

# **Marxism and Human Nature**

## **Preface to the Turkish Edition**

In the first part of this book I focus on philosophical questions about the role of work in human life. I argue that a fundamental and distinctive feature of Marx's philosophy is that it regards humans as essentially productive beings and work as a potentially liberating and self-realising activity. This part of the book was written in the context of the mass unemployment in Britain in the nineteen eighties and the industrial action which it provoked. However, the issues it deals with are of enduring significance and I have returned to them in my current work.

The second part of the book focuses on the moral implications of Marxism, and particularly its view of human nature. This has been a topic of intense controversy among philosophers in the English-speaking world. 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 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. It is often assumed that these are the only alternatives, but they are not, I argue. Marxism is distinct from either. It involves a historical account of human nature. Our basic needs, powers and capacities are not fixed and universal, they evolve and change socially and historically. Such change is not purely contingent and accidental, it is fundamental to our character as human beings, it is part of our nature. The specific course of such change, moreover, is in a progressive direction.

These ideas, I show, lead neither to moral relativism nor to an untenable sort of universalism, but to a historical form of humanist moral position. This has important implications for the nature of Marxist social criticism. It implies that capitalism is a necessary stage in historical development and hence that it can be assessed only relatively. Relative to early stages capitalism is in some important respects a progressive development. It becomes a hindrance to development and can be criticised as such only when the conditions for a higher stage have evolved within it.

This position, it is sometimes said, is inherently conservative, it cannot explain Marx's critique of capitalism. Instead of condemning capitalism it defends it as a 'necessary stage'.

This is true, but only up to a point. In certain circumstances, and relative to earlier, traditional

forms of society, capitalism can in some ways be a force for individuality, equality and liberation. But it is *only a stage* in the process of social development. Its value is only relative and limited. With further development it ceases to be progressive and can then be criticised in these terms.

Of course, it is also true that capitalism has a destructive impact on traditional communities and causes enormous suffering and dislocation. Moreover, it introduces new forms of oppression and exploitation, absent in earlier conditions. There is no question of ignoring this, or of trying to justify capitalism and portray it as benign or beneficial. My purpose rather is to show how Marxism provides a framework for comprehending and explaining the impact of social change and reaching a valid and realistic understanding of its impact. I am delighted that this book will now find a new audience in Turkey, where I believe these ideas have a particular relevance.

Many of the chapters that make up this book were written originally as separate articles. Each is a self-contained piece that can be read on its own. This means that there is occasional overlap and repetition. However, taken together they make a continuous line of argument and this is how I hope that they will be read.

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