

# Karl Marx

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Karl Marx (1818–1883) was the most important of all theorists of socialism. He was not a professional philosopher, although he completed a doctorate in philosophy. His life was devoted to radical political activity, journalism and theoretical studies in history and political economy.

Marx was drawn towards politics by Romantic literature and his earliest writings embody a conception of reality as subject to turbulent change and of human beings as realizing themselves in the struggle for freedom. His identification with these elements in Hegel's thought (and his contempt for what he regarded as Hegel's apologetic attitude towards the Prussian state) brought Marx to associate himself with the Young Hegelians.

The Young Hegelians had come to believe that the implicit message of Hegel's philosophy was a radical one: that Reason could and should exist within the world, in contrast to Hegel's explicit claim that embodied Reason already did exist. Moreover, they also rejected Hegel's idea that religion and philosophy go hand in hand: that religion represents the truths of philosophy in immediate form. On the contrary, the Young Hegelians saw the central task of philosophy as being the critique of religion—the struggle (as Marx himself was to put it in his doctoral dissertation) 'against the gods of heaven and of earth who do not recognize man's self-consciousness as the highest divinity'.

Marx came to be dissatisfied with the assumption that the critique of religion alone would be sufficient to produce human emancipation. He worked out the consequences of this change of view in the years 1843 to 1845, the most intellectually fertile period of his entire career.

Hegel's philosophy, Marx now argued, embodies two main kinds of mistake. It incorporates, first, the illusion that reality as a whole is an expression of the Idea, the absolute rational order governing reality. Against this, Marx's position (and on this point he still agrees with the Young Hegelians) is that it is Man, not the Idea, who is the true subject. Secondly, he charges, Hegel believes that the political state—the organs of law and government—has priority in determining the character of a society taken as a whole. In fact, according to Marx, this is the reverse of the truth: political life and the ideas associated with it are themselves determined by the character of economic life.

Marx claims that the 'species-being' of Man consists in labour, and that Man is alienated to the extent that labour is performed according to a division of labour that is dictated by the market. It is only when labour recovers its collective character that men

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will recognize themselves as what they are—the true creators of history. At this point, the need to represent the essence of human beings in terms of their relation to an alien being—be it the Christian God or Hegelian *Geist*—will no longer exist.

In the mature writings that followed his break with the Young Hegelians, Marx presented a would-be scientific theory of history as a progress through stages. At each stage, the form taken by a society is conditioned by the society's attained level of productivity and the requirements for its increase. In societies before the coming of socialism, this entails the division of society into antagonistic classes. Classes are differentiated by what makes them able (or unable) to appropriate for themselves the surplus produced by social labour. In general, to the extent that a class can appropriate surplus without paying for it it is said to be an exploiting class; conversely, a class that produces more than it receives is said to be exploited.

Although the exploiting classes have special access to the means of violence, exploitation is not generally a matter of the use of force. In capitalism, for example, exploitation flows from the way in which the means of production are owned privately and labour is bought and sold just like any other commodity. That such arrangements are accepted without the need for coercion, reflects the fact that the ruling class exercises a special influence over ideas in society. It controls the ideology accepted by the members of society in general.

In *Das Kapital* (Capital), the work to which he devoted the latter part of his life, Marx set out to identify the 'laws of motion' of capitalism. The capitalist system is there presented as a self-reproducing whole, governed by an underlying law, the 'law of value'. But this law and its consequences are not only not immediately apparent to the agents who participate in capitalism, they are actually concealed from them. Thus capitalism is a deceptive object, one in which there is a discrepancy between its 'essence' and its 'appearance'.

In Marx's view, it is inevitable that capitalism should give way to socialism. As capitalism develops, he believes, the increasingly 'socialized' character of the productive process will be ever more in conflict with the private ownership of the means of production. Thus the transition to collective ownership will be natural and inevitable. But Marx nowhere explains how this collective ownership and social control is to be exercised. Indeed, he has remarkably little to say about the nature of the society to the struggle for which he devoted his life.

The *Critique of the Gotha Programme* envisages two phases of communist society. In the first, production will be carried out on a non-exploitative basis: all who contribute to production will receive back the value of what they have contributed. But this, Marx recognizes, is a form of 'equal right' that leaves the natural inequalities of human beings unchecked. It is a transitional phase, although inevitable. Beyond it there lies a society in which individuals are no longer 'slaves' to the division of labour, one in which labour has become 'not only a means of life but life's prime want'. Only then, Marx thinks, 'can the narrow horizon of bourgeois right be crossed in its entirety and society inscribe on its banners: from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs!' This is the final vision of communism.

- 1 Life and Works
- 2 Marx as a Young Hegelian
- 3 Philosophy and the Critique of Religion
- 4 Alienated Labour
- 5 The Critique of Philosophy
- 6,7 The Theory of Ideology
- 8 Historical Materialism
- 9 Political Economy
- 10 The Fetishism of Commodities
- 11 Morality
- 12 Socialism

## 1 Life and Works

Marx was born on 5 May, 1818, in Trier, a small, originally Roman, city on the river Moselle. Many of Marx's ancestors were rabbis, but his father, Heinrich, a lawyer of liberal political views, converted from Judaism to Christianity and Marx was baptised with the rest of his family in 1824.

At school, the young Marx excelled in literary subjects (a prescient schoolteacher comments, however, that his essays were 'marred by an exaggerated striving after unusual, picturesque expression'). In 1835, he entered the University of Bonn to study Law. At the end of 1836, he transferred to Berlin and became a member of the Young Hegelian *Doktorclub*, a bohemian group whose leading figure was the theologian, Bruno Bauer. The views of the *Doktorclub* turned increasingly radical (to some extent, it would seem, under Marx's influence) in the late 1830s.

Marx's father died in 1838 and in the next year—perhaps not coincidentally—Marx abandoned the law in favour of a doctorate in philosophy. His thesis, *Differenz der demokritischen und epikureischen Naturphilosophie* (Difference between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature) was accepted by the University of Jena in 1841. Marx had hoped to use it to gain an academic position, but, after Bruno Bauer's suspension from his post at the University of Bonn, it became apparent that such hopes would have to be abandoned in the current political climate.

Marx turned instead to journalism, involving himself with the newly-founded *Rheinische Zeitung* and taking over the editorship in October 1842. However, the paper came increasingly into conflict with the Prussian government and was banned in March 1843. At this point, Marx decided to move abroad. In the summer he married Jenny von Westphalen (after an engagement of six years) and during a long honeymoon in Kreuznach worked on *Zur Kritik der Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie* (Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right) and the essay 'Zur Judenfrage' ('On the Jewish Question') in which he started to formulate his disagreements with his fellow Young Hegelians. He and Jenny moved to Paris in October of that year. It was in 1844 that Marx met up again with Friedrich Engels and the alliance that was to last for the rest of Marx's life was formed. Together Marx and Engels wrote *Die Heilige Familie* (The Holy Family), a polemic against Bruno Bauer. More important, however, was the body of writing on economics and philosophy that Marx produced at this time which are generally known

as The Paris Manuscripts.

Marx was expelled from France in 1845 and moved to Brussels. In the spring of 1845, he wrote for his own clarification a series of 'Theses' on Feuerbach that are one of the few mature statements that we have from him of his views on questions of epistemology and ontology. In 1845–46 Marx and Engels wrote *Die deutsche Ideologie* (The German Ideology) which, although it too remained unpublished, contains an authoritative account of their theory of history and, in particular, of the place of ideas in society. Marx's developing economic views were given expression in a polemic against Proudhon, *La Misère de la Philosophie* (The Poverty of Philosophy), published in 1847.

*Das Kommunistische Manifest* (The Communist Manifesto), written by Marx and Engels as the manifesto of the Communist League in early 1848, is the classic presentation of the revolutionary implications of Marx's views on history, politics and economics. During the revolutionary upsurge of 1848 Marx returned to Germany, but, with the defeat of the revolutionary movement, he was forced to leave, first for Paris, and then, in August 1849, for London, where he would live in exile for the rest of his life.

The years of exile in Britain were difficult ones for Marx (and even more so for his loyal and devoted family). He was in constant financial difficulty and he had to rely heavily on Engels and other friends and relations for support. His theoretical activities were chiefly directed to the study of political economy and the analysis of the capitalist system in particular. They culminated in the publication of Volume One of *Das Kapital* (Capital) in 1867. However, *Das Kapital* is the tip of a substantial iceberg of less important publications and unpublished writings. Amongst the former, the Preface to *Zur Kritik der politischen Ökonomie* (A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy) published in 1859, contains the classic statement of Marx's materialist theory of history. Volumes Two and Three of *Das Kapital*, left unfinished at Marx's death, were edited and published posthumously by Engels. In addition, three volumes of *Theorien über den Mehrwert* (Theories of Surplus-Value), a series of critical discussions of other political economists, written in 1862–63, were published in the early twentieth century. An extensive and more or less complete work, the *Grundrisse der Kritik der politischen Ökonomie* (known both in English and in German as the *Grundrisse*) was written in 1857–58 but only published in 1939. The Introduction to the *Grundrisse* is the mature Marx's most extended discussion of the method of political economy. In addition, there exist numerous notebooks and preliminary drafts, many (if not, at the time of writing, all) of which have been published.

Political economy apart, Marx wrote three works on political events in France (*Die Klassenkämpfe in Frankreich* (Class Struggles in France) (1850), *Das achtzehnte Brumaire des Louis Bonaparte* (The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte) (1852) and *The Civil War in France* (1871)). Among his many polemical writings, the *Kritik des Gothaer Programms* (Critique of the Gotha Programme) (1875) is particularly important for the light it throws on Marx's conception of socialism and its relation to ideas of justice.

Marx was in very poor health for the last ten years of his life and this seems to have sapped his energies for large-scale theoretical work. However, his engagement with the practical details of revolutionary politics was unceasing. He died on 14 March 1883

and is buried in Highgate Cemetery, London.

## 2 Marx as a Young Hegelian

Marx is relevant to philosophy in three ways: (1) as a philosopher himself, (2) as a critic of philosophy, of its aspirations and self-understanding, and (3) by the philosophical implications of work that is, in Marx's own understanding of it, not philosophical at all. These three aspects correspond, broadly speaking, to the stages in Marx's own intellectual development. This and the following section are concerned with the first stage.

The Young Hegelians, with whom Marx was associated at the beginning of his career, did not set out to be critics of Hegel. That they rapidly became so has to do with the consequences they drew from certain tensions within Hegel's thought. Hegel's central claim is that both nature and society embody the rational order of *Geist* (Spirit). Nevertheless, it did not follow, the Young Hegelians believed, that all societies express rationality to the fullest degree possible. This was the case in contemporary Germany. There was, in their view, a conflict between the essential rationality of *Geist* and the empirical institutions within which *Geist* had realized itself: Germany was 'behind the times'.

A second source of tension lay in Hegel's attitude towards religion. Hegel had been prepared to concede a role to religion as expressing the content of philosophy in immediate form. The Young Hegelians argued, however, that the relationship between the truths of philosophy and religious 'representation' was, in fact, antagonistic. In presenting reality not as the embodiment of reason but as the expression of the will of a personal god the Christian religion establishes a metaphysical dualism that is quite contrary to the secular 'this-worldliness' which (although Hegel himself might have been too cautious to spell it out fully) is the true significance of Hegel's philosophy.

This was the position endorsed by Marx at the time of his doctoral dissertation. Its subject was taken from a period of Greek thought with parallels to Germany in Marx's own time. Just as the Young Hegelians faced the problem of how to continue philosophy after Hegel, so Democritus and Epicurus wrote in the shadow of another great system, that of Aristotle. Marx's sympathies are with Epicurus. He is more successful than Democritus, Marx believes, in combining materialism with an account of human agency. Furthermore, Marx admires Epicurus for his explicit critique of religion, the chief task of philosophy, he asserts, in all ages.

In destroying the illusions of religion, the Young Hegelians believed, philosophy would provide both the necessary and the sufficient conditions for human emancipation and the achievement of a rational state. In the works that he wrote in Kreuznach in 1843 (the unpublished draft of the *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* and the essay 'On the Jewish Question') and shortly thereafter (the 'Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right: Introduction') Marx called this position into question.

In the *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* Marx has two main criticisms to make of Hegel. The first is that Hegel's real concern is to retrace in the political realm the outlines of his own metaphysics rather than developing an analysis of political institutions and structures in their own right. This gives his political philosophy an

apologetic function, for it leads him to present the contradictions that he finds in reality as essentially reconciled in the supposedly higher unity of the 'Idea'. But they are not, says Marx. On the contrary, they are 'essential contradictions'.

Chief amongst such contradictions is that between the 'system of particular interest' (the family and civil society—that is, economic life) and the 'system of general interest', namely, the state. And this leads to Marx's second criticism. Hegel, Marx alleges, assumes that the state, because it is 'higher' from the point of view of Hegelian logic, can reconcile effectively the contradictions of economic life. In fact, in Marx's view, it is civil society that is prior to the state. The state arises from the condition of civil society and is always subordinate to the form of the latter.

### **3 Philosophy and the Critique of Religion**

Marx presents the implications of these criticisms for the critique of religion in the 'Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right: Introduction'. This short essay is a compressed masterpiece of vehement rhetoric, seething with antithesis and chiasmus. In Germany, Marx writes, 'the critique of religion is essentially completed'. Thus the problem is how to go beyond it. Marx's first step is to explain the significance of that critique, as he understands it.

The world of religion is a reflection of a particular form of society: 'This state, this society, produce religion, which is an inverted world-consciousness, because they are an inverted world.' Only an inverted secular world, that is to say, would produce religion as its offshoot. In religious belief, Man finds himself reflected in the 'fantastic reality of heaven', whilst he can find only 'the semblance of himself, only a non-human being' in this world. Religion thus provides a realm in which individuals can realize themselves, at least partially, given that full and adequate self-realization is not possible in the profane world. In this way, religion preserves the social order of which it is a by-product, both by deflecting attention from its defects and by providing a partial escape from it. In Marx's famous words, 'Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people.'

Thus religion and the form of life associated with it are open to criticism at three points. (1) There is, first, the impoverished and distorted world of which religion is a by-product. (2) There is the way in which the image of reality produced by religion is falsely transfigured. (3) Finally, there is the failure by human beings to recognize the fact that religion has its origins in mundane reality.

It is this last element towards which the critique of religion is directed. Critique of religion connects religion back to its unacknowledged origins in social existence. Yet this is not enough. The critique of religion, inasmuch as it is a call to people to abandon their illusions, is also, according to Marx, 'the call to abandon a condition that requires illusions'. By itself the critique of religion cannot remove the distortion and impoverishment of the world from which religion arises. This is, of course, Marx's real project, for which the criticism of religion has merely prepared the ground.

Once the criticism of religion has done its work, philosophy must move on 'to unmask human self-alienation in its secular forms.' The critique of religion ends, Marx

says, 'in the doctrine that man is the supreme being for man; thus it ends with the categorical imperative to overthrow all conditions in which man is a debased, enslaved, neglected, contemptible being'.

Much of this analysis represents common ground between Marx and his Young Hegelian former associates. Marx concedes that philosophy has both a critical role to play in exposing the illusions of religion and an affirmative one in establishing an ideal of human fulfilment. Nevertheless, Marx takes the Young Hegelians to task for thinking that philosophy alone provides a sufficient condition for human emancipation. Philosophy, he maintains, must move beyond itself: 'criticism of the speculative philosophy of right does not remain within itself, but proceeds on to tasks for whose solution there is only one means—praxis.' For this a material force, a 'class with radical chains', is required, namely, the proletariat.

At this stage, then, Marx is critical, not so much of the content of philosophy but of what we might call the meta-philosophical belief associated with it: that it is possible (as he puts it in relation to the Young Hegelians) 'to realize philosophy without transcending it'. A truly successful critique of religion would require the transformation of the social conditions within which religion is generated and sustained.

#### **4 Alienated Labour**

In Paris, Marx threw himself into the study of political economy. His objective was to amplify his critique of Hegel and the Young Hegelians with a more far-reaching account of the nature of 'civil society'. The Paris Manuscripts thus provide a unique link between Marx's economic theory and his philosophical view of human nature.

The concept which brings the two together is that of alienation (*Entfremdung*). Although Marx had made little use of this term in his earlier writings, the structure of the concept is clearly anticipated in his critique of religion. The fundamental idea is that an entity or agent gives rise to a product or expression that is distinct from but at the same time essential to itself. This secondary product comes to be cut off from its origin. In consequence, the agent suffers a loss of identity in some sense. Thus, for the agent to realize itself fully, it must remove the separation that has come between itself and its own product.

In the central discussion of the Paris Manuscripts, Marx sets out to apply the concept of alienation to the labour process. Alienation, Marx argues, is characteristic of a situation in which (1) labour is directed towards the production of commodities (that is, goods exchangeable in the market) and (2) labour itself is such a commodity. Marx divides the alienation involved in labour into three main forms.

1. There is, first, the separation of the worker from the product of labour. It is in the nature of the labour process that it involves 'appropriating' the external world. But, when labour is alienated, the sensible, external world becomes an object to which the worker is bound, something that is hostile to him, instead of being the means to his self-realization.
2. At the same time, the labour process itself becomes alien to the worker. Because the imperatives according to which labour takes place come to the worker 'from

outside' (that is, from the market, either directly or indirectly) labour is no longer an act of self-realization. It becomes, from the worker's point of view, 'an activity directed against himself, which is independent of him and does not belong to him.'

3. Finally, Marx says, the consequence of these two forms of alienation is to alienate man from from what he calls his 'species-being' (*Gattungswesen*). The latter concept (of which Marx made frequent use in 1843–44) is adapted from Feuerbach. Man, says Marx, is a species-being 'because he looks upon himself as the present, living species, because he looks upon himself as a universal and therefore free being.'

An analogy that may be helpful in clarifying this apparently circular definition is with a family. In a limited sense, people can be part of a family without consciously behaving accordingly (at the limit, we can think of members of a family who do not even know that they are related). But in order to be a family in a fuller sense, people must relate to one another as a family, and at least a part of this is that they should be aware that they are a family.

So it is with human species-being. While the fundamental phenomenon on which the family is based is a biological relation, in human species-being it is labour. Thus, as labour is alienated in other respects, so man becomes alienated from his species-being. The consequence is the alienation of members of the species from one another.

Each of these three points are, one might think, somewhat questionable. Surely, in any situation in which individuals do not produce entirely for themselves, it will be inevitable that the products of labour are 'separated' from the original producer. Likewise, the labour process cannot be something that is freely chosen by individuals so long as they are objectively constrained by the nature of the material world and the resources available to them in finding efficient means to given ends. Finally, it is not at all clear what is involved in human beings 're-appropriating' their 'species-being'.

One way of making the concept of alienated labour more precise is to ask what it might be for labour to be non-alienated. Marx addresses the issue at the end of a discussion of James Mill's *Elements of Political Economy*. 'Let us suppose', Marx begins, 'that we had produced as human beings'. In that case, he claims, each of us would have 'affirmed' both themselves and their fellows in the process of production. In the first place, I, the producer, would have affirmed myself in my production. At the same time, I would be gratifying a human need—that of my neighbour, for whom I am in this case producing. Thus, in meeting your need, I would have mediated between you and the species: 'I would be acknowledged by you as the complement of your own being, as an essential part of yourself.' In this way, production and the meeting of needs involves a mutuality of self-realization and reciprocal recognition:

In the individual expression of my own life I would have brought about the expression of your life and so in my individual activity I would have directly confirmed and realized my authentic nature, my human, communal nature.

These ideas help to explain Marx's antagonism towards what he would call 'bourgeois' political theory. Insofar as traditional political philosophy takes as its fundamental question how to reconcile competing interests, its starting point is, from Marx's

point of view, unacceptably individualistic. For what entitles us to assume that the interests of individuals are bound to be antagonistic? Rather than asking how to allocate rights and duties fairly when interests conflict, the task, Marx believes, is to move humanity towards a form of life in which conflicts of interest are no longer endemic.

## 5 The Critique of Philosophy

Although the Paris Manuscripts show Marx's increasing engagement with political economy, they do not represent an abandonment of his concern with philosophy. But the attitude that Marx takes towards philosophy is now more critical than it had been in his earlier, Young Hegelian period.

In part, this can be traced to Ludwig Feuerbach, whom Marx quotes approvingly at several points. It was Feuerbach's great achievement, Marx writes, 'to have shown that philosophy is nothing more than religion brought into thought and developed in thought, and that it is equally to be condemned as another form and mode of existence of the alienation of human nature.' Thus Marx now regards philosophy as essentially continuous with religion, not a force directed against religion, as he had represented it at the time of his doctoral dissertation.

Marx makes a number of negative remarks regarding philosophy in general, but his more specific critical comments are directed towards Hegel. Like Feuerbach, he takes the view that Hegel has brought philosophy to a point of completion. The dynamic principle at the heart of Hegel's philosophy, according to Marx, is that of abstract mental labour. Nevertheless, despite the genuinely critical elements contained within it, Hegel's philosophy is vitiated by its idealist assumptions. In the end, for Hegel, alienation is merely a matter of the separation of the products of thought from thought itself, something to be overcome by a philosophical reorientation of consciousness. To go beyond Hegel, it would be necessary to make the concept of real, concrete labour fundamental. But this, Marx suggests, leads beyond philosophy itself.

Marx pursues these ideas in the 'Theses on Feuerbach', written in the spring of 1845. Here he makes it explicit that his disagreement is not only with idealistic philosophies, such as Hegel's, but also with would-be materialist ones, Feuerbach's included. In incorporating within itself an idea of activity, idealism has important advantages over materialism. It is, Marx writes,

the chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism (that of Feuerbach included)... that the thing, reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the object or of contemplation, but not as sensuous human activity, praxis, not subjectively. Hence, in contradistinction to materialism, the active side was developed abstractly by idealism—which, of course, does not know real sensuous activity as such.

It should be noted that this passage is ambiguous. Is Marx envisaging a new kind of materialism (one that would not have the defects of 'hitherto existing materialism') or is it a call to leave philosophy—both materialism and idealism—behind altogether? Interpreters of Marx who take the former view have ascribed an implicit philosophical position to him (often called 'dialectical materialism'). Nevertheless, the fact remains that Marx himself never developed such a position explicitly and the conclusion of the 'Theses on Feuerbach' appears to lead away from philosophy entirely:

The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it.

*The German Ideology*, which Marx and Engels wrote from September 1845 to the summer of 1846, continues this line of argument. As in so many of Marx's writings, the rhetorical trope from which the criticism starts is that of an inversion of an inversion. The Young Hegelians, Marx alleges, think of themselves as engaged in a struggle with the illusions that hold the Germans in their grip. But in fact they are in the grip of an illusion themselves: the illusion that ideas are an independent, determining force in political life.

Feuerbach is not excepted from this criticism. Although he purports to demystify the realm of pure ideas, he still remains, according to Marx and Engels, 'in the realm of theory'. Feuerbach, they claim, 'never arrives at really existing active men, but stops at the abstraction "man"'.

The alternative that Marx and Engels propose is, of course, also a theory, but it is a theory, they claim of quite a different kind. 'In direct contrast to German philosophy, which descends from heaven to earth', their purpose is to present an account which will 'ascend from earth to heaven'. Instead of translating general ideas back into equally general anthropological categories, the aim is to give a specific account of their historical origins. In so doing, it undermines the presuppositions on which the philosophical enterprise rests and philosophy, as an independent branch of knowledge, loses its medium of existence:

The philosophers would only have to dissolve their language into the ordinary language, from which it is abstracted, to recognize it as the distorted language of the actual world, and realize that neither thoughts nor language in themselves form a realm of their own, that they are only manifestations of actual life.

## **6 The Theory of Ideology: (1) The Reflection Model**

*The German Ideology* is full of polemical assertions of the priority of material life over the world of religion, thought and speculation. But it sets out to do more than sloganize. It aims to develop the framework for a scientific explanation of how the material life conditions and determines thought and culture.

By the time that *The German Ideology* came to be written, the term 'ideology' had established itself in German as referring to systems of ideas detached from and out of proportion to empirical reality (Heinrich Heine, with whom Marx was on intimate terms in Paris, used it in that sense). In *The German Ideology* this is certainly part of the meaning of the term. But the concept also has a wider explanatory function.

Since the ancient world, thinkers about politics had been concerned with the role that 'false' or irrational forms of consciousness play in political life. To this extent, the Young Hegelian critique of religion represented the latest manifestation of a very long tradition. The originality of Marx's concept of ideology, however, lies in the way that it brings the idea of false consciousness together with a distinctively modern conception of society.

At the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century, a conception of society came to the fore, in Germany and France in particular, according to

which societies, like organisms, have the power of maintaining and reproducing themselves through time. Marx was very much taken with this view, which he endorsed in the *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*. Chief amongst the conditions for a society to reproduce itself, according to Marx, are the ideas held by its members. Thus false consciousness, rather than being simply an accidental feature of human nature (albeit one with enormous political consequences) should be regarded as a phenomenon to be explained by the particular character of the society in which it is to be found.

If societies do not rest solely on coercion, then this is because those who are oppressed or exploited accept this for some reason. As Marx puts it bluntly: 'the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas'. But how does this come about? What sort of connection holds between the economic structures of a society and the ideas of its members? *The German Ideology* contains two analogies that might serve as mechanisms for the explanation of the connection between material life and ideas. The first is embodied in the following famous passage:

If in all ideology men and their circumstances appear upside-down as in a camera obscura, this phenomenon arises just as much from their historical life-process as the inversion of objects on the retina does from their physical life-process. . . We set out from real, active men, and on the basis of their real life-process we demonstrate the development of the ideological reflexes and echoes of this life-process. The phantoms formed in the human brain are also, necessarily, sublimates of their material life process, which is empirically verifiable and bound to material premises.

Let us call this the reflection model of ideology. The idea is that ideology relates to material life as images do to reality in a camera obscura or on the retina of the human eye: items in reality are reproduced accurately, but in reverse.

Yet brief consideration of the analogy shows that, as it stands, it is completely inadequate. It is indeed true that the images on the human retina are 'upside-down'. But does this mean that human beings do not perceive the world about them accurately? Of course not. The fact is that, as far as human perception is concerned, 'upside-down' is the right way up for images to be on our retinas. And this points the way towards the problem with Marx's analogy. By describing all consciousness as reversed or inverted the contrast between 'true' and 'false' loses its sense.

A further objection arises from the phrase later in the quoted passage in which Marx continues the reflection analogy by speaking of the ideological 'reflexes and echoes' of real life-processes. Ideological ideas are, he goes on to say, 'phantoms' and 'sublimates'. These metaphors carry with them an important implication: that ideological thought is the effect of real processes, but that it is itself insubstantial, without material reality or causal power. If this is Marx's considered view, then it is, clearly, disastrous for the theory of ideology. For the point of the theory of ideology was to explain how it was that certain forms of thought served to sustain particular societies. Thus these forms of thought are, by assumption, not ineffective, but have very important causal effects: namely, helping to maintain a particular social and economic order.

Finally, it is not obvious why we should suppose that ideology relates to material life as mind does to matter. Is the implication that ideology is immaterial and material life non-intellectual? But this plainly contradicts Marx's basic position. Not only would it be odd for an avowed materialist to suggest that ideas are something basically

insubstantial, but, even more importantly, it conflicts with the idea that economic life, so far from being unconscious or unreflective, is the central part of man's cognitive engagement with external reality.

## **7 The Theory of Ideology: (2) The Interests Model**

But there is another model at work in *The German Ideology*. While the reflection model draws on the parallel between the ideological process and a traditional, realist account of perception (the immaterial mind mirrors passively a mind-independent reality) what we may call the interests model develops from a more instrumentalist approach to epistemology. That Marx was (at this time, at least) attracted to such views is apparent from the Theses on Feuerbach. In the second thesis he writes:

The dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking that is isolated from practice is a purely scholastic question.

From this point of view, the most significant aspect of ideas is not their relationship to a mind-independent reality but that they are the products of practical activity, and that this practical activity is itself guided by interests. The materialistic view of history that this leads to, Marx and Engels say:

... does not explain practice from the Idea but explains the formation of ideas from material practice.

The problem with the interests model does not lie in the view that ideas are the product of interests itself, which is, of course, very plausible (although it is more difficult to determine just what proportion of our ideas are products of interests in this way—surely not all of them—and to explain just how it is that interests should assert themselves in the process by which ideas are formed). The problem is that ideological ideas are not simply ideas formed in the pursuit of interests. They are, in fact, supposed to be ideas that go against the interests of a large number of those who hold them (and in this way further the interests of others). How do ideas of this kind come to be accepted?

Marx and Engels's answer starts from the claim that:

The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it.

But this is not a satisfactory solution. Marx and Engels seem to have adopted a view of those who live under the domination of the ruling class as passive victims, taking their ideas from those who control the 'means of mental production' like obedient chicks, with no critical reflection on their part as to whether the ideas are either true or in their own rational interests. Yet why should one suppose that the ruling class is capable of promoting its interests effectively, forming its ideas in response to those interests, whereas the dominated classes simply accept whatever is served up to them?

Marx and Engels do, however, attempt to make their claim more plausible by what they have to say about the nature of mental production. It is, they write, the most

significant development in the division of labour that mental and manual labour become separated:

Division of labour only becomes truly such from the moment when a division of material and manual labour appears. . . . From this moment onwards consciousness can really flatter itself that it is something other than consciousness of existing practice, that it really represents something without representing something real; from now on consciousness is in a position to emancipate itself from the world and to proceed to the formation of ‘pure’ theory, theology, philosophy, ethics, etc.

The separation between mental and manual labour, Marx and Engels maintain, does not really lead to the formation of autonomous ideas; the ideologists who produce ideas are still part of the ruling class whose interests their ideas represent. Nevertheless, it offers an explanation as to why such ideas should be accepted by those, the dominated classes, whose interests they go against. They are accepted because they are apparently disinterested. The ideologist, on this view, is like a bribed referee: able to influence the outcome of a game all the more effectively for the fact that he is falsely believed to be impartial.

Is the ideologist, then, engaged in deception? Does he know the partiality of his ideas but presents them nonetheless as if they were neutral and disinterested? On the contrary. According to Marx and Engels, ideologists are sincere—and, because they sincerely believe in the independence and objective validity of their own ideas, they are able to persuade others to accept them as such all the more effectively. Here, however, is the problem. How are we to suppose it to be true that the ideologists should both be constrained so that they produce ideas in the interests of the ruling class of which they are, appearances to the contrary, a part and that they (and those who accept the ideas from them) remain sincerely unaware of the nature of this connection? Why do they think that they are independent when in fact they are not? And, if they are not independent, how do their shared class interests with the rest of the ruling class assert themselves?

In any case, it is clear why Marx should now become so hostile to philosophy: like any supposedly ‘pure’ theory, philosophy represents a deceptive abstraction from the particular circumstances and material interests that it serves. This move to detach ideas that are the products of material interests from the interests that they represent is epitomized, for Marx and Engels, in Kant (the ‘whitewashing spokesman’ of the German bourgeoisie, as they call him). Kant, they write:

... made the materially motivated determinations of the will of the French bourgeois into pure self-determinations of ‘free will’, of the will in and for itself, of the human will, and so converted it into purely ideological determinations and moral postulates.

For Marx and Engels, at this stage at least, ‘moral postulates’ are, by their very nature, ideological.

## 8 Historical Materialism

‘Where speculation ends—in real life—there real, positive science begins’, according to Marx and Engels in *The German Ideology*. The science to which they are referring is

the materialist theory of history, whose classic statement is given in the Preface to *Zur Kritik der politischen Ökonomie* (A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy).

Taken most generally, the materialist theory of history asserts that the manner in which human beings produce the necessities of life determines the form of the societies in which they live. Every society other than the most primitive produces a 'surplus' beyond what it immediately consumes. The manner in which this surplus is 'appropriated'—taken from the direct producers and redistributed—determines the class structure of the society in question. If society is divided between direct producers and those who benefit from the former's 'unpaid surplus labour' (something that is true of all societies where a surplus exists, prior to the advent of socialism) the relationship between classes is antagonistic.

At any stage, the size of the surplus is an expression of the level of development of the 'productive forces'—the resources, physical and intellectual, upon which material production draws. Every society contains both an economic 'base', composed of 'relations of production' (the relations producers have to the means of production and to one another) and a legal and political 'superstructure', corresponding to the base. The relations of production favour the development of the productive forces up to a point. Beyond this they become, Marx says, 'fetters' upon the forces of production and a conflict arises which leads eventually to the replacement of the existing relations of production with new and superior ones.

Presented in these terms, it is clear that the materialist theory of history is intended as an exercise in social science rather than philosophy. Thus it may seem surprising that it should have attracted such enduring attention on the part of philosophers.

But scientific theories may be of concern to philosophers if their assumptions are novel, obscure or questionable even if the intentions behind them are in no way philosophical (examples are Darwin, Freud and Newton). In the case of Marx's theory of history, it is not just the meaning of and evidence for the particular claims to be found in the theory that have been controversial. The more general issues of the form of explanation that Marx is employing and the kind of entities such an explanation presupposes have been continuing matters of dispute.

Interpreters of Marx divide broadly into three on these questions. In the first group are those for whom Marx's theory of history is intended to be scientific in the way that any other scientific theory is. With some qualifications, the majority of the earliest Marxists (for example, Engels himself, Kautsky and Plekhanov) fall into this group. Those, on the other hand, who believe that there is a contrast between Marx's conception of science and the natural sciences may be divided into those who see Marx's theory as a transformation of Hegel's theory of history and those for whom it is fundamentally anti-Hegelian. The most influential presentation of the former interpretation is to be found in Georg Lukacs's *History and Class Consciousness*, while the latter is particularly associated with the French philosopher, Louis Althusser.

In the late nineteen-seventies the first approach was revived in the English-speaking world by G.A. Cohen's seminal *Karl Marx's Theory of History: a Defence*. According to Cohen, historical materialism can be presented in a way that contains nothing that should be unacceptable to anyone who accepts the legitimacy of Darwinian biology.

The two theories are, in Cohen's view, importantly parallel to one another, for both employ functional explanation. When Marx says that the relations of production

correspond to the forces of production, what he means, according to Cohen, is, first, that the relations are, in some sense, 'good for' the (development of the) forces, and, second, that they obtain because they are good for the forces. (The same analysis, suitably adapted, applies to the correspondence between superstructure and base.)

What is distinctive about Darwinian biology, however, is not just that it employs functional explanation but that it provides a convincing account (what Cohen calls an 'elaborating explanation') of why its functional explanations are true: the process of natural selection. Does Marxism have an equivalent elaborating explanation?

All the indications are that it does not. To this, there have been two main lines of response. One is that the theory should have (but lacks) such an explanation and that it is the task of a sympathetic reconstruction of Marx to provide one. On the other hand, it is also possible to argue that the search for what Jon Elster has called 'micro-foundations' is misguided. Thus the functional explanations that Marx invokes in the theory of history rest on the fact that there really are collective agents (classes, for example). On this 'collectivist' reading it is sufficient simply to appreciate the nature of collective agency to see why collective agents should feature in functional explanations: they have the power to act purposively to bring about their ends. No reductive 'elaborating explanation' is necessary.

To take this view is to align oneself with the second and third groups of Marx's interpreters and to affirm the fundamental gap between Marx's theory of history and the explanations of the natural sciences (where functional explanations are not simply left unelaborated). If so, the Marxist theory of history cannot draw on the general prestige of science for its justification.

## 9 Political Economy

In contrast to his relatively brief and schematic statements concerning general history, Marx wrote very extensively about the economic system under which he himself lived. *Das Kapital*, which presents Marx's definitive analysis of capitalism, is a work of exceptional methodological complexity, as is already suggested by its sub-title, 'Critique of Political Economy'. The phrase is ambiguous. Is Marx's objective to criticize the bourgeois economy or bourgeois economics? In fact, Marx rejects this as a false antithesis: the subject-matter of the book is both. Ten years before its publication, Marx described the work that was to become *Das Kapital* in a letter:

The... work in question is a critique of the economic categories, or, if you like, the system of bourgeois economy critically presented. It is a presentation [*Darstellung*] of the system and, simultaneously, a critique of it.

The two aspects go together in Marx's view because economic categories are not simply the means employed by an observer to classify some inert mass of data. They are themselves a part of social reality, 'abstract forms' of the social relations of production.

Bourgeois economists, Marx alleges, characteristically fail to recognize that their categories are specific to capitalism, and so they treat the capitalist mode of production as one 'eternally fixed by nature for every state of society', Marx alleges. A 'critical

presentation' of economics must counteract the false eternalization of the economy that bourgeois economics carries within itself.

As it stands, this is a criticism of the limitations in the self-understanding of bourgeois economics rather than a challenge to its empirical content. Yet empirical explanation is a central part of Marx's project. 'It is', he writes in the Preface to *Das Kapital*, 'the ultimate aim of this work to lay bare the economic law of motion of modern society'. Has bourgeois economics failed to discover this law or has it simply not put its categories in historical context? At its strongest, Marx's case is that both criticisms are true and that the former failing is a result of the latter. The 'law of value' that Marx claims to have discovered could not, he says, have been discovered by economic science 'so long as it sticks in its bourgeois skin'.

The connection that Marx sees between the categories of economic life and the categories of economic analysis is made more complicated by the structure that he ascribes to capitalism. Marx believes that an indispensable ingredient for understanding capitalism is the contrast between its 'essence'—its underlying determinants—and its 'appearance'—the way that it immediately strikes those who live in it. Corresponding to this distinction are two kinds of bourgeois economic thought: what Marx calls 'classical economy', on the one hand, and 'vulgar economy' on the other. Classical economy (the tradition whose greatest representatives were Ricardo and Adam Smith) aims towards the essence of capitalism: it 'nearly touches the true relation of things', although it is not able to formulate that relation explicitly. According to Marx, it is the mark of the 'vulgar economy' of his own time, by contrast, that it 'feels particularly at home in the alienated outward appearances of economic relations'. Yet this means that it is fundamentally unscientific, for 'all science would be superfluous if the outward appearance and the essence of things coincided.' A truly scientific political economy must go beyond the immediately received categories of economic life.

This is what Marx believes that he himself has achieved (and he considers himself for this reason to be the heir of the tradition of classical political economy).

In a letter to Engels, written at the time of the publication of *Das Kapital* Volume One, Marx singles out what he calls the 'two-fold character of labour' as the most important point in his book. Labour, Marx claims, is both the source of value and, at the same time, under capitalism, a commodity itself. Yet this commodity (labour-power, as Marx calls it) is a commodity of a special kind. Its value is not the same as the value of the commodities produced by the labour that is exercised on behalf of its purchaser, the capitalist. This discrepancy, in Marx's view, explains the 'origin' of surplus-value—the fact that the capitalist appropriates the surplus-labour of the worker under the guise of a fair exchange. In discussing the manner in which, in capitalist society, labour is sold to capitalists as a commodity, in exchange for wages, Marx writes:

Hence we may understand the decisive importance of the transformation of the value and price of labour-power into the form of wages, or into the value and price of labour itself. This phenomenal form, which makes the actual relation invisible, and, indeed, shows the direct opposite of that relation, forms the basis of all the juridical notions of both labourer and capitalist, of all the mystifications of the capitalist mode of production, of all its illusions as to liberty, of all the apologetic shifts of the vulgar economists.

Thus we see Marx making three claims:

1. that we should see reality as layered, having a surface appearance governed by an underlying structure.
2. that to make such a distinction is characteristic of the scientific approach to reality in general.
3. that the phenomenal form conceals the real relations (it ('makes the actual relation invisible and indeed shows the opposite of (that relation)').

However, claims (1) and (2) do not entail (3). According to claims (1) and (2) (in themselves extremely plausible) the way that we see the world is not, immediately, adequate for us to explain the way that the world is. But that does not make our immediate perception of the world false. It simply lacks a theory. Yet Marx's claim (3) is much stronger: reality presents itself in a way that deceives those who immediately perceive it. Marx's own statements to the contrary, it seems that this third claim is best understood not as a general consequence of the nature of scientific understanding but as a specific feature of capitalism. Capitalism mystifies those who live under it, Marx believes, because it is a deceptive object. To penetrate its surface scientifically it is necessary to go beyond the limitations of bourgeois political economy.

## 10 The Fetishism of Commodities

The most detailed discussion that Marx provides of a case where the surface of capitalism presents itself as 'false' is to be found in the section of *Das Kapital* called "The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof". This discussion is a recognizable re-working of the central themes to be found in the treatment of alienated labour in the Paris Manuscripts.

In the eighteenth-century sense of the term, fetishists were those non-European peoples whose religion involved the worship of inanimate objects. Fetishism, that is, is a fallacy attributing to objects in the world some quality (power and personality) that they, in fact, lack. Marx's conception of commodity fetishism shares this structure but with an important difference. The fetishism of commodities is not a matter of subjective delusion or irrationality on the part of perceivers but is somehow embedded in the reality that they face.

According to Marx, two separate facts or properties are distorted in the commodity-form. (1) First, the 'social character' of human beings' labour appears (falsely) as 'objective characteristics of the products themselves', and, (2) secondly (in consequence of the first fact, as Marx asserts) the producers' own relationship to their 'collective labour' appears 'as a social relationship between objects, existing externally to the producers'.

The first issue is what the 'social character' that is apparently a property of the products themselves amounts to. Is it the sheer fact that the commodity is a commodity? This suggestion must be rejected, for the belief that the product is a commodity is in no way a false or deceptive one. Likewise, it cannot be something concealed from the producers that commodities do as a matter of fact exchange for one another in certain

proportions: it is hard to see how anyone could live their lives within a market society without having an adequate understanding of facts of this kind (enough, at least, to be able to buy something to eat).

The best interpretation of Marx's argument is that it is not such first-order facts about commodities but a second-order one that is the source of deception: it is not that commodities can be exchanged with one another in certain ratios but the reason why they exchange in the ratios that they do that is their hidden secret.

Marx's account of the illusion regarding the social character of the products of labour is complemented by the account he gives of the second element in commodity fetishism. Because commodity production takes place as a process by which the producers' activities are coordinated solely through the imperatives of a system of market exchanges, it follows, Marx says, that 'the social relations between their private acts of labour manifest themselves as what they are—that is, not as the immediate social relationships of persons in their labour but as material relationships between persons and social relationships between things'.

Implicitly, the market commensurates the labour of each individual with the labour of every other producer—individual labour has its value in relation to the way in which others perform the same labour. The socially useful character of the labour of the individual producers thus appears to them, according to Marx, 'only under those forms which are impressed upon that labour in everyday practice, in the exchange of products'.

Here, again, Marx is indicating an illusion of the second rather than the first order. The individual producers are aware of the role of the market in determining the way in which they labour. In this they are quite correct. But they also believe (falsely) that it is the market that makes their labour useful (rather than recognising it as a contingent fact about capitalist production that their socially useful labour takes on a market-determined form).

Society generates such false beliefs spontaneously, Marx claims. The world of commodities 'veils rather than reveals', he says, the social character of private labour and of the relations between the individual producers.

That the true source of the value of commodities lies in the labour expended in their production is, Marx maintains, a matter of simple scientific truth. So, too, is the fact that the social character of private labour consists in the equalization of that labour under the auspices of the market. Nevertheless, fetishism is a matter of 'objective illusion' and knowledge of these truths does not dispel such false appearance. The discovery of the law of value 'by no means dissipates the objective illusion through which the social character of labour appears to be an objective character of the products themselves' any more than 'the discovery by science of the component gases of air' altered the atmosphere that people breathed.

The analogy that Marx chooses here is not a happy one. Admittedly, it is absurd to think that a scientist's discovery about an object should change the object itself. But that is not the issue. It is not a question of whether the atmosphere itself changes after the discovery of its component gases but whether the way that we think about it does. It is only if we suppose that capitalism, unlike the atmosphere, is an object of a particular kind—a deceptive object—that it is possible to claim that it will continue to encourage such false beliefs in the face of contrary knowledge.

But it is not just that the individuals who live in a society based on commodity production are deceived by it regarding the way that it works. The way that it works is itself criticized by Marx. Above all, the 'social character of labour' is made private in fact. This is not a misperception or false belief but a contradiction: a discrepancy between what Marx takes to be the intrinsic nature of social labour and the way that it is in fact organized. Capitalism, that is to say, is not just deceptive but also defective.

## 11 Morality

The question whether Marx's theory has a moral or ethical dimension is one of the most controversial of all issues of Marx interpretation.

The difficulty facing interpreters is easily seen. On the one hand, Marx has a number of uncompromisingly negative things to say about morality. Moreover, after 1845 at least, he affirms that his own theory is not a utopian or ethical one but 'real positive science'. Yet, on the other hand, much of the language that he uses to describe capitalism is plainly condemnatory (for instance, that it is antagonistic, oppressive and exploitative). Does this not represent an inconsistency on Marx's part? Is he not moralizing and rejecting morality at the same time?

This section will present a line of interpretation according to which Marx is not inconsistent. The interpretation depends on a contrast between certain doctrines typical of moral philosophy (which, it will be argued, Marx rejects) and the rejection of ethical values as such (to which, it will be argued, he is not thereby committed). However, it is only fair to say that this interpretation is controversial and involves a considerable amount of reconstruction of the rather sparse evidence that we have of Marx's views.

It is helpful to start, as Marx himself did, with Hegel's critique of Kant. Both Marx and Hegel share the belief that morality, as embodied in Kant's moral philosophy, is, as they put it, 'abstract'. There appear to be three interconnected elements compressed into this criticism.

1. First, morality is alleged to be abstract in the sense that it contains principles expressed in universal form (in Kant's case, the 'categorical imperative' to 'act only according to that maxim which you can, at the same time, will to be a universal law'). While such principles may function as a test upon proposed actions, they do not, so the argument goes, determine the content of the action to be performed. Thus, the claims of moral philosophy to the contrary, specific content is surreptitiously imported into ethics from the existing institutions or codes of behaviour of the society in question.
2. Secondly, morality is abstract to the extent that it takes the form of a mere injunction: an imperative that is addressed to people's 'moral reason', telling them to act in a certain way because that is 'good in itself'. Moral action is detached thereby from other forms of human action and, as a result, moral theory has nothing to say about the conditions under which the forms of behaviour that it commends will be realized in practice.
3. Finally, morality may be said to be abstract in that it contains an unhistorical understanding of its own status. It presents its principles as if they were the

axioms of some timeless moral geometry. Yet, in fact, every system of morality is a way of seeing the world that arises in particular circumstances and responds to definite needs within those circumstances.

Although one or more of these features may be present in the forms of moral philosophy with which we are most familiar, it is not clear that they are a necessary feature of every view that one might call 'moral'. Not all ethical positions have to express themselves as systems of universal principles that we are enjoined to follow because they are good for their own sake. Admittedly, many philosophers would argue that to combine the value-commitments characteristic of morality with the meta-level doctrine that such values are, in the end, expressions of interest (Marx's version of point (3) above) inevitably undermines, as Nietzsche might have put it, the value of value itself. But it is at least arguable that the two standpoints are compatible. The path from sociological determinism to moral scepticism is not as steep, slippery and remorseless as it is sometimes made out to be.

If this is conceded, we can draw a distinction between morality in two senses: morality as a quasi-Kantian system of principles (which Marx rejects) and morality as a set of values embodying a conception of what is good for human beings (which he can consistently accept).

To present things in this way, however, may seem to give insufficient weight to the vehement hostility which Marx shows towards ideas of justice and rights, in particular. On the interpretation being proposed here, Marx's animus is best understood as aimed against what he sees as the assumptions behind such values, rather than to their being values as such.

Speaking roughly, we may think of rights as permitting individuals to act in certain ways, in given circumstances, should they wish to do so, and to be able to claim correlative duties on the part of others. A duty, correspondingly, would require individuals to act in some way, whether they wished to or not. Justice (if we do not think of it simply as a matter of rights and duties) would consist of principles on which benefits and burdens are distributed in cases where interests conflict.

What these values have in common is that they provide a framework which regulates and limits the self-seeking behaviour of individuals. They are values that assume a conflict between (to put it in Kantian terms) 'duty' and 'inclination'. Just as Marx supposes that the categories of bourgeois economics eternalize the forms of bourgeois economic life, so, he believes, discussion of rights (which he denounces in the *Critique of the Gotha Programme* as 'ideological nonsense') eternalizes a situation in which the good of each individual is independent and so can only be advanced at the expense of others. Right, moreover, can only apply a fixed and equal standard to unequal individuals, 'from outside'.

For the liberal, concerned to protect the individual's powers of self-direction against the intrusions of others, the attraction of the idea of rights is that it presupposes nothing about individuals' character and personalities. For Marx, on the other hand, that is just its weakness: rights do nothing to transform human nature. Against this, it is clear that Marx, from the time of the Paris Manuscripts, sees social progress as characterized by a form of community in which (as he and Engels put it in the *Communist Manifesto*) 'the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all'. Marx's

ethical ideal is one of solidarity in which all advance together.

Hence Marx's reluctance to use the language of justice to condemn capitalism becomes more intelligible. It is not that Marx thinks that exploitation, expropriation, oppression, slavery, misery (a few of the terms he applies to the capitalist system) are just. But he is reluctant to use language that would suggest that these are forms of injustice for which 'justice' (in the sense of giving 'each their due') is the final and sufficient remedy.

## 12 Socialism

It may seem odd, given that Marx devoted his life to the achievement of a socialist society, how brief and unspecific his accounts of it are.

One explanation that is often advanced for this apparent neglect is the following. Marx believed, it is said, that thought is limited to its own time. Thus it would have been improper for him, living under capitalism, to try to anticipate the nature of the society that would replace it and to write (as he puts it in the Preface to the Second Edition of *Kapital*) 'recipes for the cook-shops of the future'.

While this may be part of the reason for Marx's reticence, it cannot be the whole of it. For, even if we grant that Marx believed that each stage of society sets a boundary which thought cannot cross (and it is by no means beyond question that he did hold this view in such a strong form) he is also committed to the view that socialism is anticipated within capitalism.

In the Preface to *Zur Kritik der politischen Ökonomie* Marx makes the general claim that new forms of society are always pre-figured within the old ones that they replace. 'Mankind', he writes, 'only sets itself such tasks as it is able to solve, since closer examination will always show that the problem itself arises only when the material conditions for its solution are already present or at least in the course of formation'.

Marx describes the process by which capitalism prepares the ground for socialism at the end of *Das Kapital*, Volume One. As the productive forces developed by capitalism grow, so, too, he claims, does the 'mass of misery, oppression, slavery, degradation, exploitation'. A stage is reached, however, at which the monopoly of capital becomes a 'fetter' on production and 'the centralization of the means of production and the socialization of labour at last reach a point where they become incompatible with their capitalist shell.' At this point, the shell 'bursts asunder', the 'death-knell' sounds for capitalism and the 'expropriators are themselves expropriated'.

The first and most obvious difference between capitalism and socialism is that common ownership leads to a quite different pattern of distribution of the products of labour. No longer will the capitalist, in virtue of his ownership of the means of production, be able to exploit the individual producer. In the *Critique of the Gotha Programme* Marx distinguishes two stages of post-capitalist society. In the first, the direct producer receives back from society (after deductions for shared costs and social expenditure) 'what he has given to it as his individual quantum of labour'.

But this, Marx points out, is a principle of distribution that merely rectifies exploitation. It does not remedy the inequalities that come from contingent differences in natural capacities between individual producers. Later, however, society will move

beyond this, Marx claims, and ‘the narrow horizon of bourgeois right’ will be ‘crossed in its entirety’. At this point, the principle upon which society will operate will be: ‘From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs!’

But socialism is distinguished by more than its principle of distribution. In particular, labour will be organized quite differently from the way that it is organized under capitalism.

One of Marx’s few reasonably extensive accounts of the nature of the socialist organization of production is to be found in the section on the Fetishism of Commodities in *Das Kapital*, as part of a comparison between capitalist and other forms of production. Marx starts with Robinson Crusoe, whose productive activity he describes as ‘simple and clear’. For Robinson, Marx says, the organization of production is a purely administrative operation: the end is known, as are the resources available and the techniques by which that end could be attained. Marx then moves from ‘Robinson’s island, bathed in light’, via feudal and patriarchal forms of production, before alighting on:

... a community of free individuals, carrying on their labour with the means of production in common, in which the labour-power of all the different individuals is consciously applied as the combined labour-power of the community.

Here, says Marx,

All the characteristics of Robinson’s labour are... repeated, but with this difference, that they are social, instead of individual... The social relations of the individual producers to their labour and to the products of their labour remain here transparently simple, in production as well as in distribution.

The idea that labour could be ‘consciously applied’ in a complex modern society—resources and needs co-ordinated, efficient techniques adopted, innovation managed—with the same ‘transparent simplicity’ as an individual allocating his time to different tasks on a desert island is astonishingly implausible. And, even if it were not so, the question would still arise how that ‘common and rational plan’ (as Marx terms it elsewhere) would relate to the individuals whose task it was to carry it out. Would it not be, from their point of view, no less of an ‘external’ imperative to be followed than the dictates of the market that govern their labour under capitalism? Arguably, the idea that society under socialism would be spontaneously unified like one great, self-transparent super-individual represents an unacknowledged hangover in Marx’s mature thought from Hegel’s doctrine of Geist. However that may be, the presence of this doctrine goes a long way towards explaining why Marx had so little to say about the problems of socialist economic organization: he simply failed to see the difficulty. Few theoretical omissions, surely, have ever had more disastrous historical consequences.

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