

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-17394-0 - Marxism and the Good Society

Edited by John P. Burke, Lawrence Crocker and Lyman H. Legters

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Introduction

JOHN P. BURKE, LAWRENCE CROCKER,
and **LYMAN H. LEGTERS**

Visions of a good society emerge, at least by implication, from concrete social criticism. It is a truism that one can criticize a given society without offering a blueprint for its replacement. But it is also clear that any but the most superficial criticism of existing society delimits the range of alternative societies that the critic would find more congenial. These could only be societies lacking the feature that is the immediate target of criticism in the present society. Vague as it may be, a vision of a good society is, if nothing else, at least the hidden agenda of all social criticism.

It was once common for many Marxists to claim that Marxism, properly understood, was an evaluatively neutral science whose products were explanations and predictions, not criticisms and recommendations. That Marx and Engels were not engaged in, among other things, social criticism is, however, difficult to reconcile with the texts. It is now nearly universally granted that their social theory is a critical one. That theory must therefore tell us something about its authors' views of what a better society would be like.

Marx had early perceived the prevailing social system as being so deeply flawed, from the standpoint of realizing human freedom, dignity, and community, as to be irreparable. And, being as impatient with utopian fantasies as he was with mere tinkering, he was driven to develop not only the intellectual forecast of bourgeois capitalism's necessary demise, but also the plan of human action that would at once hasten that demise and school the revolutionary actors for the postrevolutionary task of constructing a good society.

Although we can only conjecture about the way in which we would remember Marx if the social movement launched in his name had met with conclusive defeat, it is probably safe to sup-

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[More information](#)*Marxism and the good society*

pose that he would, in any event, belong to the most exclusive pantheon of profound nineteenth-century European social thinkers, albeit with a difference. That difference lies in the exceptional quality of Marx's construction, whether expressed as the unity of theory and practice, as the dictum of the eleventh thesis on Feuerbach, or as the history of a theoretically informed social movement. In short, Marx's system was provided with intrinsic armament against the prospect of becoming a mere intellectual artifact.

In fact, of course, we are spared the conjecture, and for precisely the same reasons: Virtually alone among historic plans for social reordering, Marxism provided for the continual process of adjustment to changing social reality, thus becoming, as Lenin correctly understood, a guide to action even under drastically changed conditions. Hence the uninterrupted invocation of Marx's name and theory by a succession of social movements right down to our own era, when Bentham and Mill, Rousseau and Proudhon, Hegel and Herzen have ceased, regardless of their permanent intellectual significance, to offer a practicable course of action in the contemporary world.

This singularity is, to be sure, not without its problems, even on a purely intellectual plane. The wide range of variation among contemporary Marxisms poses special difficulties for those who like their intellectual history to be tidy or neatly compartmentalized. Unchanging texts are much more convenient, in this sense, than a body of teaching that is undergoing constant evolution in a deliberate interaction with social experience. Just as the history of Christianity is not only a study of doctrine but also a study of the evolution of the church, so the history of Marxism embraces a plethora of movements and parties, as well as a body of theory. And as the range of derivative versions fans out to include an ever-widening assortment of circumstances, coherence and intelligibility has to give way to perplexity.

The bickering of the various Marxist parties and tendencies cannot be entirely dismissed as sibling rivalry. The differences among Marxists run deep on such central matters as material equality, democracy, liberty, and individuality. Consider a Marxist whose vision of a good society is equality of consumption (adjusted for need) and a close agreement within the society on all questions of

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substance—all presided over by a single benevolent party. Such a Marxist will undoubtedly exhibit uncompromising antagonism toward a Marxist who emphasizes liberty, individuality, and a multiparty democracy. Each would be a revolutionary within the good society of the other.

Such disparities among branches of the Marxist tradition may be either intensified or overshadowed by the landmark occurrence of accession to power. If there is a natural history of social movements, wherein political or strategic considerations assume a growing importance in comparison to purely theoretical considerations, then a revolutionary seizure of power by a theoretically informed movement or party is surely *the* crucial sea change. No longer is it a question of the adequacy of the plan for a future good society, or of the practicality of the means for attaining it: The central issue becomes, immediately or as soon as tolerance of post-revolutionary difficulties wears thin, a testing of the degree to which the new regime measures up to its professed norms. Up to that point, the movement for change and its informing theory have posed a critical or normative challenge to the established order; then, abruptly, the normative questions turn back upon the movement-come-to-power and it is asked to show at least that it is on the way toward realization of those qualities—freedom, equality, justice, and the like—the absence of which it has criticized in the past and the realization of which it has promised for the future.

That this represents a special problem for regimes that proclaim their dedication to Marxist teaching is repeatedly demonstrated by the elaborate exercises in self-justification in which they engage. A different sort of problem arises, however, for those equally devoted to Marx's message who happen to live outside the jurisdiction of governments that authorize themselves to define the content of Marxian orthodoxy. Their dilemma, shared by growing numbers of independent-minded observers from within the post-revolutionary social orders, consists of a belief that the essential features of a good social order are unobtainable within a bourgeois capitalist system along with the growing conviction that the known substitutes are equally unpromising. Occupants of this uncomfortable position thus feel compelled to defend the original Marxist theory against those who, while claiming to implement it, seem instead to have corrupted it and, simultaneously, against

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[More information](#)*Marxism and the good society*

those who believe, or profess to believe, that Marxism is to be judged according to what a particular revolutionary experience has made of it. And, as if this were not a sufficient hardship, however much they argue in good faith, the activist imperative of Marxism is likely to force them into a condition of bad conscience. The position might seem to be altogether unattractive, then, except for the fact that it also entails grappling with the most acute and consequential intellectual problems of “the good society” that are posed to us in this era.

Since the time of Marx’s writing, reflection on the good society is constituted by concern, first of all, with that problem and its attendant issues in his own writings, together with later resonances of that theme within the tangle of Marxian interpretation and criticism. Second, it focuses attention on problems that have arisen from the various attempts to implement Marx’s theory in practice. The centrality of the good society—as a conception, as a historically plausible aim, and as a program of human action—is hardly to be doubted in the context of Marx’s theory. And as long as socialist regimes continue to invoke Marx’s name, they necessarily render themselves subject to the norms contained within or implied by Marx’s understanding and endorsement of freedom, equality, justice, and human self-realization in a community. This volume deliberately attempts to address the general theme in both contexts.

More specifically, twentieth-century reflections on the good society invite, perhaps necessitate, considerations that explore a cluster of related issues, only some of which are represented by the contributions to this volume. Such an ambitious project thus commits us to conceptual clarification and perhaps legitimation of the good society. And in the absence of a definitive image of a good society drawn from texts of Marx and Engels, it may be necessary to reconstruct a coherent image by identifying and arguing for particular properties of such a society in a “Marxian spirit.” The problem of the existence of theoretical differences between Marx and Engels on a future society, and how such differences are to be determined, is another issue that may have to be addressed.

Because Marx and Engels both believed that bourgeois society was irreparable and that socialism would constitute a decisive transformation and repudiation of capitalism, it is important that

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[More information](#)

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we examine their views on the need for and the nature of revolution. Might there be room in their theory for nonrevolutionary advance to socialism? What was their perception of the relationship between democracy and socialism?

Considerations of the Marxian understanding of human nature, freedom, equality, and economic and political justice are relevant as well. What is the place of science and technology in the Marxian conception? Given Marx's indictment of the capitalist market, is it nonetheless conceivable and defensible that market processes could function in socialism without violating justice? That is, is market socialism a viable concept?

Diverging from these issues, which are largely theoretical, we are led to consider problems linked to the contemporary existence of societies that profess to be socialist societies and that implement Marx's theory in diverse, although not wholly singular, ways. Our reflections must be augmented by considerations about the Soviet Union and China, as well as smaller existing models such as Yugoslavia. What is the role of dissent in societies that are avowedly socialist? How is one to contend with the problems associated with bureaucracy? Does examination of such existing models of functioning socialist societies suggest that they serve to advance or repress those aspects of a good society that were of concern to Marx and subsequent Marxists? It is not at all implausible to expect that inquiry into the nature and problems of existing socialist societies will provide reflected illumination back upon the theoretical corpus of Marx, suggesting fresh directions for thought and study, assessment and criticism.

Although this hardly exhausts the spectrum of issues that can be evoked by reflections on Marxism and the good society, those that have been briefly identified may be found to constitute a coherent focus, a fitting texture of thought directed upon an intellectually defensible and timely topic in social theory. If such reflections are pursued by a number of individuals working in different disciplines, the ambitiousness of attempting to present together their various understandings of the general theme will become only too apparent. Yet, this is precisely what the editors and contributors to the present volume have sought to do.

The first two chapters are both introductory, although in different ways. Professor De George, aware of the plan of work

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Marxism and the good society

that his paper was inaugurating, offers some fundamental intellectual discriminations against the background of Marxism as a historical movement. Professor Crocker, eschewing the historical dimension, prepares the way for subsequent offerings by proposing a set of conceptual norms as belonging properly to any Marxian undertaking.

The next two contributions, by Professors Fischer and Burke, continue the theoretical orientation by examining two of the most salient features of Marxism—the linkage between socialism and democracy and the manner in which human actors function both as subjects and objects of the revolutionary process.

Chapters 5 and 6 form an intermediate segment, incorporating both theoretical concerns and examples of the working out of the Marxian ideal in practice. Professor McLellan scrutinizes certain differences between Marx and Engels in their vision of a communist future; Dr. DiQuattro uses the model of market socialism to illuminate the problem of justice in Marxism.

The next two offerings address different manifestations of resurgent Marxist thought in the socialist world. Professor Crocker singles out Marković as representative of the Praxis group in Yugoslavia and Professor Legters focuses on Medvedev as a Marxist critic of the Soviet order.

Finally, Professor Graham examines the crucial role assigned to and assumed by science in a socialist society as beset by problems of modernization as by the norms of Marxian thought. Dr. Sweezy concludes the volume by weighing the Maoist variant of revolutionary experience as, potentially, a way out of the impasse in which the socialist world finds itself.

It would, of course, be absurd to pretend that this assortment of essays can be any more than a sampling of the salient issues. By stressing the issue of realizing the good society, and by comparing original theory and current practice, we hope at least to have achieved a measure of coherence in this varied set of illuminations of the Marxist tradition.

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[More information](#)

I

Marxism and the good society

RICHARD T. DE GEORGE

A good society and the good society

The difference between speaking of *a* good society and speaking of *the* good society is considerable. The designation of “a good society” could be applied to an indefinite number of different kinds of societies organized in various ways. A society might be called good if it had a large preponderance of goodness over evil in it; or if it had a smaller amount of goodness but almost no evil. The nature of the goodness or evil might vary from society to society. A society with no poverty, in which all the members enjoyed social justice, might be called a good society despite the fact that the arts failed to rise above a mediocre level. Another society in which the large majority of people enjoyed a high standard of living, comfort, and creativity, but in which some crime—maintained within tolerable limits—remained present, might also be considered a good society. A society might be considered a good society by its members but not by those outside of it; or there might be general agreement among most individuals about whether a certain society was a good one. There might be a number of good, although different, societies existing simultaneously. To call a society a good one, moreover, is not to say that it is perfect or that it could not be improved.

To speak of *the* good society, however, is a different matter. The use of the definite article implies that there is only one good society—whether this means one given society or one type of society. It is not one among many, but one that is unique and good for everyone. The use of the definite suggests as well that if societies can be graded, then not only is the good society *a* good society, but it is in some ways the best—perhaps the best possible, or if this is too strong, then at least it is basically the best, although there may be room for some improvement here or there.

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The notion of a best society, however, is an abstraction and not the description of an achievable society. For if we imagine any supposedly best society it will be possible to think of ways to make it better, if only by increasing the amount of happiness it contains. The ultimate perfect society in which everyone is perfectly happy, in which there is perfect harmony among all the inhabitants, in which there is no pain or sadness, in which death, if it occurs, is gentle, timely, accepted, and appreciated, in which no parting causes sorrow and no presence impatience, in which there is no want or desire that is not satisfied at the optimal time and in the optimal way, in which there are no accidents, and so on, is a description possibly of heaven, but of no earthly society. Nor is it entirely clear that such a society would be better than one in which there is some pain to make the experience of pleasure more sweet by anticipation and longing, in which there is some separation to make someone's presence more appreciated, in which there is some unfulfilled desire to make the attaining of other desires more precious, in which there is some labor and sweat to make the achievement of one's endeavors more satisfying. To speak of one ideal good society, *the* good society, is to limit the imagination of man too radically, to assume a homogeneity of human tastes and desires, some of which may not in fact be completely harmonious with others, or to prescribe for mankind with an unfounded arrogance.

The same difficulties exist if we interpret the good society to mean the best *kind* of society, of which many, differing in detail, are possible.

The notion of a good society, although not open to the same objections, suffers primarily from vagueness. I suggested that any good society would have an overwhelming preponderance of goodness in it, possibly together with a tolerable amount of evil. The number of ways to mix the good with the bad, however, are limitless. As I have suggested, the presence of some evil might enhance, and so increase, the good present in a society. Some evil might also be tolerated if any attempt to eradicate it would produce more evil of a different kind, or inhibit more good than its toleration would. Suppose, for example, that in a good society drunkenness, although not a problem, was considered (and actually was) an evil. The complete eradication of drunkenness might

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*The good society*

necessitate prohibition of the sale of alcoholic beverages, or a close scrutiny of citizens' private lives—measures that would produce more harm than the toleration of the evil of occasional alcohol abuse. Whether the evil tolerated affects small segments of the population, or whether it affects all of the population in some small way are again differences that might exist in different societies. Suppose that a wealthy society of free, enterprising citizens contains a small population that has some strange ideas. These people are recalcitrant and dangerous to others. As a result they are placed in penal or mental or other institutions. The society would be better off without them; however, the society that cares for them is better than one that simply eliminates them. Another society enjoys comfort and justice for all its citizens, and cultivates the arts. But in order to achieve this it creates some tolerable, but nonetheless annoying, amount of pollution. It would be a better society if it created less pollution, if the air everyone breathed and the large bodies of water that all could enjoy were purer, but it cannot eliminate the amount of pollution it does have without lowering its standard of living.

We might argue that any good society cannot contain overwhelming misery, poverty, disease, repression, exploitation; that its members must have some rather high level of comfort, culture, freedom, security, and peace. But once we reduce the “overwhelming” to “some,” the questions of exactly what mix is preferable to which, and exactly when a society becomes a good society are moot. If, during the Middle Ages, someone had foreseen and described American society today, would it have been called a good society? Would Soviet society have been called a good society? Some American and some Soviet citizens feel their respective societies are already good societies, despite the presence of certain evils. Would a society with more social justice and less personal freedom or vice-versa be a better society? Some would argue one way and some the other way. Can a society be a good society if it exists in a world in which there are other societies that can in almost no way be considered good societies; that is, societies in which misery, poverty, disease, oppression, and exploitation are rampant? Again there is room for disagreement. Our language assigns no clearcut meaning to the phrase “good society,” and the questions already raised preclude any possibility of general agreement.

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[More information](#)*Marxism and the good society*

I have claimed that one of the characteristics of a good society is a large preponderance of good over evil. Insofar as the notion of a good society is a moral notion, however, it seems reasonable to maintain that the goodness of a society must include not only material goods and the satisfaction of needs, but moral goodness as well. And there is a tradition in political and social thought that maintains that preeminent among the social virtues is justice. Hence a *necessary* condition for any good society is that it embody justice to a preeminent degree. If it does not enjoy justice in this way, despite the other goods it might contain, it cannot be considered a good society. Yet justice is not a sufficient condition for a good society. A society in which all men were treated equally and fairly and in which justice reigned, but in which all lived at a subsistence level might be called a morally good society; but most people would agree that more of the goods of life should be present for a genuinely good society.

If justice is not only a necessary, but the most important condition for a good society, it might seem plausible to argue that the notions of *a* good society and of *the* good society become so close as to coincide for all practical purposes. *The* good society is one in which justice is widespread and preeminent, the other conditions—as long as basic needs are satisfied—being of lesser importance. The uniqueness of the concept of *the* good society would then stem from its being the just society. But despite its plausibility, this notion will not do, for several reasons. The first is that we can imagine very disparate societies, each of which enjoys justice, but that are so different in other ways that to speak of *the* just or *the* good society, as if there could be only one or only one type, would be to combine what it would be more fruitful to keep separated. The second is that the meaning of justice and the specifics of its implementation are sufficiently ambiguous in some respects so as to produce drastically different societies. Consider the difference, for instance, between a society in which justice is embodied in the maxim “From each according to his ability, to each according to his need,” and one in which, following Aristotle, distributive justice consists in proportioning what is received not by the recipient’s need but by his merit.¹ A third difficulty comes in considering the possible mix of justice and other values. If, for example, in order to achieve perfect justice the freedom of the