independence Day in 1845, but this coincidence suggests a degree of forethought prior to his declaration of independence from the society that ties his hand as well as his mind, which is symbolic (Thoreau, 2008: 61). The duration of the stay at Walden, two years, two months, and two days also throws doubt on the entirely unplanned beginning day of the experience. The gap between the end of his venture and the first publication of his work, entitled *Walden, or Life in the Woods* in 1854, gives us a clear idea that he took several years to revise his writings to make them ready for the public interest.

*Walden* joined a growing genre of literature in the early to mid-19<sup>th</sup> century that constituted awakenings to new thoughts and concepts. In 1836, R. W. Emerson published “Nature”, which made a great impression on his protégée Thoreau, particularly its foregrounding of Nature (with a capital ‘N’) and the notion that one can discover the realities of life through experiencing and relating with Nature. The following decade saw the publication in German of *The Communist Manifesto* (February 1848), just as many European nations were in the midst of a revolution. There is hardly any literature concerning Thoreau’s relationship with Marx, and whether he knew him or read Marx

is not yet known; however, Thoreau's knowledge of German allows for the possibility that he might well have read the first edition of *The Communist Manifesto*. Making familiarity with Marx's works yet more possible was the publication of the first English translation of *The Communist Manifesto*, undertaken by Helen Macfarlane, in the *Red Republican*, London in 1850 (*Communist*, Preface). As the writer of "Civil Disobedience", originally published as "Resistance to Civil Government" (1849), Thoreau breathed the same revolutionary air common in Europe making it highly probable that he read some of these influential pieces. As we learn from Meltzer et al.'s *A Thoreau Profile*, the 1840s, according to Emerson, was "a time when the air was full of reform" (Meltzer et al., 1962: 111). By the fifties, Thoreau's radicalism was certainly read alongside that of Marx and Engels in the US, as they shared a publisher in the *New York Daily Tribune* and editor in the person of Horace Greeley, a correspondent with Thoreau (Meltzer et al., 1962: 81). While there is no evidence pointing to a meeting between Thoreau and Marx, it is plausible to assume familiarity with each other's work: howsoever this may be, the following argument shows that whether they knew each other or not, their ideas share great similarities and at times they are hand in hand.

For Thoreau, "To be a philosopher is not merely to have subtle thoughts, nor even to found a school, but so to love wisdom as to live accordingly to its dictates, a life of simplicity, independence, magnanimity, and trust" (Thoreau, 2008:13). This is to say, for Thoreau, living in the woods was a philosophy in practice. In this context "the essentials of life" can be accepted as his theories and as a philosopher, he was to live accordingly. Leo Marx, in *The Machine in the Garden*, defines Thoreau's experience as "pastoral withdrawal" and adds that "[i]nstead of writing about it—or merely writing about it—he tries it" (Marx, 2008: 452). Thoreau's experiment in the Walden Pond is a reflection of this characteristic: for Thoreau to be convinced of a philosophical compulsion he needed to live it, not merely write about it, albeit on a small scale. His

choice was a declaration of a self-manifestation of independence and wisdom. In short, Thoreau actively participated in the actualization of his theories by experiencing them. Unlike Marx's call for "working men of all countries" (Marx and Engels, 2005: 25), Thoreau called for, at first, his own self since, for him, a philosopher was "to solve some of the problems of life, not only theoretically, but practically" (Thoreau, 2008: 13). Given that, Thoreau's clear emphasis on individualism in *Walden* can be seen as a direct result of his ideas on how to live life as a philosopher, and this counters those critics who decry him as egotistical and selfish (Lowell, 2008: 413). Furthermore, Thoreau's impulse that *thoughtful change* must be lived through the self-*first* chimes with Marx's key critique of German idealism, found in his "Theses on Feuerbach", where he charges that "[t]he philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it." (Engels, 1976: 65), which is a line that can be understood as a plain call for action that Thoreau was clearly in agreement with.

This idea of small-scale change being a prerequisite for large-scale systemic change is also found in *The Communist Manifesto*. Thus, Marx clarifies that despite the inherent internationalism of the communist movement, "the struggle of the proletariat with the bourgeoisie is at first [necessarily] a national struggle" (Marx and Engels, 2005: 9). Because nineteenth-century capitalism functioned via the nation-state, the primary "struggle must first be with each country's "own bourgeoisie" (Marx and Engels, 2005: 9). Thoreau's individualist venture was indeed a challenge to, if not yet a struggle with, North America's bourgeoisie, whom Thoreau was convinced were predicated on "false human relations in society" (Abbot, 1985:185). If Walden Pond becomes a metaphor for his own liberation from society's pretensions, then, so it goes, if every individual took responsibility for his actions, the whole society would be in action towards the same end. This does not mean that Thoreau invited or encouraged people to live in nature; rather, with his lectures regarding his

experience, he told and proved that a life without property, without selling your time, in which you can enjoy every second of it, is possible.

The era in the Western world during which Thoreau and Marx lived was one dominated by the idea that property belonged to virtuous people, and that if you were not good enough, you would, for certain, be poor. In *the Memoirs of Samuel Slater*, published in 1836 and dedicated to US populist President Andrew Jackson, Slater expresses this ideological view of the value of property and how it contributed to a virtue-based understanding of the global order. He writes that: “[t]he value of property is manifest because it is the reward of the virtues of order, diligence, and temperance; and these are essential to the acquisition of it; for the industrious nations are elevated above all the people of the earth” (White, 1836: 144). This version of the white Protestant work ethic held great sway during this period of America’s history.

Thoreau lived in the same area with these same white Protestant property owners, but he was developing contrasting ideas on property. Writing in his journal in 1855, Thoreau shows his opposition to the Protestant work ethic and property justification, writing, “wealth accumulates and men decay” (*Journal*, December 21, 1855). A similar version to individual ownership comes through in *Walden*, where he writes that one should “[e]njoy the land but own it not” (Thoreau, 2008: 142), a clear expression against the property accumulation tendency in a very simple, straightforward sentence. Thoreau’s antagonism towards what he sees as the evils of capitalism can be found at the outset of his experience. When Thoreau decided to build a place of his own in the woods “to front only the essentials of life” (Thoreau, 2008: 65), he “borrowed an ax” rather than buying one. The owner of it said it was the “apple of his eye” (Thoreau, 2008: 31) and Thoreau gave it back sharper than it was before. This very simple but meaningful act is a perfect example of Thoreau’s condemnation of capitalism, particularly the idea of “owning property”, which shows that he shared similar ideas on property with Karl Marx. As is well-

known, Marx was against property ownership and condemned the principle in all his works, *The Communist Manifesto* being a prime example. He believed that in accumulating capital and every kind of property, the bourgeoisie develops into an ever more malign social force. The more they accumulate wealth, the poorer proletariat becomes. Thus Marx asserts, “the bourgeoisie keeps more and more doing away with the scattered state of the population, of the means of production and of property. It has agglomerated production and has concentrated property in a few hands” (Marx and Engels, 2005: 5). When the property is in the hands of the few, those few keep accumulating wealth, while those that lack property become their slaves. Thoreau, in his *Economy* chapter, deals with the same idea several times. However, instead of Marx’s terms Bourgeois and Proletariat, Thoreau uses “civilized” for the former, and “savage” for the latter. The brutality of his terminology acts as a mirror to criticize “civilized” society in its ongoing corruption. In this way, it is almost impossible not to hear the echoes of Marx in these lines of Thoreau: “The luxury of one class is counterbalanced by the indigence of another. On the one side is the place, on the other are the almshouse and ‘silent poor’” (Thoreau, 2008: 27). A few pages later Thoreau openly asks: “Who bolsters you? Are you one of the ninety-seven who fail, or the three who succeed?” (Thoreau, 2008: 29). As industrialization was growing and taking root day by day in Concord, Thoreau’s birthplace and residence was a place where the iniquities of the capitalist system could be experienced first-hand, though, in Thoreau’s model, the rich farmers were the Bourgeoisie. Writing about farmers and their houses in “Economy”, Thoreau writes about people who try to own a house and sacrifice their lives on it. He boldly condemns them and writes that when he bought the house instead of being richer he became poorer as “it be the house that has got him” (Thoreau, 2008: 26).

Lance Newman similarly understood the target of Thoreau’s critique to be capitalism, commenting that “Thoreau describes the effects of capitalist

property relations, labor relations, and competition on the lives of individual workers and farmers” (Newman, 2008: 650). Moreover, Thoreau’s use of some words such as; poor, rich, poverty, or wealth can be considered as having deeper connotations, as can be seen with the example above. For instance, if we interpret richness as corruption, or poverty as purity, we reach a deeper meaning. He “...had been a rich man without any damage to [his] poverty” (Thoreau, 2008:59). To John Burroughs “[Thoreau] knew the true value of money, and he knew also that the best things in life are to be had without money and without price” (Burroughs, 2008: 419). The real value of life was an experience rather than property for Thoreau, yet he was fully aware of and critical of the operations of the capitalist system. In his journals, he writes, “I know no riches I would keep back. I have no private good unless it be my peculiar ability to serve the public. This is the only individual property” (*Journal*, March 26, 1842). For him, wealth is not based on money; rather one does not need to have money to be rich. Richness may be used with a double meaning; on the one hand, we can claim that Thoreau uses a literal meaning and a rich person cannot see the world properly with intuition and thus becomes vulnerable to the ill effects of capitalism. On the other hand, we might consider wealth as knowing one’s self and others in the universe, and accordingly, understand richness in terms of being “wise” because wisdom is an important element of Transcendentalism. As a result, reading *Walden* can be challenging but productive.

Whether we consider his richness as wisdom or not, Thoreau was wise enough to combine one’s finding his self while ignoring some mediums of capitalism. In his book, *The Morality of Spending*, Daniel Horowitz understands Thoreau’s criticism of consumerism and owning property to be tantamount to an attack on American identity. He writes, “[Thoreau’s] opposition to the accumulation of possessions, to the uncleanness of commerce, provided an attack on the way Americans become” (Horowitz, 1992: 3). If we are to make a

distinction between Marx and Thoreau on the issue of property, one difference might be the audience they have in mind; the former believing that 'workers have no nations' thus speaking to all nations, all people, the latter taking aim at Americans and speaking to them.

For Marx, one of the most important problems of capitalism is that in the process of commodity exchange workers become alienated from the work they do. This alienation of labor leads to the sense that life is meaningless and workers become nothing but machines in factories. Marx contends that before the use of machinery increased, people used to make their products – and could be proud of what they finished. When they finished the product, they were praised or not and paid the money for their production. That is, they had a real relationship with their products and were financially recompensed for it. However, as the capitalist economic model developed, workers started to get paid hourly, not for what they produced but for the time they spent producing. This abstraction away from the material and towards time compensation begins the process of labor alienation. Furthermore, as mechanization increases, the work required by human agents lessens, resulting in a reduction in wages and thus they are to work longer hours to afford a living. The following paragraph can be considered the heart of *The Communist Manifesto* dealing with the issue:

Owing to the extensive use of machinery and the division of labor, the work of the proletarians has lost all individual character, and consequently, all charm for the workman. He becomes an appendage of the machine, and it is only the most simple, most monotonous, and most easily acquired knack, that is required of him. Hence, the cost of production of a workman is restricted, almost entirely, to the means of subsistence that he requires for his maintenance and the propagation of his race. But the price of a commodity, and therefore also of labor, is equal to its cost of production. In proportion, therefore, as the repulsiveness of the work increases, the wage decreases. Nay

more, in proportion as the use of machinery and division of labor increases, in the same proportion the burden of toil also increases, whether by prolongation of the working hours, by an increase of the work exacted in a given time or by increased speed of the machinery, etc. (Marx and Engels, 2005: 6)

As a result of this very fact, workers are exploited or even enslaved by the bourgeoisie or small-scale manufacturers. Marx's clarity is that he does not stop at criticizing bourgeoisie society and bourgeois state for this, but recognizes that such alienation necessarily leads to exploitation and is a fundamental precondition of the capitalist system. Thoreau, similarly, recognizes the risk that alienated labor poses, this time to the quality of work undertaken itself, writing in his journal in 1852: "The motive of the laborer should be not to get his living, to get a good job, but to perform well a certain work. A town must pay its engineers so well that they shall not feel that they are working for low ends, as for a livelihood merely, but for scientific ends. Do not hire a man who does your work for money, but him who does it for love, and pay him well" (*Journal*, June 15, 1852).

In *Walden*, Thoreau criticizes those who give importance to earning money and owning property rather than being independent and free from the burdens of money. As Curtis White simplifies, money "is a medium of exchange. We trade our time for money" (White, 2006: "The Spirit"). White recognizes the agreement between Marx and Thoreau in terms of labor alienation and simultaneously commends Thoreau's acuteness, writing that "the true cost of a thing, Thoreau shrewdly observes, condensing hundreds of pages of Marxist analysis to an epigram, is "the amount of what I will call life which is required to be exchanged for it, immediately or in the long run" (Thoreau, 2008: 24). That is, Thoreau believes that we have to trade our time, our lifetime to afford the necessities of life, which is a Marxist idea in itself. Emphasizing the similarity, Stanley Cavell asserts that "When we read that "the cost of a thing is the amount of what I will call life which is required to

be exchanged for it”, it is inevitable that we should think of the so-called labor theory of value” (Cavell, 2008: 477).

In “Economy”, Thoreau also writes about his townsmen “whose misfortune is to have inherited farms, houses”, criticizing them and asking “Who made them serfs of the soil?” (Thoreau, 2008: 6). Yet, in some ways, Thoreau’s criticism is reserved not only for the bourgeoisie but also for the proletariat, as he believes one must be able to take responsibility for oneself and be able to live without much money, as he did in Walden Pond. Just as we see with Marx, with Thoreau we see criticism of alienation from work and exploitation of people, although Thoreau allows that such exploitation can be self-inflicted while Marx tends to orient his analysis at the level of the system. Thoreau believes “men labor under a mistake” and as a result of this mistake they cannot enjoy life as it is as “its finer fruits cannot be plucked by them” (Thoreau, 2008: 7). He goes on to write that: “The laboring man has not leisure for a true integrity day by day; he cannot afford to sustain the manliest relations to men; his labor would be depreciated in the market. He has no time to be anything but a machine. How can he remember well his ignorance- which his growth requires- who has so often to use his knowledge? We should feed and clothe him gratuitously sometimes and recruit him with our cordials before we judge him. The finest qualities of our nature, like the bloom on the fruits, can be preserved only by the most delicate handling. Yet, we do not treat ourselves nor one another thus tenderly” (Thoreau, 2008: 7).

I would like to pay closer attention to the emphasis both Marx and Thoreau place on mechanization and the intensification of working time. While Thoreau writes “[the laboring man] has no time to be anything but a machine”, Marx writes “[the worker] becomes an appendage of the machine” (Marx and Engels, 2005: 6). In the following pages, Marx adds that “culture, the loss of which he laments, is, for the enormous majority, a mere training to act as a machine” (Marx and Engels, 2005: 13). In this, we recognize that

Marx is criticizing the closed nature of capitalism, which works at every level of society, including art, culture, and education to prepare the worker to meet the needs of the economic system. In the *Reform Papers*, we see a similar analysis of entrapment, where Thoreau casts doubt on the individual agency to thwart tyranny: “Even if we grant that the American has freed himself from a political tyrant, he is still the slave of an economical and moral tyrant” (Thoreau, 1998: 1987). Finally, Lance Newman who posits Thoreau as both in the philosophical and in the political sense argues that “he saw that capitalism actively managed the relationship between humans and nature by organizing labor according to the economic forms of property and profit. The exploitation of labor (both wage and slave) and the appropriation of nature were thus twin features of an intensely destructive modernity” (Newman, 2016: 8). Consequently, there is not much difference in what they both say about men’s turning into machines in the hands of the system whether by your own identity or the bourgeoisie, though the solutions offered by them differed.

Even the critics who brutally attacked or, equally, were indifferent to Thoreau’s *Walden* could not ignore the significance of his political writings, especially “Civil Disobedience”. Thoreau is regarded as the father of the concept itself and his writings on the subject were influential on some of the most important freedom fighters and figureheads of the social justice movements of the twentieth century, including Gandhi and Martin Luther King (Meltzer et al., 1962:166). As such, any study concerning similarities between Marx and Thoreau would be inadequate without considering “Civil Disobedience”, or “Resistance to Civil Government”, published in 1848. As is well-known, the document provides a rationale behind Thoreau’s refusal to pay his tax – a political gesture of non-violent opposition to government policy towards slavery and the Mexican-American War. In 1846, Thoreau was imprisoned for a few days in Concord for withholding tax payments to the government. Meltzer et al. narrate the following widely told anecdote

concerning the episode: Emerson visited Thoreau in jail, asking “Henry, why are you here?” Thoreau is said to have replied: “Waldo, why are you not here?” (Meltzer et al., 1962:163).

“Civil Disobedience” starts with Thoreau’s famous aphorism “that government is best which governs least”, adding “which governs not at all”. He believes that government is “inexpedient”, “a sort of wooden gun to the people” which is inherently oppressive and structurally conditioned *not* to “keep the country free” or to “educate people” (Thoreau, 2008:227). We see a similar criticism in Marx, but this time *specifically* of the capitalist state, because Marx was not against government *per se*, as Thoreau contends, but rather reserved his criticism for the bourgeois state: “The executive of the modern State is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie”, thus working in the interest of capital to exploit the proletariat (Marx and Engels, 2005:3). Thus, a key Marxist aim is to “rescue education from the influence of the ruling class” (Marx and Engels, 2005: 14). Thoreau, correspondingly, is more sweeping in his condemnation, criticizing those individual citizens, including those Marx would term the proletariat, who serve the state “not as men mainly, but as machines, with their bodies” (Thoreau, 2008: 229). The main criticism, however, is towards the state that turns citizens into machines, or slaves. For Marx the critique reaches to the level of the system, as the proletariat is not only “slaves of the bourgeois class, and of the bourgeois State; they are daily and hourly enslaved by the machine...” (Marx and Engels, 2005: 6). Thus, it is the system that must be destroyed and a better system, which for Marx is communism, adopted. Destroying the existing system does not merely mean taking charge, it may also mean disobeying the rules of the current oppressive bourgeois state.

One of the most important duties of a citizen is to pay tax for the state and state-related institutions to exist. When Thoreau refuses to pay taxes he enacts an instance of Civil Disobedience and refuses to “recognize the authority of

the state which buys and sells men, women, and children, like cattle at the door of its senate-house” (Thoreau, 2001:171). Although this very act is a reaction to existing conditions, when his whole life and works are considered, it might be understood as an anti-establishment act. This act rightfully serves Marx’s aims in the hands of a bourgeois state. Nonetheless, Thoreau’s “Civil Disobedience” is rich in critics and attacks, but ultimately Thoreau’s position is to call the state to account and in the process apply pressure to effect “a better government”; his aim is not a stateless society, which, once communism has been established, will, according to Marx, incrementally result.

As for religion and religious organizations, Marx and Thoreau are both profound skeptics but occupy different critical positions. For Marx, religion is all ideology, a fabrication to justify the corruption of the system itself. For Thoreau, religious practice is full of misconceptions, questionable doctrine, and corrupt institutions. Indeed, in some parts of his life, particularly when his brother died, Thoreau questioned the essence of religion itself, as Stanley Cavell points out, writing that *Walden* “is a brutal mocking of our sense of values, by forcing a finger of the vocabulary of the New Testament (hence of our understanding of it) down our throats” (Cavell, 2008: 476). Thoreau makes criticisms about the state and clergymen in *Walden*. Having always been in the circle of Transcendentalism, Thoreau believed that one could find God without a relationship with the Church. For the Transcendentalists, it is Nature that helps people to experience transcendence themselves and become “a part and particle of God” (Emerson, 2008: 29). To them, people did not need clergymen or church and it was enough for them to find themselves, transcend themselves in Nature to find that they were parts of God. Horowitz also claims that “*Walden* rejected the Protestant virtues of hard work, steadfast habits, moderate comfort, and restrained feelings and opted instead for intense pleasures achieved not through material comforts but through transcendence” (Horowitz, 1992: 5).

Similarly, Marx understood that religion could negatively impact

people, with the belief that it silences those who would protest about injustice with the promise of finding eternal justice in the hereafter. His criticism of Christianity, in particular, is also included in the *Communist Manifesto*: “As the parson has ever gone hand in hand with the landlord, so has Clerical Socialism with Feudal Socialism. Nothing is easier than to give Christian asceticism a Socialist tinge. Has not Christianity declaimed against private property, against marriage, against the State? Has it not preached in the place of these, charity and poverty, celibacy and mortification of the flesh, monastic life, and Mother Church? Christian Socialism is but the holy water with which the priest consecrates the heart-burnings of the aristocrat” (Marx and Engels, 2005: 18). Whether intending to eliminate religion or reform it, both Thoreau and Marx criticized the existent modes of state and church, in addition to their more general critiques against the establishment. Both understand that religion can encourage a false consciousness amongst practitioners, and both see a fundamental re-imagining of the relationship between people and religion as fundamental in their joint quest towards a more socially just world.

To conclude, Karl Marx wanted to change the world's economic and social system by awakening a widespread political consciousness and raising the proletariat's awareness of the dangers of a capitalist system whose primary desire is, metaphorically, to suck their blood. Thoreau spent two years in Walden Pond, making him more keenly alert to society's exploitation and able to write powerfully about similar political problems. M.T. Gilmore claims that “[T]here is no doubt that Thoreau hoped his text would result in some political awakening. Indeed, one of his political objectives in writing Walden is to restore his countrymen to the freedom they have lost under the market system” (Gilmore, 1986: 299). In the same token, Savannah Kuper states, “Throughout Walden, Thoreau observes the interactions between humanity and its surrounding environments. His writings and observances eerily parallel Marx's depiction of nature in a capitalist framework” (Kuper, 2015:

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8). Over time, others linked Thoreau and Marx’s ideas, accusing Thoreau of possessing “communist principles” (“Review”, New York Times, 381) and of enacting “communism” (“Review”, Boston Daily Journal, 380) itself via his experience in nature. Living in the same era, observing people’s lives, watching them almost killing themselves to keep living, Thoreau and Marx were two giant philosophers walking in the Garden of Eden. Both condemned the same issues, took different actions, but they both used writing as a vehicle to tell what they assumed the truth was. Their ideas were not acceptable to all the people in the world. “Bourgeoisie” and “civilized” men did not like their words; they either refused or ignored them. However, obstacles never stopped them; they fought with the system in their way.

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