

Marxism and Arguing for Justice

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ARGUING FOR JUSTICE is arguing for principles and practices which are to be justified on the basis of disinterested or impartial considerations. This, of course, is not all it is, but still in arguing for anything that could conceivably count as justice it is irreducibly at least that. Turning now to Marx, with that in mind initially to fix ideas about justice, it is important to realize that as a matter of Marx exegesis it is very difficult and indeed perhaps impossible to establish what he thought about justice. Indeed, in recent years there has come into existence a minor growth industry trying to establish what his views about justice and, more broadly, about morality were. It is agreed on all sides that Marx, one of the great denouncers of all time, though he stressed capitalism's prodigious productive capacities, nevertheless condemned capitalism as a brutalizing social system which dehumanized, exploited, and oppressed human beings. Marx also believed, it is further agreed, that capitalism does this even in the face of objective possibilities for radical social change. It does this even in the period of what Marx regarded as developed capitalism, where a change to socialism in the developed countries would render such brutalization unnecessary. It is generally agreed that Marx believed these things. It is further agreed by many that if (a) Marx's description of how capitalism works and (b) his assessment of what the alternatives are and what they are like is close to being correct, then Marx would be justified in those criticisms and that harsh condemnation. But, that notwithstanding, there is

deep and seemingly intractable dispute among sophisticated, conceptually astute thinkers very knowledgeable about Marx's texts as to whether Marx thought capitalism was unjust or whether he thought any whole social system could be properly appraised in terms of the justice or injustice of the whole system where those terms were taken, as people arguing for justice take them, as terms of critical appraisal. There is here among both Marxist theoreticians and Marxologists a deep and informed disagreement. I do not intend to step into that thicket and try to establish what Marx's views about justice really were, though I think we should at least entertain the possibility that Marx, who disdained writing systematically about justice or any other moral conception, had no consistently thought-out view here.

What does concern me, and what seems to me far more important to ascertain than the Marxological point, is—whatever Marx may or may not have thought about ethics—whether we can draw out, in some not-implausible way, from his central views about history, about how capitalism is structured, and about the nature of society, *implicit* principles of justice that can be of some value in the critique of capitalism and other whole social formations. Put differently, and extended slightly, can contemporary Marxists who are knowledgeable about moral philosophy and who share such unproblematic considered moral convictions find implicit in the Marxist canon a basis for consistently articulating principles of justice which are (a) critical principles of justice capable of assessing in those terms whole social formations and (b) are compatible with core canonical Marxist social theory and practice? Can they discover or construct such principles and can these very principles play a modest and rationally justified role, compatible with the full acceptance of historical materialism, in a critique of capitalism and a defense of socialism which includes, as a component of that critique and defense, a moral critique and defense? Again there is deep and knowledgeable disagreement about the prospects here among

contemporary philosophers who are also Marxists or Marxologists. Allen Wood and Richard Miller, for example, think such a project is both very un-Marxian and, Marxian or un-Marxian, thoroughly mistaken, while G.A. Cohen and Jon Elster believe that this is just what contemporary Marxists should set about doing.¹

I want to investigate here whether Marxists, operating with what I shall characterize as core Marxist beliefs, can consistently make transhistorical assessments of the justice or injustice of whole social systems and whether, if they consistently can, they should do so. Can they reasonably claim, particularly if their descriptive-explanatory-interpretive claims are approximately true, that capitalism is unjust and that socialism is just or at least less unjust than capitalism and can they argue that it is reasonable to expect that the communist society of the future, in being what Marx calls a truly human society, will also be through and through just or will it be “beyond justice”? Or—standing back from this—does it even make much sense to talk of a society being “beyond justice”?

It might seem to some that plainly Marxism allows such judgments and that socialism cannot make much sense if such judgments cannot be made. But we should also remember that such astute and knowledgeable students of Marx and Marxism as Allen Wood and Richard Miller argue that Marx made no

¹ Allen W. Wood, “The Marxian Critique of Justice,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1 (1971–72): 224–282; idem, “Marx on Right and Justice,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 8 (1978–79): 267–295; idem, *Karl Marx* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982), pp. 125–156; idem, “Marx’s Immoralism,” in *Marx en Perspective*, ed. Bernard Chavance (Paris: Editions de l’Ecole des Haute Etudes en Sciences Sociales, 1985), pp. 681–698; idem, “Justice and Class Interests,” *Philosophica* 33 (1984): 9–32; Richard W. Miller, *Analyzing Marx* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), pp. 15–97; G. A. Cohen, “Freedom, Justice and Capitalism,” *New Left Review*, March/April 1981, pp. 3–16; idem, “Review of Wood’s *Karl Marx*,” *Mind* 92 (July 1983): 440–445; Jon Elster, “Exploitation, Freedom, and Justice,” *Marxism, Nomos* 26, eds. J. R. Pennock and J. W. Chapman (New York: New York University Press, 1983), pp. 277–304; and idem, *Making Sense of Marx* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 196–233. For an important review article (a) with a good grasp and an illuminating categorization of the literature and (b) which provides a defense of Marxist moralism, see Norman Geras, “On Marx and Justice,” *New Left Review* 60 (March/April 1985): 47–89. He also provides a useful bibliography.

such transhistorical assessments of justice. They claim that Marx did not use “justice”—more accurately, *Gerechtigkeit*—as a critical normative term and, they further argue, that a good understanding of what I have called the core conceptions of Marxism should dissuade contemporary Marxists from doing so themselves.² Turning the screw one more notch against moralistically inclined Marxism, they contend that in reality it is unnecessary and undesirable to moralize Marxism even if it were possible to do so. It is, as Wood puts it, “quite possible for an immoralist to possess a rational, humane outlook, as indeed Marx did” and, without inconsistency, believe that it is a mistake to think that one must appeal to morality in order to oppose tyranny, brutality, and inhumanity. Indeed, it is worse than a mistake, it is “a superstition, a first cousin in fact of the superstition that one must believe in God in order to be morally good.”³ Taking the point that people can be decent and humane without believing in morals, the question remains: Why, particularly in political contexts, should Marx and Marxists reject the taking of the moral point of view? Why should they steadfastly set their faces against the very possibility of the assessment of the justice or injustice of whole social systems? This is particularly puzzling when such Marxist immoralists as Wood and Miller readily admit that Marx critically assessed whole social systems. He was, as is patently and uncontroversially evident, perfectly willing to use evaluative concepts in his appraisals of capitalism and socialism. Indeed, he was lavish in their use. He did not, in the way Max Weber was later to recommend, think of himself as a normatively neutral social scientist. What Wood and Miller are concerned to deny is that Marx made these assessments in *moral* terms, in terms of moral values. They further believe (Miller more unqualifiedly than Wood) that contemporary Marxists should follow him here, for, as Wood claims, “it will

² See the references to Wood and Miller in the previous footnote.

³ Wood, “Marx’s Immoralism,” pp. 696–697.

prove difficult, for instance, to combine a materialist conception of history and society with a critique of capitalism on moral grounds.”⁴

Principles of justice, Wood reminds us in his “Justice and Class Interests,” and as I noted initially, “must be advanced on impartial considerations.”⁵ Marx, however, Wood claims, “refused to evaluate social institutions from an impartial or disinterested standpoint, and regarded the whole enterprise of doing so as ensnared in ideological illusions.”⁶ That refusal, both Wood and Miller argue, is a matter of Marxists being faithful to their own deepest beliefs. A belief in the division of society into antagonistic classes is such a deep belief within Marxist theory. So is a belief in the necessity of class struggle. In our time, Marxists believe, the class interests of the two principal opposing classes are in conflict. (That some members of either class are not aware of it does not gainsay it.) They have no alternative but in one way or another to fight it out until the proletarian class, or so Marxists believe, is victorious. There is no realistic way of resolving these conflicting class interests by an appeal to the impartial considerations of justice.

What from a consistently Marxian point of view should be struggled for, Wood claims, is “the achievement of the immediate interests of the working class. . . .”⁷ We should not attempt to justify, both Miller and Wood argue, the overthrow of capitalism from a disinterested standpoint. We should argue instead for the desirability of its overthrow and its replacement by socialism from the standpoint of the proletariat, and, as well, and derivatively, from what is in accordance with the interests of those classes whose interests coincide with the interests of the proletariat in this respect (such as the peasantry)

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 696.

⁵ Wood, “Justice and Class Interests,” p. 15. See also Miller, *Analyzing Marx*, pp. 15–97.

⁶ Wood, “Justice and Class Interests,” p. 15.

⁷ Karl Marx, *Marx Engels Werke* (Berlin, 1961–66), 4: 492.

or from classes whose members are in his opinion destined to become proletarians (such as the petit bourgeoisie).⁸

Canonical Conceptions

In asking whether a consistent Marxist should be such a Marxist immoralist, as Wood somewhat misleadingly characterizes her, or whether she should argue that Marxists can, and should, make moral assessments—including assessments in terms of the justice/injustice—of capitalism, socialism, and communism as well as earlier social formations, we need to spell out what I shall call the core canonical conceptions of Marxism, for without such a conceptualization we will not have any reasonable understanding of what it is to take a Marxist standpoint and thus we can have scant grounds for asserting or denying that Marxists can consistently and coherently make such assessments.

What are these canonical core conceptions? They are historical materialism and its allied conception of ideology; class as an objective reality where one's class position is determined by one's relation to the means of production; the pervasiveness and necessity of class struggle culminating in a social revolution which would institute a fundamental change in the modes of production and its attendant social relations; the transition from capitalism to socialism; a future communist society; the role of the party; democracy; a belief that communism is at least feasibly on the historical agenda and that its advent is desirable; a stress on the viability of something called dialectical method; a belief in the unity of theory and practice; a conception of human nature (that is, a conception of the needs and capacities of human beings); and finally, and very centrally for classical Marxism, an acceptance of the labor theory of value.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 471.

These core conceptions played a prominent part in the theories of all classical Marxists. That is to say, to treat the notion extensionally, they were accepted by Marx, Engels, Lenin, Luxemburg, Trotsky, Lukacs, Gramsci, and Mao. Different Marxists give these conceptions somewhat different readings (compare Gramsci and Bukharin on historical materialism) and different stresses (compare Lenin and Luxemburg on the role of the party). Moreover, Marxists not only give these core beliefs different readings, usually reflecting their different cultural backgrounds (compare contemporary French or Italian Marxists with English or Scandinavian Marxists), they make different noncanonical additions to this core and some of them reject or at least distance themselves from some elements of the core. Analytical Marxists, for example, tend to distance themselves from talk of dialectics, Lenin's admonitions to the contrary notwithstanding. And three major analytical Marxists (G. A. Cohen, John Roemer, and Jon Elster) have rejected the labor theory of value. Some (Cohen and Elster) have even come to doubt the approximate truth of historical materialism, and another, Andrew Levine, has only accepted a reduced something from historical materialism which he calls its rational kernel.⁹

What, all this notwithstanding, makes them all Marxists is that they take a sympathetic departure from these core canonical beliefs; and in doing so they take them very seriously indeed, and not just as theses to be refuted, but as possible sources of truth. Moreover, and connected with this, they link their own analyses of social phenomena to those of Marx and the classical Marxists and they find, as does Jon Elster, who departs very extensively indeed from Marx, that most of the views about society they hold to be true and important they can trace back to Marx.¹⁰ If the departure goes too far, where "too

⁹ Andrew Levine, *Arguing for Socialism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), pp. 192–196.

¹⁰ Elster, *Making Sense of Marx*, p. 531.

far” can surely not usefully or indeed reasonably be defined precisely, it is possible reasonably to wonder—as is the case with Elster—why that person continues to describe himself as a Marxist.

Marxism is, thankfully, not written in stone. It should not be treated like a theological or a metaphysical system. Indeed, if it is, it could have no claim to being a scientific account of social reality. It is, rather, in a good scientific spirit, a developing account of social reality in which some of the core elements will drop out, others will get modified, and new elements will be added. Talk of either “orthodox Marxism” or “revisionism” should be rejected as being more appropriate to theology than to a scientific social theory. That Marxism is also, and integrally, a revolutionary *praxis* should make no difference to this judgment.

Still these core conceptions are the central elements in “orthodox Marxism,” and contemporary Marxism must take its departure from a very extensive relation to them, including an attempt to see their force in our present attempts to interpret the world and to change it. What I most centrally want to do here is to see if that core, or reasonable extensions or retractions of that core, require an acceptance of Marxist immorality or whether instead it is compatible with some defense of transhistorical principles of justice which neither collapse into ideological twaddle or into the pointless vacuities of “eternal justice” so aptly satirized by Engels.¹¹ (It is important to recognize that a political conception of justice such as John Rawls’s has no more use for “eternal principles of justice” than does Engels.¹²)

¹¹ Frederick Engels, *Anti-Duhring*, tr. Emile Burns (New York: International Publishers, 1939), chs. 9–11. See also Kai Nielsen, “Engels on Morality and Moral Theorizing,” *Studies in Soviet Thought* 26 (1983).

¹² John Rawls, “Justice as Fairness: Political Not Metaphysical,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 14 (Summer 1985): 223–251.

Capitalism and Robbery

There is one very short way with dissenters developed by G. A. Cohen in explicit criticism of Marxist immoralism.¹³ If sound, it would, in a snappy set of arguments, give us good grounds for condemning capitalism as unjust and for preferring—and indeed morally speaking preferring—socialism to capitalism. Cohen starts with Wood's startling claim that, if Marx's account of capitalist society is on the mark, it remains true that, although "capitalist exploitation alienates, dehumanizes and degrades wage laborers, it does not violate any of their rights, and there is nothing about it which is wrongful or unjust."¹⁴ This surprising claim is so, it is argued, because in capitalist societies there are, if Marxist theory is right, "no rights beyond those which capitalist exploitation honors."¹⁵ Cohen responds by pointing out that in many places Marx says the capitalist has robbed the worker and that capitalism is based on theft, "since capitalists pay wages with money they get by selling what workers produce."¹⁶ Moreover, Marx cannot mean by "robbery" here simply that the worker has, according to the rules of capitalism, been robbed, since in the cases that Marx takes to be the most paradigmatic of robbery the transaction in the capitalist system is the exchange of equivalents. But Marx's central point in this context is that this very exchange—though it is indeed in a perfectly straightforward sense "an equal exchange"—enables the capitalist to rob the worker since it allows the capitalist to appropriate surplus labor from the worker. This extraction of what comes, in a Marxist way of characterizing things, to surplus value—newly created value from surplus labor—is the source of the capitalist's profits. The capitalist gains from the labor power of the workers beyond what the labor power

¹³ G. A. Cohen, "Review of Wood's *Karl Marx*," *Mind* 92 (July 1983): 440–445.

¹⁴ Wood, *Karl Marx*, p. 43.

¹⁵ Cohen, "Review of Wood's *Karl Marx*," p. 442.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 445.

produces that is equivalent to the commodities the worker must consume to remain alive and to be able to work. This, according to the rules of capitalism, is a fair exchange, so, *given the rules of capitalism*, the worker is not robbed. However, Marx says, the worker is robbed, though not by capitalist standards, when surplus value is extracted from him. The capitalist, on Marx's view, is like a conqueror "who buys commodities," as Marx put it in the *Grundrisse*, "from the conquered with the money he has robbed them of, since capitalists pay wages with money they get by selling what workers produce."¹⁷

It is clear here, Cohen claims, that Marx is using "rob" in some transhistorical mode-of-production-nonrelative sense since Marx agrees that according to the rules of capitalism the worker is not robbed but still insists that he is robbed. Then, Cohen goes on to remark, in a passage that has received some attention from both Steven Lukes and Jon Elster,

. . . since, as Wood will agree, Marx did not think that by capitalist criteria the capitalist steals, and since he did think he steals, he must have meant that he steals in some appropriately non-relativist sense. And since to steal is, in general, wrongly to take what rightly belongs to another, to steal is to commit an injustice, and a system which is 'based on theft' is based on injustice.¹⁸

So there we have it. Marx, whatever he might at other times have thought, or perhaps sometimes thought he thought, did clearly, as a direct consequence of a central part of his theory, believe that capitalism is unjust and he thereby thought that (*pace* Wood and Miller) transhistorical and non-mode-of-production-relative judgments of justice and injustice could be made. This, it is tempting to say, establishes quite unequivocally that Marx at least sometimes in his actual social criticism shows that he regards capitalism as unjust and, more

¹⁷ Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, tr. Martin Nicolaus (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1973), p. 705.

¹⁸ Cohen, "Review of Wood's *Karl Marx*," p. 443.

importantly, it shows that such a belief in the injustice of capitalism is linked to, or is at least not incompatible with, core elements of Marxist social theory.

Cohen remarks that Marx could only “lack the belief that capitalism was unjust because he failed to notice that robbery constitutes an injustice.”¹⁹ But it is implausible to believe that on most occasions Marx would do this for, after all, the logical (conceptual) relationship between “robbery and injustice is so close that anyone who thinks capitalism is robbery must be treated as someone who thinks capitalism is unjust, even if he does not realize that he thinks it is.”²⁰

The existence of texts, stressed by Wood, which show, or at least seem to show, that, when writing them, “Marx thought all non-relativist notions of justice and injustice were moonshine” show, if that is really the import of those texts, “that, at least sometimes, Marx *mistakenly thought that Marx did not believe that capitalism was unjust, because he was confused about justice.*”²¹ But it is clear from Cohen’s argument in the immediately preceding paragraph that in his actual practice of social criticism Marx believed that capitalism is unjust and that that is what a consistent application of his theory commits him to. The upshot of Cohen’s argument then is to uphold, against Wood and in effect against Miller (against Marxist antimoralism generally), the conventional idea that Marx thought, and rightly thought, that capitalist exploitation is unjust.

However, even if we can thus set the conflicting exegetical passages aside, there are theoretical difficulties involved that perhaps keep Cohen’s argument from being as decisive as he believes it to be. (Remember here our concern is not with *Marx* exegesis but with what *Marxians* can consistently say in this domain.) First, as Elster notes, “the robbery involved differs from the standard cases of theft.”²² In standard contexts, as

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 444; italics in original.

²² Elster, *Making Sense of Marx*, p. 225.

when I steal your pen, the stolen object exists prior to the act of stealing it. Suppose you have a pen that I want which either I cannot afford or I cannot find another like it. I steal your pen when I proceed to take it without your permission. Something exists that is not mine that I want and this provides the incentive to steal. In all the standard cases of stealing there must be something there to be taken prior to the act of stealing. But, Elster points out, this is not the case with Marx's and Cohen's cases of capitalists stealing from workers. Indeed, in Cohen's case, and cases like it, it is the other way around, and this raises some worries about whether what is going on is properly described as stealing or robbery. As Elster puts it: "In capitalist exploitation it is the other way around: it is because the surplus can be appropriated and robbed that the capitalist has an incentive to create it. Had there been no capitalist, the workers would not have been robbed, but they also have nothing that anyone could rob them of."²³

This weakens—or at least appears to weaken—Cohen's case, for, given the differences here, we may not be justified, as Cohen takes it that we are justified, in assimilating capitalist exploitation to straightforward theft. But it is straightforward theft that is unproblematically wrong and unjust because it is, among other things, a violation of others' rights. However, that this is so for this extended use of "theft" appears at least not to be so unproblematically evident. Perhaps we can successfully argue that it is unjust, but then we must produce that argument. It appears at least that we cannot so straightforwardly decisively establish that Marx believed capitalism to be unjust or that Marxist theory requires that claim from the consistent Marxist.

Capitalism's Justice

Steven Lukes in his *Marxism and Morality* makes, at the end of

²³ *Ibid.*

his discussion of Marxism and rights and after his own attempt to unravel the conundrum of Marx and Marxism on justice, a criticism of Cohen's argument which, if well taken, would be far more damaging than Elster's. Cohen just assumes, Lukes maintains, that Marx assumes that on these matters that we can have some perspective which is nonrelativistic enabling us to say that the capitalist steals in some appropriately nonrelativist sense. But, Lukes claims, Marx, and indeed all consistent Marxists, will deny that there is any coherent sense in accordance with which we can make such a judgment. For Marx all such judgments, Lukes claims, "are perspective relative."²⁴ It is Lukes's belief that Marx was committed, and that contemporary Marxists should likewise be committed, to the belief that, in such matters, "objectivity, in the sense of perspective-neutrality," is "an illusion, indeed an ideological illusion."²⁵ There just is no perspective-free, appropriately objective sense in which the capitalist can be said to rob the worker and violate his rights. What is appropriate to say here all depends on the perspective from which we look at the matter, and there is no such thing, on Marx's account, as a privileged perspective. As Lukes sees it, "Marx's view on capitalism's justice was both internally complex and hierarchically organized."²⁶ Depending on the perspective from which we are viewing it, Marx's theory sanctions (1) the belief that the relation between the capitalist and the worker is just, or at least not unjust, (2) that it is unjust, (3) that it is just in one respect and unjust in another and (4) that it is "neither just nor unjust."²⁷ When Marx stresses a functionalist account of how juridical norms serve to stabilize and rationalize the relations of production, he is viewing things from the first perspective. This is the perspective to which Wood repeatedly draws our attention. But Marx also stresses that when we are looking at

²⁴ Steven Lukes, *Marxism and Mortality* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), p. 59.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

things from the perspective of the socialism of the transition we will make an external critique of the functional capitalist norms. This includes the norms of justice employed in capitalist society. When we do this we will say that from *that* perspective capitalism is unjust. But in doing so we are now judging them according to the socialist norm, "To each according to his labor contribution." Marx, however, also makes an internal critique of the functional norms of capitalist society, showing how they are the mere appearance of an equivalent exchange of commodities. This is a third perspective. When we look just at the transaction between capitalist and worker, ignoring background conditions and what goes on in production, we will say that the transaction is just. Alternatively, when we look at the background conditions we will see how the worker is forced to sell his labor to some capitalist or other. Moreover, in the sphere of production, when we look at the vital situation of the workplace, we will see how workers fall under the control of capitalists. We should say that system is unjust.²⁸ So from this third perspective, Lukes maintains, we will say that in certain respects capitalism is just and in other respects it is unjust. Moreover, from this perspective, there is no way—or so Lukes maintains—of summing it up and saying it is just or unjust *sans phrase*. Finally, from a fourth perspective, we will say that capitalism and indeed socialism as well are neither just nor unjust. This is the view, according to Lukes, from which we will view capitalist functional norms from the perspective of communism's higher phase. In communism, with the great abundance brought about by the development of the productive forces and with the creation of communist human beings with more cooperative, more work-oriented, less acquisitive personalities, we will come to live and cooperate together in society in a situation

²⁸ Gary Young, "Justice and Capitalist Production: Marx and Bourgeois Ideology," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 8 (1978): 421–454, and idem, "Doing Marx Justice," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, Supplementary vol. 7 (1981): 251–268.

which is effectively beyond what Hume and Rawls refer to as the circumstances of justice. It is a circumstance where (on Lukes's and Wood's understanding) "the nonjustice principle" "From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs" guides our relations with one another. From this fourth perspective the very attribution of justice and injustice is a mark of class society, a flawed society, which is transcended in communist society where no attributions of either justice or injustice are made. From this perspective (to put it paradoxically) a well-ordered society will be neither just nor unjust; it will be beyond justice.

Such a fourfold analysis reveals the internal complexity, the multiperspectival quality, the hierarchical organization of Marx's view of capitalism's justice or lack thereof. It also reveals the justifiability, if Lukes is right, of "going beyond justice" in a successor social formation to both capitalism and socialism. Marx, Lukes claims, maintained, and consistently so, all these perspectives. In nuanced ways Marx brought them all to bear in his analysis and critique of capitalist society. But he, Lukes has it, steadfastly denies that any one of these perspectives is a privileged perspective. There is no all-things-considered perspective here. Cohen's error, Lukes claims, is in failing to see the perspectival quality of Marx's account and how Marx in effect denied that any perspective had a privileged or authoritative place that would give us an Archimedean point or a nonrelativistic conception of justice. Cohen's mistake, Lukes would have it, is just to take uncritically and without justification the second perspective as the authoritative perspective: the perspective which would give us such an Archimedean point, an objective, nondecentered perspective from which to appraise capitalism in moral terms. Lukes's counter is that there is no such single perspective on Marx's account which would, with respect to norms and values, afford an Archimedean point or any single authoritative fully objective critical perspective.

Marx's Conception of Dialectics

In reflecting on that portion of Lukes's account expounded above, some remarks about Marx's conception of dialectics are in order. However, before I turn to that, there are two things which should first be said about Lukes's claims. First, vis-à-vis the Marxist canonical core, there may be nothing with respect to either Lukes's or Cohen's claims which would lead one to favor one view rather than another with the possible exception that *perhaps* Lukes's view of Marx might fit better with Marx's conception of the dialectic and dialectical method. But the part about dialectics needs in turn to be balanced against the greater simplicity and direct plausibility of Cohen's claim. Perhaps Lukes multiplies perspectives beyond need. On the other hand, Lukes's hierarchical and alternative perspectival account does have distinct advantages. It puts together, in at least a putatively complimentary and coherent account, the rival accounts of what Marx's scattered remarks about justice come to. With Lukes's account they are no longer seen as simply rival accounts. Indeed, they are not rival accounts at all but complimentary accounts placed in a wider perspective. Cohen's account, by contrast, sets the putative alternatives to his accounts aside on the grounds that Marx, who was not a moral philosopher, and did not think carefully and systematically about justice or other moral values, could very well have been confused about justice. What to do on Cohen's view is to try instead to ascertain what plausible view of justice fits best with a Marxist core social theory. Cohen, in this vein, and in contrast with Lukes, takes something really central in the Marxist core, namely his labor theory of value and his related conception of capitalist exploitation, and, working from that, tries to show that, given those theories, Marx must to be consistent say that the capitalist robs the worker and, if he says that, then he is logically committed to saying he treats him unjustly.

The only way I can see for Lukes to resist Cohen's alternative (apart from a turn to dialectics I shall consider in the next section) is for him to try to make out, as Wood no doubt would, that neither the labor theory of value nor the theory of capitalist exploitation allied to it commits one to saying the capitalist robs the worker. However, here I think, given Cohen's careful arguments, the burden of proof lies with Lukes and Wood to show that the capitalist either does not rob the worker or that, in robbing him, we somehow thereby do not do him an injustice. But here—or at least so it seems—they will have uphill going, and this will remain true even if, *à la* Elster, the use of “rob” in this context is not exactly paradigmatic. (This will remain true even if we reject the labor theory of value, as Cohen does, for, as he shows, in Marx's account there is a powerful conception of exploitation that does not depend for its force on the labor theory of value.²⁹)

The second thing to be said is that, given the very Hegelianism that Lukes stresses in Marx and, indeed in Marxism, it is not plausible to believe that Marx would take all of those perspectives as being equally valid or, if “valid” is not the right word here, equally adequate. After all, the dialectical account was a developmental account, stressing that we attain progressively more comprehensive and more adequate perspectives with the more developed perspectives accounting for and importantly transcending the earlier ones or the less nuanced ones. For Hegel, no one could overleap history, but, looking back on previous epochs, we can come to comprehend them in a more adequate way. There is the dialectical method, so much at the Marxist core, and there is Lukes's stress on an internally complex hierarchically organized multiperspective conceptualization of justice. Neither leads us to a relativism where all these perspectives are taken to be equally valid but to the

²⁹ G. A. Cohen, “The Labour Theory of Value and the Concept of Exploitation,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 8 (1979): 338–360 and his “More on Exploitation and the Labour Theory of Value,” *Inquiry* 26 (September 1983): 309–331.

developmental view I have just described. Lukes appears at least to believe that Marx believes that all these perspectives are equally valid or at least that there is no reason to say that some are more comprehensive and more adequate than others. But that seems to be not the way one would expect Marx or a Marxist to look at things. We should expect, rather, that, given Marx's method (here a good coherentist methodology), the different perspectives would lead to progressively higher syntheses so that the fourth perspective, that of the future communist society, with its distinctive norms, would, as things now stand, provide the most adequate perspective.

Marx and Hegel

For many contemporary philosophers, including some Marxists, talk of dialectics or dialectical method is embarrassing. Talk of "dialectical logic" as a replacement for logic as we have come to know it is (to put it minimally) a nonstarter. Yet a notion of dialectics is a canonical element of Marxism. J. N. Findlay, Charles Taylor, and, most importantly as far as Marx is concerned, Allen Wood have given us demythologized readings of dialectics which do not set it in conflict with logic and which reveal it to be a reasonable and perhaps useful conception to employ in coming to understand the social world, including those aspects of the social world that have to do with justice and morality more generally.³⁰ The thinking here may be useful to apply to Lukes's analysis, for I think Lukes was in effect employing a dialectical conception when he gave his perspectival reading of Marx on justice. A more explicit use of dialectical conceptions may very well strengthen such an account.

³⁰ J. N. Findlay, *Language, Mind and Value* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1963), pp. 217–231 and his *Hegel: A Re-Interpretation* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1965), Charles Taylor, *Hegel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979) and Wood, *Karl Marx*, pp. 189–234.

Marx was clearly indebted to Hegel for his conception of dialectics. It is quite uncontroversial both that he was critical of the Hegelian dialectic and that he considered himself to be working with a dialectic related to the Hegelian one. He wanted both to expose its “mystical” nature and to save (as he put it) its rational kernel. Marx never got around to saying straightforwardly what its rational kernel is or to giving a clear articulation of what dialectics and the dialectical method come to, but some commentators have given a clear and plausible interpretation of what Marx was about here.³¹ I shall simply use elements of their readings to help elucidate and strengthen my claims about a Marxian understanding of justice that is responsible to the Marxist canon.

Dialectic, in either a Hegelian or Marxist form, should be understood as a general conception of the type of intelligible structure that is to be found in the world and a dialectical conceptual system or a dialectical method should be thought of as a program for the sort of theoretical structure that would best display that intelligible structure. Both Hegel and Marx saw the dialectic as a process of organic development. For Hegel that organic development was fundamentally a process of “cosmic reason.” It is the process by which *Geist* tests and refutes the imperfect forms of its embodiment as it rises successively to higher forms. For Marx it was the organic development of the productive forces and the consequent changes of relations of production over whole epochs in an ever more adequate answering to our needs and affording us an ever greater control over our lives.³² In the Hegelian conception, the dialectical method does not typically or paradigmatically proceed by way of inferences or entailments but by way of

³¹ Wood, *Karl Marx*, pp. 207–218. See, as well, the essays by Richard Norman and Sean Sayers, *Hegel, Marx and Dialectic: A Debate* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1980).

³² Wood, *Karl Marx*, pp. 207–211, and G. A. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), pp. 1–27.

a notational deepening of what has gone before.³³ For Marx and Marxists there is as well a search for genuine causal connections, though causal connections they want to see placed in a wider framework than empiricists are wont to do. For Marx, unlike for Hegel, our thought processes, as we gain an ever more adequate notational grip on things, do not generate the known reality out of our conceptions, but our thought processes, as our notational grip improves, ever more adequately grasp the inner connections of an independent reality given to us empirically. (Here we see a crucial difference between idealism and realism.) But Marx agrees with Hegel in believing that a theory which captures the structure of reality must conceive of things as organized totalities. It will perspicuously display the developmental tendencies and it will, as well, explicate that organic structure of reality through a hierarchy of conceptions or viewpoints on this whole which will display all the levels or stages belonging to its nature.

Where Hegel in an *a priori* fashion looks for a necessary movement of thought, Marx looks for real (empirically discerned) causal connections. Still, they both think of the world as something which is correctly characterized by inherent tendencies to develop and as subject periodically to radical changes in its basic structure. As Allen Wood well puts it,

. . . the 'rational kernel' is his [Hegel's] vision of reality as structured organically and characterized by inherent tendencies to development. The 'mystical shell' is Hegel's logical pantheistic metaphysics which represents the dialectical structure of reality as a consequence of thinking spirit's creative activity. Marx's 'inversion' of Hegel consists in viewing the dialectical structure of thought not as a cause or explanation for the dialectical structure of reality, but merely as a consequence of the fact that it is thought's function to mirror a dialectically structured world.³⁴

³³ Findlay, *Language, Mind and Value*, p. 225.

³⁴ Wood, *Karl Marx*, p. 209.

Marx, as a historical materialist, takes the social world (society) to be an organic whole whose economic relations pass through definite stages of historical development and are driven by basic tendencies to change. It sees the underlying dynamic of this change in the conflict between the economic relations and the productive forces as they develop throughout history and in the resulting class conflict. "Historical materialism," as Wood puts it, "is animated by Hegel's philosophical vision, even if there is nothing specifically Hegelian about the explanatory factors it postulates."³⁵

In both Hegel and Marx there are two species of dialectic. They have been usefully labeled a "temporal dialectic" and a "hierarchical dialectic."³⁶ We have so far been principally talking about a temporal dialectical process (as in epochal changes in social formations brought about by the development of the productive forces over time) but the dialectic *à la* Lukes's talk of justice is a hierarchical one as is the dialectical development displayed in Marx's *Capital*.³⁷ Where we have a hierarchical dialectic we have, not a temporal process, but a series of successively more adequate viewpoints on a subject matter. Our notational scheme and with it our general understanding successively improves with our changed and ever more comprehensive and probing viewpoints.

Luke's four perspectives from which we can understand justice on a Marxian account should be understood as such a hierarchical dialectic. There is, as Lukes remarks, for Marx no perspective-neutral viewpoint in such contexts but, that notwithstanding, we are not mired in relativism for each successive perspective gives us an increasingly more adequate viewpoint from which to both understand justice and from which to make judgments of justice. There is no privileged perspective, but some perspectives are more adequate than other perspectives.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 214. Also see Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History*, pp. 1–27.

³⁶ Wood, *Karl Marx*, p. 197.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 216–234.

Marx does not believe that we will, with this dialectical hierarchy of viewpoints, finally get to “the truth” or the Absolute, as if we even understood what we were talking about here. Marx is as much a fallibilist as Dewey or Quine. But that does not gainsay that some of these viewpoints will not enable us to make more true statements or more approximately true statements more coherently, perspicuously, and comprehensively arranged than we can from other viewpoints. In that way one viewpoint can without any mystification be said to be more adequate than another. But our knowledge will never be final and complete. Even our best scientific knowledge will always be no more than an approximate grasp of reality. It will be subject to development and revision and to periodic theoretical revolution.³⁸ And the same will be true for our moral understanding including our judgments about what is just and unjust.

Lukes in effect gives us a typology of a hierarchical development of our thinking concerning justice. I do not think he has either the stages or the number of stages right, as I will in effect gesture at in the next section, but the sense of how a Marxist conception of justice should be dialectical implicit in his conceptualization does seem to me to be right. Moreover, it is fallibilistic and perhaps even historicist without (whatever Lukes may have thought he was establishing) being relativist. From the fact (if it is a fact) that we cannot, at least in such domains, obtain perspective neutrality and from the further fact (if it is a fact) that all such judgments are perspective relative, we do not get relativism or subjectivism. We do not get the belief that all moral beliefs are equally valid or that one moral judgment is as good as another. These relativistic or subjectivistic beliefs do not follow from the above Marxist beliefs about perspectivism. The Marxist conception of a hierarchical dialectic helps us see why.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 215.

Beyond Justice

It might, as I have just suggested, readily be accepted that Marx's dialectical approach led to increasingly higher and more adequate perspectives while denying, as I would, that the highest most adequate perspective was a "beyond justice perspective." It might be said, alternatively, that the perspective Cohen in effect adopts, where capitalism is said to be unjust, is the more adequate perspective. Here, I think, what should be said is that while Lukes is right about there being a hierarchical account in Marxism—a hierarchical dialectical account, if you will—he is, nonetheless, mistaken in not seeing (a) that the perspective at the pinnacle of the hierarchy (to keep the metaphor) affords a more adequate perspective than those further down the hierarchy (stage 4 gives a more adequate perspective than stage 1) and (b) that Elster is right in believing that at the pinnacle of the hierarchy we do not move "beyond justice" but to its highest form in a hierarchy of conceptions of justice, a hierarchy which shows us what an increasingly more just society would look like. Elster's reading of *The Critique of the Gotha Programme*, a reading I have also independently made elsewhere, enables him reasonably to impute to Marx a hierarchical theory of justice with the needs principle taking priority over the contribution principle when the forces of production are so developed that social wealth flows very freely indeed and when the last vestiges of class divisions disappear. When such a state of affairs obtains (if it ever obtains) then we will come to have communistically inclined human beings without the slightest inclination to commit capitalist acts.³⁹ When it becomes possible to act on the needs principle, rather than the contribution principle, because the world will have turned, our societies will have become more just than previous societies. (The conservative

³⁹ Kai Nielsen, "Marx, Engels and Lenin on Justice: *The Critique of the Gotha Programme*," *Studies in Soviet Thought* 30 (1986): 23–63.

claim that this can never come about is an empirical claim about what is feasibly possible and must be argued on empirical grounds. Here is also a place to recall the dictum about the pessimism of the intellect and the optimism of the will.)

It is, as Elster points out, one of Marx's wilder, more utopian scenarios to think that we could ever attain such abundance that we could just take what we need.⁴⁰ There always will remain some scarcities (though these scarcities—as always—will be in part socially defined) and some conflicts of interest. We need, for such circumstances of abundance, a nuanced statement of the needs principle. It will assert something like "To each according to his needs that are compatible with others similarly satisfying their needs." But we also need to supplement this with the principle "Where two needs, had by two different persons, conflict and it is impossible to satisfy both needs and where both needs are equally compatible with satisfying the needs of others, to her whose need is greater, where this can be ascertained." Where, in turn, there is no ascertaining this, or where the needs are the same, the guiding principle should be "To others whose needs would be the most extensively satisfied by satisfying the needs of the one rather than the other of the two persons." To put roughly the same general point differently, where satisfying A's need is more fecund for satisfying the needs of others than is the satisfying of B's need and A's need is itself no greater than B's or we cannot ascertain the difference, then satisfy A's needs rather than B's, where they both cannot be satisfied. And where A and B are both as above, but there is no way of ascertaining the satisfying of whose needs is the more fecund for others, then the operative principle should be "To her who wins with something like a fair flip of a coin."

I am not saying that a Marxist should be committed to just this modification of the needs principle. It is much too

⁴⁰ Elster, *Making Sense of Marx*, pp. 230–233. See also pp. 526–527.

slapdash and a kind of initial trying things out for that, but I am saying she should be committed to something of this sort, something that tries to capture both an equal consideration of the needs of everyone and, as far as it is compatible with such an equal consideration of needs, the maximal satisfaction of needs all around at the highest level of need satisfaction of which human beings are capable.

This modulation of a stress on maximization—the determined building up of the productive forces—makes good sense in a society that has sufficiently developed productive forces to make social wealth extensive, but this is the only sort of society in which the needs principle should gain operative force. Elsewhere it is just a heuristic. But in a world of abundance it is the principle to be used. So we are not, even in a developed communist society, beyond the circumstances of justice. Rather, in different societies with different modes of production, we have distinct principles of justice uniquely applicable to that society with that mode of production. In a capitalist society we have something like “From each according to her contribution and to each according to the assets she owns and controls.” In the transitional socialist society it is “From each according to her labor contribution and to each according to her labor contribution.” In the communist society of the future, ignoring the above complications for the nonce, it is “From each according to her ability and to each according to her needs.”

These principles are hierarchically arranged in a developmental scheme and these societies are progressively higher forms of social existence which are progressively more just. From the perspective of a communist society of the future, capitalism is unjust, where it is possible for a higher form of society to replace it. However, even when capitalism first came into existence or where its mode of production is extremely stable with no conflict between the forces of production and relations of production, it could still have been possible, coherently and correctly, to say that capitalism is unjust. Not

many in that context would have said it or even have thought it. People do not think beyond the grid of their culture very readily. There will not be many who will think in this way in stable capitalist societies. Still it is possible to envision a better, a more just, society which could come into existence in the future under changed conditions. Such a person would see capitalism as a necessary evil. It is an evil that they are not at present able to overcome. They know that they will not be able to overcome it until the productive forces are sufficiently developed so that socialism becomes a possibility. For a time—and in some circumstances for a very long time—they will have to settle for something very inferior indeed. Most people in most societies do not have such an awareness. They, more or less, do the thing done and believe in most of the mores of their society. But there are in every society always a few nay sayers who are not utterly culturally and conceptually imprisoned. Some of them in some cultural circumstances may well be able to see that such a society, with the development of the productive forces and with determined class struggle, will become in time possible and that such a society is the more desirable society. When (or indeed if) such a society comes into existence, it will be a society in which there will be more justice than in the old society and, in the comparison with which, the old society will seem morally and humanly inadequate indeed. With such an understanding, to persist in a defense of the old society is to act wrongly, for it is in reality to support a reign which among other deplorable things is a reign of injustice. If this new society is (a) a feasible possibility and (b) not likely to have unintended consequences which would make life worse than the life people have in the old society, then an agent who understands this has, morally speaking, very good reason indeed to favor the new society. If Marxist theory has got it roughly right about the social world's actualities and empirical possibilities, then capitalism is an unjust social system and, moreover, this is a claim which is objectively justified in the

appropriate sense in which moral claims can be objectively justified.

This account, like John Rawls's, is contextualist in denying that there is a single principle of justice or set of principles of justice that apply in all circumstances, but it is objectivist and emancipatory in maintaining that it is sometimes better to be in one situation with its determinate principle or principles of justice with their associated practices than in another situation with its determinate principle or principles of justice with their associated practices. It also argues that in principle at least anyone in either situation can come to see that. It is Karl Mannheim, not Karl Marx, who comes up with theses of conceptual imprisonment and with the belief that all perspectives are equally adequate or at least with the somewhat weaker belief that we can have no good reasons for thinking one perspective to be more adequate than another.⁴¹

⁴¹ The hierarchical dialectic I have deployed here for justice causally depends on the temporal dialectic of the epochal transformation of whole modes of production and with them other social formations. It requires, that is, movement in the social world. The socioeconomic conditions necessary to make feasible the application of the communist principle of justice do not exist when a capitalist, to say nothing of a feudal, mode of production is stable. However, it is possible to say how it is prefigured in the capitalist mode of production. That is, perceptive people can see how the capitalist mode of production is developing the capacities to be transformed into a socialist mode of production and how this in turn will in time produce the conditions necessary for the communist principle of justice actually to appropriately guide our human interactions. It is not that we have an *Aufhebung* of the principle of justice of capitalism. It is not transformed while still being preserved in socialism or in communism. Rather in both socialism and communism we have distinct principles of justice appropriate to the transformed socioeconomic structures made possible by the development of the forces of production. A hierarchical dialectic gives us the conceptual grid adequately to understand and perspicuously to display something of what it would be like to attain this more adequate perspective. However, if my demythologized account of the dialectic seems worrisome, forget about dialectics and attend to my adoption and development of Lukes's hierarchical account of justice as a stating of principles of justice that, as the world changes, make seriatim their use feasible in their various contextually appropriate circumstances. Moreover, as we move upward in the hierarchy, we will get principles of justice which increasingly answer more fully to the interests of ever widening groups of human beings.