

**Marx and Justice**  
(Tutorial of 5 December 1997)

Much recent philosophical debate of Marxist commentators has centred around the question: "Did Marx himself actually condemn capitalism as *unjust*?" That is, did Marx actually use principles of justice, or what can be reduced to principles of justice, in order to make a valid critique of capitalism, or did Marx's criticism in some way transcend the notion of justice and use principles that don't necessarily involve notions of justice?

In this essay I would like to proceed by taking a look at the different views held, starting with the view that Marx was 'beyond' justice, then looking at the place Marx's system takes in the rights vs. consequence dichotomy of moral argument, proceeding with the view that Marx did in fact employ a system of justice in his critique of capitalism, and concluding with a brief discussion of whether notions of justice actually - as Marx thought - can be avoided in a communist society.

Marx beyond justice

In order to look at the view that Marx never employed a principle of justice in condemning capitalism, I would like to take Allen Wood's paper "The Marxian Critique of Justice" as a base.

Allen Wood points out that not only do Marx and Engels not try to show why capitalism is unjust, despite of criticising it, but he adds that they actually positively assert that capitalism is, per se, *not* unjust. The notion of justice, Wood says, is for Marx an essentially juridical conception, and that it is dependent on the juridical biases of civilised Western society. Since Marx adopts the notion that any legal or juridical framework is merely a superstructure that has its actual foundations in the modes of production, he can quite easily induce that capitalist acts in a capitalist system are in fact just. Since the legal and juridical superstructure of capitalism are 'historically conditioned' by the modes of production that are now prevalent in a capitalist form, he can assert that capitalist acts are just merely because they are justified through the historically conditioned juridical system. Capitalism, in other words, justifies itself, and to condemn capitalist acts in a capitalist society would be mere folly.

This point, I believe, is very important. Marx, in his critique of the Gotha Program, strongly criticises the stance that the socialists of his day took, namely that social injustices would have to be rectified by principles of redistribution in the prevailing social system. Marx, however, asserts that this would not only be a repetitive, difficult and ultimately useless task (as defenders of the proposition "we must tackle our problems at their sources, not just their symptoms" would say), but also an essentially detrimental one, since such an interference would also destroy the mode of production that the system is relying on without making anybody better off in the end.

The only solution, Marx further purports in his 'critique', is that of radically changing society and its modes of production and adopting a communist society, where the concept of

justice now becomes obsolete, since all people will now live in a state of personal fulfilment and all resources will be available in abundance. Only then, Marx says, can we apply the distributive principle "From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs".

Wood still has to find a reasonable account for why Marx actually condemns capitalism. Marx, Wood says, condemns capitalism because it entails "disguised exploitation, unnecessary servitude, economic instability and declining productivity as features of a productive system". And all the above concepts are worth rejecting *in their own right*, i.e. one does not have to employ a notion of justice in order to find faults in capitalism.

Thus Wood purports that Marx is not merely making a descriptive statement about the defects of capitalism, but that he has valid moral grounding, which, however, does not entail justice. Where, in the systems of moral thought can Marx's claims be allocated?

Marx's moral grounding

In order to take a good look at Marx's moral framework it is well worth considering Richard Miller's comparison of Marx with Aristotle. Miller asserts that - despite the different views the two thinkers take in issues of slavery and other problems - they both have striking similarities in their approaches to the ways human beings should function in society. Here are some important common concepts:

- A minimum of material goods and physical activity are required for human lives to attain a state of fulfilment.
- Human lives are essentially different from those of animals in that they are able to use intelligence in order to make their productivity more efficient. Marx in this context points out that most human beings still perform activities that are "monotonous, repetitive and of unparalleled stupidity" which essentially equates them with animals.
- Human lives are not worthy if they are determined by forces beyond their control, if they are "playthings of alien forces".
- Friendship, for Aristotle, "is or implies virtue and is essential to a good life" and for Marx one of the greatest faults of capitalism is the fact that "social connectedness becomes a mere means to private purposes, an external necessity".
- Money, pursued for its own sake, is a good essentially adverse to the full development of the human spirit.

Miller goes on to say that both Aristotle and Marx are in no way utilitarians and that they both condemn utilitarian concepts. Marx asserts directly that utilitarianism suffers from "the stupidity of merging all the manifold relations of people in the *one* relation of usefulness", whereas Aristotle quite aptly brings the counterargument: "No one would choose to live with a child's mentality throughout the whole of his life, even though he took the greatest possible pleasure in the things that children are pleased by".

On the other hand Miller also emphasises that both thinkers in no way endorse rights-based principles, for the reason that any basic right will have enough counterarguments to

make it unfeasible to implement as a strict guide to society's conduct and that any system of rights will find internal contradictions undermining it.

Thus, Miller says, it is best to allocate both Marx's and Aristotle's moral concepts as consequentialist ones and that any principles of conduct are weighed by the consequences they lead to for society and its members.

The essential question here now is, what are the consequences that Marx seeks? In effect, Miller points out the same things as Wood, when he speaks of the defects of disguised exploitation, unnecessary servitude, economic instability and declining productivity as features of a productive system. But the question still remains, do the consequences Marx talks about actually stand for themselves or are they reducible to a notion of justice?

### Marx's Justice

The writers who assert that Marx essentially had a notion of justice claim that he didn't actually specifically admit his principles to attain justice, since he, for tactical reasons, thought that a justice-critique of capitalism would be detrimental to the development of communism for the above mentioned reasons. Thus Marx was afraid that if one takes justice as a grounding for change, that this justice would be confused with historically constrained notions of justice that are linked to juridical systems of the time. On the other hand, if one takes the concept of justice more broadly and sees it as a "prime virtue all societies wish to attain", then one could argue that Marx did indeed employ notions of justice in order to propound his claims, but didn't actually say so. After all, the argument goes, are critiques of disguised exploitation, unnecessary servitude etc. not in a way critiques of the *injustice* of disguised exploitation, unnecessary servitude etc.?

Ultimately, I think, this is an issue of verbal squabbling, despite Wood saying it isn't. If one defines justice the way Marx does, then Wood is right. If one defines justice as the "prime virtue all societies wish to attain", then I think one can take a broader view and assert that Marx indeed did employ notions of justice. What, after all, did Wood mean, when he said that disguised exploitation etc. were "*good reasons*" for criticising capitalism?

What I think is important to discuss, is, if Marx was right in claiming that a notion of justice is no longer applicable in a communist society, since all human lives are now ultimately fulfilled and the world is in a state of abundance. Will Kymlicka adequately argue that even in the most abundant of worlds conflicts will arise that will need some system of justice to deal with these conflicts. And more importantly, as Galston says: "While friendship may render justice unnecessary as a motive, it may still require some aspects of justice as a standard. Friends do not automatically know what to do for one another."