Marx as a Critic of Liberalism

Sean Sayers

Marx is well known to be a critic of liberalism, but you would hardly suspect this from much of what is written about his philosophy. In the spate of recent writing about his moral and political thought, Marx’s divergence from liberal ideas is almost invariably minimized or set aside altogether.¹ The criticisms of liberalism that are implied in his philosophy are passed over and his theories are reinterpreted so as to assimilate them to some form of radical liberalism. It is time to rescue Marx from this misappropriation and defend him as a critic of liberalism. That is my purpose here.

By Liberalism, I mean the political philosophy founded on the values of liberty and equality that has been predominant in the Western world in the modern era. It has most often taken the form either of a philosophy of justice and rights or a variety of utilitarian naturalism. In what follows I am going to focus on Marx’s treatment of rights and justice – I have discussed the naturalist aspect of Marx’s philosophy at length elsewhere.²

In its classic, enlightenment form the fundamental values of liberalism are embodied in a number of supposedly universal and timeless ‘natural’ or ‘human’ rights. These are listed in some of the major constitutional documents of the bourgeois revolutions of the eighteenth century, such as the US ‘Declaration of Independence’ and the various ‘Declarations of Rights of Man and Citizen’ of the French Revolution. The rights claimed in these documents vary somewhat, but usually include the rights to liberty, equality and private property. These are supposed to be the basic principles of a just society. Philosophical justifications for this approach are set out by a succession of thinkers, from Locke, Rousseau, and Kant, down to Rawls in modern times.

I The Historical Materialist Approach

Marx’s approach is entirely different. Appeals to principles of justice and right play little if any part in his analysis of bourgeois society or in his ideas about

---

¹ This is true of writing not only in the analytic but also in the continental tradition, see Paul Blackledge, Marxism and Ethics (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2012).
the society that will succeed it. Partly this is because his primary aim is to understand and explain bourgeois society rather than to pass moral or political judgement on it or to advocate an alternative; but it is also because his critique takes an historical form and does not invoke supposedly universal standards.

The fundamental principles that guide his thought – the basic ideas of historical materialism – are clearly set out by him in a number of places and are familiar.3

Does it require deep intuition to comprehend that man's ideas, views, and conceptions, in one word, man's consciousness, changes with every change in the conditions of his material existence, in his social relations and in his social life? What else does the history of ideas prove, than that intellectual production changes its character in proportion as material production is changed?... When people speak of the ideas that revolutionise society, they do but express that fact that within the old society the elements of a new one have been created, and that the dissolution of the old ideas keeps even pace with the dissolution of the old conditions of existence.4

The implications of these views for the notions of justice and right are clear enough. These – like other kinds of moral principles – are social and historical products. They arise out of, and express, the norms governing the social relations of particular societies, they are (in that sense) 'ideological'.5 Different kinds of society give rise to different values and principles of right. Hence, there are no universal moral principles, no timeless principles of right. Consistently with this, Marx is scornful of his socialist contemporaries who appealed to supposedly eternal principles of 'justice' and 'fairness',6 and he worked strenuously to try to keep such ideas out of those statements of socialist principles with which he was associated.7

---

5 This is the neutral as contrasted with the pejorative sense of the term 'ideology', see Sean Sayers “Philosophy and Ideology: Marxism and the Role of Religion in Contemporary Politics,” in David Bates (ed.), Marxism, Intellectuals and Politics (London: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2007), 152–168.
7 See Karl Marx and Friederich Engels, Selected Correspondence (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, n.d.), and Geras, 'The Controversy About Marx and Justice', 50.