KARL MARX

2nd Edition

Allen W. Wood

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
NEW YORK AND LONDON

claims and requirements of social roles become effective. They *can* avoid mentioning them, because the system of claims and requirements which define social relations is logically independent of the particular sanctions which give these claims and requirements their force. And they *must* avoid mentioning them if the legal forms are to be explained on the basis of the social relations they sanction.

Although the criticisms of Marx advanced by Dahrendorf and Plamenatz are mistaken, they do point to some serious unclarities in Marx's exposition of historical materialism. Just as Marx does not always distinguish clearly between social production relations and material work relations, so he does not always distinguish clearly between social relations and property relations, understood in terms of moral or legal rights. Plamenatz is correct when he says that 'except when they are defining them, Marx and Engels nearly always speak of relations of production as if they were the same as property relations'.[14] And Dahrendorf's misinterpretation of Marx is rendered plausible by the fact that Marx never actually defines bourgeois property relations in terms of social relations of bourgeois production. Instead, Marx nearly always relies for his notion of bourgeois social relations on a common conception of bourgeois property relations which he could take for granted. This does not show that his theory itself is confused or untenable, but it does indicate how much more would need to be done to state it in a really rigorous manner.

2 History and social classes

Marx's theory holds that social relations are revolutionized when they no longer correspond to society's productive forces, or when they become fetters on the development of these forces. Yet it also holds that history is made by human beings themselves. Productive forces do not make revolutions; people make revolutions when historical circumstances provide them with the motives and opportunities for doing so.

Marx's theory holds that history is made by human individuals, acting from a wide variety of different conscious motives. But it also holds that history is not to be understood in terms of the motives and acts of particular individuals. Perhaps the best way to get at the Marxian view here is to look at a passage from Engels' *Ludwig Feuerbach*.

> Human beings make their history, however it may turn out, in that each pursues his own consciously willed ends, and his-

> tory is just the resultant of these many wills acting in various directions and their manifold influence on the external world. Thus it all depends on what the many individuals will.

The Marxian theory does not deny that history is the cumulative result of actions of human individuals. Nor does it deny that these actions are usually performed from the motives the agents might cite to explain their own behavior: 'The will', says Engels, 'is determined by passion or deliberation', which is in turn determined by motives of various kinds, by 'external objects', 'ideal motives, ambition, "enthusiasm for truth and justice", personal hatred or even purely individual crotchets of all kinds.' Marx, unlike Freud, does not hold that our actions are often motivated by subterranean psychic compulsions of which we are ignorant, or which we systematically hide from ourselves. In particular, Marx's theory does *not* say that when I think I am being moved by 'enthusiasm for truth and justice' I am really moved instead by my own economic interests.

Although history is the cumulative result of the actions of individuals, the conscious motives of these actions do not provide us with good explanations of historical change. Engels gives two reasons for this: First, individuals often fail to achieve what they will; their motives explain only what they will, while history is the cumulative result of what they actually accomplish: 'Most of the individual wills active in history produce results different from what they willed – often exactly the opposite. Hence for the total outcome their motives are only of secondary significance.' Second, individual motives are too multifarious and accidental to explain historical change, which results from the sustained action of great masses of people over long periods of time. Consequently, Engels argues, our theory must seek out what he calls (I think misleadingly) the 'driving powers' or 'driving forces' of history which, while perhaps not prominent in the conscious motivation of very many individuals, do account for the systematic results of their actions:

> When it is a matter of investigating the driving powers which – consciously or unconsciously, but very frequently unconsciously – stand behind the motives of men acting in history, . . . it cannot be so much a question of the motives of individuals, however prominent, as of motives which set in motion great masses . . .; and this too not momentarily for the transient flaring up of a strawfire which quickly dies out, but

> for lasting action which flows into a great historical alteration.[15]

When Engels says that people are largely unconscious of the 'driving forces' of history, he does not mean that they are unaware of (or have false beliefs about) what motivates them individually. (This is why it is so easy to be misled by his talk of 'levers' or 'driving forces' which 'stand behind' people's conscious motives.) What he means is that people usually do not understand the social and historical significance of their motives and actions: they do not understand the way their motives and action function in the social system or contribute to large scale historical trends. They do not understand, for instance, that the religious enthusiasm in which they participate is socially available to them chiefly because it sanctions the secular status quo; they do not see how their highminded defense of individual freedom serves the social purpose of keeping most of society in chains. Of course, if they did come to understand, there would probably be changes in both their motives and their actions. Marx's theory aims at effecting such changes in anyone who is sufficiently free of class prejudice to be open to them. To acquire knowledge about the social meaning of one's motives is not to learn anything new about one's psychological makeup. But it is in an important sense to acquire self-knowledge. For it is to learn something important about oneself as a social and historical creature.

Individual motives are of secondary importance in understanding the movement of history because large scale social changes result only from the systematic and (consciously or unconsciously) co-ordinated behavior of large groups of people, of 'peoples', 'masses', above all of social *classes*.

What are classes? Unfortunately, Marx never completed the chapter of *Capital* devoted to this question. He is clearer in rejecting certain answers to it than he is about his positive account. Marx rejects the theory that classes are distinguished merely by wealth and poverty or property and propertylessness. 'The size of one's purse', he says, is 'a merely quantitative distinction', while the 'antithesis of property and propertylessness' is by itself merely an 'indifferent antithesis' not grasped in its 'active connection' or 'internal relation'.[16] Marx also rejects a definition of classes in terms of their sources of revenue:

> At first glance, the sameness of revenue and sources of revenue. There are three great social groups ... who live

> respectively on the value from their labor, capital and landed property. But from this standpoint, physicians and officials, for instance, would also form two classes, for they belong to two social groups, with the revenues of each one's members flowing from the same source. The same would hold for the infinite fragmentation of interests and positions into which the division of social labor splits laborers, capitalists and landowners – the latter, for example, into owners of vineyards, farms, forests, mines, fisheries . . .[17]

The problem here seems to be that 'source of revenue' is too loose a notion. What Marx wants to do is to classify revenue sources in such a way that they identify the 'great social groups' on whose interaction the course of history depends. But such a classification must be based on something more than the notion 'source of revenue'.

Eric Hobsbawm suggests that 'classes are merely special cases of social relations of production.'[18] I think this is true, if it means that Marx conceives of production relations as dividing people into the economic roles out of which social classes emerge. But production relations, as defined by the various kinds of claims people may have on others and which others may have on them, might in principle be used to categorize people in all sorts of ways. The problem is to discover which ways of categorizing them enable us to identify the groups which are crucial for the understanding of large scale social change.

Marx says that classes 'arise out of' production relations because the latter create 'masses with a common situation, common interests'.[19] He conceives of the dynamics of social change in terms of the struggle of opposed class interests. It is these interests which are (to use Engels' misleading language) the 'levers' or 'driving forces' behind large scale social changes. Hence in looking for the social relations from which classes arise, we should attend especially to those relations which systematically set people's interests in opposition. Marx was well aware, however, of systematic divergences of interest between segments of the same class (between skilled and unskilled laborers or between industrial and finance capitalists). His analyzes of actual historical events (such as those in France between 1848 and 1851) often turn as much on the struggle between parts of the same class as on struggles between different classes. Marx's reason for distinguishing wage laborers, capitalists and landowners as the three basic and most prominent classes in modern society seems to be that

he regards the conflicts of interest between these social groupings as fundamentally more historically important than conflicts within them, or conflicts between them and less potent classes (such as the peasantry and the petty bourgeoisie).

Once we grant to Marx the very substantial thesis that the constitution of a society's noneconomic institutions and the course of its history are determined by the struggle of social groups with opposed economic interests, there is a certain triviality in the further claim that politics, ideology and historical change are the result of a struggle between *classes*. For Marx gives us no way of identifying these classes independently of judgments about which production relations and social groupings will prove socially and historically decisive.

We might think that Marx's identification of the basic social classes could be derived from another source: from the fact that in any given society there are certain dominant social forms or production relations, certain characteristic patterns of effective control over the means of production and characteristic ways of bringing human labor together with these means.[20] *Classes* would be the groups specified by the terms of these dominant relations. But this suggestion will not work. To begin with, it does not account for classes not involved in the dominant relations (classes defined by relations pertaining to relations left over from a previous era, for instance). Besides, what is meant here by 'dominant'? We might suppose that it is merely a quantitative matter: certain production relations 'dominate' in the sense that they account for the greater part of society's total product or involve the majority of social laborers. But this is clearly not Marx's view. He recognizes the parcel peasants as the most numerous class in French society, but sees this class as having real historical significance only insofar as it is content to follow the lead of the (less numerous but historically more potent) proletariat.

Further, Marx says:

> In all forms of society there is one determinate kind of production which assigns ranks and influence to all the others, and whose relations assign rank and influence to all other relations. It is the general light which dyes all the other colors and modifies their particularity. It is the particular aether which determines the specific gravity of every existence which emerges from it.[21]

Whatever this means, it does not treat the 'dominance' of a production relation merely as a matter of the proportion of laborers or social product involved in it. I suggest that Marx regards a relation as dominant when the social dynamics engendered by it are decisive in explaining the superstructural institutions of the society and its basic tendencies for historical development. Marx treats the relation of capital and wage labor as dominant in bourgeois society because he believes that by focusing on this relation he can 'unveil the economic law of motion of modern society'.[22] I conclude that his analysis of the class structure of a society cannot be separated from his judgment about its underlying dynamics. We can justify such an analysis only in terms of its usefulness in explaining the society's superstructural institutions and historical movement.

3 Class interests

Individuals form a class because they have 'common interests'. They have common interests because they share a 'common situation'. In view of this, it may be natural to suppose that 'class interests' for Marx are simply the interests of a class's individual members, which happen to coincide because of the similarity of their life-situations. But this is an oversimplification. For one thing, the interests of the members of a given class do not coincide in every respect. Members of the same class are often in economic competition with one another. And a turn of events which affects the interests of most members of a class in one way may accidentally have just the opposite effect on the interests of some of its members. Further, Marx would probably not want to say that some state of affairs is in the class interests of a certain class just because it happened accidentally to benefit only (or even all) members of that class. He would only want to say this if the state of affairs involved some mechanism (whether open or hidden) which systematically preferred the interests of the members of that class to the interests of others.

But there is a still deeper problem with any attempt to understand Marxian class interests simply as a function of the interests of the class's individual members. It is that so long as people are united only by shared interests based on a common situation, they do not yet properly constitute a 'class' in Marx's sense. Individuals who share a common situation and common interests are at most a class potentially, unconsciously or 'in itself'; they are not yet a class actually, consciously or 'for itself'. Of the French parcel peasants, Marx says:

> Insofar as millions of families live under economic conditions of existence which separate their mode of life, their interests and their culture (*Bildung*) from those of other classes and put them over against these others in hostile relation, they form a class. But insofar as there subsists only a local connection between the parcel peasants, so that the sameness of their interests begets no community of interests, no natural combination and no political organization among them, they do not form a class. They are thus incapable of making their class interests valid in their own name, whether through a parliament or convention.[23]

Marx's point here is not only that the peasants are unable to promote their shared interests politically, but also that since there is no 'combination or political organization' among the peasants, there is no 'community of interests' among them, and hence no genuine *class* interests in the fullest sense.

Classes, as Marx conceives of them, are not simply *given* along with a system of production relations. Classes 'arise' or 'develop' out of such a system when the shared interests of people in a common situation engender characteristic political movements and class ideologies promoting these interests. 'Only then do the interests they defend become class interests.'[24] 'Separate individuals form a class only insofar as they have to carry on a common struggle against another class.'[25] This 'carrying on of a common struggle' implies some sort of organized movement with goals over and above the individual interests which gave rise to the movement. These goals then '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'.[26] One of the functions of class ideologies, as Marx conceives of them, is to instill in its individual members a commitment to these 'general' interests:

> 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.[27]

Marx of course does not think that in order to be a class 'for itself' a social group must recognize its general interests and organization as those of a 'class'. Until the work of historians such as Saint-Simon, Thierry and Guizot, the notion of social classes did not even belong to people's conceptual vocabulary. And (as the above quotation makes clear) Marx believes that people usually fail to see class movements and ideologies for what they are even when the ideologies constitute (from a social point of view) the real explanation (or 'starting point') for their own actions. This means that the connection between a class and the organized movement which makes it a class may often not be self-evident. It may need to be established by a sophisticated theoretical analysis of the long-term historical interests of the group, and what the movement actually does in relation to these interests.

Marx has a great deal to say about the class affiliation of particular movements and ideologies, and especially about those which pretend to represent the proletariat without really doing so. But he has very little to say in general about the conditions under which a social movement can be said to represent a given class. He is quite explicit, however, that the movement need not be composed chiefly of people belonging to the class. Speaking of petty bourgeois democracy, Marx says:

> One must not make the narrow minded assumption that the petty bourgeoisie wills to promote in principle an egoistic class interest. Rather, it believes that the *particular* conditions of its emancipation are *universal* conditions within which alone modern society can be saved and the class struggle denied. Just as little must one assume that its democratic representatives are all shopkeepers or their enthusiasts. According to their education and individual situation they may be heavens apart. What makes them representatives of the petty bourgeoisie is that in their heads they have not gotten beyond the limits which the latter haven't gotten beyond in life, that they are driven theoretically to the same tasks and solutions that the latter are driven to practically by their material interests and social situation. This is in general the relation of the *political* and *literary* representatives to the class they represent.[28]

A movement counts as the representative of the class not because of who belongs to it, or because of its professed goals, but because in its

actual behavior it systematically promotes the historical interests of the class. On the other hand, the political movement has a life of its own, and pursues goals which cannot be directly identified with the interests or conscious aims of particular individuals. As Marx puts it:

> It is not a question of what this or that proletarian or even the whole proletariat *represents* to itself as its goal at a given time. It is a question of *what* the proletariat *is*, and what it is compelled to do historically by this *being*. Its goal and historical action are sensibly, irrevocably prescribed (*vorgezeichnet*) by its own life-situation.[29]

As we shall see in the next section, the basic goal or 'historic mission' of a given class is to establish and defend a certain set of production relations. It is goals of this sort which count for Marx as 'general class interests' and it is only by having an organization which promotes such interests that a class can be said to be actual or 'for itself'.

Marx thinks there is a tendency for certain social groups with a common situation and shared interests to develop into actual classes, with representative social movements and general interests. He also believes that class interests, and especially the general interests, tend to get themselves satisfied as far as historical conditions permit. He regards these tendencies as fundamentally important for the understanding of the historical dynamics of society. General class interests, however, can often oppose the individual interests of particular members of the class, and call for self-sacrifice on the part of individuals. The historical potency Marx ascribes to general class interests thus presupposes not only that people tend to organize to promote the individual interests they share, but also that they sometimes tend to sacrifice these interests for the sake of the organizations they create and for the sake of the ideal values which serve to unify and strengthen these organizations. This means that Marx's historical materialism is *incompatible* with any simple form of psychological egoism. Instead, it presupposes that people act from a combination of egoistic, altruistic and ideal motives whose nature depends largely on the kind of society in which they live and the kinds of social ties they have. Marx makes this quite explicit: '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 egoism and unselfishness] are sides of the personal development of individuals, equally generated by the empirical conditions of life.'[30]

Marx's recognition that people's actions are motivated by ideal and altruistic considerations as well as egoistic ones makes his theory in this respect much more a reflection of ordinary common sense than is often supposed. Where Marx departs from the humdrum is in his belief that the historically efficacious motives are those which serve to promote general class interests.

Marx's attitude toward individual self-sacrifice for the sake of general class interests is not a simple one. Unsurprisingly, he views it as noble and morally praiseworthy. Marx lauds the 'self-sacrificing heroism' of the Paris communards of 1871 and scorns the decadence of the French bourgeoisie of 1848, 'which every moment sacrificed its general class interests, that is, its political interests, to the narrowest and filthiest private interests'.[31] But Marx also regards the sacrifice of individual interests to general class interests as an aspect of alienation: 'As personal interests come to be independent as class interests, the personal conduct of the individual comes to be reified, alienated, thus becomes a power independent of him and without him, produced by intercourse.'[32] He does so, I think, because he views class ideologies generally as living on the illusion that they represent universal human interests.[33] This illusion is alienating in that it amounts to the rule over human beings of social relations which they have created but do not understand or control. Thus it stands in the way of free, fully self-conscious human activity.

There is no contradiction between Marx's admiration for self-sacrifice and his belief that the sacrifice of individual interests to general class interests involves ideological illusions. Once we realize that human history has unavoidably been characterized by systematic illusions of various kinds, there ceases to be any good grounds to think badly of any particular social phenomenon because it has been caught up in them. We need think no less of loyalty, devotion and self-sacrifice merely because they have often been practiced under the influence of class illusions. (If we do think less of them on this account, that is probably because we suppose they might have been put in the service of worthier goals than the promotion of class interests. But as Marx sees it, this supposition is just a symptom of our own subjection to some such illusion.) But Marx does not believe that illusions are necessary for self-sacrifice, since he does not fear that exposing them will undermine the revolutionary heroism of the proletariat.

Some people question the propriety of ascribing interests to anything but individual human beings, and in particular the propriety of

ascribing them to groups (unless this is an indirect or shorthand way of referring to the interests of individuals). I must say that I do not see the difficulty. The concept of something's interests, it seems to me, is closely connected to several other concepts: what benefits it, what is good for it, what makes it well off. Something can be said to have interests if these other things can be said of it. And these things can, I submit, be said of classes quite directly and without metaphor. They may be said of classes not only because they may be said of the individual members of classes, but even more because they may be said of the political movements which (on Marx's theory) make classes actual. Roughly speaking, what is good for such a movement is the strength to achieve its ends; something benefits a movement when it contributes to this strength or aids it in the pursuit of its goals. The goals of a class movement, as we have already seen, are not to be identified with what any particular members of the class, or even the class as a whole, visualizes as its goals at any given point in history. They are instead to be identified with the class's 'historical mission', the historical potentialities which the class movement over time brings to actuality. We can speak of general class interests, therefore, simply because there is in fact a powerful tendency for definite class movements to produce definite historical results. Perhaps the real objection to the notion of general interests is that rugged individualists think people ought not to lend their strength to movements with such autonomous ends. But for Marx it is a significant fact that history never heeds the advice of these individualists. In a world where they did, human history would make no sense – or at least it would not make the kind of sense that it actually does make.

4 Class struggles

> The history of all previous society is the history of class struggles. Free man and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild master and journeyman, in short, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to each other, and carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden and now open struggle.[34]

Why must society be torn by class antagonisms? In some passages, Marx and Engels appear to argue that class struggles are an inevitable feature of any society whose productive powers fall within a given range.[35] Very primitive societies are classless because their labor tends

to be undifferentiated and because all members of society must work full time just to procure their basic subsistence. Classes at this stage do not exist because there does not exist the productive surplus which makes possible the existence of a non-laboring (oppressing) class. Society will once again be classless when its productive powers have grown far enough that everyone can enjoy a substantial degree of free, self-actualizing activity. In between, the scarcity of the fruits of human progress requires that their enjoyment should be the privilege of certain classes, while others (the majority) must remain slaves to society's limited powers of production.

But these considerations do not adequately explain the historical prevalence ascribed by Marx's theory to class antagonisms. For there is still no reason why some set of productive forces in the long intermediate phase of history might not yield a set of production relations which determines people to share equally in the limited achievements of economic progress. Engels attempts to supplement this basic account with the idea that at an early stage the administrative needs of society required a distinct, non-laboring class to attend to them.[36] But this does not explain why the administrators must always oppress and subjugate the productive majority. It also fails to explain the fact that oppressing classes often do not consist wholly (or even chiefly) of people who in fact fulfill an administrative function relative to production.

G.A. Cohen claims to find in Marx an argument to the effect that class oppression is necessary to coerce laborers to raise production to the level where its collective, democratic control (socialism or communism) is possible.[37] I think he is correct as far as Marx's account of the history of modern Western Europe is concerned. But Marx does not hold in general that class oppression is always necessary for the acquisition of the productive forces of modern industrial society. He asserts (as we saw earlier) that Russia might possibly be able to industrialize under socialism.[38] Marx's own most general account of the historical necessity of classes explains this necessity in terms of the recognizably Hegelian postulate that dialectical progress can come about only through struggle and contradiction: 'Without antagonism, no progress: that is the law which civilization has followed until today. Until now the productive forces have developed on the basis of this dominance of class antagonism.'[39] But Marx does not say anything to justify either this metaphysical postulate or his application of it to history.

I think Marx's belief in the universality of class antagonism is

motivated chiefly by his conviction that class conflict is vital to explaining the dynamics of modern European society, and his hope (built on this alleged theoretical success) that it may provide a similar explanatory key in a wide range of other cases. 'The class struggle', says Marx, 'is the proximate driving power of history, and especially the class struggle between bourgeoisie and proletariat as the great lever of modern social revolution.'[40]

In Chapter 5, we saw that the materialist conception of history explains alterations in production relations through the tendency of productive powers to grow and the tendency of production relations to adjust to these powers. Class struggles are the chief mechanism through which these adjustments are effected. The social relations in a class society serve the interests of some people at the expense of others. The privileged seek ways of maintaining the relations which favor them, while the disadvantaged, who feel chafed, confined and oppressed by these relations, look for ways to modify or overthrow them.

The relation of oppressor and oppressed is, of course, not the only form class antagonisms can take. But Marx focuses on relations involving oppression because he regards them as especially important for understanding social dynamics. It is the nature of oppression that the life style of oppressors can be sustained only through a virtually total sacrifice of the interests of the oppressed. The existence of an oppressed class, especially when it becomes politically organized, compels the prevailing production relations constantly to prove their suitability as vehicles for the exercise and development of society's production. The advantage of the oppressing class, in Marx's view, derives ultimately from the fact that the production relations through which it dominates correspond to the existing stage of society's productive powers: The oppression of labor by capital, according to Marx, 'by no means arises from the political rule of the bourgeois class, but vice versa, the political rule of the bourgeois class arises from the modern relations of production'. As long as production relations correspond to these powers, class movements in behalf of the oppressed will not be victorious. Or if they are, their attempt to create a new set of production relations will be premature and their triumph will be short-lived. 'If the proletariat overthrows the political rule of the bourgeoisie, its victory will only be temporary, . . . as long as the material conditions have not yet been created which make necessary the abolition of the bourgeois mode of production.'[41] When society's productive powers have developed to the point where the existing

production relations have become 'fetters' on them, then the basic tendencies of history will be on the side of the revolutionary class, whose interests demand a set of relations suited to further productive development.

This picture is plain in the *Communist Manifesto*'s account of the rise of the modern bourgeoisie:

> The means of production and intercourse on whose foundation the bourgeoisie built itself was generated by feudal society. At a certain stage in the development of these means of production, . . . the feudal property relations no longer corresponded to the already developed productive powers. They restricted production instead of furthering it. They changed into so many fetters. They had to be burst asunder; they were burst asunder.
>
> In their place stepped free competition, with a social and political constitution adapted to it, with the economic and political dominion of the bourgeois class.[42]

It is even plainer in the *Manifesto*'s account of the anticipated fall of capitalism:

> A similar movement is going on before our eyes . . . Modern bourgeois society . . . is like the sorcerer who is no longer able to dominate the infernal powers he has conjured up. For decades the history of industry and trade has been a history of the revolt of modern productive powers against modern production relations . . .
>
> The weapons with which the bourgeoisie struck down feudalism have turned against the bourgeoisie itself.
>
> But not only has the bourgeoisie forged the weapons which will bring death to it. It has also generated the men who will wield those weapons – the modern workers; the *proletarians* . . .
>
> What [the bourgeoisie] produces above all is its own gravediggers. Its fall and the victory of the proletariat are equally inevitable.[43]