

Karl Marx on Equality

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We live in a world in which wealth, power, resources, life-prospects are very unevenly distributed. American society today is by many measures even more unequal than the capitalist order against which Karl Marx wrote in revolutionary protest in the mid-nineteenth century. As of 2004, the wealthiest 1% in the U.S. owned more than five times as much as the total owned by the bottom half of the wealth distribution, and this inequality has continued to grow: In 2009-2010, as we began to recover from the banker-made financial disaster from which the bankers made billions, the top 1% of US income earners captured 93% of the income growth.¹ The United States is the most unequal of all developed nations, but the inequality between it and poorer countries is even greater. The trend to increasing inequality began in the 1970s; it is accelerating.

The maldistribution could reflect no conceivable measure of desert or distributive justice. It arises not from a “free” market (whatever that might be), but from a market characterized by monopolies and oligopolies, collusion, bought political influence and cronyism, some of it criminal even under our extremely lax laws and regulations. This system of inequality is not merely self-perpetuating but self-reinforcing. Political institutions are largely in the hands of those who benefit most from the inequality, and they are constantly being used to widen, intensify and multiply the disparities between the privileged and the disadvantaged.

It is understandable, therefore, that some among that tiny minority of us malcontented and politically impotent intellectuals who are outraged by this situation should have been busy exploring the idea that social, political and economic equality is something greatly to be valued, either for its own sake or because it is indispensable for the attainment of other social goods

which our society so conspicuously lacks. A little over twenty years ago, G. A. Cohen expressed the egalitarian intuition this way: “I take for granted that there is something justice requires people to have equal amounts of, not no matter what, but to whatever extent is allowed by values which compete with distributive equality.”² Many others would not put it that way, but nevertheless consider themselves egalitarians, holding that equality should be valued either for its own sake or as a way of promoting other important goods, such as community, political democracy, and personal liberty and self-respect.³

Karl Marx opposed the systematic inequalities in the society around him. He also explicitly advocated, at least for the near future, many social measures that egalitarians also support: For example, a graduated progressive income tax, abolition of the right of inheritance, equal liability of all to labor, and universal free public education (CW 6:505).⁴ So it is natural for us to think of Marx as an egalitarian of some sort. But Marx definitely did not share the egalitarian intuitions I have just been describing. My task today will be to try to understand why he did not.

Marx and Engels on the meaning of equality

We should begin by noting a subtle difference between the writings of Marx and those of Engels whenever the concepts of equality and inequality come up. Marx, quite frequently, and with very few exceptions, mentions ‘equality’ only to make the point that it is an exclusively *political* notion, and, as a political value, that it is a distinctively *bourgeois* value (often associated with the French revolutionary slogan: *liberté, égalité, fraternité*). Far from being a value that can be used to thwart class oppression, Marx thinks the idea of equality is actually a vehicle for bourgeois class oppression, and something quite distinct from the communist goal of the abolition of classes (CW 3:79, 163-164, 312-313, 4:39-41, 5:60 ; 6:228, 511; *Capital* 1:280).

Engels, on the other hand, while also repeating these claims, is sometimes more positive in his attitude toward equality. Then he distinguishes ‘political equality’ or ‘equality of rights’ from ‘social equality’ or ‘real equality’ (CW 3:393-394, 6:5-7, 19, 28-29, 6:346, 10: 414, 24:286-287, 25:19-20, 592). There are a few similar passages, though only a few, that are either by Marx or co-authored (CW 3:79, 163, 5:479). But the differences between Marx and Engels can be seen to narrow when Engels explains further the proletarian demand for “social” or “real” equality:

“The demand for equality in the mouth of the proletariat has therefore a double meaning. It is either – as was the case especially at the very start, for example in the Peasant War – the spontaneous reaction against the crying social inequalities, against the contrast between rich and poor, the feudal lords and their serfs, the surfeiters and the starving; as such it is simply an expression of the revolutionary instinct, and finds its justification in that, and in that only. Or, on the other hand, this demand has arisen as a reaction against the bourgeois demand for equality, drawing more or less correct and more far-reaching demands from this bourgeois demand, and serving as an agitational means in order to stir up workers against the capitalists with the aid of the capitalists’ own assertions; and in this case it stands or falls with bourgeois equality itself. In both cases the real content of the proletarian demand for equality is the demand for the *abolition of classes*. Any demand for equality which goes beyond that necessarily passes into absurdity” (CW 25:99).

Here Engels regards the proletarian demand for equality as standing or falling with the bourgeois demand, and, when it goes beyond the demands of bourgeois equality, as drawing conclusions of doubtful validity. The real meaning of this demand, he thinks, to the extent that this demand has any validity, is the demand for the abolition of classes. In fact, Engels regards the proletarian demand for equality as valid only at a stage of development which he regards as now past:

“The idea of socialist society as the realm of *equality* is a one-sided French idea resting upon upon the old ‘liberty, equality, fraternity’ – an idea which was justified as *stage of development* in its own time and place but which, like all the one-sided ideas of the earlier socialist schools, should now be overcome, for it produces only confusion in people’s heads and more precise modes of presentation of the matter have been found” (CW 24:73).⁵

Marx and Engels distinguish “abolition of classes” from “equalization of classes,” regarding the latter as a recipe for “harmony between Capital and Labor” (of course on Capital’s terms, since those terms define the production and class relation). They reject “equalization of classes” on that ground (CW 23:88).

In treating the notion of equality, then, Engels as well as Marx holds fundamentally to two ideas: *first*, that equality is properly speaking only a political notion, and even a specifically bourgeois political notion; and *second*, that the real meaning of the proletarian demand for equality, to the extent that it has a meaning, is the demand for the abolition of classes – and that this demand is a better developed and more precise expression of proletarian aspirations. To understand Marx’s reasons for rejecting the common intuition that social justice, in some desirable sense of the term, requires equality, we need to explore further these two ideas.

Equality as a political concept

Bourgeois equality before the law. The Marxian idea that equality is a political notion is itself a complex idea – as complex as Marx’s understanding of the political itself. The most basic bourgeois equality, as Marx understands it, is a form of ‘procedural equality’⁶, namely, *equality before the law*: the legal system must not accord some estates more privileges than others (as was still true in the feudal-aristocratic political orders of early modern Europe) (CW 6:228, 24:286). Thus we find in Kant, for instance, the identification of equality with “independence of being bound by others to more than one can in turn bind them” (MS 6:237, cf. 6:314, TP 8:291-294, 297, EF 8:349-350). This equality, Kant says, “is quite consistent with the greatest inequality in terms of the quantity and degree of their possessions” (TP 8:291-292).⁷ Kant’s own arguments that the poor have a right that the wealthy should be taxed to support them are based not on considerations of equality but rather of their right to freedom and independence as their own

master (*sui iuris*) (MS 6:325-326, TP 8:295). Fichte's even more far-reaching demands for economic redistribution are based not on equality but on the right to be able to live independently from one's own property (NR 3:212-215, GH 3:402-403.)⁸ Both Kant and Fichte here are following Rousseau, who argues that equality is necessary only because freedom cannot exist without it (*Social Contract*, II, 11 [1, 2], p. 78).⁹ The wisest philosophers in this tradition thus do not regard inequality in possessions, benefits or opportunities as bad in itself, but do think it necessary to limit it for other ends, especially freedom (independence of the arbitrary will of another). Marx disagrees with this bourgeois tradition on many points, but fundamentally agrees with it on this one.

Bourgeois equal justice. The assumption that equality is a bourgeois notion, involving only equality before the law and formal equality in contractual dealings is what underlies, I believe, Marx's own theoretical requirement in *Capital* that surplus value must be explained on the assumption that equal values are exchanged between formally free and equal economic agents (see *Capital* 1:271, 301). Marx's claim that the sphere in which the capitalist purchases labor power is "a veritable Eden of the innate rights of man... liberty, equality, property and Bentham" (*Capital* 1:280), is quite literally meant, however ironical its intent.

More generally, it ought to be hard to miss the fact – and also impossible to interpret it away – that Marx does not regard capitalist exploitation of labor as unjust, or as any violation of the laborer's rights.¹⁰ In Marx's view, the only rights that could come into question here are those corresponding to the bourgeois mode of production (*Capital* 1:301, cf. *Capital* 3:460-461). Right (*Recht, droit*), for Marx, as for Rousseau, Kant and Fichte, is a concept essentially associated with political and legal institutions, which, on Marx's historical materialist theory, are merely the legal-political superstructure that arises out of its real foundation in the existing mode

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of production (CW 29:263). To attempt to apply under the conditions of bourgeois society any standards of right but those corresponding to the capitalist mode of production is, in the words of Engels quoted above, to make “a demand that necessarily passes into absurdity.”

We can see such views in action in Marx’s critique of the Gotha Program’s demands for “a just distribution,” and “a distribution of the proceeds of labor to all members of society with equal right.” On the Program’s demand for a “just distribution,” Marx comments with a series of pointed rhetorical questions:

Do not the bourgeois assert that the present distribution is ‘just’ [*gerecht*]? And is it not in fact the only ‘just’ distribution on the basis of the present day mode of production? Are economic relations regulated by concepts of right [*Rechtsbegriffe*], or do not, on the contrary, relations of right arise out of economic ones? (CW 24:85-86).

Marx takes the answers to these questions to be plain: Of course the bourgeois *do* assert that the present distribution is just – and Marx agrees with them that it *is* the only just distribution on the basis of the present day mode of production. He agrees, because the materialist conception of history says that economic relations are *not* regulated by concepts of right, but, on the contrary, relations of right *do* arise out of economic ones. Marx then continues:

“Right can never be higher than the economic structure of society and its cultural development conditioned thereby...Any distribution whatever of the means of consumption is only a consequence of the distribution of the conditions of production themselves. The latter distribution, however, is a feature of the mode of production itself... If the elements of production are [distributed as they are under the capitalist mode of production], then the present day distribution of the means of consumption results automatically” (CW 24:87-88).

This means that the only standards of distribution that can apply in capitalist society are those that result in the capitalist distribution of wealth. As Marx puts it in *Value, Price and Profit*: “To clamor for *equal or even equitable remuneration* on the basis of the wages system is the same as to clamor for *freedom* on the basis of the slavery system” (CW 20:129).

The defects in any equal standard. As we have seen, Cohen takes it to be self-evident that justice requires something to be distributed in equal amounts (setting aside values that might compete with equality), but egalitarians involve themselves in squabbles and perplexities as soon as they ask what the equal standard should be. Some think it should be welfare, others wealth or income, others opportunity or capabilities. Other philosophers recognize that there are multiple dimensions on which equality might be measured. Inequalities, especially on the side of disadvantage, tend to form clusters: Low income often goes along with poor education, poor health, lack of control over one's circumstances, lack of political influence, and so on. There are obviously causal interconnections here too, but how do they work? Sometimes, however, these bad circumstances also come apart, and if we equalize along one dimension, we may fear we are unfairly neglecting those who are disadvantaged along other dimensions. These considerations lead people to ask: Which of these forms of disadvantage should be included in our measures of inequality, and how much weight should be given to each, in deciding what society should try to equalize for its members? Then still other philosophers worry about equalizing in matters for which individuals ought to take responsibility for the actions that make them better or worse off than others. It might be good to equalize, they argue, but not in *these ways*.

Do we really have any idea at all what it is that justice requires that it should be equal for everyone? Even if we doubt that we do, the view still seems to be commonly held that if we could only find the right equal standard, equality of something is still the demand of justice -- or at least one of its demands.¹¹ Marx's response to all this is simply to reject the egalitarian intuition, and deny there is any equal standard that could be used to formulate some ideal demand of justice. At the same time, Marx recognizes that some equal standard is likely to be applied in fact as long as the (still essentially bourgeois) notions of right and equality are in play.

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He accepts that this will have some consequences that can be regarded only as unsatisfactory. (Justice is not for Marx, as it is for Rawls, the first virtue of social institutions – it is simply a feature they display when viewed from a legal and political standpoint.)

The *Critique of the Gotha Program* also deals with the system of distribution Marx expects to prevail under the first phase of post-capitalist society: “a co-operative society based on common ownership of the means of production.”

The individual producer receives back from society – after the deductions have been made [“for replacement means of production, expansion of production, reserve or insurance funds to provide for accidents and funds for those unable to work”] exactly what he gives to it. What he has given to it is his individual quantum of labor... He receives a certificate from society that he has furnished such and such an amount of labor...and with this certificate he draws from the social stock of means of consumption as much as costs the same amount of labor...[Equal right] *is therefore a right of inequality in its content, like every right*” (CW 24:86).

Marx then emphasizes that this is still “equal right” only in the bourgeois sense of the term, even if the standard is no longer bourgeois. It remains unsatisfactory *precisely because* it applies an equal standard.

“Right by its very nature can consist only in the application of an equal standard; but unequal individuals (and they would not be different individuals if they were not unequal) are measurable by an equal standard only insofar as they are brought under an equal point of view, are taken from one definite side only, for instance, in the present case, are regarded *only as workers* and nothing else is seen in them, everything else being ignored. Further, one worker is married, another is not; one has more children than another, and so on and so forth. Thus with an equal performance of labor, and hence an equal share in the social consumption fund, ne will receive more than another. To avoid all these defects, right instead of being equal would have to be unequal. But these defects are inevitable in the first phase of communist society” (CW 24:86).

To avoid the defects that are inevitable in any system of equal justice, Marx thinks, right instead of being equal would have to be unequal. And he looks forward to a more distant future in which he hopes people will not have to think in terms of right or justice at all:

“In a higher phase of communist society, after the enslaving subordination of the individual to the division of labor, and therewith also the antithesis between mental and physical labor has vanished; after labor has become not only a means of life but life’s prime need; after the productive forces have also increased with the all-round development of the individual, and all the springs of co-operative wealth flow more abundantly – only then can the narrow horizon of bourgeois right be crossed in its entirety and society inscribe on its banners: *From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs!*” (CW 24:86-87).

This last slogan is now popularly associated with Marx himself, but at the time, and for Marx’s intended audience, it would have been associated with Louis Blanc.¹² Its source may also be the New Testament: “And all that believed were together, and had all things common; and sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need” (*Acts* 2:44-45). The slogan might therefore just as well be attributed to St. Luke as to Louis Blanc or Karl Marx -- and also held up to Bible-believing Christians as a principle to which their faith commits them. Be that as it may, Marx uses it here precisely because it is *not* a principle of equal right in any sense: Neither people’s abilities nor their needs are equal: a society that lived according to Louis Blanc’s slogan would not be applying an equal standard either in what it asks of individuals or in what it distributes to them. Further, Marx does not see such distribution in terms of people’s rights; for it applies only “after the narrow horizon of bourgeois right [has been] crossed in its entirety.”

Marx’s deeper critique of the political. Egalitarianism is usually a political notion in another way that hasn’t yet been made fully explicit. When people say that justice requires treating people equally from some point of view, or that people have a right to equal amounts of something, the assumption (whether tacit or explicit) is that this treatment or this doling out are going to involve actions of the political state. The basic notion of bourgeois equality is equality before the law. In bourgeois society, this means equality in political terms that correspond to the

laws of the bourgeois economy. As Engels puts it: "Political equality -- what is it but the declaration that class differences do not concern the state, that the bourgeois have as much right to be bourgeois as the workers to be proletarian?" (CW 23:418-419).

It is usually taken for granted that economic redistribution, through tax policy, education policy, land reform and other measures will be carried out through laws and their administration. In whatever way people are being treated as equals, they are going to be regarded as equals fundamentally as citizens of some political entity, such as a nation state – only by some extension of this can one speak of equality in international terms. Marx's deepest reasons for questioning the notions such as right, justice and equality, is that these notions apply to people only in their specifically political identity. But ever since his early essay *On the Jewish Question*, Marx had the deepest reservations about that way of considering human beings.¹³

Marx's teacher Bruno Bauer argued that Jews should not seek political emancipation until they first emancipate themselves from their religion (as indeed Christians too must do if they are genuinely to be emancipated). In his review essay, Marx objects that Bauer has not understood the nature of political emancipation itself, and its relation to human emancipation (CW 3:149).¹⁴ Human emancipation must belong to that sphere which Hegel called 'civil (or bourgeois) society' (*bürgerliche Gesellschaft*), which is where human beings lead their truly human life.

"The political state [says Marx] stands in the same opposition to civil society, and prevails over the latter in the same way as religion prevails over the narrowness of the secular world...[Here] the human being...leads a twofold life, a heavenly and an earthly life: life in the *political community*, in which he considers himself a *communal being*, and in *civil society*, in which he acts as a private individual, regards other men as means, degrades himself into a means, becomes the plaything of alien powers...In the state, where the human being is regarded as a species-being, he is the imaginary member of an illusory sovereignty, is deprived of his real individual life and endowed with an unreal universality" (CW 3:154).

When people think of their communal life in terms of rights and justice, they are thinking of their social nature as their political nature, which relegates their real social life in civil society to the status of a private, atomistic and merely self-interested life – the sort of life it actually assumes in bourgeois capitalist society. Their rights as members of the state, therefore, are seen by them not as a positive social or species-life, but only as a set of powers they have over against other human beings – the power to free themselves from the control of others, or to obtain from others, via state coercion, what they can claim by right.

“None of the so-called rights of man, therefore, go beyond egoistic man, man as a member of civil society, that is, the individual withdrawn into himself, into the confines of his private interests and private caprice, and separated from the community. In the rights of man he is far from being conceived as a species-being; on the contrary, species-life itself, society, appears as a framework external to individuals, a restriction on their original independence. The sole bond holding them together is natural necessity, need and private interest, the preservation of their property and their egoistic selves” (CW 3:164).

The political life of human beings, therefore, is not their real social life, and political emancipation is not human emancipation. Equality, along with right, justice and other conceptions of a merely political nature, are necessarily inadequate expressions of the human aspiration to membership in a free community. This is why these conceptions are also inadequate to genuine human emancipation. This is the point, therefore, at which we should turn to the second of the two Marxian ideas mentioned above – that the true meaning of ‘equality’ when used by the proletariat is the demand for the *abolition of classes*.

Class society

It is probably natural for us to think of the Marxian notion of a classless society in egalitarian terms. Accordingly, we naturally interpret the Marxian notion of class oppression or

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exploitation as a particularly odious form of inequality, and we see the remedy for it (whatever name Marx may choose to give it) as egalitarian in substance and content. The rest of my remarks today will be devoted to explaining why these natural thoughts are profoundly mistaken, at least as an interpretation of Marx.

Marx does not tell us very much about what a classless society would be like. He scorns the enterprise of “writing recipes for the cook-shops of the future” (*Capital* 1:99) and insists that communism “is not an ideal to which reality has to adjust itself. We call communism the real movement which abolishes the present state of things” (CW 5:49). Marx takes this position because, to a perhaps surprising extent, he accepts Hegel’s view that “the owl of Minerva begins its flight only at dusk”¹⁵ – in other words, that future human history is necessarily largely opaque to us, though Marx thinks we can perceive those tendencies in the present toward future developments, and choose to align ourselves with those we favor. We learn little in Marx about the socialist, communist or classless society of the future, except through what we learn from him about the class society of the present day, and those aspects of human life he thinks depend on social classes and class antagonisms.

Marx began a Chapter on classes in Volume 3 of *Capital*, but the draft breaks off after only a couple of paragraphs. The only point he makes is the negative one that classes are *not* to be distinguished merely on the basis of different sources of revenue (e.g. landowner: rent, capitalist: profit, worker: wages). “From this standpoint, physicians and officials, for instance, would also form two classes...The same would hold for the infinite fragmentation of interests and positions into which the division of social labor splits laborers and capitalists” (*Capital* 3:1025-1026). Elsewhere, however, Marx tells us more about classes. They arise out of production relations, he says, because these relations “create masses with a common situation, common interests” (CW

6:211). But such masses, with opposing interests, become classes, in Marx's view, only when they engage in some kind of common action sufficient to make them potent forces in history – either in the role of ruling class or revolutionary class, or at least as a subordinate player in the struggles between the main classes that determine a historical epoch or the revolutionary transition between epochs. The common situation of a class, that give its members shared interests, makes it into a class potentially or in itself; it becomes a class actually or for itself, or “constitutes itself as a class,” only when it acts as a class, through common social, political or intellectual deeds (CW 6:211, CW 11: 187). “Only then do the interests it defends become class interests” (CW 6:211). Class interests, moreover, always consist in an opposition to other class interests. “Separate individuals form a class only insofar as they have to carry on a common battle against another class” (CW 5:77). The very existence of classes is constituted by a class struggle (CW 6:482). A class society, in its very concept, is one in which the interests of some are irreconcilably opposed to the interests of others. In such a society, any conception of general interests, or of universal values or principles having normative authority for all members of society, is necessarily an illusion: typically, it is the illusion of the ruling class. This is why “law, morality, religion, are [to the clear-sighted proletarian, only] so many bourgeois prejudices, behind which lurk in ambush just as many bourgeois interests” (CW 6:494-495).

The process by which a class arises out of a set of production relations is a process necessarily involving people's ideas and consciousness, and also a process involving activities (especially political ones) that pertain to the social superstructure rather than to the economic foundation of society. For this reason, it is a fundamental misunderstanding to think that Marx regards only economics as determining human history, and treats politics, law, morality, religion as merely “epiphenomenal”. The language of “superstructure” and the Marxian phrase “social

being determines consciousness” are not about the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of that to which these terms apply, but instead about their opacity to those individuals that act in terms of them. The point is that superstructural activities are not typically understood for what they are by those subject to them: class-consciousness does not typically employ the concept of ‘class’ at all. The most characteristic concept it employs, in fact, is precisely that of *general* or *universal* interests, principles, laws, norms or values: for example, those of right or justice, morality, or the common interests of society on which the authority of a political state is thought to rest. This happens when the interests of a particular class “develop in spite of the persons into common interests, standing independently over against the individual persons and in this independence assuming the form of *general* interests” (CW 5:245).

“On the different forms of property, on the social conditions of existence, here arises a whole superstructure of different and characteristic feelings, illusions, modes of thinking and views of life. The whole class creates and shapes them from its material foundations and out of the corresponding social relations. The single individual, to whom they flow through tradition and education, can imagine that they are the real motives and starting point for his action” (CW 11:128).

And as far as his own psychological motives are concerned, he may be right in imagining this. It is not a matter of self-deception about his own motives, as if he were mistaking selfish class interests for the true values that he thinks are motivating him. The illusion rather consists in not understanding the true social source and power of these ways of thinking, ascribing to them an objective meaning and authority they don’t have -- because, in fact, nothing ever has it.

It is *not* Marx’s view that bourgeois conceptions of justice, right, morality are merely class interests usurping the place of the true or genuine standards (which, we might think, Marx would identify with proletarian standards, or the standards that will apply in some future communist society after classes have been abolished). Marx holds instead that the whole concept of general

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interests, universal principles or values, anything that might claim authority over individuals in the name of some common interest or objective truth about right or morality, is never anything but the interests of some particular class falsely claiming such an authority. The very concept of universal moral authority, in Marx's view, is a product of class society and would have no application were it not for its mystifying and ideological use in class struggles. A class interest falsely claiming universal validity or authority is the closest thing there ever is, or ever could be, to anything actually having such validity or authority.

This is why, in Marx's view, individuals do sacrifice their individual egoistic interests to class interests (those of their own class, or even sometimes of a class hostile to them). And this is just as true of proletarian class interests as of any others. The difference is – and here Marx gives to capitalism a great deal of credit – that in modern bourgeois society “man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life and his relations with his kind” (CW 6:487). It therefore becomes possible for communist consciousness to accept the fact that it struggles, and even makes individual sacrifices, not in the name of any universal interest or objective principle of right or justice, but simply on behalf of the class interests of a revolutionary class: “Communists know very well that under determinate relations egoism as well as self-sacrifice is a necessary form of the successful interaction of individuals... [Both] are sides of the personal development of individuals, equally generated by the empirical conditions of life” (CW 5:246-247). Nor does Marx think that egoism is in general any more or less “rational” than self-sacrifice on behalf of the interests of some class. Both motives are equally products of the social conditions of life, and once individuals come to understand this, it is up to them, as free individuals, to decide by which their actions should be motivated.

Marx thinks that social relations of the past – in the modern world, especially bourgeois social relations – have created the prejudice, or illusion, that egoism is more “rational” than self-sacrifice for a revolutionary cause, as well as the equally mystified illusion that self-interest can be rationally overridden only by some universal or objective interest or value. Neither egoism nor class interest has more “natural” authority than the other -- nor, for that matter, does either have any *natural* authority at all. Such talk belongs entirely to the historically conditioned illusions to which class society has made us susceptible. All such motivational patterns have only the rational authority that the clear-sighted thinking of individuals might give them. What Marx is saying in the above passage is that communists, once they come to understand social life and history materialistically, will be freed from all such illusions. This is the liberation that becomes possible for us when we face with sober senses our true relations with our kind.

Marx and Stirner

There is nevertheless a temptation to seek in Marx (or read into him) some conception of a system of rightful distribution that will govern future communist society – what Engels once referred to as “a human morality which stands above class antagonisms” (CW 25:88). Marx, however, never uses such phrases, and to the imagined charge that “communism abolishes...all religion and morality, instead of constituting them on a new basis,” the *Manifesto* replies only that “the Communist revolution is the most radical rupture with traditional property relations; no wonder that its development involves the most radical rupture with traditional ideas” (CW 6:504). The response, in other words, is that the “abolition of all morality” is part of that radical rupture.

The unpublished manuscript of *The German Ideology*, which Marx and Engels willingly left (as Marx says) to the gnawing criticism of the mice (CW 29:263), devotes well over three hundred pages of often tedious polemic to attacking Max Stirner's 1844 book *The Unique Individual and His Property*.¹⁶ It is seldom appreciated how far they had gone in the earlier pages of *The German Ideology* (and how far Marx himself went in all his writings) toward accepting some of Stirner's more radical ideas. Stirner's book was a critique of everything that he thought served to enslave the individual personality, to subject it to any form of 'hierarchy' or the 'dominion of thoughts', which deprive it of what is authentically its own. This critique begins with religion, but extends to all morality, even including all ideals of human flourishing, and takes in all forms of social authority, family, community, state or party, which might claim precedence over the egoism of the unique individual.

Marx clearly rejected some basic elements of Stirner's creed, such as his designation of 'egoism' as the free individual's orientation and his rejection of all social ties that could not be seen by the egoist as merely forms of his own "self-enjoyment". But Marx accepted the idea that all interests, ideals and principles that claim universal authority are to be rejected as *ideology* in a sense equated with "the dominion of thoughts" and are therefore false impositions on human freedom (CW 5:24, 43-45, 59-61). This false universality is now interpreted by Marx and Engels as an expression of a society divided into warring classes; it is the way class interests try to impose themselves on us as having some sort of transcendent or sacred authority (CW 5:46-47, 61-63). A society that has transcended class antagonisms, therefore, would not be one in which some truly universal interest at last reigns, to which individual interests must be sacrificed. It would instead be a society in which individuals freely act as the truly human individuals they are. Marx's radical *communism* was, in this way, also radically *individualistic*.

“Only within the community has each individual the means of cultivating his gifts in all directions; hence personal freedom becomes possible only within the community. In the previous substitutes for community, in the state, etc., personal freedom has existed only for the individuals who developed under the conditions of the ruling class, and only insofar as they were of this class” (CW 5:78).

The motivations of free individuals in a genuine community might be described either as egoistic or altruistic, or rather, as Marx puts it in his excerpt-notes of 1844, they would be both at once, because for social individuals there is a natural harmony or even identity between what actualizes me, fulfills my needs, and what actualizes others or fulfills their needs, and at the same time actualizes the species being that belongs simultaneously to myself and others: “In the individual expression of my life I would have directly created your expression of your life, and therefore in my individual activity I would have directly *confirmed* and *realized* my true nature, my human nature, my communal nature” (CW 3:228).

“Communism differs from all previous movements in that it overturns the basis of all earlier relations of production and for the first time treats all naturally evolved premises as the creations of hitherto existing human beings, strips them of their natural character and subjugates them to the might of the united individuals” (CW 5:81). “It is the association of individuals...which puts the conditions of the free development and movement of individuals under their control” (CW 5:80).

There is no reason to think that Marx believed that the abolition of class society would do away with all sources of conflict between individuals, or bring them into total agreement on how to direct their collective future. Post-class society for him is not the end of history but only the end of human “pre-history” (CW 29:264). But Marx thinks that in all past society (beyond the most primitive stages of economic development), these conflicts and disagreements have been determined in both form and content by the pervasive fact of class conflict. What people have represented to themselves as a “war of all against all” or “unsociable sociability” arising from human nature itself is, for Marx, as it was also for Rousseau, not a fact of nature but a social

product. But human history has been even more deeply a history of human co-operation than of the antagonistic forms this co-operation has assumed. Marx holds that humanity has the chance to retain the social co-operation without class conflict, because “all previous historical movements were movements of minorities, or in the interest of minorities. The proletarian movement [however] is the self-conscious independent movement of the immense majority in the interest of the immense majority” (CW 6:495). This is why he thinks the proletariat has the opportunity to abolish class society and begin *human* history.

Coming to terms with Marx on equality

My aim so far has been to present *Marx's* views, and draw out their implications for what he thinks about the causes of social inequality and about ideals of social equality. I have even been trying to defend these views, at least in a limited and conditional way, by arguing that they make coherent sense, and by presenting Marx's reasons for holding them. But since I don't myself accept the entire Marxian story, I suppose I owe it to you in conclusion to say something about where I myself stand in relation to all of this. Since I began seriously studying Marx in the mid-1960s, I have always found his basic critique of capitalism entirely convincing. Nothing that has happened in the past half century has budged me a single iota from that conviction. But I have never been attracted only to that part of Marx I found compelling or credible. The following are the best explanations for that curious fact that I am able to come up with:

Next to the sick, abominable unthinking hostility toward Marx's ideas that prevails in much of the world, and especially in this hopelessly benighted land, the most contemptible obstacle to their sympathetic reception has always been the dogmatic pseudo-religious attitude of uncritical acceptance found among many of his self-appointed followers, especially those that have been

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best organized and most resolute. I think I am drawn to the most radical and adventurous of Marx's teachings -- those a sensible person can be least comfortable adopting uncritically -- precisely because I want to distance myself from this second way Marx's thought has been abused just as much as from the first way.

Then too, Marx's critical attitudes toward right and justice, and his radical rejection of all universal moral standards, have always had, if not a direct appeal, at least a special kind of attraction for me. I am attracted to these radical ideas because, even as I find myself unable to swallow them whole, they do seem to me to make a kind of sense. They certainly involve a form of metaethical antirealism -- if not about all values, then at least about those values associated with right and morality. I find it refreshing that Marx frankly and openly accepts the radical rejection of all morality that plainly and necessarily goes with any such metathetical position. Here, very much to his advantage, Marx stands in sharp contrast to the squalid dishonesty found among ethical 'emotivists,' 'projectivists,' 'fictionalists', 'quasi-realists' and others who embrace essentially the same view, but then proceed to quibble and prevaricate in cowardly evasion of the radical conclusions that obviously do follow from their bleak moral nihilism.

As far back as I can remember, I have always thought, contrary to Marx, that there are objective standards of right and ethics, which are not mere masquerades worn by class interests (or by any other sort of subjective conation, feeling or attitude). For almost as long, I have thought that Marx's correct account of capitalist relations and capitalist society can be used to show that the capitalist exploitation of labor violates the rights of workers -- not on any grounds of equality, but because workers have a right to lead their lives free from the coercive power that capitalists have always exercised over them in really existing capitalism. I accept the idea that human beings have dignity, and that this makes them equal *as persons*. But this does not imply

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that they must be treated alike, or that there is anything of which all people must be given equal shares. Louis Blanc's slogan appeals to me, as it did to Marx, in large part because of its directly anti-egalitarian implication that society should *not* treat people equally. It is self-evident that any decent society should demand more of those who have more to give, and provide more to those whose needs are greater. It is not the least of the evils of capitalism that it has corrupted people, making this truth seem less self-evident to many of them than it is. Those to whom it does not shine as brightly as the sun ought to have to go and live in the wilderness, deprived of all the advantages of social life, until their vision clears. Further, in order to protect the freedom that human dignity requires, it seems equally evident that a decent society should be aggressive in protecting the freedom of vulnerable, which demands sharp restriction of the freedom¹⁷ of those in a position to take advantage of them.¹⁸

But to return to my settling accounts with Marx: It has taken me a long time to realize that my biggest disagreement with him is over capitalism, of which his opinion was *far too favorable*. Marx thought capitalism was a transitional economic form, whose historic mission was to elevate the productive powers of humanity – albeit at terrible human cost – to the point where they would offer abundance to all in a higher and freer society. For a long time after his death it looked as if he might be right. But I fear this is no longer the way capitalism can appear to us. Now it looks like only a quagmire, a quicksand, in which our species – unable or unwilling to extricate itself – may eventually be doomed to perish miserably, or at least to suffer from want and misery, due to the long-term effects – the unsustainable way of life – brought on by the very technology Marx thought was capitalism's great liberating gift to humanity. Capitalism, however, has so degraded our humanity – blinding us to the insight of Louis Blanc (or of the New Testament), reducing us to abject slavery to capitalism's inhuman social forms -- that the

prospect of our extinction may no longer offer any cause for regret -- unless we find it in the comfortless words of Willa Cather: “Even the wicked get worse than they deserve.”¹⁹

Notes

¹ This was an estimate prepared in 2004 by Arthur B. Kennickell on behalf of the Federal Reserve Board: <http://www.wealthandwant.com/issues/wealth/50-40-5-4-1.htm> Since such inequalities have been growing steadily since then, it is a very conservative estimate of how things are now. For further statistics, see <http://inequality.org>

² G. A. Cohen, “On the Currency of Egalitarian Justice,” *Ethics* 99 (1989), p. 906. Cf. Richard Arneson, “Equality and Equal Opportunity for Welfare,” *Philosophical Studies* 56 (1989), Larry Temkin, *Inequality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), and Ronald Dworkin, *Sovereign Virtue: The Theory and Practice of Equality* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).

³ See David Miller, “Arguments for Equality,” *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* (1982), and “Equality and Justice,” *Ratio* 10 (1997); T. M. Scanlon, “Equality of Resources and Equality of Welfare: A Forced Marriage?” *Ethics* 97 (1986); Amartya Sen, *Inequality Reexamined* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992); Martin O’Neill, “What Should Egalitarians Believe?” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 36 (2008); and D.M. Hausman and M.S. Waldren, “Egalitarianism Reconsidered,” *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 8 (2011).

⁴ Writings of Marx and Engels will be referred to using the following system of abbreviations:
CW *Marx Engels Collected Works*. New York: International Publishers, 1975-. Cited by volume: page.
Capital Marx, *Capital*. tr. B. Fowkes and D. Fernbach. New York: Vintage, 1977-1981. Cited by volume: page.

⁵ Marx did include in the *Rules of the International Workingmen’s Association*, as among aims of the Association, the following words: “...equality of rights and duties and the abolition of class rule” (CW 20:14, 23:3). It seems clear that he accepted “equality of rights and duties” because others insisted on it, and he thought it did no harm if followed immediately by “the abolition of class rule”, which he took to be a better expression of the same aim.

⁶ As John Rawls long ago pointed out, the procedural interpretation of equality – “treating like cases alike” – is very weak in its demands. Depending on the grounds that may be offered to justify inequalities, it is consistent with caste systems or even slavery. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), pp. 507-508. Marx clearly thinks that procedural conceptions of equality tailored to bourgeois legal and political institutions will merely support the class oppression to whose divisions these bourgeois institutions correspond.

⁷ Kant’s writings will be cited according to the following system of abbreviations:
Ak *Immanuel Kants Schriften*. Ausgabe der königlich preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften. Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1902 -. cited by volume:page number in this edition.
Ca Cambridge Edition of the Writings of Immanuel Kant (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992-) This edition provides marginal Ak volume:page citations.
EF *Zum ewigen Frieden: Ein philosophischer Entwurf* (1795) , Ak 8
Toward perpetual peace: A philosophical project, Ca Practical Philosophy
MS *Metaphysik der Sitten* (1797-1798), Ak 6
Metaphysics of morals, Ca Practical Philosophy

TP *Über den Gemeinspruch: Das mag in der Theorie richtig sein, taugt aber nicht für die Praxis* (1793), Ak 8
On the common saying: That may be correct in theory but it is of no use in practice, Ca Practical
 philosophy

⁸ Fichte's writings will be cited according to the following system of abbreviations:

SW *Fichtes Sammtliche Werke*, edited by I. H. Fichte. Berlin: deGruyter, 1970. Cited by volume: page number.

GH *Der geschlossene Handelstaat* (1800), SW 3

NR *Grundlagen der Naturrecht* (1796), SW 3

Foundations of Natural Right, ed. F. Neuhouser, tr. M. Baur. New York: Cambridge University Press,
 2000.

⁹ "If one inquires into precisely what the greatest good of all consists in, which ought to be the end of every system of legislation, one will find that it comes down to these two principal objects: *freedom* and *equality*. Freedom, because any individual dependence is that much force taken away from the state; equality, because freedom cannot subsist without it... As for wealth, no citizen should be so very rich that he can buy another, and none so poor that he is compelled to sell himself" (p. 78). Rousseau, *On the Social Contract*, is cited by page number from *The Social Contract and other later political writings*, ed. and tr. V. Gourevitch. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

¹⁰ See Allen Wood, *Karl Marx*, 2nd edition. London: Taylor and Francis, 2004, Chapters 9-10 and 16.

¹¹ But if for some x, whatever x may be, justice truly demands that everyone have an equal amount of x, then it looks like an injustice to let any other value permit us to distribute more of x to some than to others. I am not sure how egalitarians should deal with that problem.

¹² "À chacun selon ses besoins, de chacun selon ses facultés" is usually attributed to Louis Blanc, then one cites his book *L'Organisation du travail* (1839), 5th edition: Paris: Au bureau de la société de l'industrie fraternelle, 1847. But this is not a direct quotation from that work. "De chacun selon ses moyens, à chacun selon ses besoins" is rather a quotation from Louis Blanc's 1851 pamphlet *Plus de Girondins*.

¹³ There is a brief but very good discussion of this essay, with which the following paragraphs are largely in agreement, in Jonathan Wolff, *Why Read Marx Today?* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002, especially pp. 40-47. Compare Wood, *Karl Marx*, pp. 51-58, 63-66.

¹⁴ "We do not say to the Jews as Bauer does: You cannot be emancipated politically without emancipating yourselves radically from Judaism. On the contrary, we tell them: Because you can be emancipated politically without renouncing Judaism, political emancipation is not human emancipation" (CW 3:160).

¹⁵ Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*. ed. A.W. Wood, tr. H. B. Nisbet, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, p. 23.

¹⁶ The standard English title of Stirner's book is *The Ego and Its Own*, trans. David Leopold (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). This title is no doubt meant to capture the fact that Stirner describes his position as 'egoism'. But 'Einzig' means 'individual' or 'unique', and it is essential to Stirner's view that the free individual is entirely unique, self-defined, not subject to any universal standards, whether of right, morality or even general human self-actualization, flourishing and well-being. Marx adopts from Stirner the idea that free individuals are not subject to universal standards; in a classless society they will be merely the (social) individuals they are.

¹⁷ “A Yankee comes to England, where he is prevented by a Justice of the Peace from flogging his slave, and he exclaims indignantly: ‘Do you call this a land of liberty, where a man can’t larrup his nigger?’” (CW 5:210). In the American south, freeing slaves was seen as (what it also actually was) a curtailment of the liberty of slaveholders. Today in the U.S., by the same reasoning as that used by the Yankee in the above quotation, it is universally regarded by the economically dominant political party (the party of corporations and the top 1%) as an encroachment on natural liberty (the liberty of employers, or the freedom of the “free market”) when workers seek to organize and bargain collectively, or when the state seeks to regulate working conditions so workers are protected from injury. But in the political world – Marx would say: in all class society -- there can be no such thing as promoting ‘liberty’ in general. Protecting one person’s liberty necessarily requires curtailing another’s. The question is only whom we choose to emancipate and whose liberty we choose to curtail. Our monstrously unequal society, like a society based on slavery, systematically favors the liberty of the victimizers over that of the victims.

¹⁸ Some egalitarians may try to take account of the point I am making by means of what is commonly called ‘luck egalitarianism.’ For example, see Richard Arneson, “Luck Egalitarianism Interpreted and Defended,” *Philosophical Topics* 32 (2004). I am sure the “luck egalitarians” mean well, and the policies they advocate in practice are probably policies I would also favor. But, to begin with, it is not *luck* at all, but rather a structural necessity of modern capitalism, that it leaves the majority of workers helpless and at the mercy of capital. See G. A. Cohen, “The Structure of Proletarian Unfreedom,” in John Roemer (ed.) *Analytical Marxism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986. So “luck egalitarianism” (taken literally) seems committed to leave capitalist oppression intact (since this oppression is not a result of luck). Perhaps, however, the idea is that it is luck that determines who is assigned to which class, and the luck egalitarians want somehow to compensate for that. But can they do so, while leaving class society intact? It looks as if “luck” in luck egalitarianism is being understood in such a way that luck egalitarianism requires society to treat people *unequally* in whatever way turns out to be necessary to make up for the unequal distribution of “luck” (in whatever arbitrary way the luck egalitarian chooses to define this latter term). In that case, I submit that luck egalitarianism is not a form of *egalitarianism* at all, but rather an open-ended invitation to treat people *unequally* in whatever ways seem fairer to us than any kind of *equal* treatment would seem. So why try to sell these policies under the “egalitarian” brand? I fear that once again, the fraudulent pitch is being made to the oppressors that in a just society they would not be treated any worse than the oppressed. Are we hoping that if we use the word ‘equality,’ they won’t notice that their advantages are being taken away from them with the direct aim of protecting those they victimize? (Oppressors, however, never have been and never will be stupid enough to fall for such a ruse.) If it were really true, on the other hand, that oppressors and oppressed were being treated *equally*, then the ‘just’ society would merely be countenancing the oppression. However, the capitalist should no more be treated equally with the worker than the loan shark, the price-gouger, the blackmailer or the human trafficker should be treated equally with those *they* oppress. You have to admit that capitalism itself is like these other exploitative relations. You have to barge right in and take the freedom to exploit away from the oppressors, so as to give to their victims the freedom not to be exploited. But you won’t get the exploiters to agree to this no matter what even-handed sounding words you use. So don’t try to whitewash what you are doing by pretending that everyone is being treated the same. Marx thought that ‘equality’ is a hopelessly political notion. When you use the idea of equality in this way, ‘equality’ becomes a “political” notion in yet another very recognizable sense of the term: like political rhetoric in general, it stinks of euphemism and mendacity.

¹⁹ Willa Cather, *One of Ours* (1922) (West Valley, UT: Waking Lion Press, 2006), p. 206: “‘Claude, my boy,’ the doctor spoke with sudden energy, ‘If I ever set foot on land again, I am going to forget this voyage like a bad dream. When in normal health, I’m a Presbyterian, but just now I feel that even the wicked get worse than they deserve.’”