

# MARXISM, MORALITY, AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

*R. G. Peffer*

Studies in Moral, Political, and  
Legal Philosophy

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AND SOCIAL JUSTICE**

**STUDIES IN MORAL, POLITICAL,  
AND LEGAL PHILOSOPHY**

*General Editor: Marshall Cohen*

For  
S.E.R.  
and  
D.A.R.P.

The bourgeois period of history has to create the material basis of the new world. . . . Bourgeois industry and commerce create these material conditions of a new world in the same way as geological revolutions have created the surface of the earth. When a great social revolution shall have mastered the results of the bourgeois epoch, the market of the world and the modern powers of production, and subjected them to . . . common control . . . then only will human progress cease to resemble that Hindoo pagan idol, who would not drink the nectar but from the skulls of the slain.

—Karl Marx  
*New York Daily Tribune*  
August 8, 1853

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## INTRODUCTION

The ultimate goal of this work is to develop at least the outlines of an adequate Marxist moral and social theory. By a "moral and social theory" I mean one that provides a set of moral principles or standards by which to judge social arrangements and, by so doing, provides criteria to decide between competing sets of historically possible social arrangements. Such a theory must contain enough of an empirical, social-scientific theory to determine which sets of social arrangements are real historical possibilities and—of those that are possible—which best conform to the moral principles or standards propounded by an adequate moral theory.

By an "adequate" moral and social theory I mean one that is based on a correct set of empirical, social-scientific theories and on an adequate (i.e., correct) moral theory. By an "adequate" or "correct" moral theory I mean one that is most in wide reflective equilibrium with our considered moral judgments. (Whether there is one unique theory that is in wide reflective equilibrium with everyone's judgments or whether morality is in some sense relative is discussed in chapter 7.)

By a "Marxist" moral and social theory I mean one that (1) is informed by the spirit of Marx's radical humanism and egalitarianism; (2) is based on the empirical theses centrally important to the Marxist political perspective (particularly Marx's theory of classes and class struggle and his analysis of capitalism); and (3) attempts to defend the Marxist's basic normative political positions. The first of these positions is that socialism—that is, democratic, self-managing socialism—is morally preferable to any form of capitalism as well as to any other form of society possible under the conditions of moderate scarcity and moderate egoism. The second is that social and/or political revolution, if necessary (and sufficient) to effect the appropriate transformations, is *prima facie* morally justified.

Anyone interested in developing such a theory and showing that it is both a Marxist theory and a plausible moral theory faces two tasks. The first is to interpret Marx's moral views and, if pos-

sible, to reconstruct his implicit moral theory.<sup>1</sup> This task is made difficult, of course, by the submerged character of these views. The second task is to answer the charge made by Marxists and non-Marxists alike that Marxism and morality are somehow incompatible. The completion of the first task is necessary if we are to know precisely what it is we are to critique and/or make adequate; the completion of the second is necessary if we are to have a coherent notion of a Marxist morality or a Marxist moral and social theory.

The task of interpreting and reconstructing Marx's implicit moral theory is taken up in part I (chapters 1 through 3). The task of showing the compatibility of Marxism and morality is discussed in part II (chapters 4 through 7). In part III (chapters 8 through 10), I attempt to refute Marx's criticisms of justice and rights and then attempt to provide at least the outlines of an adequate Marxist moral and social theory. In order to accomplish the latter task, I attempt to provide an acceptable theory of social justice, on the one hand, and a minimal set of plausible Marxist empirical, social-scientific theses on the other. Although I view these three parts of the present work as compatible and mutually supportive, I do not claim that the correctness of one part is absolutely dependent on the correctness of the others. For example, one could accept most of the claims within one section of this work and consistently reject most of the claims in the others. Therefore, the adequacy of each of the three sections can and should be judged separately.

To begin the interpretive task, chapter 1 traces the development of Marx's moral views from his earliest published works through the development of his original philosophical system (as expressed in *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* of 1844) to his transitional works (of which *The German Ideology* is the most important) and, then, to his works of maturation (1847–1858) and his fully mature works (1858–1883). *The Grundrisse* and *Capital* are the most important works of these latter two periods. (For my periodization of Marx's works, see the Appendix.)

The major theses propounded in this chapter are that although Marx does not have a fully developed philosophical theory about

<sup>1</sup> I agree with Allen W. Wood's claim that it is "responsible exegetical practice" to distinguish between (1) textual facts, (2) interpretations that can be based on the texts, and (3) speculative extensions that cohere with the texts, even though—as Wood notes—"it is a distinction which cannot always be drawn sharply" ("Justice and Class Interests," p. 10). I shall generally distinguish examples of the third sort from the second by referring to the former as "rational reconstructions." (Works in the Bibliography will be cited by author and title only.)



morality, he does have a normative moral perspective, in which there is a fundamental continuity, at least from the formation of his original systematic views in 1844 through his later works. This moral perspective is based on three primary moral values: freedom (as self-determination), human community, and self-realization, as well as on some sort of principle demanding an egalitarian distribution of these goods—or at least the good of freedom. (No effort is made at this point to analyze the exact nature of this principle or Marx's concept and theory of freedom. This task is postponed until chapter 3.) I argue further that the evaluative content of alienation is reducible to or analyzable in terms of these values and principles.

In chapter 2 I review attempts to interpret Marx's overall moral perspective or theory as a species of hedonistic utilitarianism, eudaemonistic utilitarianism, and as some form or other of nonutilitarian consequentialism (e.g., self-realization theory or perfectionism). I argue, in opposition to all of these interpretations, that Marx is a mixed deontologist: he demands not simply the maximization of the primary nonmoral goods of freedom, human community, and self-realization but a radically egalitarian distribution of these goods (or at least the good of freedom). Further, he takes the nonconsequentialist notion of human dignity rather than pleasure, happiness, or human perfection as the ultimate court of appeal in moral reasoning.

In chapter 3 I argue that, in the final analysis, the most fundamental nonmoral good to be promoted, for Marx, is freedom (as self-determination). (The notion of "human dignity" is even more fundamental for him, but it cannot be classified as a nonmoral good because it cannot be specified without using moral terms. It is, in other words, a *moral* good.) Freedom, the feeling of human community, and the realization of "truly human" potentialities (particularly through the production and "consumption" of higher cultural products) are all intrinsically valuable on Marx's view and, thus, all components of his theory of the good. But it is only his principle of freedom (which must be construed as a principle of *equal* freedom on my interpretation) that provides grounds for a theory of the right, i.e., a theory of right action, duty, obligation, and/or the rights of individuals. (Although such principles may not be needed in a full-fledged communist society, they are essential in the first stage of communism, even on Marx's view.)

Although Marx did not explicitly defend these views as such, he believed that everyone should be as free and self-determining as