



STEVEN LUKES

MARXISM AND MORALITY

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To the memory of Peter Sedgwick

With whom would the just man not sit
To help justice?
What medicine is too bitter
For the man who's dying?
What vileness should you not suffer to
Annihilate vileness?
If at last you could change the world, what
Could make you too good to do so?
Who are you?
Sink in filth
Embrace the butcher but
Change the world: it needs it!
(Brecht 1929-30: 25)

You who will emerge from the flood
In which we have gone under
Remember
When you speak of our failings
The dark time too
Which you have escaped.

For we went, changing countries oftener than our shoes
Through the wars of the classes, despairing
When there was injustice only, and no rebellion.

And yet we know:
Hatred, even of meanness
Contorts the features.
Anger, even against injustice
Makes the voice hoarse. Oh, we
Who wanted to prepare the ground for friendliness
Could not ourselves be friendly.

But you, when the time comes at last
And man is a helper to man
Think of us
With forbearance.

(Brecht 1938: 319-20)

With the rest of my generation I firmly believed that the ends justified the means. Our great goal was the universal triumph of Communism, and for the sake of that goal everything was permissible—to lie, to steal, to destroy hundreds of thousands and even millions of people, all those who were hindering our work or could hinder it, everyone who stood in the way. And to hesitate or doubt about all this was to give in to 'intellectual squeamishness' and 'stupid liberalism', the attributes of people who 'could not see the forest for the trees.'

That was how I reasoned, and everyone like me, even when I did have my doubts, when I believed what Trotsky and Bukharin were saying, when I saw what 'total collectivization' meant—how they 'kulakized' and 'dekulakized', how mercilessly they stripped the peasants in the winter of 1932–3. I took part in this myself, scouring the countryside, searching for hidden grain, testing the earth with an iron rod for loose spots that might lead to buried grain. With the others, I emptied out the old folks' storage chests, stopping my ears to the children's crying and the women's wails. For I was convinced that I was accomplishing the great and necessary transformation of the countryside; that in the days to come the people who lived there would be better off for it; that their distress and suffering were a result of their own ignorance or the machinations of the class enemy; that those who sent me—and I myself—knew better than the peasants how they should live, what they should sow and when they should plough.

In the terrible spring of 1933 I saw people dying from hunger. I saw women and children with distended bellies, turning blue, still breathing but with vacant, lifeless eyes. And corpses—corpses in ragged sheepskin coats and cheap felt boots; corpses in peasant huts, in the melting snow of old Vologda, under the bridges of Kharkov . . . I saw all this and did not go out of my mind or commit suicide. Nor did I curse those who had sent me to take away the peasants' grain in the winter, and in the spring to persuade the barely walking, skeleton-thin or sickly-swollen people to go into the fields in order to 'fulfil the Bolshevik sowing plan in shock-worker style'.

Nor did I lose my faith. As before, I believed because I wanted to believe. Thus from time immemorial men have believed when possessed by a desire to serve powers and values above and beyond humanity: gods, emperors, states; ideals of virtue, freedom, nation, race, class, party. . . .

Any single-minded attempt to realize these ideals exacts its toll of human sacrifice. In the name of the noblest visions promising eternal happiness to their descendants, such men bring merciless ruin on their contemporaries. Bestowing paradise on the dead, they

maim and destroy the living. They become unprincipled liars and unrelenting executioners, all the while seeing themselves as virtuous and honourable militants—convinced that if they are forced into villainy, it is for the sake of future good, and that if they have to lie, it is in the name of eternal truths.

Und willst du nicht mein Bruder sein

So schlag ich dir dein Schädel ein.

[And if you won't be my brother

I'll crack your skull open.]

they sing in a Landsknecht song.

That was how we thought and acted—we, the fanatical disciples of the all-saving ideals of Communism. When we saw the base and cruel acts that were committed in the name of our exalted notions of good, and when we ourselves took part in those actions, what we feared most was to lose our heads, fall into doubt or heresy and forfeit our unbounded faith.

I was appalled by what I saw in the 1930s and was overcome by depression. But I would still my doubts the way I had learned to: 'we made a mistake', 'we went too far', 'we didn't take into consideration', 'the logic of the class struggle', 'objective historical need', 'using barbaric means to combat barbarism'. . . .

Good and evil, humanity and inhumanity—these seemed empty abstractions. I did not trouble myself with why 'humanity' should be abstract but 'historical necessity' and 'class consciousness' should be concrete. The concepts of conscience, honour, humaneness we dismissed as idealistic prejudices, 'intellectual' or 'bourgeois' and, hence, perverse.

[Kopelev 1975: 32–4]

Preface

In this book I am concerned with three questions. The first concerns marxism as a theory: what does it have to say about morality, and what answers does it offer to such central moral questions as 'What is justice?', 'Do people have rights and, if so, what rights do they have?', 'In what does the human good consist?', 'What means may we employ in the pursuit of our ends?' The second concerns marxism in practice: what can now be said about the moral record of marxism as a social movement and as a system of rule, whether measured against its own values and standards or against others that may be thought appropriate? The third question concerns the relation between the first two, between marxism in theory and marxism in practice: what bearing has marxism's approach to morality and moral questions had upon its moral record in the struggle for and exercise of power? And conversely, what lessons may be drawn from an examination of that record with respect to marxism as a system of belief? Within the span of this book, I can only examine the first of these questions in any detail, but in doing so, I shall suggest my answers to the second and third. At the least, I hope that this book will both encourage and help others to face them, for they should be faced rather than either avoided or assumed to have self-evident answers.

To speak somewhat more bluntly, my purpose is to raise (I obviously cannot answer) the question whether the theory constructed by Marx and Engels, and developed by their successors, can in any respect and to any degree account for the moral disasters of marxism in practice. The record has, of course, been a mixed one. Marxists have an honourable place in the annals of resistance to oppression, above all to fascism and nazism; and in simple utilitarian terms, in developing societies, the achievements of marxists in power must be set against the ravages of death, hunger, unemployment, poverty, and disease often permitted and the tyranny and repression often practised

by the historically available alternatives. The record must also be set against the human costs of capitalism, both within its heartlands and throughout its dependent periphery, and against the entire history of capitalist imperialism and neo-colonialism, whose massive endorsement of local brutalities, and suppression of individual and collective liberties are presently visible behind the moralistic façade of United States foreign policy, especially in South-East Asia and now in Central America. It should also be recalled that, as Trotsky remarked and Barrington Moore has shown, bourgeois or liberal democracy 'came into the world not at all through the democratic road' (Moore 1967, Trotsky 1938: 24). None the less, disasters there have been—above all, when they are measured, as they demand to be, against marxism's moral promise. Of course, many plausible explanations have been and can be offered (including the contributions of anti-socialist forces)—for the Bolshevik terror during and after the Civil War, for Stalin's terror, the purges and trials, the mass deportations and the vast network of labour camps, for the social catastrophe of Mao's Cultural Revolution, for the 'murderous utopia' of Pol Pot's Cambodia, and for the grim, surveillance-minded, demoralized world of contemporary 'actually existing socialism', above all in the USSR and Eastern Europe, where civil society and public life have been destroyed, and both marxist and moral vocabulary have become wholly devalued, the worthless currency of an empty rhetoric. The ironic culmination of these developments has been the general annihilation in such societies and beyond of the belief that the socialist project is worthy of allegiance, or even serious attention.

Those who derive satisfaction from this outcome may welcome this book as grist to their mill; others, for that very reason, may condemn it, or its publication, as unhelpful at a time when socialism needs all the friends it can muster (I write in the second year of Mrs Thatcher's second term). But '*pas d'ennemis à gauche*' has always been a dubious principle, stifling critical discussion; and it is no service to the cause of socialism to avoid meeting *its* enemies' strongest challenge. This book is, emphatically, not just another anti-marxist tract. Rather, it advances a hypothesis, that is both conceptual and historical, about the links between the marxist ethic and the spirit of

socialism, in the belief that the latter can only flourish when some of these links have been severed. It is, in short, an attempt to come to grips with what is wrong with marxism's approach to the central questions of how we should and might live, in the conviction that this has borne some relation to what has gone wrong in practice.

That relation is not, however, to be captured by the metaphor of the germinating seed: this falsely and naïvely suggests that the historical developments were inherent in the theory, which could only come to fruition in these disastrous ways. Theories are plundered and their ideas selected and interpreted by historical actors pursuing their interests within objective conditions and under pressure of historical contingencies: it is all of these, in combination, not simply the logic of the theories, which explain historical outcomes. That much, at the very least, marxism has taught us. A better image is that of disablement: despite its many strengths, the theory of the founders was blind and deaf to, and silent about, certain ranges of moral questions—roughly, those concerning justice and rights, which set constraints on how people are to be treated in the here and now, and in the immediate future. This disability has been transmitted from the original theory to its main descendants, as Chapters Two and Six seek to show. It has also, I believe, characterized marxist ideology far and wide, though I do not show that here, or chart the influence it has had on the attitudes and conduct of marxists, prominent and obscure. But only the most vulgar of deterministic marxists could suppose such influence to be negligible.

Can these congenital defects of marxist theory be cured, and, if so, can this be done from within marxism, perhaps by developing lines of thought suggested but undeveloped by Marx himself? Possibly. My concerns in this book, however, are diagnostic only: with the structure of what has been marxism's distinctive approach to morality and moral questions, with its underlying rationale, and its possible consequences.

Acknowledgements

The argument of this book has grown slowly into its present shape. Essential to that process was the reaction of a group of friends in Prague, deeply and immovably sceptical of my very title, and a comment of Jerry Cohen's that it sounded like a short book. (It is a short book). No less essential were lively discussions with Denis Wrong and Tracy Strong, with each of whom I taught a course on this theme, and the invaluable reactions and suggestions of Anthony Arblaster, Tom Bottomore, David Cauter, G. A. Cohen, Bill Connolly, Jon Elster, Tim Garton Ash, Norman Geras, Tony Giddens, David Held, Irving Howe, Wayne Hudson, Brian Knei-Paz, Yaakov Malkin, Alan Montefiore, Gary Ostrolenko, Frank Parkin, Jo Raz, Raphael Samuel, the late Peter Sedgwick, Nina Stanger, Christine Sypnowich, and Erik Olin Wright.

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1 The Paradox Stated

Marxism's attitude to morality is paradoxical. A paradox, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, is a 'statement seemingly self-contradictory and absurd, though possibly well-founded and essentially true'. The aim of this chapter is to suggest that the traditional marxist view of morality is, indeed, paradoxical: a mixture of positions in apparent contradiction or at least tension with one another. The following chapter seeks to substantiate this suggestion by surveying what the marxist tradition has had to say on the topic. In Chapter 3, I shall try to resolve the paradox by showing that the view in question is only *seemingly* self-contradictory: that marxism offers a consistent and distinctive approach to morality and moral questions. I shall not, however, suggest that this approach is, as a whole, either 'well-founded' or 'essentially true'. The following two chapters illustrate and explore that approach. Focusing more directly on Marx's own thought, they consider in turn his contrasting treatments of two different domains of morality and ranges of moral questions. The final chapter asks whether, if this account is correct, marxism has anything distinctively moral to say in answer to Lenin's question: 'What is to be done?' and to its no less important corollary: 'What is not to be done?'

One preliminary definitional question: what do I mean by 'marxism' and by 'morality'? As to the first, we must, of course, bear in mind Marx's own dismissal of the label 'marxist'—'All I know', he used to say, 'is that I am not a marxist' (Engels 1890: 496)—and the great diversity of subsequent marxist sub-traditions. Nevertheless, my argument will be that, whatever other issues may have divided them, there has always been a certain coherent view that united very many, though not all, self-proclaimed marxists (and certainly all those who have been influential in practice) with Marx himself and his close collaborator Engels. It is that view which this book aims to

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articulate and analyze. I am, of course, aware that Marx's thought is remarkably rich, complex, and many-sided, expressed at different levels, in different contexts (sometimes polemical, sometimes journalistic, sometimes scientific), and in different tones of voice (sometimes ironic, sometimes demagogic, sometimes analytic, sometimes prophetic), and in many respects undeveloped and open-ended. I am also aware that the marxist tradition is no monolithic unity, but a contested terrain in which the solemn orthodoxies of the Second and Third Internationals have faced many and various forms of heterodoxy and revisionism, from Bernstein and the Austro-marxists to the Frankfurt and Budapest Schools. In speaking of 'marxism' in theory and practice, I do not mean to endorse any particular line of descent from Marx as legitimate, least of all that which runs via Engels, Plekhanov, and Lenin through dialectical materialism to Soviet-style communism. Orthodox 'scientific' and Russified marxism is only one line of (arrested) development within the tradition, which happens to have been the one that has had momentous world-historical effects in practice; and other lines have undoubtedly been far truer to the letter and spirit of Marx's thought. Rather, my claim is that there is a central structure of thinking, developed by Marx and Engels, which I seek here to exhibit, that has been partly constitutive of that tradition, and by which even the heterodox have been deeply imprinted. By that claim my entire argument stands or falls. I shall, when describing Marx's own views and writings, use the adjective 'marxian', and when describing those of his followers the adjective 'marxist'. I do not, however, intend these terms of art to imply, in general, that the marxist contradicts or even diverges from the marxian: where it does, I shall say so.

As for what 'morality' means, that will, I hope, become clear in the course of the analysis; let it suffice here to say that it concerns at least the domain of the right and the good, and questions of obligation, duty, fairness, virtue, character, the nature of the good life and the good society, and, behind these, assumptions about the nature of man, the preconditions for social life, the limits of its possible transformation, and the grounds of practical judgement.

The paradox in marxism's view of morality lies in the fact

that one set of positions central to marxism throughout its history when set beside another set of positions no less central appears to generate a striking contradiction.

On the one hand it is claimed that morality is a form of ideology, and thus social in origin, illusory in content, and serving class interests; that any given morality arises out of a particular stage in the development of the productive forces and relations and is relative to a particular mode of production and particular class interests; that there are no objective truths or eternal principles of morality; that the very form of morality, and general ideas such as freedom and justice that are 'common to all states of society', cannot 'completely vanish except with the total disappearance of class antagonisms' (Marx and Engels 1848: 504); that the proletarian sees morality, along with law and religion, as 'so many bourgeois prejudices, behind which lurk in ambush just as many bourgeois interests' (ibid.: 494-5); that marxism is opposed to all moralizing and rejects as out of date all moral vocabulary, and that the marxist critique of both capitalism and political economy is not moral but scientific.

On the other hand, no one can fail to notice that Marx's and marxist writings abound in moral judgements, implicit and explicit. From his earliest writings, where Marx expresses his hatred of servility, through the critique of alienation and the fragmentary visions of communism in the Paris Manuscripts and *The German Ideology*, to the excoriating attacks on factory conditions and the effects of exploitation in *Capital*, it is plain that Marx was fired by outrage and indignation and the burning desire for a better world that it is hard not to see as moral. The same applies to Engels, author of *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, a work full of moral criticism of the social conditions created by advancing industrial capitalism, which remained basic to his thought, and which Marx explicitly endorsed for its depiction of the 'moral degradation caused by the capitalistic exploitation of women and children' (Marx 1867: 399-400). The same applies to their followers down to the present day. Open practically any marxist text, however aseptically scientific or academic, and you will find condemnation, exhortation, and the vision of a better world. As for the socialist leaders, as Irving Howe has well said, few 'were of proletarian origin, few acted out of direct class needs,

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and most were inspired by moral visions their ideology somehow inhibited them from expressing' (Howe 1981: 492).

Notice that the paradox, the seeming contradiction, lies at the level of general belief. On the one hand, morality, as such, is explained, unmasked, and condemned as an anachronism; on the other, it is believed in and appealed to, and indeed urged upon others as relevant to political campaigns and struggles. I am not referring to a contrast between, say, bourgeois morality on the one hand, and authentic proletarian morality on the other. As we shall see, marxists have sometimes drawn this distinction, but it is no contradiction. I am concerned rather with marxist beliefs about morality and moral judgement *per se* and in general: in the absence of further explanation, these certainly do look contradictory. Nor am I referring to the contrast between theory and practice, between what marxists say and what they do. Often, where this contrast exists, it does constitute a contradiction, but it is one common to all political ideologies and creeds, and it is no paradox. In short, what is striking about marxism is its apparent commitment to both the rejection and the adoption of moral criticism and exhortation.