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Harry van der Linden. "Marx and morality: an impossible synthesis?" *Theory and Society* 13.1 (1984): 119-135.

Review Essay

MARX AND MORALITY: AN IMPOSSIBLE SYNTHESIS?

A discussion of Allen E. Buchanan, *Marx and Justice* (Totowa: Rowman and Littlefield, 1982); Marshall Cohen, Thomas Nagel, and Thomas Scanlon, eds., *Marx, Justice, and History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980); and Kai Nielsen and Steven C. Patten, eds., *Marx and Morality*, Supplementary Volume VII of the *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* (Guelph: Canadian Association for Publishing in Philosophy, 1981).

HARRY VAN DER LINDEN

Can the case for socialism be based on a specific set of values and does this constitute a remedy for bureaucratic communism or does it lead to elitism and even repression? Did Marx believe that wage-labor is unjust or was it his view that any concern with economic justice is a typical bourgeois preoccupation? And, finally, should the appeal to values play a role in revolutionary motivation? These are some of the more important questions raised and discussed in the above publications, which are concerned with the normative aspects of Marx's thought.

Evaluative Perspective

Marx appraised the emergence of the communist society as progress rather than as mere change. Throughout his work he both investigated capitalist society and condemned it. These value judgments are launched from different perspectives in his early and later works. In the early writings (notably, the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*), Marx unfolds a conception of human nature that functions as his evaluative perspective. He singles out certain human capacities as truly human, denouncing capitalism as inhuman because it causes man's alienation from these capacities. In the communist society this alienation is overcome, thus making it superior to the capitalist society. Such an attempt to ground normative judgments in a conception of human nature is characteristic of humanistic socialism, whereas it is, of course, repudiated by scientific socialism.

Douglas Kellner's "Marxism, Morality, and Ideology" (*Marx and Morality*) reflects the humanistic viewpoint despite his claim that each of the two Marxisms distorts the original Marxian enterprise ("integral Marxism"). Kellner argues that socialist values express radical human needs and are to be grounded in a theory of human nature that is materialist, social, and historical. He stresses that these values must guide the construction of socialism, contrasting his viewpoint with scientific socialism which bases moral and political action on the laws of history with the result that "it tends toward elitism and support for party-dictatorship in which the working class is ordered to submit to the directives of those who allegedly know the laws of history (i.e., the party leadership)" (120).

The opposing viewpoint can be found in Andrew Collier's "Scientific Socialism and the Question of Socialist Values" (*Marx and Morality*). He assails "theoretical humanism" for its disregard of the objective conditions required for the revolution and socialism, and maintains that as such humanism has a profound affinity with Stalinism, as exemplified in "Stalin's voluntaristic contempt for objective laws at the time of industrialization, expressed in the slogan 'there are no fortresses that Communists cannot storm'" (131). This is not a very telling objection because it is not necessary that this voluntarism be imbedded in humanistic socialism. But Collier's major and more interesting criticisms are directed against humanism as an axiology and, in general, against the attempt to base the case for socialism on a specific set of values.

Collier offers two arguments against interpreting socialism as a value system. The first rests upon the premise that "any political movement whose motivation lies outside the needs, desires, sufferings and aspirations of the majority of its contemporaries can only lead, if successful, to the imposition of the ideals of an elite on a reluctant people" (148). Thus Collier maintains that the danger inherent in any ethical socialism is that those who fail or refuse to realize truly human capacities will be repressed. Examples given are Gorky's defense of prison sentences for homosexuals (re-introduced by Stalin) in the name of "proletarian humanism" (131) and the Khmer Rouge leaders' claim that in the revolution the "rotten fruit," i.e., corrupt people, must be eliminated because the condition for socialism is a population of uncorrupted individuals (127). Here Collier responds to E. P. Thompson's suggestion that anti-humanist ideas may have had some impact on the Khmer Rouge's bloody "experiment." Collier says that Marx left this "humanistic danger" behind at the time that he wrote *The German Ideology*, for "from that time on, Marx does not appeal to a particular privileged subset of human motives, nor does he appeal to an unrealized ideal of human excellence: he relies, for the motivating force of his ideas, on desires that existing individuals already

have” (132). In Althusserian fashion, Collier calls this change in Marx’s work an “axiological break” and cites the following well-known passage from *The German Ideology* to support his case (140): “Communism is for us not . . . an *ideal* to which reality [will] have to adjust itself [but] the *real* movement which abolishes the present state of things [and] result[s] from the now existing premise.”

Collier’s second argument is that the effort to construct a specific set of socialist values is futile. He briefly discusses equality, freedom, and collectivism (as opposed to individualism), denies that any interpretation of these values is specifically socialist, and infers that there is no set of socialist values. Moreover, he substantiates his argument with the claim that “there is an extremely wide spectrum of axiological standpoints which, combined with a Marxist analysis of the workings of capitalism, would compel their adherents to adopt socialist politics” (146). Collier concludes that the worthwhile task is not searching for socialist values, but carrying out scientific investigation of capitalism (and other social formations). Obviously, he thinks that Marx, in his time, came to the same conclusion.

This essay fails both as a criticism of humanist (and ethical) socialism and as an interpretation of Marx. Collier’s thesis that Marx’s writings “after the axiological break” demand “a democratic respect for the existing aspirations of the workers” (140) is hard to reconcile either with Marx’s own role in the workers’ movement, or with his political writings. For instance, it conflicts with Marx’s overly severe attack on the self-taught worker Wilhelm Weitling and with his criticism of the Proudhonists in the First International, who enjoyed working-class support.¹ Perhaps Collier would reply that criticism and respect are not mutually exclusive, but this reply, although sensible in itself, would not vindicate Marx in all respects and would undermine the position that humanistic and ethical socialists, when they construct and argue for their own value systems, violate the demand for respect for the aspirations of the working class. A second and more important objection involves Collier’s interpretation of the evaluative perspective in Marx’s middle and late writings. This interpretation suggests that no specific evaluative perspective is present and that Marx’s indictment of capitalism appeals to a large variety of axiological standpoints.

A similar viewpoint is developed by Allen Wood in “The Marxian Critique of Justice” (*Marx, Justice, and History*). He holds that Marx’s condemnation of capitalism is based on a set of quite unexceptional values that require no defense and, in agreement with Collier states that “no one has ever denied that capitalism, understood as Marx’s theory understands it, is a system of

unnecessary servitude, replete with irrationalities and ripe for destruction” (41). It is beyond doubt that capitalism will be denounced from a variety of axiological standpoints (or from a set of noncontroversial values), if shown to cause such evils as servitude, waste, hunger and death. This, however, does not sustain the viewpoint of Collier and Wood, since it is equally certain that condemnation admits of degree. Thus one might accept major aspects of Marx’s analysis of capitalism and denounce capitalism, without sharing his radical indictment of it, because one may not share his belief that the evils in question *can* be completely eliminated under *any* system. It is from this perspective that Buchanan’s response to Wood in *Marx and Justice* is to be understood: “because Marx is neither a reformist nor a meliorist, but a radical, his indictments of capitalism are implicitly *comparative* and the standard of comparison is external to capitalism: the hunger, death, exhaustion, and loneliness of capitalism are seen to be avoidable – and hence irrational – *only* [my emphasis] by reference to communism” (26). In other words, without the communist society as the evaluative perspective in Marx’s middle and late writings (to which Buchanan is referring), Marx’s criticisms lose their radical character. Yet in order to decisively refute Collier and Wood it remains to be shown that this perspective implies a commitment on Marx’s side to a distinct set of values.

Buchanan argues that in *The German Ideology* Marx withdrew the evaluative concept of human nature and employed instead a descriptive-explanatory concept anchored in the materialist theory of history. Then what is distinctive about human beings is that they change themselves, their consciousness, their needs, and their social relations by changing the mode of production. Further, Marx believed that the history of mankind is a history of defective modes of production and that as a result all societies have displayed distorted need patterns and impoverished human relations. (Considering the famous preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, a defective mode of production might be defined as a mode in which antagonistic production relations sooner or later fetter the development of the production forces.) Buchanan comments: “It appears, then, that Marx may have held the very strong thesis that all serious interpersonal conflicts are artifacts of defective modes of production or of the distorted consciousness which defective modes of production engender” (33).

That Marx indeed held this thesis is clear from his brief descriptions of the transition from capitalism to communism. The *essential* factors in this transition are the socialization of the means of production, the elimination of the division of labor, and the rapid growth of the production forces. The first factor is fundamental for the initial stage of communism (later often called

“socialism”), whereas the other two are crucial for the higher stage of communism (later simply called “communism”). It is, then, the communist mode of production that enables the communist society to inscribe on its banner the classic slogan of Louis Blanc: “From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs.” Buchanan correctly interprets this not as a principle of justice (with the function of prescribing how conflicting claims are to be adjudicated) – he argues that Marx thought that such principles would not be required under communism – but as a principle that succinctly describes the communist society: under the communist mode of production human needs will no longer be distorted and undistorted needs will be satisfied.

The satisfaction of undistorted needs makes communism superior to capitalism. This aspect of communism’s superiority is, however, only one aspect of Marx’s view. For the fulfillment of needs not to lead to serious interpersonal conflicts, their *content* must be taken into account. Buchanan observes that Marx assumed the undistorted needs would turn out to be the very same truly human capacities that he had identified in his early writings and that Marx thought that this would prevent conflicts of social coordination. Certainly Marx’s brief sketches of the communist society substantiate these observations and refute the Collier/ Wood thesis that Marx criticized capitalism from a set of noncontroversial values.

It should now be evident that the passage from *The German Ideology* Collier quotes to support his claim of an axiological break in Marx does not confirm Marx’s rejection of a specific set of values as his source of inspiration. Rather it reflects Marx’s conviction that the proletariat in virtue of its needs, misery, and oppression would bring about the collapse of capitalism and that the change in the mode of production would ensure adherence to the communist values embedded in his evaluative concept of human nature. Consequently, the difference between the early writings and the later work is not an axiological break, but the development of a transition theory, the materialist conception of history as applied to the collapse of capitalism and the emergence of communism. Buchanan objects that this Marxian schema uncritically presupposes that the maximization of satisfaction and the fulfillment of truly human desires will converge in the communist society. He also says that even if one accepts Marx’s claim that the socialization of the means of production and the ensuing development of the production forces will bring about undistorted preference-structures, it is not at all clear that these preferences will coincide with the values that Marx assigns to future communist individuals. This gap in Marx’s argument could be filled by a normative theory powerful enough to show that informed and rational agents will

choose these values, but with good reason Buchanan observes that “Marx nowhere offers such a theory of practical rationality, and even if he had rehabilitated his early normative concept of human nature, that concept is not adequate to the task” (34). Marx’s radical indictment of capitalism, then, would be stronger were it grounded on an adequate socialist theory of value. Moreover, a socialist axiology is important to guide the construction of the socialist (or communist) society, as Kellner rightly argues, and can function as a platform from which to condemn bureaucratic communism and social “experiments” as undertaken by the Khmer Rouge.

Collier’s arguments against the desirability and even possibility of a socialist axiology can be refuted on rather formal grounds. The argument that links socialist axiologies and repression fails to see the possibility that humanist and ethical socialists adhere to axiologies that exclude repression for the sake of the socialist (or communist) ideal. Yet certainly, this has been the case historically. Further, Collier’s argument that there is no list of socialist values ignores the fact that even if it is correct that there are no values that are specifically socialist, it does not follow that there is not a *set* of values (and their lexical ordering) that is specifically socialist (the fallacy of composition). Finally, contra Buchanan, although the communist society is Marx’s ultimate evaluative perspective, Marx may also have condemned capitalism from the perspective of the intermediate socialist society.

Exploitation and Economic Justice

Marx frequently charges that the proletariat is exploited under capitalism. With this everyone can agree. What has stirred much controversy, however, is whether Marx saw exploitation as a form of economic injustice. In his “The Labor Theory of Value and the Concept of Exploitation” (*Marx, Justice, and History*), G. A. Cohen, while agreeing that Marx saw exploitation as unjust, criticizes Marxists who believe that the labor theory of (surplus) value is needed to expose economic injustice under capitalism. Cohen thinks that Marx is to be counted among those Marxists and maintains that their argument for the charge of exploitation runs as follows (139): (1) Labor and labor only creates value. (2) The laborer receives the value of his labor power. (3) The value of the product (created by the laborer) is greater than the value of his labor power. Therefore, (4) the laborer receives less value than he creates. (5) The capitalist receives the remaining value. Therefore, (6) the laborer is exploited by the capitalist. Cohen calls this argument the “Traditional Marxian Argument,” pointing out that premise (1) comes from the labor theory of value, while the labor theory of surplus value yields premises (2), (3), and (5). In addition, Cohen says that to speak of

“*the laborer*” and “*the capitalist*” is to individualize the class relationship but that this is merely done in imitation of *Capital’s* practice. He also remarks that he wishes to sidestep the problem of identifying the working and capitalist classes, as he is confident a solution can be found that preserves the application of the Traditional Argument even for our time (140). But Cohen need not deal with this problem. All that matters for the Traditional Argument is that capital ownership by itself brings value to its possessor and that this value is created by the laborer. The problem of identifying capital ownership (or lack thereof) with certain empirical classes – no matter how important for other purposes – is not crucial for the Traditional Argument.

Cohen begins his attack on the Traditional Marxian Argument with the claim that the labor theory of surplus value is irrelevant for the charge of exploitation. Premises (2), (3) and (5) can be replaced by the simple (and undoubtedly true) premise (7), which says that the capitalist receives some of the value of the product. From (1) and (7) Cohen infers that the laborer receives less value than he creates and that the capitalist receives some of the value the laborer creates. It follows that the laborer is exploited. Cohen calls the newly constructed argument the “Simpler Marxian Argument.” The price paid for this simplification is a loss of explanatory power, but Cohen thinks that this is irrelevant when the concern is the charge of exploitation, remarking that “it does not matter what *explains* the difference between the value the worker produces and the value he receives; what matters is just that there is that difference” (141).

Cohen next turns to the labor theory of value, which is supposed to yield premise (1), and argues that a strict interpretation of this theory proves that this premise is false. The strict doctrine claims that the value of a commodity is determined by the *currently* socially necessary labor time to produce it. “Currently” refers here to the moment the product enters the market, and it can be readily seen that the omission of this term makes the labor theory of value untenable. For suppose that at this moment a certain commodity enters the market which was made five years ago in a labor time twice as long as it takes now to produce it, then it is plainly wrong that its value is determined by the labor time it took to produce it rather than by the labor time that is currently socially necessary. In general, the value of a product is not determined by the *actual* labor time invested in it, but by the labor time that is socially required at the moment that the commodity enters the market. Technological innovation and increasing efficiency can explain possible differences between these two labor times. It follows, then, that it is false that labor and labor only creates value (premise 1), if the strict labor theory of value is true. For if labor creates value, then past labor creates value and

determines the value of the product, which contradicts the strict doctrine. Cohen shows that Marx sometimes confused premise (1), the “popular doctrine” of the labor theory of value, with the strict doctrine, and proposes that (1) is to be replaced by the truism that the laborer is the only person who creates the product, that which has value (premise 8). The difference between (1), the workers create *value*, and (8), they create *what has value*, is a subtle one. Cohen says that Marxists confuse the two, while as a matter of fact they are really motivated by the latter premise in their criticism of capitalism: the workers live in poverty amid the riches they have created. The premise change leads to the “Plain Argument” in which the charge of exploitation is no longer based on the labor theory of (surplus) value (153): (8) The laborer is the only person who creates the product, that which has value. (7) The capitalist receives some of the value of the product. Therefore, (9) the laborer receives less value than the value of what he creates, and (10) the capitalist receives some of the value of what the laborer creates. Therefore, (6) the laborer is exploited by the capitalist.

Cohen’s essay presents a challenge to those Marxists who believe that the main purpose of the labor theory of (surplus) value is to expose economic injustice within capitalism. The underlying assumption is that Marx *defined* exploitation as unjustly appropriating that which belongs to the worker – his product or its value. It is noteworthy that this assumption is also made by such vehement opponents of Marxism as Milton Friedman and Robert Nozick. The latter comments on Marx’s thesis that the rate of surplus value equals the rate of exploitation: “the charm and simplicity of [Marx’s] . . . *definition* of exploitation is lost when it is realized that according to the definition there will be exploitation in *any* society in which investment takes place for a greater future product . . . and in *any* society in which those unable to work . . . are *subsidized* by the labor of others.”² This absurd consequence indicates that Marx did not define exploitation as unjust appropriation. Moreover, in *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, as Buchanan points out (45), Marx criticized the authors of the *Programme* for committing the very error which Nozick attributes to him. The authors equated the reasonable demand for an end to exploitation with the unreasonable demand that the workers receive the “undiminished proceeds” of their labor. Marx, to the contrary, argued that in the intermediate socialist society portions from the total product are to be deducted for such things as the expansion of the means of production, schools, health services and insurance funds. It is only after these deductions that the remainder of the total product is to be distributed according to the amount of labor that each person has invested.

One difficulty with this socialist principle of economic justice (or “rights”

principle, each individual has a right to get from society what he has given it – after deductions), is that it remains unclear how the amount of labor is to be measured. Marx mentions the factors of duration and intensity, which remind one of the well-known problems of measuring utility. Another difficulty is that Marx does not argue for this principle. Its basis seems to be some kind of Lockean labor theory of property and, interestingly enough, a similar theory seems to underlie Cohen's Plain Argument. A final problem is put forward by Marx himself: any principle of justice (or rights principle) suffers from the defect that an equal standard is applied to individuals with different needs, with the result that inequality occurs. Further, Marx attacked the authors of the *Programme* for being overly concerned with just distribution rather than with the conditions of production. (And, notice, after all Marx said that the socialist society and, hence, its principle of justice, is "still stamped with the birth-marks of the old society.") Marx argued that this bourgeois preoccupation with justice (and rights) would be overcome under communism, for he was convinced that the abundance of economic goods and the undistorted needs of communists would bring the communist society beyond the narrow horizon of "bourgeois" justice (and rights). It is from this perspective that Buchanan's previously mentioned contention that communist society is beyond justice is to be understood. Moreover, it clarifies his thesis that the slogan "From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs" is not a principle of distributive justice.

An alternative interpretation of Marx's conception of exploitation as well as of the function of his labor theory of (surplus) value is required. For Marx, the worker is exploited because the capitalist's ownership of the means of production compels the worker either to enter the wage contract or to face unemployment and even the threat of starvation. Another aspect of exploitation is that the capitalist controls the commodities produced by the workers as well as the work activity itself, leading to alienation. Further, since the worker's product is appropriated by the capitalist and has a value greater than the wage paid (unpaid labor equals surplus value), an accumulation of capital takes place, which, in turn, results in further control over the worker. The main purpose of the labor theory of (surplus) value, then, is to reveal that the "free" exchange of labor power and wage between the worker and the capitalist leads to the domination of the worker. The thesis that the rate of surplus value equals the rate of exploitation thus equates the rate of surplus value with the rate of servitude. The worker could freely spend his miserable wage within the private contours of the family, but even here (said Marx) the spirit of exploitation led to prostitution and child labor.

The foregoing does not rule out that Marx also thought that exploitation is

unjust or that the labor theory of value may be used to expose economic injustice. In “Marx on Distributive Justice” (*Marx, Justice and History*), Ziyad I. Husami states: “under capitalism, the producer is treated unjustly because his reward is not proportional to the *labor* he supplies [as in the intermediate socialist society, my addition] but, at best, to the value of his *labor power* (a lesser quantity)” (59). And one might add that the workers are unjustly treated because the deductions under capitalism foremost benefit the capitalists rather than the workers. Yet clearly the labor theory of value is barely needed to make these observations. This is not surprising if I am correct that the major function of this theory is to reveal the mechanisms of servitude rather than to unmask unjust distribution. Marx’s use of words such as “robbery,” “embezzlement,” and “theft” in reference to exploitation show that he indeed believed that exploitation is also unjust. For Marx, then, exploitation encompasses economic injustice but is in its essence a form of servitude. With good reason Eugene Kamenka opens *The Ethical Foundations of Marxism* with the statement that Marx “came to Communism in the interests of freedom, not of security.” In conclusion, Cohen’s analysis might refute the view of *some* Marxists, but not that of Marx.³

In “A Reply to Husami” (*Marx, Justice and History*) and in his essay cited above, Wood likewise argues that Marx saw wage-labor as an instance of servitude. However, he denies that Marx considered it to be unjust. Wood’s analysis starts with Marx’s claim that the content of transactions (such as the one between worker and capitalist) “is just whenever it corresponds, is appropriate, to the mode of production; it is unjust whenever it contradicts that mode” (*Capital* III: 340).⁴ Wood interprets this as saying that every mode of production *ought* to be evaluated according to its appropriate standard of justice. That is, he is not simply arguing that Marx made the sociological observation that every mode of production has a corresponding dominant principle of justice (to paraphrase Marx, the ruling conception of justice is the conception of the ruling class), but that Marx thought that “the only rational basis for applying any standard of justice to a transaction or institution is the conformity of this standard to the mode of production within which the transaction or institution is to be found” (108–9). Consequently, Wood argues that since wage-labor is appropriate to the capitalist mode of production, Marx believed that it would be wrong to claim that wage-labor is unjust or violates the rights of the worker. The following passage (*Capital* I: 234–5) seems to support Wood’s contention:

The capitalist maintains his rights as a purchaser when he tries to make the working-day as long as possible . . . and the labourer maintains his right as seller when he wishes to reduce the working-day to one of definite normal duration. There is here, therefore, an antinomy, right against right, both equally bearing the seal of the law of exchanges. Between equal rights force decides.

Moreover, Marx said (*Capital* I: 194) that the creation and appropriation of surplus value is “a piece of good luck for the buyer, but by no means an injury [*Unrecht*, injustice] to the seller” (the laborer).

Wood’s thesis that Marx considered wage-labor just has drawn several replies. Buchanan criticizes Wood for not distinguishing between what he calls Marx’s internal and external criticisms of capitalism (54 ff.). The former is a criticism in terms of the capitalist notion of justice, whereas the latter is a criticism from the perspective of the communist society. Buchanan says that according to the internal criticism the exchange between wage-laborer and capitalist is unjust because it is a *forced* exchange, thereby violating the capitalist standard of just transactions as a *free* exchange of equivalents. But this reply is unsatisfactory, for Wood agrees that Marx condemned wage-labor as intolerable coercion. The problem is that labor can be forced without violating a reasonable standard of economic justice or the right of the worker to a proper reward (and I take it that Wood is using the term “justice” in the sense of economic justice, distribution of material goods). Further, Buchanan argues that Marx did not denounce capitalism as unjust from a standard external to it, because such a standard does not pertain to communism. It is precisely here that Buchanan’s neglect of the intermediate socialist society as an evaluative perspective becomes important. On his account it is unclear why Marx speaks of theft and robbery in reference to exploitation, whereas this is intelligible on the basis of the socialist principle of economic justice. Marx’s use of these words, of course, also poses a problem for Wood’s thesis.

Another difficulty with Wood’s thesis is discussed at length by Husami, who claims that Wood has misinterpreted Marx’s materialist conception of history. The correct interpretation is that the mode of production constitutes only one level of determination of superstructural phenomena such as ideas on politics, law, and morality; the other is the class structure. Within any mode of production there are different moral outlooks corresponding to conflicting class-interests. Husami continues: “the rising class, as the harbinger of the new society, embodies the future outlook, the outlook that will become dominant; in its struggle with the declining class, it criticizes the declining society in terms . . . of the future society and its norms” (49, 50). Accordingly, Husami reasons that it is consistent with the materialist conception of history that the proletariat and its spokespersons criticize the bourgeois order in terms of a socialist principle of justice. Thus far, Husami’s analysis agrees with (and further explicates) the viewpoint defended here; he proceeds to argue, however, that normative criticisms are not merely consistent with this conception of history but that Marx thought that they played an important role in the proletariat’s motivation to revolt. Moreover, Husami contends that the passages cited in support of Wood’s thesis are to be understood as mere sociological observations.

Revolutionary Motivation and Morality

It seems reasonable to suppose (as Husami does) that Marx meant his indictment of capitalism, based on values such as freedom and justice, to have the function of motivating the proletariat to rise against its oppressor and inducing the moral conviction that the communist society ought to be realized. Yet Marx denied throughout his writings that the appeal to values is relevant for the class struggle. His attack on the “true socialists” in the *Communist Manifesto* as well as his contention that the authors of the *Gotha Programme* manifested a bourgeois preoccupation with economic justice can serve here as examples or, alternatively, one might point to Marx’s famous statement in *The German Ideology* that “the communists do not preach *morality* at all.” Instead of morality, Marx saw a rather narrowly circumscribed “material” self-interest as the core of the revolutionary motivation. Anthony Skillen in “Workers’ Interest and the Proletarian Ethic: Conflicting Strains in Marxian Anti-Moralism” (*Marx and Morality*), provides several reasons why this “egoistic utilitarianism” is a genuine strain in Marx (158–160). Reformulating these clarifies why Marx rejects morality as a motivating force: (1) Marx’s theoretical framework, in which the material (economic) base of society dominates, leaves little room for the “communicative” dimensions of social human life under which morality falls – a theme familiar from the work of Jürgen Habermas. (2) Marx depicted capitalism as a society penetrated by egoism, not only among the bourgeoisie, but also among the oppressed. Moreover, he portrayed the worker as alienated from his fellow workers and entangled in a desperate struggle for survival. Thus it is an understatement to say that for Marx the proletariat’s motivation for revolution is self-interest – the interest is *survival*. (3) Marx often expressed the belief that the capitalist economic order would collapse in virtue of its own logic and contradictions: the falling rate of profit, recurrent economic depressions and the growing misery of the proletariat. Within this “inevitable” process morality is superfluous as a motivating force. (4) Marx believed that the interest of the proletariat coincides with the general interest of mankind. He argued that the proletariat is characterized by “the *total loss* of humanity and . . . can therefore redeem itself only through the *total redemption of humanity*.”⁵ It follows that morality is not needed in order to transform the pursuit of self-interest into a pursuit that takes the interest of humanity as its guideline.

Skillen points out that the Marxian idea that self-interest and general interest coincide is implausible once it is admitted that the workers have more to lose than their chains. More interesting, though, is Buchanan’s criticism. He sets out to show that “even if revolution is in the best interest of the proletariat,

and even if every member of the proletariat realizes that this is so, so far as its members act rationally, this class will *not* achieve concerted revolutionary action” (88). This conclusion assumes that revolution is, for the proletariat, a public good in the technical sense: its success will be beneficial to all workers, even those who do not revolt. What threatens the pursuit of revolution is the “free rider” problem. Each member of the proletariat, if rational, will reason as follows: “Regardless of whether I engage in revolutionary action and pay the price for doing so, either enough others will participate in the revolution or they will not. If the former is the case, then I will enjoy the benefits of revolutionary action and my contribution would be wasted. If the latter, my contribution would be again a loss to me. So rational self-interest requires that I do not engage in revolutionary action but go for a ‘free ride’ on the efforts of the other workers.” The revolution, then, will not occur when the proletarians act as self-interested agents. Moreover, Buchanan observes that the same result obtains when every member of the workers’ class intends to maximize the interest of his class, the reason being that the free rider increases the group utility if enough workers participate in the revolution and, if not enough workers participate, then the individual worker’s contribution adds to the suffering of his class (90).

Buchanan argues that there are two types of strategies which might be used to refute the public-goods objection (92). The first tries to solve the public-goods problem, the second attempts to show that there is no such problem for the proletariat. Buchanan argues against several hypothetical versions of the second strategy. The first strategy can rely on any of the three generally recognized types of solution to the public-goods problem: coercion, in-process benefits, and moral principles. The use of force can solve the free rider problem because its use either creates a cost for the individual worker who does not participate in revolutionary action or prevents those who have refrained from action from enjoying the benefits. The history of the communist movement shows that this type of solution is a viable one, but there is no textual evidence that Marx adhered to it. For Marx, the communist party did not have a police function, but constituted the educational and tactical elite of the workers’ movement (Buchanan, 93). At some points, Marx seems to have recognized the importance of in-process benefits. In the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, he said that “when communist *workmen* gather together, their immediate aim is instruction, propaganda, etc.; but at the same time they acquire a new need . . . and what appears as a means has become an end . . . company, association, conversation . . . is enough for them; the brotherhood of man is not a hollow phrase, it is a reality, and the nobility of man shines forth upon us from their work-worn figures.” Skillen argues that this passage makes clear that there is besides the “egoistic

utilitarian” strain in Marx another strain which formulates a “materialist ethic,” that is, morality as a way of life, rooted in the passions of the proletariat (164–6). He counterposes this ethic to those moral systems in which prescriptive rules are formulated with the purpose of redirecting selfish desires toward actions in the interest of humanity. As a solution to the public-goods problem, this “materialist ethic” is inadequate, for, first, the intrinsic benefits of association are not always forthcoming and it is doubtful that they are sufficient to counteract the costs of revolutionary activity, and, second, it is far from obvious that in-process benefits explain how the revolutionary process starts. Buchanan rightly notices that even if it is true that in-process benefits are important to those who participate in the revolutionary struggle, the question is still what motivates its initiators.⁶ The third type of solution gives an adequate answer: moral principles that require one to establish free and just institutions. Adherence to such principles produces cooperation in situations where none would be forthcoming if individuals maximized their own interests or the interests of the group. Thus Buchanan concludes (with good reason) that “Marx seems to have overlooked the possibility that even where morality and interest seem to speak as with one voice, morality may still have a function” (97). This function becomes even more important once the “happy” coincidence of the requirements of morality (the interest of humanity) and self-interest is left behind in the realm of dialectical myths.

Limitations and Implications

Marx unwittingly showed by way of his own work that the appeal to values plays an important role in revolutionary motivation. The impact of Marx’s work would surely have been much less without its biting criticisms of the moral shallowness of the life of the bourgeoisie, its solidarity with the suffering of the proletariat and its vision of the communist society. However, Marx’s denial of the relevance of morality has left its traces behind as well. Marxists have traditionally ignored the necessity of developing a socialist value theory and a corresponding theory of moral obligation. It is a limitation of the literature reviewed here that this Marxian attitude has not been traced back to Hegel.

Hegel’s belief that the passions and selfish aims of “World-Historical Individuals” would bring about the aim of history (the consciousness of freedom and its objectification in the modern state, such as the Prussian State) finds its parallel in Marx’s idea that self-interest is the core of revolutionary motivation as well as in his idea that capitalists in the pursuit of their self-interest would contribute to the collapse of the capitalist economic

order. The Marxian version of Hegel's cunning of reason, then, is that communism will inevitably emerge from the internal contradictions of capitalism. Both Hegel and Marx rejected morality as a powerless and irrelevant protest against the existing state of affairs because they were convinced that history was on their side and would lead to that which ought to be. It is from this perspective, that history is the incarnation of reason (or "world spirit," *Weltgeist*), that Hegel's contention in the *Philosophy of Right* that "the history of the world . . . is the world's court of judgment" is to be understood. The Marxian version of this is displayed in the passages cited in support of Wood's thesis. Marx's remark that force will decide between the conflicting rights of the worker and the capitalist reflects his conviction that history will show whose rights will prevail and that any rights-claim is irrelevant and ineffective in this respect. Marx believed that the "piece of good luck" of the capitalist would be short-lived, for as he said elsewhere, "history is the judge – its executioner the proletarian."⁷ The failure to recognize this Hegelian dimension in Marx causes Wood to infer that Marx viewed capitalism as just. Hegel's influence on Marx is also exemplified by the latter's claim that the ruthless British imperialism in India was to be welcomed, because England would be the "unconscious tool of history," bringing about the revolution in India.⁸ Alternatively, this influence sheds light upon Marx's contempt for those groups that were, so to speak, outside the dialectic, as well as upon his admiration of capitalism which would draw "even the most barbarian nations into civilisation" (*Communist Manifesto*). Marxists have too seldom subjected these aspects of Marx to extensive criticism, and the literature examined here does not constitute an exception.

The Hegelian elements in Marx help to explain some of the repulsive aspects of Soviet Marxism such as its indifference to rights-claims and its repression of cultural minorities. Moreover, they clarify the idea that the party line represents the "objective truth." The party leadership grasps the intentions of the *Weltgeist* and any moral protest against its course is senseless – historical necessity leads to conformity. (Leszek Kolakowski perceptively spoke of the "opiate of the *Weltgeist*.") But the Hegelian elements in Marx are offset by Kantian elements. This is not the place to argue for this thesis in any detail, but I will briefly sketch three similarities between the ideas of Kant and Marx that make the thesis at least plausible.

Lucien Goldmann in his study on Kant's philosophy states that "Kant succeeds in concentrating into a few words the most radical condemnation of bourgeois society and in formulating the foundations of any future humanism: 'Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at

the same time as an end.”⁹ Negatively, this formulation of the categorical imperative implies an indictment of capitalism similar to Marx’s because exploitation in its most general definition is using other persons as mere tools for one’s own benefit. Positively, it leads to Kant’s vision of the moral society as the aim of history in which autonomous persons will enhance each other’s ends. Here, similarities can be drawn to Marx’s vision of the communist society, although Kant held the more sensible position that the furtherance of each other’s ends must take place within a rights framework. (Marx’s idea that the communist society is beyond rights-principles is subjected to criticisms by Buchanan, 165 ff.) A third similarity concerns Kant’s conception of history. He developed the idea that the antagonisms between human beings (caused by their “unsocial sociability”) have the hidden purpose of bringing about peace within and between states, which would be a first historical step towards the moral society. But in contrast to Marx, this idea of the cunning of nature never takes on a dogmatic (i.e., speculative and metaphysical) character – Marx spoke of the “natural laws of capitalist production [that work] with iron necessity towards inevitable results” (*Capital* I: 8) – but rather is always meant to spur moral and political action towards the moral society: it is a *regulative* idea. To what extent Marx’s conception of history is to be interpreted along these Kantian lines is debatable, but one might speak here of a similarity because Marx in the practice of inquiry conveyed the same message as Kant. Thus Marx’s philosophy becomes one affirming the primacy of praxis: history and nature must be interpreted in light of the socialist (or communist) ideal and changed accordingly.

The similarities between Kant and Marx indicate that a synthesis of Marx’s social theory and morality is possible, provided that the Hegelian elements are purged from his work while the Kantian elements are stressed and further developed. This conclusion was already drawn in the beginning of this century by the neo-Kantian socialist Hermann Cohen. His work stimulated other neo-Kantian socialists, such as Karl Vorländer, to attempt to synthesize Kantian ethics and Marxism. Such a Kantianization of Marx also requires, of course, that Kant’s ethics be transformed in some respects. For example, Kant paid too little attention to the historicity of human nature – a problem that also characterizes most humanistic moral theories. A recent promising attempt to come to a Kantianization of Marx is in the work of Habermas. Yet Habermas fails to pay any serious attention to neo-Kantian socialism and makes the all too common Marxist mistake of viewing Kant through the eyes of Hegel (and Lukács), with the result that Kant’s ethics is alleged to be an “empty formalism.” It is time to look the opposite way, to see Hegel and Marx through the eyes of Kant.¹⁰

- tion (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984). Cf. Edmund Wilson, *To The Finland Station* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1940, 54), 164-68.
2. Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), 253. Contrary to Friedman, Nozick also discusses the possibility that exploitation is a form of servitude. For Friedman's view, see his *Capitalism and Freedom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).
3. In "Property Relations vs. Surplus Value in Marxian Exploitations" *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, (Fall 1982), John Roemer also argues that the labor theory of value is inadequate to build a case for economic injustice under capitalism. Although his argument is irrelevant as a criticism of Marx, Roemer's attempt to base the charge of economic injustice on capitalist property relations deserves attention because Marx never offered an adequate theory of economic justice.
4. All quotations from *Capital*, Volumes I and III, are taken from the International Publishers editions.
5. K. Marx, *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right, Introduction*, in Quinton Hoare, ed., *Karl Marx, Early Writings* (New York: Random House, 1975), 256.
6. This difficulty also applies to Jon Elster's solution of the free rider problem, the "Assurance Game." In this game egoism is the best reply to egoism, solidarity is the best reply to solidarity. See his "Marxism, Functionalism, and Game Theory: The Case for Methodological Individualism," *Theory and Society*, 11 (July 1982): 468 ff. Disagreeing with Elster, I think that the "Categorical Imperative Strategy" is necessary for revolutionary action, or, at least, some agents must follow this strategy.
7. Quoted in Robert C. Tucker, "Marx and Distributive Justice," *Nomos VI* (New York: Atherton Press, 1963), 307. Marx said these words in a speech in London in 1856.
8. See K. Marx, "On Imperialism in India," in Robert C. Tucker, ed., *The Marx-Engels Reader* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1972, 78), 658.
9. Lucien Goldmann, *Kant* (London: NLB, 1971), 176.
10. A brief discussion of neo-Kantian socialism can be found in Leszek Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism*, Volume II (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), ch. 12. Kai Nielsen in his introduction to *Marx and Morality* touches upon neo-Kantian socialism. An historical analysis of neo-Kantian socialism is given by Timothy R. Keck, *Kant and Socialism: The Marburg School in Wilhelmian Germany* (Dissertation, Madison, The University of Wisconsin, 1975). Within the English speaking world, neo-Kantian socialism has been, in general, ignored. The situation is somewhat better in the German speaking world. A good selection of essays can be found in Hans J. Sandkühler and Rafael de la Vega, eds., *Marxismus und Ethik: Texte zum neukantianischen Sozialismus* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970). Also to be mentioned is Henning Günther, *Philosophie des Fortschritts* (München: Wilhelm Goldmann Verlag, 1972). This publication presents a discussion of the contemporary relevance of Cohen's work. Similarities between Habermas's communicative ethics and Kant's ethics are analyzed by Thomas McCarthy, *The Critical Theory of Jürgen Habermas* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1981), 325 ff. Finally, some recent attempts to develop a Marxian theory of justice are indirectly based on Kant, for they take as their starting point John Rawls's theory of justice. See, for example, Jeffrey H. Reiman, "The Possibility of a Marxian Theory of Justice," *Marx and Morality*. For such attempts to be successful, a Marxianization of Rawls (and, thus, Kant) is required, and the reverse is also the case. The Marx-Rawls issue is also discussed in *Marx and Justice*.