CHAPTER 3

Political Economy and the Normative
Marx on Human Nature and the Quest for Dignity

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He who would criticize all human acts, movements, relations, etc., by the principle of utility, must first deal with human nature in general, and then with human nature as modified in each historical epoch.¹

1 Introduction

One of the central issues of Western philosophy, and indeed the philosophies of most other cultures, has been the normative or ethical question. What are the standards of the good, the goals that govern behavior and tell us how we should live? Plato's answer was the pursuit of “justice” achieved by “giving every man (sic) his due,” depending on his location in the social hierarchy of the Republic. Aristotle, seeing that men (sic) were political animals saw the “good life” as fulfillment in civic participation. However, Aristotle defended private property and indeed, defended both democracy and slavery. Yet both philosophers agreed that the polis was the place that not only enabled self-fulfillment that perhaps enabled happiness as the gratification from the good life. But neither philosopher saw that as a possibility for all, indeed, such participation in the political has typically been the prerogative of affluent male elites—till this day.

For Marx, the critique of capitalism began with wage labor and alienation that robbed workers of their freedom, humanity and dignity. Less interest has been paid to the normative or ethical basis of those concerns, why is freeing workers from alienation and wage slavery a “good” while subordination, servitude, denigration have been justified. While Marx avoided discussions of ethics, he yet embraced an ethical position. Blackledge argued that Marx did consider issues of freedom and justice as part of his normative stance that we claim rests on Marx's view of human nature and desire, but that nature is always expressed in historically particular forms.² We will argue that, first, Marx’s had a tacit notion of “human nature,” and desire play a fundamental

role in his theory of history while thwarted desires provided an ethical basis for his 1844 critique of wage labor as a source of misery, frustrations of “natural” desires and distortions of self. Second, Marx was quite clear how capitalism fostered the indignities, abasement and indignation of workers based on the contradiction of its human nature and the condition of its life. This would be overcome by socialism, but his observation needs to be grounded in basic life process rooted in human nature and desire. While basic affects may be “hard-wired,” humans are subjected to socialization processes to dispose motives, actions and feelings. Uniquely human desires emerge, especially as will be argued, the need for dignity as both an emotionally based desire and a normative principle.

Third and finally, we will therefore argue that Marx’s critique of alienated labor rests upon an ethical critique that saw human desires in general and capacities for self-realization and dignity in particular frustrated by political economy and sustained by ideology. Transcending the political economy, which depends on unmasking ideological distortions, was the precondition of emancipation and freedom, self-realization and dignity for all. But his notion of dignity was not based on some kind of disembodied “recognition” of selfhood that was independent of political economy. The ethical must be grounded in the ontological—which must consider human nature and an essential part of that nature is its emotional bedrock.

4 We must differentiate dignity from pride or self-esteem. Rousseau considered self-esteem as self-love, distinct from pride, that led people to compare themselves with others and take pleasure in being “better” and often enjoying the suffering others. Pride, like dignity, requires recognition, typically through accomplishments whether prowess in war, business, academics or the arts, or simple decency in one’s everyday acts. This can be seen as a person’s “worth” based on effectiveness for a system or organization that may however well depend on exploitation and that may well foster inequality, degradation and alienation of others—e.g. business “leaders” who close plants, fire workers, cut wages/benefits and enhance corporate value, stock owner wealth and their own incomes (CF Bonefield and Psychopedis, 2005). Therefore, self-esteem, pride self-worth, are not only individualistic, but can come from acts without social benefit—or indeed, acts with horrendous impacts on others. Eichmann’s pride in doing a “good job” sending Jews to camps, Stalin’s pride in the extermination of the Kulaks or Bush’s pride in declaring “mission accomplished.”

5 More specifically, the notion of “recognition” has become the focus of recent Critical Theory, especially in the work of Axel Honneth. But his perspective has dismissed the historical context of capitalism as the material foundation of a class society based on private property that alienates labor, appropriates surplus value and whose ideologies and cultural distractions sustain domination.