

MARX AND JUSTICE REVISITED:
THE GREEK DIMENSION

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The question of the ethical status of Marx's analysis of capitalism has provoked considerable disagreement among scholars in recent years, and in Britain the contributions of Norman Geras have done much to clarify the important points at issue.¹ In this article I will offer some criticisms of Geras's position while arguing that an appreciation of the Greek dimension of Marx's thought helps to shed light on the origins of the ethical outlook implicit in his social theory.

The tension in Marx's social science is clear. He disdained ethical discourse and consistently opposed moralistic interventions in the social and political issues of his day, once proclaiming that 'communists do not preach *morality* at all.'² He showed no interest in abstract discussions about how and why individuals ought to act towards each other in a morally defensible way, and he argued that capitalism had either destroyed morality or turned it into a palpable lie.³ Attempts to build support for socialist ideas on moral precepts were viewed as distractions from the priority of confronting the underlying causes of social misery in the processes of material production.⁴ Yet his work is replete with indignant descriptions of the dehumanising power of capital, expressed in clearly moral terms. Although in general I am sympathetic with attempts to draw out the ethical dimension of Marx's thought, I will argue that Geras is wrong to designate the tension as a 'pervasive contradiction'⁵ and that it is possible to explicate Marx's position without

resorting to Geras's argument that 'Marx did think capitalism was unjust but did not think he thought so.'⁶ I will argue that Marx operated from a position of 'qualified relativism' with regards to justice, accepting that capitalism was just in its own terms but exposing the limitations and inadequacy of that justice in terms of a socialist alternative which was developing within capitalism itself. I question Geras's conclusion that Marx implicitly condemns capitalism as unjust by reference to a 'generalised moral entitlement' to control over the means of production, which, is, in effect, a natural right.⁷ Finally, I take issue with his suggestion that Marx considered that the working class could dispense with ideals in their struggle for socialism.

Geras argues that there is a real and deep-seated inconsistency in Marx's work between his acceptance of capitalism as 'just' and the moral language which he uses to condemn it. On the one hand, Marx argues that the process through which surplus value is produced is just, as each mode of production has norms of justice appropriate to it. For example, in the third volume of *Capital* he states that the content of capitalist contracts is just 'so long as it corresponds to the mode of production and is adequate to it,'⁸ and he makes the same point in the *Critique of the Gotha Programme*.⁹ In the first volume of *Capital* he specifically denies that an injustice has been done to the seller of labour power when the capitalist makes a profit,¹⁰ or that the seller has been defrauded.¹¹ On the other hand, Marx condemns

capitalism in moral terms which amount, in Geras's view, to deeming it unjust. In various parts of the first volume of *Capital* he describes the extraction of surplus value as 'robbing', 'stealing', 'pumping booty' out of the workers, and 'embezzling',¹² and elsewhere he refers to it 'in plain language' as 'loot' and 'the theft of alien labour time.'¹³ Geras concludes that Marx makes transhistorical moral judgements while simultaneously holding the view that all principles of justice are specific to each mode of production and cannot be used to judge practices in other modes.

A number of writers have argued that it is not necessarily a contradiction to maintain a relativist view of justice and at the same time criticise capitalism in moral terms. George Brenkert, Steven Lukes, and Allen Wood¹⁴ have separately argued that Marx's condemnation of capitalism rested on values such as freedom and self-actualisation, but not on a conception of justice based on eternal principles. Joseph McCarney has argued that the moral language employed by Marx in describing exploitation need not necessarily be treated at the same theoretical level as the concept of justice. He suggests that in Marx's work we can separate justice, as 'relativised to a particular social order' from evaluations which have 'some element of transhistorical meaning,' for, after all, it is common enough to regard justice as 'contextually bound and specifically juridical.'¹⁵ I think that on this point McCarney is fundamentally correct, but Geras quite reasonably demands to see some evidence to

support and explain the point that this was what Marx was doing.¹⁶ In what follows I will attempt to clarify Marx's conception of justice as one of 'qualified relativism' and suggest that it owes much to his early immersion in the philosophy and culture of Ancient Greece.

A key feature of Marx's ethical position is his conception of human essence, a conception which Geras has done much to defend.¹⁷ I have argued elsewhere that his conception of human essence serves as an ethical foundation for his social theory.¹⁸ Marx considers that what makes us distinctively human is our ability to produce creatively and socially, a conception which combines thinking and doing. The products of human endeavour are the material evidence of our distinctiveness, 'the open book of man's essential powers,'¹⁹ but in successive modes of production the producers do not experience this power as their own. The mass of producers have never controlled the productive process. The human essence is realised throughout history, but always in distorted or perverted forms. In the emergence and further development of capitalism as a global system imbued with inescapable structural contradictions, Marx sees the opportunity for the producers to take control over the production processes and bring their existence into harmony with their essence, thereby announcing the end of the 'prehistory' of human society.²⁰ This outlook is essentialist and teleological and reflects Marx's enduring attachment to Ancient Greek thought. Like Aristotle, Marx defines the human essence not simply in factual terms but

with the implication that it *ought* to be fulfilled. Its projected fulfilment in communist society is conceived in epic terms as the end of a long journey of successive class struggles.

When Marx deals with the unfairness of the labour contract in capitalism he does so in explicitly dialectical terms. Geras accuses Marx of resorting to 'dialectical wizardry' in arguing that equal exchange is transformed into unequal exchange.²¹ In the *Grundrisse* he proposes that 'by a peculiar logic the right of property on the side of capital is dialectically transformed into the right to an alien product...the right to appropriate alien labour without equivalent.'²² In the first volume of *Capital* he writes that 'to the extent that commodity production, in accordance with its own immanent laws, undergoes a further development into capitalist production, the property laws of commodity production must undergo a dialectical inversion so that they become laws of capitalist appropriation.'²³ Behind the appearance of the exchange of equivalents lies the essence of exploitation. In unmasking the extraction of surplus value hidden behind the rhetoric of the free exchange of equivalents, Marx shows how power is wrested from the producers and re-presented to them in the forms of money or capital as alien powers standing above them.²⁴ The worker, when exchanging his labour capacity with the capitalist, 'surrenders its creative power, like Esau who gave up his birthright for a mess of pottage.'²⁵ This loss of freedom is

inscribed in capitalism's defining process, the extraction of surplus value arising from the purchase and sale of labour power. For Marx, the deprivation of the creative power of labour from the worker is a perversion of the human essence.

Geras objects that Marx's resort to the dialectic in discussing the rights and wrongs of the labour contract only muddies the water, as the wage relation is either an exchange of equivalents and therefore just, or it is not, and 'a thing cannot be its opposite.' He concludes that the confusion among commentators on this point is therefore 'a fruit of Marx's own prevarication.'²⁶ This fundamental criticism of Marx's use of dialectic is somewhat surprising in view of Geras's earlier work on the appearance/essence distinction in Marx,²⁷ but it requires us to think more carefully about Marx's work on essence and appearance and how it fits in with the ethical position implicit in his work. With this in mind I will now turn to the Greek dimension of Marx's thought.

THE GREEK DIMENSION

Marx began to forge his social theory in an intellectual *milieu* dominated by the ghost of Hegel and the iconoclastic Feuerbach, but the more distant voices of Ancient Greece resonate in the German philosophical debates of the early nineteenth century and were particularly significant in Marx's education. I do not wish to elevate Aristotle as a major

influence on Marx's social theory at the expense of Hegel,²⁸ but rather work from the assumption that both Hegel's idea of ethical community (*Sittlichkeit*) and Marx's vision of communist society owe a great deal to their independent absorption of Greek philosophy.²⁹ German intellectual life in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century was prone to 'Graecomania', following the rediscovery of Greek art by Johann Winckelmann.³⁰ Michael De Golyer refers to a Greek 'fetishism' in Germany, with Berlin the undisputed centre of classical scholarship, crowned in 1831 by the commencement of the publication of the first modern edition of Aristotle's works.³¹ Marx was steeped in Greek and Latin culture at school and later at University, and his library contained numerous volumes of Greek and Roman texts, most of them in the original language.³² His doctoral thesis was a highly original comparison of the natural philosophy of Democritus and Epicurus, and the preparatory work involved extensive reading of Aristotle's work. Marx referred to Aristotle as the 'genius' and 'the greatest thinker of antiquity,'³³ and he regarded Epicurus as 'the greatest representative of Greek Enlightenment' and 'the true radical Enlightener of antiquity.'³⁴

Let us first consider the affinities between Marx's philosophy and the ethics of Greek culture as displayed in the epic literature to which he returned throughout his life. As Julia Annas has written, the central element of Greek ethics was wholeness, the sense of things coming together,

reconciled.³⁵ This is exemplified in the Homeric epics, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, in which the extremes of brutality and suffering are brought to resolution with a sense of integrity earned through hard experience. Of all the Greek myths, the story of Prometheus made the biggest impact on Marx, who even described this fictional character as 'the most eminent saint and martyr in the philosophical calendar.'³⁶ Prometheus (the 'foreseer') stole fire from the Gods and empowered humanity, and the Gods took vengeance by having him bound to a rock for thousands of years. At night he froze and by day his liver was pecked at by birds, but he endured his sufferings, eventually to be freed and reconciled with the God Zeus.³⁷ This idea of achieving ultimate resolution only through the experience of heroic struggle is a leitmotif in Marx's political writings. For example, in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* he depicts proletarian revolutions as throwing down their adversary 'only in order that he may draw new strength from the earth and rise again, more gigantic, before them, and recoil again and again from the indefinite prodigiousness of their own aims, until a situation has been created which makes all turning back impossible.'³⁸ In *The Poverty of Philosophy* Marx, quoting George Sand, concludes that the last word of social science will always be 'combat or death, bloody struggle or nothingness.'³⁹

The distinctive elements of Greek ethical philosophy which, I argue, throw light on the ethics implicit in Marx's analysis of capitalism are Essentialism, Teleology and

Justice. A number of scholars have noted the similarity between the essentialism of Aristotle and Marx,⁴⁰ and, as Scott Meikle has pointed out, that Marx made the first German translation of Aristotle's *De Anima*, the text in which Aristotle discusses what makes us distinctive from other animals.⁴¹ Aristotle, at the beginning of the *Politics*, sets down his essentialism:

all things derive their essential character from their function and their capacity; and it follows that if they are no longer fit to discharge their function, we ought not to say that they are still the same things, but only that, by an ambiguity, they still have the same names.⁴²

For both Aristotle and Marx our sociality and rationality are elements of our human essence, and the exercise of these capacities must be the proper function of a human being. Aristotle is concerned with the virtuous self-development of citizens, who, ultimately, must have the opportunity to engage in the contemplation of truth to achieve *eudaemonia*, or happiness.⁴³ Marx's view of what constitutes our essence goes further than specifying our capacity to reason. We are certainly moral beings, but the proof of our distinctiveness is shown in our production, in our conscious life activity. He views the self-realisation of human essence as the end or *telos* of historical development. Only with the abolition of private property and its replacement by communist society can the human essence of creative social activity be realised by

all humanity. What is assumed here is a universal ethical community based on cooperation, and without it, we are not fully free.

There is a sense in which Marx appears to move closer to the Aristotelian conception of freedom in his mature work. As we saw in the previous chapter, early in his career Marx conceived of humanity expressing its freedom through the satisfying experience of cooperative labour and interactive exchange, but in the famous passages on the realm of freedom in the third volume of *Capital* he acknowledges that true freedom is possible only when we are entirely free from necessity.⁴⁴ As Marx comments earlier in that work, for Aristotle this freedom was rendered possible only when others performed the work, not simply the labour but also the supervision of the labour. Marx envisaged the achievement of freedom through minimising necessary labour time by the employment of cooperative planning and advanced technology. Interestingly, he pointed out in the first volume of *Capital* that Aristotle conjured the ideal image of production by self-activated machines which rendered labour unnecessary.⁴⁵ Marx also refers in *Capital* to Aristotle's contempt for money-lending, expressed in the *Politics*, in which profit from money-lending has 'justice disapproved' because it is based on 'mutual cheating.' The usurer is 'rightly hated' because he is using money for purposes for which it was not invented.⁴⁶ In other words the usurer is perverting the essence of money, which lies in facilitating the exchange of commodities. He

condemns traders as *kapelos*, or hucksters, because their activities undermine the bonds which hold the community together. Marx's analysis of money ruled out the idea that money could operate in a 'purer' way through schemes such as 'labour money,' as suggested by the followers of Proudhon, but the attention given to this issue in the *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* reveals his appreciation of Aristotle's thoughts on the role of money in society.⁴⁷

Essentialism is often rejected on the grounds that it falls into the trap of the naturalistic fallacy of deriving an 'ought' from an 'is'. How can we infer a moral commitment from an essence which is defined in factual and descriptive terms? It may be true that human beings are essentially human because of their social creativity, but this does not tell us why the realisation of this essence ought to be regarded as a morally desirable goal. One answer to this has been provided by Richard Norman, who suggests that Marx, unlike Aristotle, relies not on essentialist arguments for justifying his goal of self-realisation, but on empirical ones, that is, he points to widespread dissatisfaction if human existence continues to be alienated.⁴⁸ This is true, but it makes it no less of an essentialist argument. The important thing to bear in mind is that the definition of essence is not simply a factual one but has values built into it. Alasdair MacIntyre, in *After Virtue*, argues that values are often built in to premises, particularly when the premises are of a functional kind. In the case of Aristotle his ethical theory is couched in

functional terms - the relationship of 'man' to 'living well' is likened to a harpist playing the harp well.⁴⁹ In Marx the human essence is located in our capacity for social creativity, which encompasses our capacity to regulate our lives in a moral way. The 'ought' is built in to what it is to be human, so in effect we are deriving an 'ought' from an 'is'. Philip Kain, in *Marx and Ethics*, recognises similarities in the essentialism of Aristotle and Marx, and rightly argues that for Marx values are embedded in our essence. He accepts that it *is* illegitimate to deduce moral conclusions from non-moral premises, but if real-world facts already have values embedded in them, then we can derive values from these facts.⁵⁰ MacIntyre and Kain are correct in arguing that values are embedded in Marx's view of what it is to be human; as Mihailo Markovic has concluded, in Marx the 'is' is always infused with the 'ought'.⁵¹

According to Aristotle, the nature of a thing is its end, or *telos*, 'the final form attained in an entity's process of development.'⁵² Teleology has long been an unfashionable philosophical concept often equated with irrationalism or mysticism because it understands past and present developments in terms of a purpose or final cause. Yet there is nothing mystical in realising that, for example, we can understand the nature of an acorn only if we know that its natural development will produce an oak. This perspective may be extended to help us make sense of historical development, as Hegel does in *The Philosophy of History*, in which he claims

that 'the final cause of the World at large' is the successive unfolding of human freedom.⁵³ Marx adopted a teleological approach, not simply as an assertion of historical inevitability, but in his endeavour to uncover 'the special laws that regulate the origin, existence, development and death of a given social organism and its replacement by another, higher one.' This description of his method by a reviewer of *Capital* was received with approbation by Marx as an accurate summary of his dialectical method.⁵⁴

In the Introduction to the *Grundrisse* Marx considered why people continued to derive immense aesthetic pleasure from Greek art and epic poetry when the conditions which gave rise to it had so little in common with those of his day:

An adult cannot become a child again, or he becomes childish. But does not the naivete of the child give him pleasure, and must he not himself endeavour to reproduce the child's veracity on a higher level? Does not the specific character of every epoch come to life again in its natural veracity in the child's nature? Why should not the historical childhood of humanity, where it attained its most beautiful form, exert an eternal charm as a stage that will never recur?⁵⁵

This plea to reproduce the truth revealed by children at a higher level brings out the teleological nature of his own thought. He conjures an image of history as an odyssey, a wandering journey striving for a peaceful home. As he stood on

the threshold of committing himself to communism Marx commented that the feeling for freedom had vanished from the world with the Greeks, but can 'again transform society into a community of human beings united for their highest aims, into a democratic state.'⁵⁶ Marx here shows a higher regard for the Greek conception of freedom than Hegel. As Horst Mewes has commented, Marx can be seen as one of the last major figures to be 'under the influence of a peculiarly German version of the dialogue between ancient and modern dominant during the eighteenth century.'⁵⁷ Marx saw communism as the realisation of human freedom, the rational culmination of a long process of struggle.

More often than not teleology is regarded as irrational, but Scott Meikle has rightly denied that Marx's teleological thought involves an 'occultism' in which the future acts causally upon the present, nor one in which teleological change is 'the fulfilment of the design of a hidden purpose.'⁵⁸ Teleological argument does not imply that a final cause acts as an agent in place of an efficient cause.⁵⁹ Marx's theory of history *is* teleological, because it projects the rise of capitalism as inexorable and its end as inevitable, but his projected alternative has to be struggled for, within the constraints of the given conditions, without guarantees. There are, of course, undoubtedly polemical pieces written by Marx in which he writes with excessive certitude about the future victory of the proletariat. For example, in 1848 he claims that the fall of the bourgeoisie and the victory of the

proletariat were 'equally inevitable', and in 1871 he refers to 'that higher form to which present society is irresistibly tending by its own economical agencies.'⁶⁰ A teleological approach may encourage these exaggerated predictions, but it also encourages an examination of immanent tendencies so that we can anticipate certain possible outcomes and formulate strategies accordingly. I shall argue later, *contra* Geras, that the teleological approach does not dispense with ideals, but only insists that they are infused with a strict sense of realism.

Does Marx's commitment to the goal of human freedom imply a belief in the imminent appearance of a perfect society? This is the caricature suggested by Lukes, who imputes to Marx a perfectionism with connotations of a complacent life free from disagreement and bereft of ambition.⁶¹ Noting that Marx had nothing but contempt for the morality of *Recht*, or civil rights, Lukes points to social relations in an imaginary socialist society and concludes that 'even high-level, communally related angels stand in need of *Recht*.'⁶² Marx criticised appeals to civil rights because they offered the false promise of social harmony by bestowing rights to individuals against the state, leaving untouched the problem of the separation of the private from the public sphere. He opposed the idea that a commitment to the 'rights of man' could provide human emancipation while leaving untouched the structures of an alienated, privatised, society.⁶³ He also noted that what civil rights could provide - political

emancipation or democracy - was often set to one side if the interests of the ruling class were endangered.⁶⁴ There is nothing at all to suggest, as Lukes does, that Marx had no place for laws in a socialist society. For Marx, *Recht* belongs to the bourgeois state, and the essence of the bourgeois state is that it reflects the domination of that class. A classless society would obviously need political and administrative institutions, but they would not constitute a state by Marx's definition, and therefore laws would not amount to *Recht*. Lukes's reference to the 'angels' of communist society imputes to Marx a romanticism which he flatly rejected. His vision of emancipated humanity needs no angels, only the democratic removal of the last 'antagonistic social relations of production.'⁶⁵ Differences of various sorts would naturally continue as real human history begins to unfold for the first time, but the differences would not be grounded in exploitation or oppression. The assumption is not one of perfect concord, but of genuine democratic assent to whatever processes are instituted to settle such differences.⁶⁶ Without differences of opinion there would be nothing left to criticise, an occupation which Marx personally looked forward to in the future society.⁶⁷

Turning now to the concept of justice, we know that Marx was familiar with the somewhat ambiguous remarks of Aristotle and Epicurus on the relationship between natural justice and legal justice. In the first volume of *Capital* Marx praises Aristotle for being the first thinker to analyse the value-

form in political economy.⁶⁸ Aristotle recognised that for commodities to be exchanged fairly they must be commensurable in some way. The standard of measure was demand, and this was expressed through the medium of money. However, although money expresses commensurability it does not explain it, and in Marx's opinion the reason that Aristotle failed to recognise that labour was the common ingredient in the value of commodities was that he lived in a slave society, based on human inequality;

The secret of the expression of value, namely the equality and equivalence of all kinds of labour because and insofar as they are human labour in general, could not be deciphered until the concept of human equality had already acquired the permanence of a fixed popular opinion.⁶⁹

The passages to which Marx refers are taken from Book V of the *Nichomachean Ethics*, which is devoted to justice. Aristotle's ideas on justice here, stressing fairness and reciprocity, would have had radical implications if he had adopted a labour theory of value, for he would have established a just entitlement for slaves. Clearly this was not his intention, and yet there is plenty of ammunition both here and in the condemnation of usury in the *Politics* for Marx to make use of in his critique of political economy.

In this part of the *Ethics* we see Aristotle stressing the importance of proportional reciprocation as the basis for fair exchange and condemning the extremes of `excess and

deficiency' as unjust. Without reciprocity there is no social bond and the state cannot hold together.⁷⁰ In bourgeois political economy the claim is made that there is reciprocity and fairness in the labour contract, but the society throws up immense extremes of 'excess and deficiency' and, in Marx's view, is unsustainable as a social formation. Michael de Golyer argues that Aristotle's concept of justice and Marx's concept of equality are 'obverse and reverse of the same concept, community.'⁷¹ Aristotle thought that equals ought to be treated equally, but appeared willing to accept whatever social divisions existed in any particular society. Marx was committed to equality for all human beings, and this is a vital part of the ethical underpinning of his work.

The philosophy of Epicurus held a powerful attraction for the young Marx, who was particularly impressed by his commitment to a life without illusions; he described Epicurus as the 'atheistic philosopher *par excellence*.'⁷² For Epicurus, freedom was conceived as freedom from fear, and fear was often fear of the unknown; knowledge was therefore central to overcoming fear. Coming after the eclipse of Athenian democracy, Epicurus chose to shun politics and favour a contemplative life of balanced mental and physical pleasures in a condition of *ataraxia*, or serenity, a feature of which was friendship, conceived as a non-instrumental end.⁷³ Although Marx was quintessentially a *political* philosopher, it seems to me that his vision of the self-realised emancipated individual

in communist society, empowered by knowledge and living free from fear, has Epicurean resonances.⁷⁴

Epicurus's views on justice (as presented by Diogenes Laertius) were copied out by Marx in the preparatory notebooks he made in 1839 for his doctoral dissertation. Their significance to Marx are clearly shown by the exceptional emphasis he gives them in the margin.⁷⁵ Indeed six years later, in *The German Ideology*, when praising Epicurus as the founder of social contract theory, the textual evidence he cites is in the passages in question.⁷⁶ Epicurus argues that justice exists only in mutual relations, and changes according to whether it is expedient for those mutual relations; what was once right can become no longer right if it ceases to serve its original purpose. If somebody stipulates a system of justice, it has the 'essence' of justice if it is valid for everyone, but this validity is socially grounded. If the system does not in fact aid 'mutual intercourse' it loses that essence. Epicurus couches his views on justice in paradoxical form:

In general, the same justice is valid for all (for it is something useful in mutual intercourse); but the special conditions of the country and the totality of other possible grounds bring it about that the same justice is not valid for all.⁷⁷

An important phrase here is 'the totality of other possible grounds,' for it points to the possibility of higher forms of justice which must, however, be based on what is materially possible. In this way Epicurus introduces a historical

dimension to the discussion of justice. I will argue later that this is precisely what Marx does in his discussion of 'equal right' in the *Critique of the Gotha Programme*. It should be noted, however, that for Epicurus the higher form of justice belonged not to the future but to the recent past, to the democratic period which had been destroyed by the Macedonian victory over Greece.⁷⁸ He speaks of old systems of justice losing their utility but continuing to embrace the conception or essence of justice, and therefore being right for those 'who do not let themselves be deluded by empty talk.' This amounts to a civil disobedience argument and an appeal to moral conscience. Epicurus therefore held a historical relativist view of justice while the central thrust of his teaching was directed towards promoting *ataraxia*. His doctrine was individualistic rather than social, a spiritual transcendence of the problems generated by the defeat of the democratic community, but the passages on justice point to the possibility of achieving social harmony. It is also interesting to note that his views on the perverting power of money share the naturalistic outlook of Aristotle which was adopted by Marx. Epicurus argues that gold 'easily robbed the strong and beautiful of honour, for...however strong men are born, however beautiful their body, they follow the lead of the richer men.'⁷⁹

MARX'S ETHICS AS 'QUALIFIED RELATIVISM'

Let us now return to Marx's views on justice and his criticism of capitalism. He states that capitalism is just, in the sense that legal justice or 'right' (*Recht*) 'can never be higher than the economic structure and its cultural development which this determines.'⁸⁰ Yet clearly Marx's discussion of exploitation is full of moral indignation. On what ethical grounds does he make this condemnation, and why does he distinguish his allegations of unfairness from the concept of justice? One way in which he does this is effectively to disclose the inconsistencies in the liberal claims to justice and fairness, a form of moral realism in which he exposes the hypocrisy of capitalist justice. The point of describing the labour contract as both 'just' and 'theft' is to point up the gap between appearance and essence in the system in order to expose the class partiality of its justificatory camouflage. Marx is seeking to reveal the cant of capitalist moral claims, as, for example, in his 1848 speech on free trade when he derisively comments that 'to call cosmopolitan exploitation universal brotherhood is an idea that could only be engendered in the brain of the bourgeoisie.'⁸¹ This is an interesting example because Marx in fact favours free trade because it is progressive, which, in his assessment of the vector of capitalism, meant that it would hasten the social revolution. If Marx had stated that free trade helped to develop a thoroughly unjust society, he would have found it difficult to

support it, but what he can do is expose the partiality of the capitalist conceptions of justice, fairness, and brotherhood.

Marx's comments on the idea of 'equal right' in the future socialist society in the *Critique of the Gotha Programme* provide the clearest evidence of Marx's qualified relativism. He argues that capitalist distribution 'is the only "fair" distribution on the basis of the present-day mode of production,'⁸² the inverted commas implying that there could be other, more socially acceptable, standards of fairness. In a similar vein in the first draft of *The Civil War in France* he had written that 'every social form of property has "morals" of its own.'⁸³ In the *Critique* Marx argues that under socialism, when private property has been abolished, 'equal right' would involve distribution to individuals according to an equal standard, labour, but as individuals are different in strength and ability, equal right would give unequal rewards. An important point here is that equal right in socialist society is considered an advance on bourgeois society because 'principle and practice are no longer at loggerheads.'⁸⁴ In Marx's view, under socialism equal right would cease to be a mere semblance and the standard by which the remuneration operated would be transparent. However, it would still be based on individual reward, with the possibility of creating different sorts of division in society. He prefers, as the distributive principle of the 'higher phase, of communist society' the formula 'from each according to abilities to each according to needs,'⁸⁵ achievable presumably through an agreed

increase in the free provision of goods and services. His preference for the latter implicitly rests on a conviction that it is fairer than distribution based on individual reward, but the question remains as to what standard of fairness Marx is appealing.

The line of argument that comes closest to explicating and defending Marx's position is the one put forward by Sean Sayers, although his contributions have been strongly criticised by Geras. Sayers argues that Marx judged capitalism not by transhistorical standards but by socialist standards which develop within capitalism itself.⁸⁶ He cites Marx's comments in the third volume of *Capital* where he speculates that from the standpoint of 'a higher economic form of society' private ownership of property will one day appear as absurd as slavery does in advanced capitalist societies.⁸⁷ Sayers' argument is in line with the essentialist and teleological perspective which Marx developed from his encounters with Ancient Greece and, of course, with Hegel, and the idea of progress is central to it.⁸⁸ Geras objects that as soon as we introduce the idea of progress we necessarily invoke 'transcendent criteria' which enable us to compare one kind of society with another to see in which respects they are superior.⁸⁹ He argues that an appeal to progress does not provide a reason why something should be valued or fought for, and he insists that if we are to argue that the socialist end of history is morally superior to capitalism we are obliged to provide 'suitably general, ethically pertinent criteria' for

doing so.⁹⁰ If we provide such criteria for progress we are offering universal evaluative standards and cannot then deny that Marx operated with such standards.

I have argued that Marx's projected goal was the fulfilment of the human essence of social creativity, but the possibility of fully realising this goal cannot arise until certain conditions have been met. The problem with the demand that we recognise universal or transhistorical principles of justice is precisely that their formulation becomes suprahistorical. It suggests that we judge societies according to criteria which were not available to those societies. It replaces old forms of moral universalism with another when Marx was adamant that there was no source of morality higher than that provided by society. Sayers cites an interesting passage from the British Hegelian Bradley to the effect that all morality is and must be 'relative' because the essence of realisation is evolution through stages, and existence in some one stage is not final. Bradley repeats the essentialist argument that at every stage the essence of man *is* realised, however imperfectly, and only later can we see the deficiencies of an earlier stage, but 'the demand for a code of right in itself, apart from any stage, is seen to be the asking for an impossibility.'⁹¹ I think this qualified relativism is true for Marx, as well as Aristotle, Epicurus, and Hegel. Marx's dialectical presentation of the tension between the justice of the capitalist labour contract and the workers' experience of its operation as palpably unfair shows

how capitalist justice engenders its opposition and begs for a resolution which is compatible with the full realisation of human potential.

To return to Geras's claim that Marx is implicitly claiming a moral entitlement to social control of the means of production as a form of natural right, this raises some interesting questions. It seems to me that Marx is not doing this, but he is obviously committed to the idea of a society that will award itself such an entitlement as a necessary condition for social harmony. Although there is an element of naturalism in his stance, in that he sees communist society as providing for the realisation of the human essence, it is not a natural rights argument in any conventional use of the term. As David Bakhurst has argued, Marx rejects the idea of eternal moral principles and insists that all normative codes are created and sustained by particular communities.⁹² Bakhurst goes further in his defence of the coherence of Marx's ethical stance. He argues that Marx accepts that there are usually answers available to moral questions on the basis of our communal forms of practice and that the ability to make moral judgements is a perceptual capacity which has its origin in socialisation and will develop with communal activity. Such a view enables us to understand Marx's confidence in attacking the hypocrisy of bourgeois moral universalism without presenting an alternative universalism of a similar kind. The morality of a free society would have to be decided by that free society. This, in my reading, would be an expression of

the full realisation of the human essence of social creativity. The strength of this approach is that it reintegrates ethics into the constitution of the life of the community and allows for the emergence of an ethical spirit of the sort which Marx admired in Athenian democracy.

POLITICS WITHOUT IDEALS?

To state the obvious, Marx overestimated the extent to which the further development of capitalism would produce an irresistible movement towards socialism. For those who still regard democratic socialism as the only system which will enable humankind to flourish, there is perhaps a greater need than ever before to criticise the operation of global capitalism as perverse and dehumanising. I think Marx did this without resorting to conventional moralism, but I cannot accept Geras's argument that Marx denied that the working class could somehow dispense with ideals. Geras concedes that in staying clear of moralising criticism Marx is able to make a strong scientific analysis of capitalism, but insists that this does not 'make good or excuse the deficiency'⁹³ involved in his hostility to moral argument. As an example of Marx's bad practice he cites this example from *The Civil War in France*:

The working class...know that in order to work out their own emancipation, and along with it that higher form to

which present society is irresistibly tending by its own economical agencies, they will have to pass through long struggles, through a series of historic processes, transforming circumstances and men. They have no ideals to realise, but to set free elements of the new society with which old collapsing bourgeois society itself is pregnant.⁹⁴

Geras complains that in this passage Marx denies the validity of ideals, leaving only 'the immanent movement and that is that.'⁹⁵ Yet the process of 'setting free' elements of a higher form of society implies multiple choices and wholesale transformations, and is here presented as the only realisable ideal; in other words setting free the elements of the new society *is* an ideal.⁹⁶ Indeed in the first draft Marx specifies that it is the setting free of social forms of production from 'the trammels of slavery.'⁹⁷ Written after a calamity of such enormity that it would deter all but the boldest from entering political struggle, Marx wanted to assure the oppressed that they had more than pious hopes to rely on, and that their oppressors were not omnipotent. At the end of the text on the Paris Commune Marx writes that 'its martyrs are enshrined in the great heart of the working class,' presupposing not only a collective subject but one with a moral purpose, fired by a collective memory. The 'exterminators' of the Commune were to be 'nailed to that eternal pillory from which all the prayers of their priests will not avail to redeem them.'⁹⁸ Marx was well aware that the pursuit of ideals was crucial to the

development of a socialist consciousness, and that people were spurred to action by passionate hatred for callous and brutal oppression. However, he was surely correct to advise that action be guided by analysis of what could be achieved in the given conditions and circumstances.

NOTES

- ¹. Norman Geras, "The Controversy About Marx and Justice" in Geras, *Literature of Revolution: Essays on Marxism* (London: Verso, 1986), originally published in *New Left Review* 150, 1985, and "Bringing Marx to Justice: An Addendum and Rejoinder" in *New Left Review* 195, 1992. A full bibliography of books and articles on the theme of Marx and Justice is included in the 1985 article and updated in 1992. The debates in North America are discussed in detail by Rodney Peffer in *Marxism, Morality, and Social Justice* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), chs. 2 & 3 and the whole of part 2.
- ². Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, in *CW* 5, p. 247.
- ³. *Ibid*, p. 73.
- ⁴. This is made clear in section three of the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* in which Marx and Engels deal with a variety of socialist literature - *CW* 6, pp. 507-17.
- ⁵. Geras, "The Controversy About Marx and Justice", p. 56.
- ⁶. *Ibid*, p. 36.
- ⁷. *Ibid*, p. 45.
- ⁸. Marx, *Capital*, 3, pp. 460-1.
- ⁹. Marx, *CW* 24, p. 84.
- ¹⁰. Marx, *Capital*, 1, p. 301.
- ¹¹. *Ibid*, p. 731.
- ¹². *Ibid*, pp. 638, 728, 743, & 761.
- ¹³. Respectively, *Theories of Surplus Value*, part 2, (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1969), p. 29 & *Grundrisse* in *CW* 29, p. 91.

- ¹⁴. George Brenkert, *Marx's Ethics of Freedom* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983); Steve Lukes, *Marxism and Morality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983); Allen Wood, "The Marxian Critique of Justice" and "A Reply to Husami" in Cohen et al., *Marx, Justice, and History*.
- ¹⁵. Joseph McCarney, "Marx and Justice Again" in *New Left Review* 195, 1992, pp. 34-5; McCarney had previously argued that Marx's moral opinions were irrelevant to his social theory, in McCarney, *Social Theory and the Crisis of Marxism* (London: Verso, 1990), pp. 172-4.
- ¹⁶. Geras, "Bringing Marx to Justice", pp. 62-5.
- ¹⁷. Norman Geras, *Marx and Human Nature* (London: Verso, 1983).
- ¹⁸. The argument is outlined in Wilde, *Marx and Contradiction* (Aldershot: Avebury, 1989), pp. 23-7 and Wilde, "Marx's Concept of Human Essence and its Radical Critics" in *Studies in Marxism* 1, 1994, pp. 23-7. It is set down in more detail in Wilde, *Ethical Marxism and Its Radical Critics* (London: Macmillan, forthcoming 1998), ch. 2.
- ¹⁹. *CW* 3, p. 302.
- ²⁰. *CW* 29, p. 264.
- ²¹. *Ibid*, p. 27.
- ²². *Grundrisse*, *CW* 28, p. 386.
- ²³. *Capital*, vol. 1, pp. 733-4.
- ²⁴. The same formulation is used in 1857 (*CW* 28, p. 132) and in 1844 (*CW* 3, p. 212).
- ²⁵. *CW* 28, p. 233.
- ²⁶. Geras, "The Controversy About Marx and Justice", pp. 27-8.
- ²⁷. Norman Geras, "Essence and Appearance: Aspects of Fetishism in Marx's *Capital*" in *Literature of Revolution*, pp. 63-84.
- ²⁸. As Heinz Lubasz has done in "The Aristotelian Dimension in Marx", *Times Higher Educational Supplement*, April 1, 1977.
- ²⁹. For Aristotle's influence on Hegel and Marx see David Depew, "The *Polis* Transfigured: Aristotle's *Politics* and Marx's *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*" in *Marx and Aristotle: Nineteenth Century German Social Theory and Classical Antiquity*, ed. G. McCarthy, (Savage, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 1992); on Hegel see Allen Wood,

"Hegel's Ethics" in *The Cambridge Companion to Hegel*, ed. Frederick Beiser, (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

³⁰. Horst Mewes, "Karl Marx and the Influence of Greek Antiquity in Eighteenth Century German Thought" in *Marx and Aristotle*, ed. G. McCarthy.

³¹. Michael De Golyer, "The Greek Accent of the Marxian Matrix" in *Marx and Aristotle*, ed. McCarthy, p. 117.

³². See De Golyer, "The Greek Accent of the Marxian Matrix," p. 115 - in a letter to Engels in 1861 Marx reveals that many of his Greek texts were lost in Cologne in the 1850s (CW 41, p. 265); on his school studies see S. S. Prawer, *Karl Marx and World Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1976), pp. 1-4.

³³. Karl Marx, *Capital*, volume 1 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), p. 152. & p. 532).

³⁴. CW 1, p. 73 & CW 5, p. 141.

³⁵. Julia Annas, *The Morality of Happiness* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), ch. 1.

³⁶. Foreword to the Doctoral Dissertation, CW 1, p. 31.

³⁷. In the myth, that is. *Prometheus Bound* by Aeschylus ends with him chained to the rock, and the resolution is left to another play which has not survived.

³⁸. Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* in CW 11, pp. 106-7. He expresses similar sentiments in *The Civil War in France* in CW 22, p. 335-6, where he speaks of 'long struggles' and the 'heroic resolve' of the working class.

³⁹. CW 6, p. 212.

⁴⁰. In Britain the foremost advocate of this view is Scott Meikle, *Essentialism in the Thought of Karl Marx* (London: Duckworth, 1985), p. 58; a number of American scholars have contributed to the excellent collection edited by George McCarthy, *Marx and Aristotle*, op. cit.; see also Michel Vadee, *Marx: Penseur du Possible* (Paris: Meridiens Klincksieck, 1992).

⁴¹. Scott Meikle, *Essentialism in the Thought of Karl Marx*, p. 58. The manuscript of Marx's excerpts from *De Anima*, written in 1840, is located in the Amsterdam Institute for Social History. Marx's deep interest in the question of human nature is revealed by the extracts he made the following year from David Hume's *A Treatise of Human Nature*, which can also be found in the Amsterdam archives.

⁴². Aristotle, *Politics*, ed. & trans. Barker, E. (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 6.

- ⁴³. Alasdair MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics: A History of Moral Philosophy from the Homeric Age to the Twentieth Century* (London: Routledge, 1995), ch. 7.
- ⁴⁴. Marx, *Capital*, vol. 3 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981), p. 959.
- ⁴⁵. *Capital*, 1, p. 532.
- ⁴⁶. Ibid, p. 267, cf. Aristotle, *Politics*, pp. 28-9.
- ⁴⁷. Marx starts the book with a reference to Aristotle which reveals his significance in developing the distinction between use value and exchange value - *CW 29*, p. 269 - and there are further six references, some in Greek.
- ⁴⁸. Richard Norman, *The Moral Philosophers: An Introduction to Ethics* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1983), pp. 176-8.
- ⁴⁹. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (London: Duckworth, 1981), pp. 54-6.
- ⁵⁰. Philip Kain, *Marx and Ethics* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 30-2.
- ⁵¹. Mihailo Markovic, *From Affluence to Praxis: Philosophy and Social Criticism* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan, 1973), p.
- ⁵². Meikle, *Essentialism in the Thought of Karl Marx* p. 179.
- ⁵³. G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History* (New York: Dover, 1956), p. 19.
- ⁵⁴. Marx, *Capital*, 1, p. 102.
- ⁵⁵. *CW 28*, pp. 47-8.
- ⁵⁶. *CW 3*, p. 137.
- ⁵⁷. Horst Mewes, "Karl Marx and the Influence of Greek Antiquity in Eighteenth Century German Thought" in *Marx and Aristotle*, p. 21.
- ⁵⁸. Meikle, *Essentialism in the Thought of Karl Marx*, p. 11.
- ⁵⁹. Ibid, pp. 170-1.
- ⁶⁰. Respectively, the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* in *CW 6*, p. 496 & *The Civil War in France* in *CW 22*, p. 335.

- ⁶¹. Steven Lukes, *Marxism and Morality* (Clarendon Press & Oxford University Press: Oxford & New York, 1985), p. 142.
- ⁶². Ibid, p. 99.
- ⁶³. Marx & Engels, *The Holy Family* in *CW* 4, p. 122.
- ⁶⁴. Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* in *CW* 11, pp. 114-8.
- ⁶⁵. *CW* 29, pp. 263-4.
- ⁶⁶. William Morris illustrates this ethical ideal beautifully in his utopian novel *News From Nowhere* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), showing how divorce, dissent and criminality can be dealt with in a humane fashion in socialist society.
- ⁶⁷. Marx, in *The German Ideology* in *CW* 5, p. 47.
- ⁶⁸. Marx, *Capital* 1, p. 151.
- ⁶⁹. Ibid, p. 152.
- ⁷⁰. Aristotle, *Ethics*, trans. J. A. K. Thomson, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), pp. 182-7.
- ⁷¹. Michael de Golyer, "The Greek Accent of the Marxian Matrix," p. 129.
- ⁷². *CW* 5, p. 142.
- ⁷³. John Gaskin, Introduction to *The Epicurean Philosophers* (London: Everyman, 1995), p. xxiii & pp. xl-xli; P. Mitsis, "Epicurus on Friendship and Altruism" in *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, ed. J. Annas (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987).
- ⁷⁴. Kain makes a similar point in *Marx and Ethics*, p. 198.
- ⁷⁵. *CW* 1, p. 410, cf. John Gaskin (ed) *The Epicurean Philosophers* (London: Everyman, 1995), p. 10; Michael De Golyer is the only scholar to have noted the potential significance of Marx's interest in these passages, in "The Greek Accent of the Marxian Matrix," pp. 128-9; for a discussion of Epicurus on justice see Julia Annas, *The Morality of Happiness*, pp. 293-302.
- ⁷⁶. Marx, *CW* 5, p. 141; he also praises Epicurus for his attack on the ancient religion.
- ⁷⁷. Marx, *CW* 1, p. 410.
- ⁷⁸. G. F. Parker, *A Short Account of Greek Philosophy from Thales to Epicurus* (London: Edward Arnold, 1967), p. 177.

- ⁷⁹. Lucretius, "*De Rerum Natura: On the Nature of the Universe*" in John Gaskin (ed), *The Epicurean Philosophers* (London: Everyman, 1995), p. 295.
- ⁸⁰. From the *Critique of the Gotha Programme* in *CW* 24, p. 87.
- ⁸¹. Karl Marx, "Speech on the Question of Free Trade" in *CW* 6, p. 464.
- ⁸². *Ibid*, p. 84.
- ⁸³. *CW* 22, p. 505.
- ⁸⁴. *CW* 24, pp. 86-7.
- ⁸⁵. *Ibid*, p. 87.
- ⁸⁶. Sean Sayers, 'Analytical Marxism and Morality' in *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, supplementary volume 15, 1989, pp. 96 - 99; see also Sayers, "Marxism and Actually Existing Socialism" in *Socialism and Morality*, eds. D. McLellan & S. Sayers (London: Macmillan, 1990), pp. 50-1.
- ⁸⁷. Marx, *Capital*, vol. 3, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981), p. 911.
- ⁸⁸. Sayers, "Analytical Marxism and Morality," p. 90.
- ⁸⁹. Geras, "Bringing Marx to Justice", p. 43.
- ⁹⁰. *Ibid*, pp. 44-5.
- ⁹¹. Sayers, "Analytical Marxism and Morality", p. 91. He cites F. H. Bradley, *Ethical Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1927), p. 190 & p. 192.
- ⁹². David Bakhurst, "Marxism and Ethical Particularism: A Response to Steven Lukes's *Marxism and Morality*" in *Praxis International*, 5 (2), 1985, pp. 210-11.
- ⁹³. Geras, "The Controversy About Marx and Justice", p. 56.
- ⁹⁴. *CW* 22, p. 335.
- ⁹⁵. Geras, "The Controversy About Marx and Justice", p. 55.
- ⁹⁶. The 'but' is taken to mean 'except'; the comma is not helpful, but Marx was working in a foreign language (English).
- ⁹⁷. *CW* 22, p. 491.
- ⁹⁸. *CW* 22, p. 355.