Marxism and Human Nature
Sean Sayers
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Reviewed by Lawrence Wilde

Sean Sayers has worked tirelessly through the years defending the rationality of Marx's dialectic and its affinity to Hegel's philosophy, and this humanist dialectic shines through this series of articles on human nature and the related questions of work, progress, and morality. Most of the articles were first published in the 1980s or early 1990s and are revised for this collection, but the introduction and final chapter are new and serve to frame the book as a coherent whole.

Sayers argues that Marx's conception of human nature is historicist, holding that human nature and human needs develop as we pass through successive modes of production, with social development being judged according to the extent to which a society is able to promote human well-being on the basis of current needs (p. 164). He holds that Marx's critique of capitalism is an immanent one, based on standards which are historical and relative (p. 10). But this is not the sort of relativism which paralyses the critical faculty, for in every society new choices arise, and the possibility is always present for the progressive development of human well-being. Sayers acknowledges that there must be some universal values by which we can identify human well-being, but he perceives a danger in making too much of this. This is the danger of essentialism, whereby we define some trans-historical values as the benchmark for judging social development. In the first place, this might lead to neglect of the specific historical factors which give rise to institutions and values, and, in the second place, such values are bound to be too nebulous to serve as criteria for judging complex social phenomena.

Sayers's reading of Marx certainly helps us to understand how Marx insisted that capitalism was just in its own terms while inveighing against it at every point of his analysis. Not only was Marx able to expose the exploitative reality behind the rhetoric of 'fair exchange', but he was able to inveigh against capitalism from the point of view of the socialist alternative developing as a real historical possibility in the course of the class struggle. Sayers provides a quotation from the third volume of Capital in which Marx states that, from the standpoint of a higher economic form of society, private ownership of the globe by private individuals will appear quite as absurd as the private ownership of one man by another (p. 123). Sayers's argument is directed tellingly in debate
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with Norman Geras, who thinks that Marx did conceive of capitalism as unjust but did not think he did. Although the latter objects to the idea of 'higher stages' of social development which can be invoked to criticise the status quo, this is precisely what Marx does and Sayers is right to insist on its coherence. However, while Sayers is right to remind us of Marx's historicism, it seems to me that Geras is right to say that, even if we acknowledge that freedom develops in historical stages, there must be some universal content to this freedom.

This is where I find it difficult to accept Sayers's radical separation of historicism from essentialism, and his association of the latter with enlightenment thought. Marx identifies two kinds of human nature in a footnote on Jeremy Bentham in the first volume of Capital. According to Marx, for utilitarianism to make sense, the philosopher would first have to deal with 'human nature in general' and then with 'human nature as historically modified in each epoch'. Marx had couched his early commitment to communism in explicit essentialist terms, and, if historicism is so incommensurable with essentialism, it is strange that he never repudiated his early work. In fact, Sayers is well aware that Marx consistently adhered to the view that general human characteristics were important, and he comes up with statements like 'Marx ... portrays human beings as essentially active, social and productive creatures' (p. 5), 'we are inherently and essentially social beings' (p. 7), and 'productive labour is thus, for Marx, the most fundamental and essential human activity' (p. 32). But Sayers refuses the obvious conclusion that Marx is both a historicist and an essentialist.

Probably his strongest reason for not accepting this is given in response to one of today's foremost leading essentialists, Martha Nussbaum, when he says that essentialist accounts of human nature are too abstract and general to provide a determinate basis for values (p. 159). In a sense, this is true, for essentialism cannot deliver a full-blown moral theory, and we know that Marx was not interested in doing so. However, a normative commitment to our self-realisation as creative and social beings can surely serve as an ethical foundation, not simply to the critique of capitalism, but also to the development of an emancipatory alternative. If we are by nature productive and social beings, in what ways are productiveness and sociality distorted in advanced capitalism, and in what ways do they continually reassert themselves? Which struggles promote social cooperation and individual creativity and thereby constitute a radical re-evaluation of values? If questions of this sort are posed, then we