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Introduction: history, ethics and Marxism

1. When I was a young lecturer at University College, London, I taught subjects that were not closely related to my research interests. I was hired, in 1963, to teach moral and political philosophy, but I wrote about Karl Marx's theory of history, for I passionately believed it to be true, and I wanted to defend it against criticism that was widely accepted but which I considered (and consider) to be misjudged. To be sure, I did also have views about issues in moral and political philosophy, but those views did not generate any writing. I had, in particular, strong convictions about justice and about the injustice of inequality and of capitalist exploitation, but I did not think that I had, or would come to have, anything sufficiently distinctive to say about justice, or about capitalist injustice, to be worth printing.

My conception of moral and political philosophy was, and is, a standardly academic one: they are ahistorical disciplines which use abstract philosophical reflection to study the nature and truth of normative judgements. Historical materialism (which is what Karl Marx's theory of history came to be called) is, by contrast, an empirical theory (comparable in status to, for example, nineteenth-century historical geology) about the structure of society and the dynamics of history. It is not entirely without implications for normative philosophy, but it is substantially value-free: one could believe historical materialism but regret that the career of humanity is as it describes, and, more specifically, that, as it predicts, class society will be superseded by a classless one.

Since historical materialism was, at the time in question, the only part of Marxism that I believed[1] – I no longer also believed in dialectical

[1] I had once believed the whole thing, as a result of having been raised inside the Canadian communist movement: see section 1 of Chapter 11 below.

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materialism, which is a comprehensive philosophy about reality as such – I often said, with the complacent self-endorsement of youth, that in so far as I was a Marxist I was not a philosopher, and in so far as I was a philosopher I was not a Marxist. In further description of the separation between my philosophical and my Marxist engagements, I shall first explain why my Marxism did not control or affect my moral and political philosophy in a manner that many Marxists and anti-Marxists would have thought that it should, and then why I did not recruit to Marxist or even to socialist service the competence in political philosophy that I was developing through teaching it.

People familiar both with Marxism and with mainstream anglophone normative philosophy might expect the first to challenge the second, since, for the philosophy, normative statements are timelessly true (or false), whereas, according to Marxism, so it is supposed, either there is no such thing as normative truth or it is a truth which changes historically with economic circumstances and requirements. Now, I endorsed – I still do – the stated severely ahistorical view of normative philosophy, but, for two reasons, I was able to reconcile it with my Marxism. For, first, and as I have already indicated, I had shed, by the time I reached University College, my belief in a general Marxist philosophy (dialectical materialism) which is commonly understood to imply scepticism, or, at least, relativism, about value. And, second, I did not believe that historical materialism, in its best interpretation, reduces all values and principles to rationalizations of class interest, but, on the contrary, I believed that it looks to the end of class domination as the beginning of a society governed by 'a really human morality which stands above class antagonisms',[2] a morality which has always had some sort of historical manifestation, within the confinement of class constraint. Accordingly, my particular Marxist convictions did not disturb my view that ultimate normative truth is historically invariant, that, while historical circumstances undoubtedly affect what justice (for example) demands, they do so only because timelessly valid principles of justice have different implications at different times.

Although I thought that Marxism had little to say, in philosophical terms, about justice, I did not think that Marxists could be indifferent to justice. On the contrary: I was certain that every committed Marxist was exercised by the injustice of capitalist exploitation, and that Marxists who affected unconcern about justice, from Karl Marx down, were kidding

[2] Frederick Engels, *Anti-Dühring*, p. 133.

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themselves. I never believed, as many Marxists professed to do, that normative principles were irrelevant to the socialist movement, that, since the movement was of oppressed people fighting for their own liberation, there was no room or need for specifically moral inspiration in it. I thought no such thing partly for the plain reason that I observed enormous selfless dedication among the active communists who surrounded me in my childhood, and partly for the more sophisticated reason that the self-interest of any oppressed producer would tell him to stay at home, rather than to risk his neck in a revolution whose success or failure would be anyhow unaffected by his participation in it. Revolutionary workers and, *a fortiori*, bourgeois fellow-travellers without a particular material interest in socialism, must perforce be morally inspired. But I thought that, while historical materialism threw light on the different historical forms of injustice (such as slavery, serfdom and the condition of being a proletarian), and on how to eliminate injustice, it had nothing to say about what justice (timelessly) is. It therefore did not control my conception of political philosophy.

Nor did I put my Marxism and my philosophy together in an opposite way, by recruiting political philosophy, as I conceived it, to socialist use. For, although I took for granted that socialism was to be preferred to capitalism for reasons of normative principle, and not, as some weirdly suggested, because historical materialism showed its advent to be inevitable, I also thought that socialism was so evidently superior to capitalism from *any* morally decent point of view, with respect to *any* attractive principle (of utility, or equality, or justice, or freedom, or democracy, or self-realization) that there was no necessity to identify the right point(s) of view from which to endorse it, no need to specify what principle(s) should guide the fight for socialism, and, therefore, no call to do normative philosophy for socialism's sake. I did not think that it was incumbent on a socialist philosopher, in his capacity as a socialist, to bother with political philosophy, because the case for socialism seemed to me to be so overwhelming that only sub-intellectual reasons, reflecting class and other prejudice, could persuade a person against it. Animating principles were of course needed by the socialist movement, and they were abundantly present in it. But political philosophy, the systematic search for the right principles, and for the structures (very generally described) that might realize them, was not required by allies, and would be unlikely to make enemies move in a socialist direction, since their resistance to socialism was not a principled one. So I did not engage in moral and political philosophy, in a creative sense. I taught it, but it was

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not the site of my research work, which was directed towards the clarification and defence of historical materialism.

2. I had never heard an argument against socialism for which I did not (so I thought) already have an answer in my pocket. Then one day in 1972, in my room at University College, Jerry Dworkin nudged me. He began a process that, in time, roused me from what had been my dogmatic socialist slumber. He did that by hitting me with an outline of the anti-socialist Wilt Chamberlain argument, as it was to appear in Robert Nozick's then forthcoming *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*.[3] My reaction to the argument was a mixture of irritation and anxiety. There was a would-be confidence that it depended on sleight of hand, alongside a lurking or looming fear that maybe it did not.

Then Nozick's argument appeared in full force, first in *Philosophy and Public Affairs* for Fall 1973, and, finally, in 1974, in *Anarchy* itself, and now I was vigorously engaged by it. It happened that I spent February to May of 1975 in Princeton, in the vicinity of two exceptionally sapient philosophers, namely Tom Nagel and Tim Scanlon. They were considerably to Nozick's left, but, I was both heartened and puzzled to observe, they were not disconcerted by his arguments. This was perhaps partly for the undeep reason that, unlike me, they had had years of pre-acquaintance with the author and his developing book, and, therefore, the time to form a response to it, long before it appeared; but I am sure that it was at least partly for the deeper reasons explored in Chapter 6 below, where, as its sub-title indicates, I seek to explain why Marxists like me were vulnerable to Nozick's libertarianism in a way that liberals like Nagel and Scanlon were not. Many friends and colleagues were surprised by how seriously I and some other Marxists took libertarianism. They thought that, since leftish liberals like Scanlon and Nagel could comfortably dismiss Nozick's view, then, *a fortiori*, it should not detain people like me. Conjectures which, so I believe, illuminate the unexpected contrast are offered in Chapter 6 below.

Whether or not people were right to be surprised that I regarded Nozick's challenge as very considerable, I did so regard it, and I resolved, in 1975, that, when I had completed a book that I was then writing on historical materialism, I would devote myself in the main to political

[3] The core of the Wilt Chamberlain argument is reproduced in the long excerpt from *Anarchy* which is given at Chapter 1, pp. 20–1 below. Readers who are unfamiliar with the argument may like to read that excerpt before continuing with this Introduction.

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philosophy proper, and the present book is one product of that turn of engagement.

At Princeton I lectured on Nozick and I thereby developed the ideas which appear in Chapter 1 below. I shall presently review that and the other chapters of this book. But first I want to turn from the somewhat local topic of the demise of my earlier cavalier attitude to the question of the justification of socialism, to the wider neglect of questions of normative justification in the Marxist tradition. Among other things, I shall explain why some excuses for that neglect which existed in the past are no longer available.

3. Classical Marxism distinguished itself from what it regarded as the socialism of dreams by declaring a commitment to hard-headed historical and economic analysis: it was proud of what it considered to be the stoutly factual character of its central claims. The title of Engels' book, *The Development of Socialism from Utopia to Science*,[4] articulates this piece of Marxist self-interpretation. Socialism, once raised aloft by airy ideals, would henceforth rest on a firm foundation of fact.

Marxism's heroic – and possibly incoherent[5] – self-description was in part justified. For its founders and adherents did distinguish themselves from socialist forerunners like Charles Fourier and Robert Owen by forsaking the detailed depiction of imaginary perfect societies, and they did achieve a great leap forward in realistic understanding of how the social order functions. But the favoured classical Marxist self-description, whether incoherent or not, was certainly in part bravado. For values of equality, community, and human self-realization were undoubtedly integral to the Marxist belief structure. All classical Marxists believed in some kind of equality, even if many would have refused to acknowledge that they believed in it and none, perhaps, could have stated precisely what principle of equality he believed in.

Yet Marxists were not preoccupied with, and therefore never examined, principles of equality, or, indeed, any other values or principles. Instead, they devoted their intellectual energy to the hard factual carapace surrounding their values, to bold explanatory theses about history in

[4] The book is usually called, in English, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*. The version of the title given above translates the more evocative German title: *Die Entwicklung des Sozialismus von der Utopie zur Wissenschaft*.

[5] Whether it really was incoherent depends on the exact sense in which socialism was now supposed to *be*, or to *rest* on, science. That matter of interpretation is too complex for me to address here.

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general and capitalism in particular, the theses which gave Marxism its commanding authority in the field of socialist doctrine, and even, indeed, its moral authority, because its heavy intellectual labour on matters of history and economic theory proved the depth of its political commitment.

And now Marxism has lost much or most of its carapace, its hard shell of supposed fact. Scarcely anybody defends it in the academy, and there are no more apparatchiki who believe that they are applying it in Party offices. To the extent that Marxism is still alive, as, for example, one may say that it (sort of) is in the work of scholars like John Roemer and Philippe Van Parijs, it presents itself as a set of values and a set of designs for realizing those values. It is therefore, now, far less different than it could once advertise itself to be from the Utopian socialism with which it so proudly contrasted itself. Its shell is cracked and crumbling, its soft underbelly is exposed.

Let me illustrate Marxism's loss of factual carapace with respect to the value of equality, which inspires this book.

Classical Marxists believed that economic equality was both historically inevitable and morally right. They believed the first entirely consciously, and they believed the second more or less consciously, and exhibited more or less evasion when asked whether they believed it. It was partly because they believed that economic equality was historically inevitable that classical Marxists did not spend much time thinking about *why* equality was morally right, about exactly what made it morally binding. Economic equality was coming, it was welcome, and it would be a waste of time to theorize about why it was welcome, rather than about how to make it come as quickly and as painlessly as possible – for the date at which economic equality would be achieved, and the cost of reaching it, were, unlike economic equality itself, not themselves inevitable.

Two supposedly irrepressible historical trends, working together, guaranteed ultimate economic equality. One was the rise of an organized working class, whose social emplacement, at the short end of inequality, directed it in favour of equality. The workers' movement would grow in numbers and in strength, until it had the power to abolish the unequal society which had nurtured its growth. And the other trend helping to ensure an eventual equality was the development of the productive forces, the continual increase in the human power to transform nature for human benefit. That growth would issue in a material abundance so great that anything that anyone needed for a richly fulfilling life could be taken from the common store at no cost to anyone. The guaranteed future abundance served as a source of rebuttal to the suggestion that inequality might

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re-emerge, in a new form, *after* the revolution, peaceful or bloody, legal or illegal, fast or slow, that the proletariat could and would accomplish. There would be an interim period of limited inequality, along the lines of the lower stage of communism as Marx described that in his *Gotha Programme* critique, but, when 'all the springs of social wealth [came] to flow more freely', even that limited inequality would disappear,[6] because everyone could have everything that they might want to have.

History has shredded the predictions sketched in the foregoing paragraph. The proletariat did, for a while, grow larger and stronger, but it never became 'the immense majority',[7] and it was ultimately reduced and divided by the increasing technological sophistication of the capitalist production process that had been expected to continue to expand its size and augment its power. And the development of the productive forces now runs up against a resource barrier. Technical knowledge has not stopped, and will not stop growing, but productive power, which is the capacity (all things considered) to transform nature into use-value, cannot expand *pari passu* with the growth of technical knowledge, because the planet Earth rebels: its resources turn out to be not lavish enough for continuous growth in technical knowledge to generate unceasing expansion of use-value.

It was not only my encounter with Nozick, but also my loss of confidence in the two large Marxist factual claims about the prospects for equality, which altered the direction of my professional research. Having spent (what I hope will turn out to be only) the first third of my academic career devoting myself to exploring the ground and character of the two predictions described above,[8] I find myself, at the end of the (putative) second third of my career, engaged by philosophical questions about equality that I would earlier have thought do not require investigation, from a socialist point of view. In the past, there seemed to be no need to *argue* for the desirability of an egalitarian socialist society. Now I do little else.

4. Let us look more closely at the two leading Marxist inevitabilitarian claims that were distinguished above.

The first claim is false because the proletariat is in process of disinte-

[6] See Chapter 5, section 3 below.
[7] *The Communist Manifesto*, p. 495.
[8] I did more work on the development of the productive forces than I did on the character and the destiny of the working class, but I had begun a project on class and class conflict, which was set aside when normative questions moved to the centre of my vision.

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gration, in a sense that I try to make precise in section 5 of Chapter 6 below. The struggle for equality is consequently no longer a reflex movement on the part of an agent strategically placed within the capitalist process itself: socialist values have lost their mooring in capitalist social structure. For, however one chooses to apply the much contested label 'working class', there is now no group in advanced industrial society which unites the four characteristics of (1) being the producers on whom society depends, (2) being exploited, (3) being (with their families) the majority of society, and (4) being in dire need. There certainly still exist key producers, exploited people, and needy people, but these are not, now, as they were in the past, even roughly coincident designations, nor, still less, alternative designations of the great majority of the population. And, as a result, there is no group with both (because of its exploitation, and its neediness) a compelling interest in, and (because of its productiveness, and its numbers) a ready capacity to achieve, a socialist transformation. In confidently expecting the proletariat to become such a group, classical Marxism failed to anticipate what we now know to be the natural course of capitalist social evolution.

It is partly because there is now patently no group that has the four listed features and, therefore, the will to, and capacity for, revolution, that Marxists, or what were Marxists, are impelled into normative political philosophy. The disintegration of the characteristics produces an intellectual need to philosophize which is related to a political need to be clear as never before about values and principles, for the sake of socialist advocacy. You do not have to justify a socialist transformation as a matter of principle to people who are driven to make it by the urgencies of their situation, and in a good position to succeed. And you do not have to decide what principle justifies socialism to recommend it to all people of good will when you think that so many principles justify it that any person of good will would be moved by at least one of them. For, when the group whose plight requires the relief supplied by socialism is conceived as having the four features that I have listed, socialism will then present itself as a demand of democracy, justice, elementary human need, and even of the general happiness.[9]

But the proletariat did not, and will not, gain the unity and power

[9] Sometimes, when I utter the foregoing thoughts about the disintegration of the working class, someone urges that, if I widen my focus, I shall see that the four features on my list may still come together, but, now, on a global scale. I am accused of overlooking the fact that a classically featured *international* proletariat is emerging. But that, so I believe, is instructively false: see my 'Equality as Fact and as Norm', section 3.

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anticipated for it in Marxist belief. Capitalism does not dig its own grave by rearing up an agency of socialist transformation.[10] Socialists must therefore settle for a less dramatic scenario, and they must engage in more moral advocacy than used to be fashionable. And I now want to discuss, in the spirit of those acknowledgements, an aspect of the present predicament which brings to the fore a basis for demanding equality which is new, relative to traditional Marxist, and also to mainstream liberal, expectations. As we shall see, that new basis is connected with the falsehood of Marxism's abundance prediction, which was the basis, in the past, not for demanding equality, but for believing it to be inevitable.

The new basis of a demand for equality relates to the ecological crisis, which is a crisis for the whole of humanity. The scale of the threat is a matter of controversy among the experts, and so is the shape of the required remedy, if, indeed, it is not too late to speak of remedies. But two propositions seem to me to be true: that our environment is already severely degraded, and that, if there is a way out of the crisis, then it must include much less aggregate material consumption than what now prevails, and, as a result, unwanted changes in life-style, for hundreds of millions of people.

Let me distinguish between what is certain and what is conjectural in that uncongenial assessment. It is beyond dispute that Western consumption, *measured in terms of use of fossil fuel energy and natural resources*, must, on average, fall, drastically, and that non-Western consumption, considered in the aggregate, will never reach current Western levels, *so measured*. But the qualification carried by the italicized phrases is important. It is certain that we cannot achieve Western-style goods and services for humanity as a whole, nor even sustain them for as large a minority as has enjoyed them, by drawing on the fuels and materials that we have hitherto used to provide them. It is less certain that the desired consumption satisfactions themselves, the goods and services considered in abstraction from the customary means of supplying them, cannot be secured, by new means, on the desired scale. But I believe that the second claim, about goods and services as such, is also true,[11] and the following remarks proceed under that assumption.

[10] See *The Communist Manifesto*, p. 496.

[11] This means that I believe, among other things, that, if a fusion gun is coming, then, relative to how parlous our situation already is, it is not coming soon enough to vitiate the remarks that follow. (It cannot be excluded that Marx's abundance prediction will be vindicated in some distant future. The present remarks perforce reflect my own assessment of likely constraints for a future sufficiently extensive to justify extreme concern, whether or not the classical prediction will one day be fulfilled.)

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When aggregate wealth is increasing, the condition of those at the bottom of society, and in the world, can improve, even while the distance between them and the better off does not diminish. Where such improvement occurs (and it has occurred, on a substantial scale, for many disadvantaged groups), egalitarian justice does not cease to demand equality, but that demand can seem shrill, and even dangerous, if the worse off are steadily growing better off, even though they are not catching up with those above them. When, however, progress must give way to regress, when average material living standards must fall, then poor people and poor nations can no longer hope to approach the levels of amenity which are now enjoyed by the world's well off. Sharply falling average standards mean that settling for limitless improvement, instead of equality, ceases to be an option, and huge disparities of wealth become correspondingly more intolerable, from a moral point of view.

Notice the strong contrast between the foregoing ecologically grounded case for reduced tolerance of inequality and traditional Marxist belief. The achievement of Marxist equality ('From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs') is premised on a conviction that industrial progress brings society to a condition of such fluent abundance that it is possible to supply what everyone needs for a richly fulfilling life. There is therefore no longer any occasion for competition for precedence, either across individuals or between groups. A (supposedly) inevitable future plenty was a reason for *predicting* equality. Persisting scarcity is now a reason for *demanding* it.

We can no longer sustain Marx's extravagant, pre-green, materialist optimism. At least for the foreseeable future, we have to abandon the vision of abundance. But, if I am right about the straitened choices posed by the ecological crisis, we also have to abandon, on pain of giving up socialist politics, a severe pessimism about *social* possibility which accompanied Marx's optimism about *material* possibility. For Marx thought that material abundance was not only a sufficient but also a necessary condition of equality. He thought that anything short of an abundance so complete that it removes all major conflicts of interest would guarantee continued social strife, a 'struggle for necessities . . . and all the old filthy business'.[12] *It was because he was so uncompromisingly pessimistic about the social consequences of anything less than limitless*

[12] *The German Ideology*, p. 49.

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