

REJECTING EGALITARIANISM

On Miller's Nonegalitarian Marx

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I

Richard Miller in his *Analyzing Marx* specifies a number of different forms of equality and argues that they all are mistaken ideals and that Marx was not, and indeed rightly was not, an egalitarian in any of these ways.¹ Miller's arguments are invariably interesting and, as well, often impressive, but the key ones are, I shall argue, unsound for all of that. However, if contrary to what I shall argue, they were sound, their import for moral theory and social theory would be very significant indeed. So these claims should take a careful examination.

II

Let us try to get a purchase on this striking claim of Miller's. Very often Marx is thought of as an egalitarian as is Engels as well. Miller, like Allen Wood, views both Marx and Engels as critics of morality, rejecting egalitarianism and a commitment to equality. To quell the paradox of this, Miller first displays what he calls the "grains of truth that Marx discerns in the demand for equality" (p. 19). Without this, as he realizes, his interpretation "will seem perverse" (p. 19).

What, Miller argues, superficially looks like egalitarianism is Marx's advocacy of "social arrangements that would. . . make people much more equal in power and enjoyment than they are at present" (p. 19).² During an early transition period to socialism, a standard for equal right for each to receive according to his or her labor would be the key norm of such social arrangements. But the value of such a standard is that it would "enhance people's lives, not that it would conform to some ultimate standard of equality" (p. 14).

Right here at the beginning, I have to demur, for, though it is indeed true that such a standard of equal right is appealed to to enhance people's lives, there is also in that very standard an appeal to *fairness*. By this I mean that there is a demand that, as far as possible, social structures be put in place designed to enhance the lives of *everyone*; where it is taken as a fundamental guiding principle that the life of each person counts and counts equally, Marx would no doubt say, in ways I take to be compatible with the above, that proletarians come first, but he also thought that it was proletarian emancipation that would make a general emancipation possible. There could be no truly human society for human beings without proletarian emancipation. Because proletarian emancipation provides the causal mechanisms for a more general liberation and because proletarians are exploited and oppressed, particular attention should be directed to them. But this would be true for *anyone* who is or becomes a proletarian (something that would take a determinate description). For, by universalizability, anyone properly so described must be so treated. This emancipation of the oppressed is, Marx and Marxists believe, the vehicle for the eventual enhancement of the lives of everyone. Proletarians are not simply being picked out as proletarians. They are picked out and given special attention in virtue of what the proletarian class is, what their condition is, and what their potential is. Because of this underlying concern with the lives of everyone, it seems to me (*pace* Miller and Wood as well) that there is an acceptance by Marx of equality. That is a condition of life that is a fundamental *desideratum*. Marx was, of course, aware of the ideological uses of talk of equality and sought to counter them. But that does not mean that he did not make the deep underlying assumption (with its attached commitments) to which I have just referred. If what I have said is on the mark then I have undermined the claim that Marx was rejecting all conceptions of equality, taking all such appeals to be the ideological flotsam of the intellectual spokesman of the bourgeoisie.

One can argue that way against Miller, and still agree with Miller's important point that

under socialism and communism, most people are less dominated, more in possession of their lives, since they are better able to develop their capacities in light of their own assessments of their needs. Moreover, people's interactions will be governed to a greater extent than now by mutual well-wishing and concern. In Marx's view, these goods of freedom and reciprocity are what most people have really desired, when they have made "equality" their battle cry (p. 19).

I would only demur at saying that that is what they really desired and not equality as well and this for the fairness considerations stated just before that citation. What they want is a gestalt of freedom, equality and reciprocity. They not only want freedom, they want, as far as this is possible, equal freedom for everyone. (What I would call a central element of fairness.) They not only want reciprocity but they want it extended to everyone without anyone stinting or being stinted here. Here egalitarian justice (equality) rides with reciprocity as well as freedom. These are ultimate *desiderata* to be attained by human beings and under normal circumstances they come as a package.

It is only if equality is not taken as being in a gestalt with these things that equality can rightly be taken to be a one-sided ideal. But egalitarians have never, as Miller implicitly recognizes, taken equality to be the *sole* ultimate value.³ However, if equality is left out in the articulation of ultimate ethical ideals (if it is not part of the firmament of ultimate values) and if that in turn is translated into social policy, there very well could be a pervasive unfairness in society that will come to there being an extensive freedom for some privileged elite and oppression in various degrees of severity for the many or lack of liberty for a despised minority while there is considerable liberty for the vast majority. If the former situation is thought to be hyperbolic for people in advanced industrial societies with bourgeois democratic traditions, consider first what the lives of the vast majority of people are and what they could be and how little control they actually have over their lives. However, if we only stress freedom and well-being and do not stress as well that it is vital to consider the distribution of these things then it might well be thought that there is nothing very wrong with such a society. To bring out in a perspicuous way how all is not well in such a society, it is essential to point out how equality is an essential element in the firmament of values.

III

Setting my arguments in the previous section aside, I shall now turn to a consideration of one of these forms of equality. I choose it because it is an important and plausible form that yields a determinate conception of equality of condition and is closely related to the conception of equality that was being appealed to in the previous section. After

explicating Miller's position here, I shall argue that he has shown neither that this is a position that Marx rejects nor that it is a mistaken ideal that Marxists should reject. Going beyond that, I shall suggest that it is a plausible and attractive ideal that Marxists and indeed others as well would do well to accept.

Miller, to get on with it, contends that Marx rejects attitudinal equality and a related conception of impartiality both of which Miller identifies with what he calls, I think somewhat misleadingly, "utilitarian equality." Miller believes that Marx not only rejects such egalitarian ideas but that he rightly rejects them and that contemporary Marxists and Marxistically inclined people should reject them as well.

Attitudinal equality is a view that requires "that equal concern or respect be shown for all" (p. 20). Impartiality, a closely related form of equality, requires "that the general welfare be promoted, without bias toward the good of some" (p. 20). Taken together, as I have just remarked, we can call these conceptions of equality utilitarian *equality*. This view can, of course, in turn, have somewhat different forms.

Suppose we argue for a characteristic utilitarian equality. What is vital in morality, if we take such a perspective, is that we assess things according to their contribution to the general welfare. Our ultimate standard is the general welfare and the general welfare is to be determined without bias toward some people's well-being. But ought implies can and, Miller argues, Marx maintains that such an "unbiased determination of the general welfare is impossible" (p. 31). There are in our societies deep and irresolvable conflicting class interests that just, in one way or another, must be fought out. There is no impartial perspective from which we can adjudicate them. Militant strikes that can improve the condition of the working class may very well "harm the vital interests of factory owners and may drive some into bankruptcy" (p. 30). If the aim, as it is for Marx, is the self-emancipation of the working class, there can be no equal concern here and there can be no impartial concern for the interests of everyone alike. Such a concern with impartiality in effect plays into the hands of the status quo.

It is at this point that Miller makes a set of remarks that seem to me in the way they add up not to be beyond question. He first, in an innocuous enough way, remarks, as a defender of utilitarian equality could, that making a ranking "for the distinctive institutions of socialism and communism or arguing that they are superior to capitalist institutions is an activity that humanitarian emotions would sustain" (p. 30-31). But we must also have means, he continues, that are appropriate to our ends.

However, equality, because of the depth of class conflict, will, if adhered to, stand in the way of humanitarian egalitarian ends (p. 96). We have something similar to the paradox of hedonism, namely, that to have a good chance at being happy one should not concentrate on making oneself happy. Analogously, to achieve humanitarian equality in a classless society (the only place where we can attain such equality) we must first struggle to achieve classlessness and to do that we must *not*, in sharply class divided societies, show an equal concern for all, but we must seek to further proletarian interests where they clash with capitalist interests or indeed with the interests of any other class. Only by doing that can we attain a more general emancipation. Still, *pace* Miller, I do not see how this is a rejection of utilitarian equality for, as far as anything he has shown is concerned, that remains one of the fundamental ends, a state of affairs to be attained. There is only, on Miller's account, the recognition that because of the class nature of our social world, such equality is not to be aimed at *directly*.

Such an attention to modalities no more shows that it is an inappropriate end than hedonism is shown to be an inappropriate end by showing that we are not going to succeed in being happy by concentrating on being happy. The underlying aim, for such an egalitarian, is not just that the general welfare is to be determined without bias toward some people's well-being, but that *s/he* wants, as well, to see attained a state of affairs, where, as much as possible, each person's well-being counts and counts equally in the design of society. We cannot, if there is anything at all to Marx's sociology, have this without classlessness, but if, say because of residual sexism, classlessness will not give us that, we should push, *pace* Engels, beyond classlessness. Classlessness, then, would be a necessary but not a sufficient condition for human emancipation. What I do not see is how Miller has shown that such a utilitarian equality is either in conflict with Marx's perspective or is an inappropriate moral ideal that humane people in class societies would reject.

In defense of his denial that such impartial and egalitarian assessments of welfare are possible in class societies, Miller argues that in class societies such as our own conceptions of the good as well as actual judgments as to what is good are various and conflicting. We do not in societies such as our own rank our preferences in one way; what makes one set of persons happy will not make another set of persons happy. Even if the majority, where they had good access to information, would have preferences of a socialist sort, that does not mean that there will not

be a minority who would have different preference schedules: preference schedules that could be just as rational as those of the majority. To override the minority here would, with their different equally rational preferences, cause them—or so Miller claims—acute deprivation. Such overriding can hardly be morally justified and certainly does not square with a commitment to utilitarian equality where the welfare of everyone has equal weight. Some people, perhaps many people, even when they reflect about it carefully with adequate information, will not be socialist persons or rush to be socialist persons. “Some care too deeply, for their own and for others’ sake, that striving for personal betterment, free from direct interference, be allowed, even if lack of resources often makes the prospects dim” (p. 34). The institutions of Marx’s classless society allow little scope for purely self-interested competition. But for some, this “activity is an important positive good” (p. 34). There is no way, Miller argues, to show here that one set of preferences is more rational than another. Some rational human beings will go one way and some go another. Even if under conditions of maximally accurate information most people would be socialistically inclined rather than be such competitive individualists, this does not show that the majority are right or that the majority are justified in overriding the minority here (pp. 34-35).

There is, Miller argues Marx argues, no generally acceptable standard for ranking equally intense enjoyments, varying needs, or different interests. People socialized in different ways will differ here. And we have no yardstick for measuring or ascertaining the morally preferable preferences or the rational preferences. We cannot make the necessary social discriminations without social bias. Miller remarks:

No ranking of all important goods, including, say, leisure as against material income, the enjoyment of competitive striving as against the enjoyment of cooperation, and the chance to occupy the top of hierarchies as against the guarantee of a secure, moderately comfortable life, is faithful to the needs or the reflective desires of all—industrial workers, farmers, investment bankers, housewives, shopkeepers and professors alike (p. 32).

It, Miller claims, is a myth—perhaps a liberal ideological distortion—to believe that if we—that is, all of us alike—had all the relevant data that we would agree on a ranking that all would accept. Such a consensus does not exist among people so variously formed and variously situated and it is not reasonable to expect that one can come to exist in class-divided societies.

Mill's solution, which consists in appealing to the preferences of those who have wide experience, in effect, shows a "bias toward the upper strata who are able to practice such connoisseurship" (p. 32). Mill's "procedure cannot do justice to the connection of the enjoyment of the individuals at any given time with the class relations in which they live" (p. 35).

Marx, I believe, is right to stress the depth and indeed the class nature of the impact of social processes on our basic wants and indeed on our needs as well (p. 33). (I do not, of course, say that is the only kind of social influence.) Miller rightly stresses that here. In this connection, Miller argues that if we appeal, à la Mill, to what the experienced person prefers—the person who has a great range of experiences and has the leisure to make the comparisons and carefully reflects on those experiences—we do leave the working class and their preferences out and skew things in the direction of the wealthier strata of society.⁴ In class struggles and in fighting for social change, we cannot gain such a superior vantage point from which we can, in a rather Olympian manner, make moral evaluations. Jürgen Habermas and John Rawls lead us down the garden path here. There is no such Archimedean point. We must instead just fight it out in terms of perceived class interests.

If that is all that Miller means in claiming that Marx rejects egalitarianism and, as well, the moral point of view in political struggles, then Miller's claim is *perhaps* on the mark. However, it does seem to me that the Marxist can and should make the following kind of *gedankin* experiment—perhaps it is better to call it a Pascalian wager—namely, that if we come to have a classless society, with the clarity about ourselves and our social relations that that would bring, that, under such circumstances, the prediction goes, people would come to have egalitarian utilitarian preference schedules. They will come to have attitudes that will favor that, from a societal point of view, an equal concern and respect be shown to all and they will come to have pro-attitudes toward the general welfare being promoted in such a way that the interests of everyone will be considered and will be considered equally. The *gedankin* experiment comes to a prediction that this is the way people's preference structures will go when they live in conditions of security and abundance and under conditions of undistorted discourse.⁵ It seems to me that Mill, Rawls, and Habermas, in various compatible ways, have indicated ways in which we can simulate and approximate impartiality without jettisoning the empathic understanding that will help us adjust for class biases and the like. When we conscientiously attempt to do this,

we will, I believe, come to have such egalitarian attitudes and this will, I am predicting, become stronger, more pervasive, and more entrenched the closer we come actually to living in conditions of undistorted discourse under conditions of abundance.

This is not with me a matter of some kind of persuasive definition but a prediction. It grows out of some hunches and some empirical assumptions that are quite fallible. It seems to me that there is something to the Humean-Smithian-Westermarckian conception of natural sympathies and to Westermarck's belief that, as our tribal myths get eroded, something that goes increasingly with modernity (Weber's progressive demystification of the world), the range of our sympathies, as a matter of fact, tends to be gradually extended.

I take it to be a fact that we do tend to care for one another and that our sympathies, with our increased understanding and our experience of the world, do get extended. I also take it as a fact that with all our differences, there are also similarities between us sufficient to make it rather compelling, or at least not unreasonable, for us to say and justifiably believe that, where circumstances make it possible without continued oppression of the underclass, we all should be objects, viewed from the point of view of society's concern, of equal concern and respect. Where we come across a particularly depraved individual or a particularly nasty sort, we can hardly avoid acknowledging, if we are reflective and not too neurotic, that there, but for the grace of God, go we, which, demythologized, comes to believing that there, but for better fortune in social upbringing or genetic wiring, go we. When we reflect along these lines, and when we have natural sympathies, we will go in an egalitarian way. If we are both Marxists and egalitarians, we will recognize that generally we must favor proletarians over capitalists. But this is principally an instrumental thing with perhaps, with some of us, a bit of justice in restitution thrown in. We want a world in which the proletarian and the capitalist can no longer be viewed as, or indeed be, either capitalist or proletarian, but will be viewed just as human beings in a producer's society where all adult able-bodied persons prior to their retirement are in some broad sense producers. (I qualify in this way because, among other things, the service sector grows.) The class perspective is instrumental, the engine for attaining the classlessness that is necessary for attaining equality and its closely related ideals: autonomy and fraternity.

Equality with these elements is not a one-sided ideal. It is part of a gestalt that, when the concept of human flourishing is thrown in as well,

will give us the central elements in the firmament of values, elements that Miller has given us no good grounds for believing the Marxist tradition should reject. (See here, counting for this, Miller's own remarks on page 36.) Miller reconstructs Marx as saying that our preferences "among social arrangements must be a preference among needs, and the bias cannot be removed in the Millian style" (p. 38). I have argued that Miller has not sustained that claim.

Miller in effect responds to this by arguing that utilitarian equality does not operate with the relatively weak premise with which it might be thought I am operating, namely, to "Give everyone's satisfaction some *prima facie* weight" but with the stronger premise "Give everyone's interests equal weight." But my appeal is to neither but to "Give everyone's interests *prima facie* equal weight." We want as egalitarians that morality should come to be, as we move to classlessness, so structured that we will want, in the way I have explicated, to weigh "the satisfaction of desires without bias toward desires of certain people" (p. 37). It should, however, be put in the way I put it with a phrase such as *prima facie* or *ceteris paribus*, for we run into situations where everyone's desires cannot be satisfied or everyone's needs cannot be met and it is there where we need to make hard choices and indeed sometimes tragic choices. Fairness (justice) requires that we start out considering everyone's interests alike. But where two interests cannot both be satisfied in a given situation, we must look for morally relevant grounds for favoring one person's interests over another's. Hence we should not say "Give everyone's interests equal weight" but "Give everyone's interests *prima facie* equal weight." But this gesture in the direction of realism is not a departure from equality. It is not to abandon equal concern and respect. For we must consider everyone's interests, give equal initial weight to each person's interests, and we must satisfy the interests of everyone and satisfy them equally where we can. It provides us *Lebensraum* where we cannot satisfy the interests of everyone, though, of course, the principle itself does not provide the criteria for deciding which interests are to be favored when not all interests can be met.

I think what is important to stress is that Marx, and Engels as well, and indeed Lenin, had as an ultimate aim universal human emancipation.⁶ However, I think that needs to be given a careful reading. On one hand, it does not mean *just* the emancipation of the immense majority, though it does, of course, have their emancipation as a central objective. And, on the other hand, it should not be read so literally that

Marx is taken to be claiming that everyone in class societies would be helped by the coming into being of socialism or communism. I think that is plainly a flight from reality. There is about 1% of the current population of North America that definitely would not be helped, though everything considered, they need not be harmed as much as they are wont to believe. If Marx's empirical picture of the world is even roughly right, there is a far greater thwarting of interests under capitalism than under socialism. But, there still are some—I think, however, that that “some” is very small—whose interests would flourish under capitalism more than they would under socialism (p. 39). Class interests are essential: firmly protecting proletarian class interests is a strategic instrumental modality that cannot be set aside by anyone who is actually interested in human emancipation. Where the forces of production are sufficient to make socialism a real possibility, there can be no blinkering at the fact that what is in the interest of the proletariat is frequently in sharp conflict with what is in the interest of the *haute bourgeoisie*. But still, such class interests are instrumentalities to human liberation whose ideal remains the liberation of every single human being where in the classless society of the future we will simply be regarded as human beings and not as personifications of economic categories, where, viewed now simply as individuals, the life of every human being matters and matters equally. It is a luxury we cannot afford in the midst of class struggle but it is what in the end the class struggle is for. Thus we are concerned in such a circumstance, where that circumstance is the ideal to be aimed at, with the satisfaction of human interests as such. Furthermore, and vitally, where, even in such a circumstance, not everyone's interests can be satisfied, we are to aim at the most extensive satisfaction of interest possible for as many people as possible, where the interests of everyone must *prima facie* be given equal consideration. We seek, in short, the greatest compossible satisfaction of interests for as many people as possible where everyone's interests have equal initial weight, that is, each is to count for one and none to count for more than one. (This is a core egalitarian notion.) Alternatively, put it in terms of wants, the underlying ideal to be realized in a classless society is as follows: Everyone is to have as much as possible of whatever it is that she or he wants, and would continue to want with adequate information, reflectively taken to heart, that is compatible with as many people as possible having their wants satisfied in exactly that manner.⁷

I do not want to be misunderstood here. I am not turning Marx into a utopian socialist. Miller has quite properly shown Marx to be a through

and through revolutionary socialist, seeing the necessity of class conflict leading in most circumstances from disguised civil war to open revolution where the proletariat is to overthrow the bourgeoisie and begin laying the foundation for a new society—the foundations for what Brecht called the new kindness. This, as Miller nicely puts it, is “not the statement of someone who believes that all resistance to socialism rests on misinformation” (p. 40). Neither Miller’s Marx nor my Marx is an economistic Marx. And indeed I do not think Marxists should have taken an economistic turn. In such revolutionary struggles, “the state in transition from capitalist to classless society ‘can be nothing but the revolutionary dictatorship of proletariat’ ” (p. 40). The state, in the circumstance of consolidating a revolution, must be concerned, as Marx puts it, with “intimidating the mass of the bourgeoisie” (p. 40). It is clear from this that Marx believed that interests of the bourgeoisie “would be offended, deeply and on balance by socialism” (p. 40).

All that is vital to keep steadfastly before our minds, but, as I have been at pains to argue above, except in the most literally wooden way, this does not mean that Marx was not a believer in universal emancipation in the way I have explicated above. His aim is to see a world in which the interests of as many people as possible would be satisfied. That a few capitalists continue to have intransigent interests, interests that are antithetical to the fulfillment of the interests of the vast mass of humankind, does not mean that the compossible interests of everyone are not to be satisfied.

We can stress, as Miller rightly does, that Marx was a thoroughly political creature who would never acquiesce in economism; he was without question a thorough revolutionary. Along with that, we should emphasize, as well, Marx’s sensitivity to the social determination of needs without coming to the conclusion that Marx was rejecting equality and the moral point of view. Some disambiguation will help here: It is correct to say that Marx rejects the moral point of view in politics, if what is meant by that is that Marx, as a historical materialist, rejects the historical idealist thesis that we could, in any fundamental way, change the world by making, no matter how convincingly, the moral case for the wrongness of a social system (say capitalism).⁸ Marx most certainly does not believe that any class-divided social system could in any fundamental sense be changed by such a moral critique.

However, there is also, to continue the disambiguation, a more telling and sophisticated way in which Marx rejects morality in politics. He realizes that in the midst of class struggle there are not infrequently clashes of class interests that cannot be rationally resolved and where

sometimes what is the fair thing to do is not obvious and perhaps even, in some instances, indeterminate. It will hurt proletarian emancipation to insist that the revolutionary or the worker struggling for her liberation must always withhold action until she has some tolerably clear idea in the context of her struggle of what fairness comes to here or of what morality requires. That is a recipe for inaction. It is a mistake to maintain that she must in that way always seek to be fair and impartial, to consider the interests of everyone, capitalist and worker alike. Such well-meant moralizing will in fact stand in the way of proletarian emancipation and, by this impeding of proletarian emancipation, stand in the way of universal human emancipation. In the name of that very universal emancipation, the workers and their militant allies cannot, Miller argues, afford to take the moral point of view and must in certain respects reject morality.

All of this to the contrary notwithstanding, there is an equally important way, a way I have been concerned to specify above, in which Marx is not rejecting the moral point of view, but is guided by that very point of view in specifying the higher stages of communism and in showing why it is desirable.⁹ And that conception, far from involving a rejection of equality, is firmly committed to it, as I have shown, in a number of important ways. I think Marx is right in rejecting morality in the two ways I have just specified. But this does not show that in the deeper sense I have been concerned to specify that Marx does not stick with morality and indeed an egalitarian morality at that.

NOTES

1. Richard W. Miller, *Analyzing Marx* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 15-97. Future references to *Analyzing Marx* will be given in the text.

2. Richard Norman argues that such things have in fact been stressed by egalitarians. Richard Norman, "Does Equality Destroy Liberty?" *Contemporary Political Philosophy*, ed. by Keith Graham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 83-109.

3. Norman, "Does Equality Destroy Liberty?," 99-108.

4. I think we should be more cautious here. We should also consider what people, including working-class people, would prefer if (to use Habermas's jargon) they were in an ideal speech situation. Moreover, and distinctly, working-class people have a range of experiences not readily available to people from the professional strata or to members of the capitalist class. It is an elitist myth to think that they do not make comparisons and reflect on their experience.

5. Jürgen Habermas, *Communication and the Evolution of Society*, trans. by Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1976), 1-68.

6. I document this in my "Marx, Engels and Lenin on Justice: The Critique of the Gotha Programme," *Studies in Soviet Thought*, 32 (1986), 23-63.

7. Kai Nielsen, "On Liberty and Equality: A Case for Radical Egalitarianism," *Windsor Yearbook of Access to Justice* 4 (1984), 121-142, and "Justice and Ideology: Justice as Ideology," *Windsor Yearbook of Access to Justice* 1 (1981), 165-178.

8. Allen Wood clearly explicates the concept of being a historical idealist and contrasts it with being a historical materialist in his *Karl Marx* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), 88-90, 117-122.

9. A documentation of this as well as both textual documentation and argument that Marx was committed to a conception of egalitarian justice is powerfully argued by Norman Geras, "On Marx and Justice," *New Left Review* no. 150 (March/April, 1985), 47-89, and by Alan Gilbert "On Ambiguity in Marx's and Engel's Account of Justice and Equality," *American Political Science Review* 76 (June, 1982), 328-346.

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