

## Moral Values and Progress

How does Marx criticize capitalism? On what basis does he advocate socialism? Marx's own account of these matters seems puzzling. On the one hand, he claims to be putting forward an objective and 'scientific' theory of history, a fundamental tenet of which is that moral values—including those of Marxism itself—are social and historical products. On the other hand, Marxism does not claim to be a 'neutral' or 'value-free' approach. It quite explicitly condemns capitalism and advocates socialism; a critical perspective is integral to it.

There has been a huge amount of controversy about these claims among 'analytical Marxists' in recent years.<sup>1</sup> Whatever their other differences, however, the great majority of these writers are agreed that these two aspects of Marx's thought are incompatible. A social account of moral values of the kind given by Marx, it is said, leads inevitably to a form of social relativism which undermines the very possibility of a critical perspective. Marx's

condemnation of capitalism *must* involve an appeal to transhistorical values, whatever Marx himself may have thought. Then what we are offered in this literature are various 'rational reconstructions' of what transhistorical values Marx would have appealed to had he shared these views.

But he does not. Marx's critical method is an immanent and historical one. It is based on the premiss that the grounds for a critical perspective are to be found in existing social conditions themselves. For actual societies are not harmonious unities. They contain within them conflicting groups and forces. Some of these support the established order; others oppose it. Social reality is contradictory. Negative and critical tendencies exist within it, they do not need to be brought from outside in the form of transcendent values: they are immanent within existing conditions themselves. Thus Marx's social theory, so far from undermining his critical perspective, provides the basis on which it is developed and justified. My aim here is to describe and explain these ideas, and show how they can be defended against philosophical criticisms commonly brought against them.

### The Historical Approach

Marx's theory of history is familiar enough; nevertheless a brief account of it is necessary here as a prelude to the discussion that follows. According to this theory, social conflict gives rise to historical change. The existing social order is not stable or ultimate; it is destined eventually to perish. History takes the shape of a development through different stages, or modes of production. In the normal course of development, Marx maintains, feudal society is succeeded by capitalism, which will in turn give way to socialism. These stages are not simply a succession of different, discontinuous and incommensurable social forms. Rather, each new stage arises on the basis of the previous stage, as a result of forces and tendencies which have taken shape within it. Each new stage initially constitutes a progressive development, necessary for its time, and relative to the conditions which it supersedes. Yet each is only a transitory form which, in its turn, will ultimately perish and be replaced by the new, 'higher' and 'more developed' form which emerges out of it, on the basis of the conditions and as a result of the forces it creates.

This theory not only constitutes the framework for Marx's account of history, it also provides the basis for his critical method. This does not appeal to transcendent standards; it is immanent, historical and relative in character. Relative to the feudal conditions which it replaces, capitalism constitutes a progressive, indeed revolutionary, historical development. From the perspective of capitalist society, feudal society, with its fixed hierarchy of ranks and privileges, appears oppressive and unjust. As the conditions for a higher socialist form of society take shape within it, however, capitalism increasingly becomes

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<sup>1</sup> See N. Geras, 'The Controversy about Marx and Justice', NLR 150, and 'Bringing Marx to Justice: An Addendum and a Rejoinder', NLR 195, for references to the analytical Marxist literature; S. Lukes, *Marxism and Morality*, Oxford 1985, usefully sets these issues in a wider and longer historical context.

a fetter to further development. From the standpoint of this higher society—whose conditions are immanent in the present and increasingly make themselves felt—capitalist social relations appear to be a hindrance to human development and unjust. This standpoint—which emerges only with the development of capitalist society and is relative to it—provides the basis for Marx’s critique.

Marx’s conception of socialism is similarly historical and relative. It does not attempt to envisage an ideal future society on the basis of transcendent principles. For it does not regard socialism as the realization of a moral ideal, but rather as a concrete historical stage which will supersede capitalism, and which will be the outcome of forces which are at work within present capitalist society. ‘Communism is for us not a state of affairs which is to be established, an *ideal* to which reality [will] have to adjust itself. We call communism the *real* movement which abolishes the present state of things.’<sup>2</sup>

### Progress and its Problems

There is a standard objection to this approach, and it runs as follows. A theory of history of this sort cannot provide a valid basis for moral values. To imagine that moral conclusions can be derived from a theory of historical progress is to commit a version of the ‘naturalistic fallacy’: the fallacy of trying to get evaluative conclusions from factual premises.<sup>3</sup> Geras puts the matter clearly as an either/or choice. Either Marx’s concept of progress is a ‘neutral’ notion, equivalent to ‘what will come next’; in which case it is a ‘morally vacuous notion’ that carries no evaluative implications. ‘That something is going or probably going to happen, does not show why, or that, it should be valued or fought for. It may be, and historically all too often is, spectacularly unpleasant.’ Alternatively, the idea of progress is a morally substantive one; in which case it must tacitly embody certain values. These values, if they are to enable ‘comparative historical evaluations’ to be made, must appeal to ‘transhistorical criteria’, ‘universal evaluative standards’, for these are ‘an obvious requirement of any morally substantive concept of progress’.<sup>4</sup>

Neither of these alternatives is satisfactory, either as an account of Marx’s ideas or of the historical realities they describe. For Marxism and, indeed, the whole Hegelian tradition in which it is located, rejects the metaphysical gulf between facts and values which is presupposed here. There is *both* a factual *and* an evaluative dimension to Marx’s theory of history and the concept of progress it involves.

Taking Geras’s either/or alternatives as a starting point, the first can be rapidly dealt with. When Marx describes a particular historical stage or mode of production as ‘progressive’ relative to the previous

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<sup>2</sup> K. Marx and F. Engels, *The German Ideology* Part I, ed. C.J. Arthur, New York 1970, pp. 56–7. For a more extended account of these ideas see S. Sayers, ‘Analytical Marxism and Morality’, *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, supplementary vol. 15, 1989.

<sup>3</sup> The classic formulation of this argument is in K.R. Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies*, vol. 2, London 1966 [5th edn], ch. 22.

<sup>4</sup> N. Geras, ‘Bringing Marx to Justice’, pp. 43–4.

stage, or as 'higher' than it—as he consistently does—he clearly does not mean only that it comes later in time. History is not a bare succession of events. What just happens to come next may well be 'unpleasant', even 'spectacularly' so. Marx does not deny this. He does not suggest that history is a continuous and uninterrupted process of improvement. He is perfectly well aware that there can be reverses and retrogressions in history. In the longer term, however, and through all the unevenness of historical change, a larger pattern can be discerned.<sup>5</sup> The delineation and explanation of this pattern is the purpose of Marx's theory of history.<sup>6</sup>

Whether or not later stages are 'higher' and constitute 'progress' depends on *what* comes later, it depends on the *content* of this pattern. For 'higher' here means not just 'later' but something like 'more developed' or 'more fully evolved'; and these notions have an evaluative dimension. This brings us to the second of Geras's alternatives. Geras, and many others who argue like him, simply assume at this point that the values involved in the notion of progress *must* have a transhistorical basis, whatever Marx may have believed to the contrary; and then, without further ado, they proceed to describe the transhistorical values that Marx is supposed to have held. Thus we get Marx the utilitarian, Marx the philosopher of self-realization, Marx the adherent to eternal principles of justice, and so on. Though each of these 'reconstructions' captures an aspect of Marx's thought, none is satisfactory. For the values involved in Marx's theory of history are immanent and relative, as I shall now explain through a discussion of these alternative accounts.

### Utilitarianism

For Marx, it is clear, the fundamental index of historical progress is the development of the productive forces. Why should this be regarded as progress? Why should it be valued? Utilitarianism gives perhaps the simplest and most familiar answer. The human being is *homo economicus*: a creature of unlimited needs and desires. Economic development is of value because it leads to an increase in material wealth, to the more abundant provision of 'the necessities and conveniences of life',<sup>7</sup> to the greater satisfaction of needs and desires, to greater happiness. This philosophy is often used to defend capitalism.

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Hegel's view that the 'actual is rational' does not preclude the 'existence' of irrationality *Logic*, trans. W. Wallace, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1975, § 6, pp. 9–10. See also S. Sayers, 'The Actual and the Rational', in D. Lamb, ed., *Hegel and Modern Philosophy*, Oxford 1987.

<sup>6</sup> At times, Marx appears to describe this pattern of historical development in teleological terms, as a process which is aimed at an end. There is no doubt that he was attracted to this Hegelian way of thinking. As he himself says, he 'coquettes' with it at times. A good account of these themes is given in J. Elster, *Making Sense of Marx*, Cambridge 1985, ch. 2.4. However, the main lines of his theory of history are not teleological. Not only does he explicitly repudiate the teleological approach; more importantly, he gives an account of historical development which is causal rather than teleological in form. In what follows I shall assume that his theory of history is not a teleological one.

<sup>7</sup> One of Adam Smith's favourite phrases, *The Wealth of Nations*, Harmondsworth 1970, p. 104 and *passim*.

According to what is usually called the 'economistic' account, Marx's critique of capitalism and idea of socialism have the same basis.

Marx does, indeed, value economic development. He regards the immense expansion of production to which capitalism has led as its progressive and 'civilizing' aspect;<sup>8</sup> and socialism, he insists, is possible only on this economic basis. He envisages socialism not as a primitive condition, but rather as an industrially advanced stage 'beyond' capitalism. Nevertheless, his reasons for these views are not utilitarian.

For Marx does not abstract the economy from the rest of social life and treat it, in utilitarian fashion, as a mere external means to satisfy given human needs.<sup>9</sup> Rather, with economic development, human needs—human nature itself—alters and develops. Through labour, Marx writes, man 'acts upon external nature and changes it, and in this way he simultaneously changes his own nature.'<sup>10</sup> Thus the *homo economicus* of utilitarianism and classical economics is not universal human nature. On the contrary, the theory that people are creatures of unlimited needs and desires depicts a form of human nature and a set of attitudes to material wealth which are distinctively modern, and which are produced by and peculiar to capitalist society.<sup>11</sup>

In short, needs are historical and changing. They cannot provide a transhistorical criterion by which historical development can be assessed. In so far as economic development is valued because it meets needs—and Marx does so value it—it is not the needs of a universally given human nature which are in question, but rather historically developed needs. This is not to deny that there is a relatively unchanging core of purely biological needs, the minimal satisfaction of which is essential for the survival of the human organism. Moreover, it is an all too familiar fact that these minimum needs are not met in many parts of the world, and that serious material deprivation is still widespread even in the most advanced societies. Nevertheless, Marx's condemnation of capitalism does not focus on such facts alone. What constitutes poverty and need, he maintains, is a historical and relative matter.<sup>12</sup> And he criticizes capitalism, not just because

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<sup>8</sup> K. Marx, *Capital* Volume 3, London 1991, p. 958; K. Marx, *Grundrisse*, trans. Martin Nicolaus, London 1993, p. 409.

<sup>9</sup> 'The history of *industry* is the open book of the essential powers of man ... up to now, this history has not been grasped in its connection with the *nature* of man, but only in an external utilitarian aspect', 'Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts', K. Marx, *Early Writings*, London 1974 p. 354.

<sup>10</sup> *Capital* Volume 1, p. 283.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. M. Weber: 'a man does not "by nature" wish to earn more and more money, but simply to live as he is accustomed to live and to earn as much as is necessary for that purpose. Wherever modern capitalism has begun its work of increasing the productivity of human labour by increasing its intensity, it has encountered the immensely stubborn resistance of this leading trait of pre-capitalist labour', *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. T. Parsons, New York 1958, p. 60. See also Marx, *Grundrisse*, pp. 325–6.

<sup>12</sup> 'Our desires and pleasures spring from society; we measure them, therefore, by society and not by the objects which serve for their satisfaction. Because they are of a social nature, they are of a relative nature', K. Marx, 'Wage-Labour and Capital', *Selected Works*, vol. 1, Moscow 1958, p. 94.

it fails to satisfy universal biological needs, but also because it fails to meet the needs it has itself created. His standard of assessment here is relative and not absolute.

But why should we value such historically created needs and regard their satisfaction as a mark of progress? Only our biological survival needs, it is sometimes argued, are 'natural' and 'true' needs. With social development, our desires expand more rapidly than our ability to satisfy them. Modern society thus creates a panoply of 'unnecessary' desires and 'false' needs: desires whose satisfaction is not necessary for life, and whose development leads to an increase in want and suffering.<sup>13</sup>

By contrast, for Marx, I am suggesting, not only desires but also needs grow historically. What are luxuries for one generation become necessities for the next. Some, at least, of these new needs are 'true' needs relative to the social conditions in which they arise, in that their satisfaction is necessary for a minimum standard of social life and for happiness. This is not to deny the distinction between 'true' and 'false' needs altogether. It is to insist that this distinction is a historical and relative one, and thus to abandon the attempt to use the fixed core of 'natural' needs as a standard by which all development beyond it may be judged.

According to the historical view, the growth of needs and desires is one aspect of the development of human nature in general. This should not be seen as a purely negative or undesirable phenomenon. Rather it is the subjective aspect of the growth of human powers and capacities. With the development of our powers and capacities new needs emerge; and the growth of new needs spurs the development of new powers. Marx makes these points, in relation to the development of the senses, as follows:

[T]he most beautiful music has *no* sense for the unmusical ear, because my object can only be the confirmation of one of my essential powers. . . . [F]or the same reasons the *senses* of social man are *different* from those of non-social man. Only through the objectively unfolded wealth of human nature can the wealth of subjective *human* sensitivity—a musical ear, an eye for the beauty of form, in short, *senses* capable of human gratification—be either cultivated or created. . . . The *cultivation* of the five senses is the work of all previous history.<sup>14</sup>

The development that Marx is here describing takes the form of a growth of human nature, of human powers and capacities; but this cannot be construed as a progress in utilitarian terms that leads to an increase in human pleasure or happiness. For there is no clear way in which the happiness of different ways of life can be compared. As Durkheim argues, greater powers and capacities, a greater range of activity, mean that the individual can experience a wider variety of

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<sup>13</sup> Such views are often attributed to Rousseau, though it is doubtful that his philosophy is correctly interpreted in these terms.

<sup>14</sup> And so, too, the development of sensuous *needs*; 'Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts', p. 353.

pleasures and perhaps it may heighten their intensity. By the same token, however, it also increases the range and intensity of the pain and discomfort experienced.<sup>15</sup> 'Happiness does not increase because activity becomes richer, but is the same wherever it is healthy. The most simple creature and the most complex one experience the same happiness if they both equally realize their own nature. The average savage can be just as happy as the normal civilized person'.<sup>16</sup>

Marx's attitude, I am suggesting, is similar. He does not recommend economic development in utilitarian terms, but rather because of the development of human nature, the development of human powers and capacities, which it involves. He makes this point, in the most visionary terms, in the course of contrasting ancient and modern attitudes to wealth. The ancient view, in which production is geared directly to meeting existing needs, at first seems 'loftier' than the modern view—the utilitarian view—which regards material wealth as the goal of production. 'In fact', Marx says:

when the limited bourgeois form is stripped away, what is wealth other than the universality of individual needs, capacities, pleasures, productive forces etc. . . . The full development of human mastery over the forces of nature, those of so-called nature as well as of humanity's own nature? The absolute working-out of his creative potentialities, with no presupposition other than the previous historic development, which makes this totality of development, i.e. the development of all human powers as such the end in itself, not as measured on a *predetermined* yardstick?<sup>17</sup>

### Self-Realization

These ideas cannot be understood in utilitarian terms. They suggest, rather, a second and quite different, 'Aristotelian'—eudaemonistic rather than hedonistic—interpretation. According to this, the criterion of historical development is the growth of human capacities and powers, the actualization of human potentialities: self-development and self-realization.

These themes are usually discussed under the heading of alienation and its overcoming, and Marx's critical approach is often taken to be rooted in them. Capitalist social relations are criticized for the alienation they involve: particularly the alienation of the worker from his or her work and its products; and the alienation of 'man from man', of the individual from his or her fellow men and women and from the community.<sup>18</sup> In both cases, what are human products appear as

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<sup>15</sup> J.S. Mill makes a similar point in *Utilitarianism*, ed. M. Warnock, London 1962, ch. 2, in his discussion of 'higher' and 'lower' pleasures, also arguing that self-development is a qualitative, not just a quantitative matter; but he does not see that the implications of his arguments are anti-utilitarian. See S. Sayers, 'Higher and Lower Pleasures', in B. Lang, W. Sacksteder and G. Stahl, eds, *The Philosopher in the Community*, Lanham, MD 1984.

<sup>16</sup> E. Durkheim, *The Division of Labour in Society*, trans. W.D. Halls, London 1984, pp. 188–9.

<sup>17</sup> *Grundrisse*, p. 488.

<sup>18</sup> I include women not as a gesture of political correctness, but because—contrary to the impression that is often given—Marxism, and particularly Engels, was responsible for some of the pioneering theoretical work that underlies modern feminism. Marx standardly refers to humankind in the masculine and, to avoid undue awkwardness of style, I follow him in this.

hostile and alien forces working against the individual. Aspects of human life and human activity which could—and, it is clear, for Marx, should—realize and confirm human powers are experienced as hostile and alien to them.

What is the concept of human nature—of human powers and potentialities—involved here? In much of the literature on alienation, Marxism is assumed to involve the notion of a universal ‘human essence’: an unchanging set of human potentialities, whose realization is denied in conditions of alienation. Alienation is thus conceived as an entirely negative phenomenon, the pure opposite of self-development and self-realization.

However, the view of human nature that I have just been describing points towards a different picture. According to it, not only needs but also powers and potentialities are in a process of social and historical development. When Marx criticizes capitalism for preventing the realization of human powers and potentialities, these are ones which have been developed within capitalism itself.<sup>19</sup> Here again the basis for Marx’s approach is historical and relative, not transhistorical and absolute. Moreover, understood in this way, alienation is not a purely negative and critical concept, the mere opposite of self-realization. On the contrary: it constitutes a stage in human self-development which is necessary and progressive relative to the stage it supersedes.<sup>20</sup>

That is to say, human nature in general is a historical product. The self is a social creation:

The more deeply we go back in history, the more does the individual... appear as dependent, as belonging to a greater whole: in a still quite natural way in the family and...clan; then later in the various forms of communal society... The human being is in the most literal sense a ζῷον πολιτικόν [political animal], not merely a gregarious animal, but an animal which can individuate itself only in the midst of society.<sup>21</sup>

This process of individuation occurs by stages with changes in social relations. In ‘traditional’, ‘pre-modern’—i.e. pre-capitalist—societies people ‘enter into connection with one another only as individuals imprisoned within a certain definition, as feudal lord and vassal, landlord and serf, etc.’<sup>22</sup> The individual’s place in the community, his activity and role, his powers and capacities, are regarded by him and by others as intrinsic to his ‘nature’, inseparable from his identity,

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<sup>19</sup> Cf. S. Sayers, ‘The Need to Work’, *Radical Philosophy* 46, 1987.

<sup>20</sup> It is necessary in that social conflict makes historical development inevitable; and social development beyond the traditional community, Marx argues, must occur in and through capitalism and the alienation it involves (cf. G.A. Cohen, *History, Labour, and Freedom*, Oxford 1988, ch. 10). That this constitutes progress relative to traditional communal relations is also Marx’s view, as we shall see more fully below. Alienated social relations, he writes, are ‘preferable to... a merely local connection resting on blood ties, or on primeval, natural or master–servant relations’, *Grundrisse*, p. 161.

<sup>21</sup> *Grundrisse*, p. 84.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 163. The language of ‘imprisonment’ is mistaken and misleading here. It is rather that the individual has not yet emerged as autonomous and independent of these definitions and roles, which are still regarded as natural.



fixed and determined by birth. 'A nobleman always remains a nobleman, a commoner always a commoner... a quality inseparable from his individuality.'<sup>23</sup>

The autonomous individual subject of Enlightenment social thought, to whom a universal range of potentialities seems open, is a distinctively modern creation. 'Only in the eighteenth century... do the various forms of social connectedness confront the individual as a mere means towards his private purposes.'<sup>24</sup> This new form of individuality comes with capitalism and the commercial market relations it imposes.<sup>25</sup> These undermine and destroy the fixed hierarchy of traditional society and, with it, the forms of self-identity it involves. The individual worker, deprived of the means of production through the 'enclosure' of common land or by other means, becomes a 'free labourer', obliged to sell his labour-power as a commodity on the market. This, according to Marx, is the social and historical basis of the modern individual.

The classical economists and the individualist philosophers of the Enlightenment welcomed the destruction of the traditional community as a liberation of the supposedly naturally autonomous individual from the restricting customs and traditions of feudal society. Rousseau, and other contemporary critics of these developments, saw things in a different light. Community, they believed, was being destroyed and modern society made into a warring collection of separate, self-interested individuals.<sup>26</sup>

Marx's writings on alienation are often thought to be in this tradition as well; but they cannot properly be understood in these terms. Both Rousseau and the philosophers he is criticizing see capitalism as having only a negative social impact, dissolving the traditional community into a mere collection of atomic individuals. Undoubtedly it does have a destructive effect. Under its impact, in Marx's well-known words, 'all fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air...'<sup>27</sup>

However, as Marx sees, there is also a positive and constructive

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<sup>23</sup> K. Marx and F. Engels, *The German Ideology*, p. 84. In such societies, 'the individual is identified and constituted in and through certain of his or her roles. ... I confront the world as a member of this family, this household, this clan, this tribe, this city, this nation, this kingdom. There is no "I" apart from these', A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, London 1985, pp. 160-1.

<sup>24</sup> K. Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 84.

<sup>25</sup> 'Human beings become individuals only through the process of history. [The individual] appears originally as a species-being, clan being, herd animal. ... Exchange itself is a chief means of this individuation. It makes the herd-like existence superfluous and dissolves it', *ibid.*, p. 496.

<sup>26</sup> Much contemporary 'communitarian' social philosophy follows this line, a point interestingly discussed in M. Walzer, 'The Communitarian Critique of Liberalism', *Political Theory*, vol. 18, 1990.

<sup>27</sup> K. Marx and F. Engels, 'Manifesto of the Communist Party', *The Revolutions of 1848*, London 1993, p. 70.

aspect to this process. At the same time as traditional social relations are destroyed, new ones are created. The agrarian household of pre-capitalist society was virtually a self-sufficient unit, producing almost everything it required for itself. The activities of its members, their relations with the outside world, their horizons, barely stretched beyond the boundaries of its own patch of land and immediate locality. With the advent of the market, the members of the household produce goods for exchange, to meet the needs of consumers outside it. At the same time, its members themselves become consumers who depend on the goods produced by outsiders and obtained through the market.

Capitalism thus dissolves the isolated, self-sufficient pre-capitalist household; but the result is not a mere collection of separate individuals. Rather, it is a new and wider network of relationships. For through the market, the work and needs of many people are linked together within a common system and made interdependent.<sup>28</sup> Initially, such connections are purely economic. They do not appear to be social relations, relations between people, at all. They take on the alienated appearance of relations between commodities, relations between things.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, Marx insists, it is a mistake to see economic relations as the negation of social relations. They *are* social relations, but in an alienated form; and they gradually have an impact on every aspect of social life: changing its patterns and extending its horizons by drawing people out beyond the confines of the household into the wider world.

In this way, there is a positive as well as a negative side to the impact of capitalism and the alienation it brings with it. To be sure, it destroys the traditional household and community, and the established bonds and relations they involved. It breaks the ties that bound people to the land and to the feudal lord. It forces them out of the isolation of traditional rural life and the fixed patterns and rhythms this involves. It drives people off the land. In so doing, however, it brings them together in a far wider network of relations. With the growth of commerce and industry, people are concentrated in towns and cities, factories and offices. Their activities are coordinated, their consciousness widened, their energies increased. Ordinary working people are, for the first time, brought into the social world and public life. The modern worker, says Marx, is 'as much the invention of modern time[s] as machinery itself'.<sup>30</sup> And in this way, he believes, capitalism is creating not only the conditions for a higher form of society, but also the agents who will bring it about: the working class.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> One of the first writers to understand this clearly was Hegel. He describes the market as a 'system of needs' through which 'the *labour* of the individual for his own needs is just as much a satisfaction of the needs of others as of his own, and the satisfaction of his own needs he obtains only through the labour of others'; *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller, Oxford 1977, p. 213.

<sup>29</sup> K. Marx, *Capital* Volume I, ch. 1, sec. 4.

<sup>30</sup> K. Marx, 'Speech at the Anniversary of the *People's Paper*', *Surveys from Exile*, London 1993, p. 300.

<sup>31</sup> Marx criticizes the 'utopian' socialists for their failure to understand precisely this point. They regarded the human impact of capitalism and modern industry as a purely destructive one which reduced the working class to a downtrodden and degraded

Undoubtedly, Marx had exaggerated expectations of the working class. In the advanced industrial societies, at least, it has not been the revolutionary force he predicted; and, with the rise of other radical movements, even the claim that it is the primary force for progressive social change is much questioned. All this poses the most fundamental problems for Marxism as a historical and political theory. Nevertheless, there is an important element of truth in Marx's account which should not be lost from view. For capitalism is not and has not been a purely destructive phenomenon. Ordinary working people have made enormous advances under it, not only materially but also in terms of their mental and moral (i.e. self-) development. Marx's account of alienation, so far from denying this, is a part of his attempt to explain and understand it.<sup>32</sup>

This aspect is essential to his critique of capitalism and his idea of socialism. For it is the conviction that the forces for a new world are taking shape within the old one that provides the foundations for his critique. This new form of society is valued not just because it will be a more productive and wealthier society, but also because it is a society in which the individual's social products and social relations will no longer confront him as alien forces, and in which the potentialities for self-development and self-realization created by the growth of the productive forces in present society will be realized. This pattern of development entails that alienation is a necessary historical stage of human development, progressive relative to the social relations which it supersedes. That is to say, paradoxical as it may sound, alienation must be regarded as a historical *achievement*: as a stage in the process of self-development and self-realization, not as their mere opposite.

It may help to mitigate the apparent paradox here to see that, interpreted in this way, Marx's philosophy embodies a characteristically Hegelian theme. Hegel presents it through an account of the biblical story of the Fall of Man. For Hegel, the myth of the Garden of Eden embodies the idea that, originally, human beings led a simple and innocent life in harmony with themselves and with nature. Historical development and civilization mean the end of this innocent state. With the Fall comes a condition of disharmony: of self-alienation and alienation from the natural world. In the Garden, according to the story, grew a tree of the knowledge of good and evil, whose fruit God had forbidden Adam and Eve to eat. The lesson seems to be that the

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mass, 'without any historical initiative or any independent political movement', 'Manifesto', p. 62. A great deal of contemporary social thought takes a similar line, whether by portraying modern society in a humanist way as purely 'degrading' and 'dehumanizing' (e.g. H. Braverman, *Labour and Monopoly Capital*, New York 1974), or in postmodernist style as an 'iron cage' suppressing and crushing the individual (cf. M. Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*). Marx, by contrast, believes that capitalism is producing 'its own grave-diggers'.

<sup>32</sup> 'Universally developed individuals. . . are no product of nature, but of history. The degree and the universality of the development of wealth where *this* individuality becomes possible supposes production on the basis of exchange values as a prior condition, whose universality produces not only the alienation of the individual from himself and from others, but also the universality and the comprehensiveness of his relations and capacities', K. Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 162.

condition of original innocence and simplicity is the ideal to which we should aspire; but this is not Hegel's interpretation:

The disunion that appears throughout humanity is not a condition to rest in. But it is a mistake to regard the natural and immediate harmony as the right state. . . . Childlike innocence no doubt has in it something fascinating and attractive; but only because it reminds us of what the spirit must win for itself. The harmoniousness of childhood is a gift from the hand of nature: the second harmony must spring from the labour and culture of the spirit.<sup>33</sup>

Our present condition of disharmony and alienation is not ideal; but there is no question of going back. The true content of the idea of a harmonious life lies in the future; and it can be attained only by going through a necessary stage of division and alienation.

### Justice and Right

I have been arguing that Marx sees historical development as progressive because it has involved the development of the productive forces and this, in turn, involves the growth of human capacities and powers. But is that all? According to writers like Geras, Cohen and Elster, Marx regards socialism as a 'higher' form of society than capitalism also because it is fairer and more just. Is there, then, also moral progress? If so, what form does it take?

In the *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, as Geras and Elster emphasize, Marx describes the socialist principle of distribution according to work as an 'advance' over capitalist principles which allow a person to live by mere ownership; and he evidently believes that a further advance will be achieved in the 'higher' stage of communism, when goods are distributed according to need. It is not clear, however, that this thought can be generalized into the view that standards of justice develop progressively throughout history. For later in the same work Marx says that only '[i]n a more advanced phase of communist society . . . can society wholly cross the narrow horizon of bourgeois right and inscribe on its banner: From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs!'<sup>34</sup> These well-known words are often taken to imply that, with conditions of abundance, the need for principles of right will be transcended altogether.

This case is well argued by Lukes, who maintains that Marx's views should be located in a tradition of thought about justice whose best known representative is Hume.<sup>35</sup> According to Hume, principles of justice are not a feature of all societies. The need for them arises only

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<sup>33</sup> G. Hegel, *Logic*, §24z, p. 43. (For Hegel, it should be noted, the sphere of spirit' is the sphere of society and history.) It is interesting to compare this passage with Marx's *Grundrisse*, p. III, where he talks of ancient Greece as humanity's stage of 'innocence' and 'childhood'. However, there is no hint of teleology in this passage. Marx acknowledges the 'eternal charm' of this stage without suggesting a future 'second harmony'.

<sup>34</sup> K. Marx, 'Critique of the Gotha Programme', *The First International and After*, London 1993, p. 347.

<sup>35</sup> S. Lukes, *Marxism and Morality*; D. Hume, *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, sec. 3.

in certain circumstances: in conditions of relative scarcity. Marx, it seems, is thinking along similar lines; although the 'circumstances of justice' which he identifies include those of class division.<sup>36</sup> On this account, principles of justice develop only with the emergence of class divisions and the state; and they are destined to perish when such divisions are finally overcome in the communist society of the future.<sup>37</sup> The history of justice culminates in its supersession.

This account does not exclude the idea of moral progress, but it does rule out the picture of it implied by writers like Geras, Cohen and Elster. For they believe that Marx has a 'transhistorical' and 'universal' idea of justice which is increasingly realized in the transition from capitalism to communism. As an account of Marx's thought this is quite untenable. Not only does Marx himself explicitly and repeatedly repudiate such a conception of justice; it is entirely alien to the historical approach. For this entails that there is no single, universally right social order. Different social forms, governed by different principles of justice, arise in different conditions and in different times, and are necessary and right for their specific conditions and times; and with time they also lose their necessity and rightness, as the conditions for a new social order develop. Principles of justice and right are social and historical phenomena.

This is clearly the case with the principles which these writers cite as 'universal' and 'transhistorical' and attribute to Marx.<sup>38</sup> According to Geras, for example, it is a universal principle that those who labour are 'entitled' to the product of their labour, on the ground that 'it violates a principle of moral equality if the efforts of some people go unrewarded whilst others enjoy benefits without having to expend any effort'.<sup>39</sup> These are distinctively modern ideas. They would have been quite alien in the ancient world and, indeed, throughout the pre-capitalist period. Almost the opposite principle is defended by Aristotle. The fruits of labour, he argues, should in the main be enjoyed by those who do *not* work to produce them. For labour, Aristotle thought, renders the worker unfit to appreciate its products: the fully human capacity for enjoyment requires leisure and a life free from work.<sup>40</sup>

These aristocratic attitudes now seem monstrous and unjust; but they are characteristic of much ancient and medieval moral thought. They seemed self-evident and right, not only to Aristotle but to countless

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<sup>36</sup> Geras questions this interpretation in 'The Controversy about Marx and Justice', p. 60f. He argues that Marx means only that *bourgeois* right will be overcome in communist society.

<sup>37</sup> I am sceptical about this vision of communism, but it was undoubtedly held by Marx.

<sup>38</sup> It is noteworthy that each holds a different view about the content of these 'universal' principles.

<sup>39</sup> N. Geras, 'Bringing Marx to justice', pp. 160–1. Marx specifically repudiates such views in 'Critique of Gotha Programme' and elsewhere. G. Cohen by contrast suggests that common ownership is a natural right. There is equally little basis for attributing this view to Marx.

<sup>40</sup> Aristotle is not just talking about slave labour but about all 'mechanical' occupations, including handicrafts, music and the arts, *The Politics*, trans. T.A. Sinclair, Harmondsworth 1981, book 8.

others over a period of several millennia. To suggest that all these people were simply mistaken, and that the eternal principles of justice were not rightly understood until modern times is absurd; to ascribe such views to Marx is doubly so.<sup>41</sup> Something like this is implied by Geras, however, when he insists that the principle of justice that he attributes to Marx has a transhistorical 'reach', and that it can be applied unproblematically to 'virtually all history'.<sup>42</sup>

It is quite possible, of course, to apply current moral standards to different societies and periods; but one should be aware that this is what one is doing. As Engels says:

It is very easy to inveigh against slavery and similar things in general terms, and to give vent to high moral indignation at such infamies. Unfortunately all that this conveys is only what everyone knows, namely, that these institutions of antiquity are no longer in accord with our present conditions and our sentiments, which these conditions determine. But it does not tell us one word as to how these institutions arose, why they existed, and what role they played in history.<sup>43</sup>

Slavery, Engels argues, constituted the necessary basis for the development of ancient Greek and Roman civilization. 'It was slavery that first made possible the division of labour between agriculture and industry on a large scale, and thereby also . . . the flowering of the ancient world.' When judged relatively, in the context of its own times—which for Engels is the only appropriate way to judge it: 'we are compelled to say—however contradictory and heretical it may sound—that the introduction of slavery under the conditions prevailing at that time was a great step forward', not only for society as a whole but even for the slaves themselves. For slaves in the ancient world were generally captured in war and previously would have been put to death.<sup>44</sup>

Coming closer to the present, similar issues are raised when the attempt is made to apply absolute standards of justice to capitalism. Cohen usefully explores these issues, which is to his credit since they pose considerable problems for his position. Like Geras, he too maintains that Marxism involves a transhistorical notion of justice, according to which it condemns capitalism as inherently unjust for exploitation it involves. On the other hand, as Cohen points out, Marx argues that, in its initial stages, capitalism and these exploitative social relations are a necessary condition for the development of the productive forces from their low level under feudalism to the level required for the creation of a 'just' (non-exploitative) socialist society. As Cohen puts it, 'exploitation was not only unavoidable for productive progress, but unavoidable *tout court*. Justice without progress was not an historically feasible option, because justice<sup>45</sup> was not an historically feasible option'.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> This is a quick way of dealing with an important and difficult issue, to which I hope to return elsewhere.

<sup>42</sup> N. Geras, 'Bringing Marx to Justice', pp. 57–8, cf. p. 44.

<sup>43</sup> Engels, *Anti-Dühring*, Moscow 1962, p. 250.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 249–50.

<sup>45</sup> I.e., Cohen's absolute conception of it.

<sup>46</sup> G. Cohen, 'Freedom, Justice, and Capitalism', *History, Labour, and Freedom*, Oxford 1988, p. 304.

Given this, to insist on a morality of justice is to adopt the attitude *fiat justitia, pereat mundus*. Some philosophers have defended this principle.<sup>47</sup> Cohen does not go so far, yet he says, ‘I hope that, had I been around in, say, 1820 . . . I would have joined the fight against capitalism, doubtful that it would succeed to a liberation-defeating extent, but . . . being determined to continue to fight even if that doubt should have turned out to be misplaced.’<sup>48</sup> This paradoxical position—*fiat justitia* but hopefully not *perat mundus*—is forced upon Cohen by his adherence to an absolute standard of justice. There are no grounds for suggesting that Marx follows him in this. For Marx, as I have been arguing, maintains that conceptions of justice are historical and relative, and arise only when the social forces whose aspirations they express have already taken shape in society.

Cohen, Geras and other recent adherents to the view that Marx believes in transhistorical principles of justice are silent about the way in which these principles are to be justified. Historically, however, this has been the greatest problem for this view. Fundamental principles of justice are sometimes held to be ‘self-evident’,<sup>49</sup> but that is not tenable; what appears self-evident at one time may well not do so at another.<sup>50</sup> Self-evidence is a historical and relative matter.<sup>51</sup>

The appeal to a universal standard of reason to settle moral disputes is not, in the end, any more satisfactory. As Hegel argues against Kant, the attempt to justify principles of justice on purely rational grounds is doomed to failure. For if, as Kant believes, reason is purely formal and abstract, then it cannot produce principles with a content; whereas if reason has a content, it is one which develops and changes historically.<sup>52</sup> Reason, too, has a history; it is not a universal and eternal court of appeal. In MacIntyre’s words, ‘rationality itself, whether theoretical or practical, is a concept with a history. . . . There are rationalities rather than rationality. . . just as . . . there are justices rather than justice.’<sup>53</sup> In short, principles of justice are not eternally self-evident or rational; they are historical and relative.

Such an account, it is often said, must lead to a pure relativism which excludes any idea of progress. But there is another possibility. Writers like Hegel and MacIntyre maintain that modern liberal conceptions of justice constitute an advance relative to those which prevailed in earlier times and served to justify slavery and serfdom, but not because they come closer to an eternal standard of rationality or right.

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<sup>47</sup> Notably Kant in *Political Writings*, trans. H.B. Nisbet, Cambridge 1970, p. 123. Engels explicitly rejects such a notion of justice as ‘reactionary’ in ‘The Housing Question’, *Selected Works*, vol. 1, pp. 565–6. Cf. Hegel: ‘welfare without right is not a good. Similarly, right without welfare is not the good; *fiat justitia* should not lead to *perat mundus*’; *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. H.B. Nisbet, Cambridge 1991, §130.

<sup>48</sup> G. Cohen, ‘Peter Mew on Justice and Capitalism’, *Inquiry*, vol. 29, 1986, pp. 321–2.

<sup>49</sup> As in the US Declaration of Independence.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. the example of Aristotle discussed above.

<sup>51</sup> That this is itself now self-evident is also historical and relative. It is an insight arising out of the tradition of social thought inaugurated by Hegel and Marx.

<sup>52</sup> G. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, §135ff.

<sup>53</sup> A. MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, London 1988, p. 9.

Thus MacIntyre argues that different conceptions of rationality and justice are parts of a continuous tradition, and that 'standards of rational justification themselves emerge from and are part of a history in which they are vindicated by the way in which they transcend the limitations of and provide remedies for the defects of their predecessors within the history of that same tradition'.<sup>54</sup> Thus for MacIntyre, as for Hegel, the succession of different forms of justice and rationality is itself rational and progressive in that sense.

This view is not open to Marxism, which diverges from Hegelian philosophy at this point. For it questions the idea that the history of ideas of justice can be understood in terms of the logic of those ideas themselves; rather we must look to the development of the social forms which give rise to them.<sup>55</sup>

This may appear to rule out the idea that justice and reason develop progressively, but it does not necessarily do so. What it does rule out is the Hegelian, teleological view that reason is the motive force of their development. Historical development has in the main been the result of non-rational causal processes. These have created the material and social conditions of modern life 'in the same way as geological revolutions have created the surface of the earth'. The result of those processes, however, is an increasing development of reason, and conditions in which human beings need not simply submit to the material and social conditions of their life as to a 'natural' and externally imposed fate. For people collectively are gradually developing the means to exert a degree of conscious and rational control over the conditions of their lives; and the circumstances are being created in which we will at last be able to 'master the modern powers of production and subject them to common control'.<sup>56</sup>

### The Value of Progress

Marx thus portrays history as a progressive process in the sense that it involves the growth of human productive powers, and hence the development of human nature in all its aspects: needs and desires, powers and capacities, freedom and reason. This theory provides the basis on which he criticizes capitalism and envisages socialism. It does not appeal to universal or transhistorical values in the sense assumed by the writers I have been criticizing—either of human nature or of morality and justice. Nor is it a teleological theory: it does not posit an

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<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>55</sup> This is what Marx means when he says: 'morality, religion, metaphysics, [and] all the rest of ideology... have no history, no development; but men developing their material production and their material intercourse, alter, along with this their real existence, their thinking and the products of their thinking'; *The German Ideology*, p. 47. Engels later adds an important and necessary qualification when he acknowledges that the development of ideas in any particular field can attain a degree of 'relative autonomy'.

<sup>56</sup> K. Marx, 'The Future Results of the British Rule in India', *Surveys from Exile*, p. 325. Cf. Engels: 'then for the first time man, in a certain sense... emerges from mere animal conditions of existence into really human ones... Only from that time will man himself, more and more consciously, make his own history', *Anti-Dühring*, pp. 388–9. See also E.H. Carr, *What is History?*, Harmondsworth 1964, chapters 5–6.



ultimate end towards which history is heading. It assesses the present and values the future on the basis of criteria which are historical and relative, and which emerge from forces and tendencies which are active and immanent in the present.

The following objection can be anticipated at this point. Even if this account of history is accepted, it will be said, it gives no reason why human development should be valued and regarded as progress. On the contrary, such development has simply been assumed as a universal value by which historical development can be assessed.

This involves a misunderstanding of the character of Marx's thought. Its aim is not to try to prove that human development *ought* to be valued, but to show that it *is* so. But even granted this—even given that human development is as a matter of fact valued—it will be objected, we can still ask whether it ought to be. What reasons are there for valuing it and regarding it as progress? At this point one can only reply in naturalistic terms, as does Mill when he insists that 'the sole evidence it is possible to produce that something is desirable is that people do actually desire it'.<sup>57</sup>

People do actually desire self-development. On that, Mill and Marx are agreed; but for very different reasons. Mill's philosophy is based on a utilitarian conception of human nature which portrays the desires for economic and human development as universal. For Marx, by contrast, these desires and values are socially and historically developed. They are explicitly repudiated by Aristotle, Plato and many other philosophers of antiquity, who regard economic growth as a threat to the social order, and the growth of needs and desires beyond traditional and established limits as incompatible with individual happiness. Universal social and individual development as ends in themselves are distinctively modern values.<sup>58</sup> Since the eighteenth century they have increasingly come to dominate social thought: not just that of Hegel and Marx, but also the main tradition of modern liberal philosophy, of which Hegel and Marx are, in this respect, heirs.

To regard such values as historical products is not to suggest, I must stress, that they are for that reason arbitrary. Their adoption is not simply a matter of one sort of moral 'discourse' or 'vocabulary' replacing another, still less of mere subjective preference. On the contrary, such values give expression to some of the most fundamental material aspects of society. The very structure of ancient society was, indeed, threatened by the forces unleashed by commercial expansion, and ancient attitudes to economic growth arise out of and reflect this fact. Plato and Aristotle had a largely correct understanding of it, even if they mistakenly believed that the conditions of ancient Greek society were universal and natural. As Marx says, 'all previous forms of society . . . foundered on the development of wealth. Those thinkers of antiquity who were possessed of consciousness therefore directly

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<sup>57</sup> J.S. Mill, *Utilitarianism*, p. 288.

<sup>58</sup> This is not to suggest that human development and progress have become universally accepted as values. They have had, and will continue to have, their opponents and critics.

denounced wealth as the dissolution of the community'.<sup>59</sup> Modern society has the very opposite basis. It positively requires constant expansion and is threatened by stagnation; and this is reflected in the values which have come to dominate modern social thought.<sup>60</sup>

The desire for universal human development has thus emerged and developed with modern, capitalist, society. And, according to Marx, it is the inability of capitalism to satisfy this desire which points the way beyond capitalism, towards a 'new' and 'higher' form of society in which the human potentialities developed by capitalism can be more fully realized. This is the basis on which he criticizes capitalism and envisages socialism.

### The End of History?

I have tried to explain Marx's critical method and defend it against a line of philosophical criticism which is often brought against it. It may well seem, however, that it does no service to Marxism to interpret it in this way. For Marxism is thereby tied to an empirical theory of history, and thus hostage to the actual course that history takes. This appears to have turned decisively against Marxism and socialism more generally in recent times. The very idea of a stage beyond capitalism is an illusion, we are constantly told: capitalism and the free market constitute the final stage of social development, the 'end of history'.

In this context it is not difficult to see the attractions of the view that Marxism is a form of ethical socialism based upon transcendent values. For that view can comfort itself with the belief that even if Marx's theory of history, with its prediction of the supersession of capitalism, turns out to be entirely mistaken, the values of Marxism and its vision of socialism are unaffected and retain their validity. However, the problems caused for socialism by the course that history has recently been taking are objectively real and it is no help to Marxism to try to evade them in this fashion.

Values and ideals are hostage to empirical reality whether we like it or not. Socialism cannot avoid the problems this presents. If no movements emerge to oppose capitalism and to create an alternative society, if we really are at the end of history, then Marxism will indeed be refuted. But there are no good grounds for believing that to be the

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<sup>59</sup> *Grundrisse*, p. 540. Of course, other views and different values also existed in the ancient world. The sophists, for example, developed a philosophy of individual self-interest, with affinities to the ideas of Enlightenment liberalism. However, the sophist philosophy too must be seen as a response to existing economic and social changes. These were undermining the traditional communal order and creating the basis for the individualism that the sophists welcomed. Nevertheless, in the fifth century BC the conditions for a fully commercial society had not yet developed, and the sophists had no conception of how their social and moral ideas could be realized. In contrast to Enlightenment liberalism, their theories do not attain a positive and programmatic form, but remain negative and sceptical.

<sup>60</sup> 'Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions . . . distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all previous ones', K. Marx and F. Engels, 'Manifesto', p. 70.

case. Marxism provides a theoretical framework for understanding the capitalist system which remains both applicable and illuminating. The capitalist world continues to be torn by conflicts and crises, and it is clear that free-market nostrums are no solution to the economic and social problems of the ex-Communist world either. It is impossible to believe that this is the end of history; forces of opposition to capitalism will surely emerge. This is the faith of socialism. It is a faith at present in that one cannot point to the actual existence of significant forces of this kind. But that is not to say that it is a blind faith. Nor is it a faith based on transcendent ideals. Rather, as I have tried to show, it is the belief—rationally grounded in a theory of history—that the aspiration towards a higher stage of society is not a mere ideal but the movement of historical reality itself.