

Marxism and Human Nature

Preface to the Chinese Edition

Many of the chapters that make up this book were written originally as separate articles. Each is thus a self-contained piece which can be read on its own. This means, however, that there is occasional repetition. The book is divided into two parts. In Part I the focus is on philosophical questions about the role of work in human life. Many of these chapters were written in the context of the mass unemployment in Britain in the nineteen eighties and the industrial action which it provoked. Although the economic situation in contemporary China is very different, and it is now much changed in Britain as well, the philosophical issues with which I am dealing in this part of the book are of enduring significance. For as I argue, one of the most distinctive features of Marx's philosophy is that it regards humans as essentially productive beings and work as, potentially at least, a liberating and self-realising activity.

In Part II the focus is on the moral implications of Marxist philosophy, and particularly its view of human nature. This has been the topic of intense controversy among philosophers in the English-speaking world in recent years. Two positions have dominated this debate. Some treat Marxism as a form of 'anti-essentialism' or 'anti-humanism' which rejects the concept of 'human nature' altogether. Others, by contrast, maintain that this leads to an unacceptable relativism and that Marxism must hang on to the notion of a universal human nature in order to provide a grounding for its social theory and critical values.

Moreover, it is often assumed that these are the only alternatives. They are not. Marxism, I argue, involves a historical account of human nature distinct from either. According to this, human nature B our basic needs, powers and capacities B is not fixed and universal; it evolves and changes socially and historically. Moreover, such change is not a purely contingent and accidental fact about us, it is fundamental to our character as human beings, it is part of our nature. And the specific course of such change is not a purely contingent matter either, it is governed by historical laws. These views, I show, lead neither to moral relativism nor to an untenable universalism, but to a historical form of humanism.

The chapters in Part II were written in the context of this debate. Above all, I am concerned to argue that Marxism is based upon a historical account of human nature and moral values, but that this does not lapse into mere relativism. The main writers with whom I am in argument are followers of the school of 'analytical' Marxism who maintain that Marxism involves universal conceptions of human nature and values. Perhaps for this reason, I tend to over-emphasise the historical character of human nature and do not acknowledge the existence of universal needs and values with sufficient clarity.

Of course there are universal human needs, and there are universal values that spring from these. To maintain that human nature is historical is not to deny this. Specifically, it is not to deny that Humans are also material, bodily beings. We are *both* historical and material beings, and we are the one on the basis of the other. It is not a matter of either/or.¹

¹I make these points briefly on pp. 155-7 below.

Of course there are universal and relatively unchanging human characteristics, such as biological ones.² For example, the needs for food and drink are universals which we have in virtue of our constitution as biological organisms. However, such biological universals are only the most abstract and general aspects of human needs. There is more to be said about human nature than this. And this `more' must be brought into the picture before human nature can play its proper role in grounding either social explanation or moral values, which is the essential role it plays in social theory and moral thought.

The main purpose of this book is to explain and defend these views. I am delighted that it will now find a new audience in China, where I believe these ideas have a particular relevance. China is a society that is going through unprecedented transformation. This transformation has involved great dislocation and suffering for many. Despite this, however, there has also been enormous development and progress, and the implication of the arguments here is that such development can be seen not only in material and economic, but also in human and moral terms.

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Sean Sayers

Canterbury

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²I say `relatively' unchanging because biological characteristics are also subject to change, but on an evolutionary rather than a historical time scale.