

On the Normative Elements of Marxism

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For much of the twentieth century Marxism had immense following, both among the intelligentsia and the common people. Large sections of oppressed and marginalized people saw in Marxism an ideology that stood for the establishment of a socialist society free of exploitation. The Marxist doctrine of historical materialism with claims of providing the ultimate key to the unravelling of the true nature of societies and their transformations through the ages mesmerized large numbers of intellectuals and academics. It was generally taken for granted that one could accept the truth of law of history as enunciated in historical materialism and at the same time subscribe to the idea of justice underlying the future exploitation-free socialist society without getting into any logical difficulties. The purpose of this paper is to have a close look at the relationship between historical materialism and the idea of justice underlying an exploitation-free society, two of the most integral elements of the Marxist doctrine. In particular, the paper discusses the following questions: (i) Does historical materialism have any normative implications? (ii) Is the existence of a non-relativistic normative criterion consistent with historical materialism? (iii) What are the main normative criteria implicit in the writings of Marx and his followers? (iv) Does the Marxist doctrine have a non-relativistic notion of justice? (v) Is there a way to make centrality of the value of justice as elimination of exploitation cohere with historical materialism?

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An earlier version of this paper was presented at the The Karl Marx Bicentenary Conference held at the Asian Development Research Institute (ADRI), Patna, on 16-20 June, 2018, as the Adam Smith Memorial Lecture.

I am indebted to Professor Subrata Guha who read an earlier version of this paper and pointed out some imprecise statements contained therein. I also wish to thank Professors Naresh Sharma, Anjan Mukherji, and Rajendra Kundu for comments and suggestions.

(Published in *Arthaniti: Journal of Economic Theory and Practice*, Volume 19(I), 2020, pp. 7-15.

DOI: 10.1177/0976747919842687)

1 Historical Materialism

One of the most fundamental constitutive elements of Marxism is the thesis of historical materialism. The thesis of historical materialism asserts that human history is explainable in terms of the development of the productive forces. In the social production human beings enter into definite relations, and these relations of production correspond to a definite stage of development of forces of production. The totality of these relations constitutes the real foundation on which the entire superstructure of the society consisting of legal, political, and other social institutions arises, and to which definite forms of social consciousness correspond. The mode of production of material life thus conditions the general character of the social, political and spiritual processes of life.² At a certain stage of their development, the material forces of production in society come into conflict with the existing relations of production within which they had been at work before. From being conducive to development of the forces of production, these relations turn into fetters. Then comes an epoch of social revolution that unfetters the forces of production, establishes new relations of production, and transforms the entire superstructure and forms of social consciousness. In other words, within each mode of production, to begin with there obtains a correspondence between the relations of production and the forces of production. As productive forces develop over time, the relationship between the forces of production and relations of production undergoes change and finally acquires a negative character, necessitating a revolution for the further unfettered development of productive forces.

An important implication of historical materialism is that notions of right and wrong,

²In the Epilogue to the second edition of *Capital*, Marx quotes a passage from the Russian reviewer of the original edition, who said: ‘Marx regards social movement as a process of natural history governed by laws that are not only independent of men’s will, consciousness and intentions, but, on the contrary, determine their will, consciousness and intentions.’ Marx declares that this is the correct interpretation of his purpose - namely, the discovery of the laws that govern social development. Marx, Karl, and Engels, Frederick (1975 etc.), *Collected Works*, Volume 35, International Publishers, New York, p. 18. Quoted in Berlin, Isaiah (2013), *Karl Marx*, fifth edition, Princeton University Press, Princeton, p. 131.

The sequence in which the forces of production determine everything else in the society is stated clearly in Marx’s 1846 letter to P.V. Annenkov. Marx writes: ‘What is society, whatever its form may be? The product of men’s reciprocal action. Are men free to choose this or that form of society? Not at all. Posit a certain state of development of the productive faculties of men and you will get such and such form of intercourse and consumption. Posit certain degrees of development of production, intercourse and consumption and you will get such and such form of social constitution, such and such organization of the family, of orders or classes, in a word, such and such civil society. Posit such and such civil society, and you will get such and such a political state, which is nothing but the official expression of civil society.’ Quoted in Wood, Allen (2004), *Karl Marx*, second edition, Routledge, New York, p. 66.

good and evil, depend on the economic structure (substructure) of the society; and these notions change with the changes in the substructure. There are no absolute normative standards applicable across epochs. Historical materialism per se merely propounds the law of progression of history and consequently cannot have any implications regarding the normative character of the progression. From the fact that the history is moving in a particular direction one cannot deduce that it is moving in a good direction. One would need some normative criterion to infer the goodness or otherwise of the movement of history. If the judgment regarding the goodness or otherwise of movement of history is to remain invariant with respect to epochs then the normative criterion for making the judgment must necessarily be non-relativistic. As historical materialism posits that all moral judgments are relative to the epoch in which they are held, having been determined by the substructure, the existence of the required non-relativistic normative criterion is inconsistent with the thesis of historical materialism, unless there is some watering-down of the thesis of historical materialism.

One way to dilute the thesis of historical materialism for the purpose of introducing non-relativistic normative criteria would be to assume that while most of the morality is epoch-specific, a part of it is not, being related to what makes people human. Another way would be to assume that some individuals, say world-historical persons, have the ability to transcend the epoch-specific morality.

2 Marxist Evaluation of the Historical Process

Although Marx does not have any explicit non-relativistic normative criterion, he does make normative judgments that are not epoch-specific, i.e., have general applicability. There is an implicit assumption in his analysis that through the historical process humanity is in a process of continual ascent. It is for this reason that, for Marx, whether something is good or bad, right or wrong, depends on whether it accords or fails to accord with the historical process. As the entire historical process in the ultimate analysis depends on the forces of production, it would do no violence to Marx's analysis if we extract from it a non-relativistic normative criterion, namely, that a higher stage of development of the forces of production is better than a lower stage of development of the forces of production. There does not seem to be any reason why this normative criterion should not be acceptable to Marxists and non-Marxists alike provided its applicability is limited by the 'ceteris paribus' (other things being equal) clause. But the addition of ceteris paribus clause will render it vacuous in the presence of historical materialism, as other things cannot be equal when there are differences with respect to development of the

forces of production. Therefore, the only way to retain the historical materialism with as little dilution as possible together with Marx's way of defining right and wrong in terms of accordance or failure to accord with the historical process is to state the normative criterion without any *ceteris paribus* qualification.

3 Notion of Justice in the Marxist Doctrine

There are sharp differences among scholars of Marxism regarding whether according to the Marxist doctrine what the worker gets as wage under the capitalist mode of production is just or unjust. One view is that under the Marxist doctrine a transaction is just if it corresponds to the prevailing mode of production; and unjust if it contradicts the prevailing mode. That is to say, transactions are just if they are facilitating and unjust if they are impeding with respect to the prevailing mode of production. In Engels' words: 'social justice or injustice is decided by the science which deals with the material facts of production and exchange, the science of political economy.'³

This particular point comes out very clearly in Marx's remarks on Adolph Wagner's interpretation of his views. Marx says: 'This obscurantist foists on me the view that 'surplus value', which is produced by the workers alone, remains with the capitalist entrepreneurs in a wrongful manner. But I say the direct opposite: namely, that at a certain point, the production of commodities necessarily becomes 'capitalistic' production of commodities, and that according to the law of value which rules that production, 'surplus value' is due to the capitalist and not to the workers. In my presentation, the earnings of capital are not in fact [as Wagner alleges] 'only a deduction or 'robbery' of the worker.' On the contrary, I present the capitalist as a necessary functionary of capitalist production, and show at length that he does not only 'deduct' or 'rob' but forces the production of surplus value, and thus helps create what is to be deducted; further I show in detail that even if in commodity exchange only equivalents are exchanged, the capitalist - as soon as he pays the worker the actual value of his labor power - earns surplus value with full right, i.e. the right corresponding to this mode of production.'

Elaborating this point Wood writes: 'If, for example, a historical analysis of the role of slavery in the ancient world shows that this institution corresponded to the prevailing mode of production, then in the Marxian view the holding of slaves by the ancients was a just practice, not only 'for them' but also 'for us', and indeed 'for' anyone. The judgment that ancient slavery was unjust, whether it is made by contemporaries of the institution

³Quoted in Wood, *op. cit.* p. 133.

or by moderns reading about it in history books, would simply be wrong.⁴ ⁵This view thus does not accord justice any non-relativistic status.

Cohen on the other hand argues that in the Marxist doctrine justice is a non-relativistic normative criterion. Criticising Wood he writes:

‘Now since, as Wood will agree, Marx did not think that by capitalist criteria the capitalist steals, and since he did think he steals, he must have meant that he steals in some appropriately non-relativist sense. And since to steal is, in general, wrongly to take what rightly belongs to another, to steal is to commit an injustice, and a system which is ‘based on theft’ is based on injustice.

Did Marx, nevertheless, lack the belief that capitalism was unjust, because he failed to notice that robbery constitutes an injustice? I think the relationship between robbery and injustice is so close that anyone who thinks capitalism is robbery must be treated as someone who thinks capitalism is unjust, even if he does not realize that he thinks it is.

And perhaps Marx did not always realize that he thought capitalism was unjust. For there exist texts, ably exploited by Wood, which suggest that, at least when writing them, Marx thought all non-relativist notions of justice and injustice were moonshine. If the texts really show that he thought so, then I would conclude that, at least sometimes, *Marx mistakenly thought that Marx did not believe that capitalism was unjust*, because he was confused about justice.’⁶

4 Multiplicity of Values: The Logical Possibilities

If there is a single normative criterion by which the social states are to be judged then the matters are straightforward. If two states differ with respect to the normative criterion then the state that is superior of the two with respect to the normative criterion must be judged to be better; and if two states do not differ with respect to the normative criterion then the two of them must be judged to be equally good. Matters become more complicated when there are multiple criteria. To keep matters simple we discuss the case of only two independent criteria. There are two possibilities: (i) one of the two criteria dominates over the other one. (ii) Neither dominates over the other. If one criterion dominates over the other then any two states that differ with respect to the dominant criterion must be judged solely in terms of the dominant criterion. The other criterion

⁴Wood, op. cit. p. 133.

⁵It should be noted that Wood’s elaboration implies the existence in the Marxist doctrine of the non-relativistic normative criterion extracted in the previous Section.

⁶Cohen, G.A. (1983). ‘Review of Allen Wood’s Karl Marx’, *Mind*, 92: 440-5.

will come into play only when the two states are identical with respect to the dominant criterion. In case neither of the two criteria dominates over the other, then it must be the case that in some cases one criterion would prevail over the other and in some other cases it would be the other way around.

5 Productive Power vs. Justice

We have identified, consistent with the writings of Marx and his followers, two possible non-relativistic normative criteria, namely, that development of productive forces is good; and elimination of exploitation is good.

Under primitive communism there is no exploitation but productive forces are weak; under capitalism there is much exploitation but forces of production are strong. The Marxist doctrine regards capitalism to be a better stage than that of primitive communism. This establishes that the normative criterion of justice does not dominate over the normative criterion that assesses the goodness on the basis of the development of the forces of production. Among all epochs of history, past and future, there is none that is considered better than some epoch that comes later. Thus it appears to be the case that in the Marxist doctrine the normative criterion that assesses the goodness of a social state on the basis of development of the productive forces dominates over the normative criterion of justice. One might be tempted to argue that although historically there has been no epoch and there will never be one that would be considered better than some epoch appearing later in time, the Marxist doctrine does not rule out such a theoretical possibility. It is not clear how such an argument would be possible given Marx and Engels' positive attitude towards rapacious exploitation of non-European societies by advanced western European nations. Kolakowski has succinctly summed up their views and reasons behind them: 'Marx and Engels believed in the rights of a higher civilization over a lower one. The French colonization of Algeria and the U.S. victory over Mexico seemed to them progressive events, and in general they supported the great 'historical' nations against backward peoples or those which for any reason had no chance of independent historical development. (Thus Engels expected Austria-Hungary to swallow up the small Balkan countries; Poland, as a historical nation, should, he thought, be restored and include in its dominion the less developed peoples to the east - Lithuanians, White Russians, and Ukrainians.)'⁷ Although Marx noted that England's actions in India were actuated by the lowest of motives, he was supportive of what the British were doing in India.⁸

⁷Kolakowski, Leszek, (1978), *Main Currents in Marxism*, Volume 1, Oxford University Press, Oxford, p. 348.

⁸In causing social revolution in India, England was, it is true, guided by the lowest motives, and conducted it dully and woodenly. But that is not the point. The question is whether humanity can fulfil

Thus it is clear that regardless of whether one accepts the existence in the Marxist doctrine of a non-relativistic normative criterion of justice or not makes no difference. Even if the existence of a non-relativistic normative criterion of justice is accepted, in view of the dominance of the criterion of assessing goodness in terms of development of the forces of production it would have no bite as its subsidiary role in assessing social states is ruled out by the thesis of historical materialism.

As both the belief in historical materialism and the commitment to the normative criterion of regarding exploitation as bad are central to the Marxist doctrine, an interpretation of the doctrine is required so that both these elements can cohere with each other without any logical difficulty. Rationalization by postulating the existence of non-relativistic normative criteria along the lines discussed above does not succeed. In the next section we examine another possible way of maintaining centrality of both historical materialism and the value underlying condemnation of exploitation.

6 Socialism as End of History

Historical materialism gives us the law of history, tells us how humanity is inexorably moving towards the socialist utopia. Socialism is not possible without humanity going through the various stages that all involve exploitation. Moral judgments regarding these stages are futile as these stages will succeed one another according to the laws of history with iron necessity. As elimination of all exploitation is highly desirable the closer the society is to reaching the socialist stage, better it is for it.

A strict interpretation of the laws of history where everything happens independently of human will, will render all political action to be historically conditioned. Therefore some dilution of the inexorable laws of history is required if political action is to have any independent role in bringing about change. One way to do it is to assert that although there is no escape from the various stages that the society has to go through before it can attain the exploitation-free stage, through political action it might be possible to shorten the time needed to reach the socialist state. But such a dilution of the iron laws of history would immediately raise difficult ethical choice problems. Suppose the choice is between the following two alternative courses of action: Under Action A time required to reach the socialist goal would be less compared to Action B, but human suffering involved in

its purpose without a complete social revolution in Asia. If not, then England, in spite of all her crimes, was the unconscious instrument of history in bringing about this revolution. *Collected Works*, op. cit., Volume 12, p. 132.

undertaking Action A would be more compared to that involved in undertaking Action B. Comparing the two actions, undertaking of Action A rather than Action B has the advantage of reduction of exploitation on account of socialism being attained in less time but the disadvantage of greater human suffering involved in undertaking the action. If the centrality of the Marxist doctrine lies in the material welfare of human beings and their just treatment then the choice of action must depend on the net effect that it would have with respect to these considerations. In the Marxist doctrine there is nothing that indicates that any such calculations are ever undertaken in deciding upon the appropriate action. Thus, although a rationalization along the lines that Marxism stands for elimination of all exploitation; the laws of history are inexorable in the sense that various stages of history, all involving exploitation, have to be gone through before socialism gets established; and the only thing that is possible through concerted human action is that time required to reach the socialist stage could be shortened; could have rationalized both the centrality of historical materialism in a slightly diluted form and justice as absence of exploitation. It, however, flounders because of the failure of the doctrine to take into account human suffering in the choice of actions.

7 Socialist Values

With the advent of socialism, the prehistory of humanity comes to a close and the proper history begins. Human beings, by nature, are social beings; and under socialism this essential feature of humanity is at last realized. Exploitation of human beings by human beings also comes to an end. These two features of the socialist society are emphasized in the Marxist doctrine.

Surprisingly an extremely important aspect of the socialist state, to be discussed in what follows, never finds any mention. Although with the advent of socialism perennially occurring conflicts between the forces of production and relations of production come to an end, the development of the forces of production continues unabated. Indeed, as the relations of production that exist under socialism never impede development of productive powers, development of the forces of production will never again be fettered. It also follows that increase in human beings' desire for material goods will keep pace with the development of the forces of production.⁹ If for some reason the increase in desire for material goods was less than the increase in the potential availability of material goods on account of development of forces of production, this itself can have an impeding effect

⁹In view of the fact that the maximum leisure that can be enjoyed has a natural ceiling, what has been stated must eventually hold.

on the further development of forces of production, which we know is not possible under socialism. Thus it is not only the socialization of human beings and elimination of exploitation that happen under socialism; it is also the case that there is continual increase in desires and their fulfilment.

Marx noted that one positive feature of capitalism was that under it there was tremendous increase in human desires for material goods in contrast with pre-capitalist societies in which people felt relatively content if a small number of basic desires were fulfilled. The capitalist system, however, could not satisfy these desires for the greater part of humanity. Socialism is as good as capitalism with respect to its role in increasing desires and better than capitalism with respect to satisfying these desires.

Why this hedonistic value underlying the socialist utopia has never been seriously discussed is quite puzzling. The importance of this hedonistic value lies in its contradiction with the environmental values.

8 Concluding Remarks

Both historical materialism and the idea of justice as absence of exploitation are central to the Marxist doctrine. An interpretation of the Marxist doctrine in which these two central elements can cohere with each other is clearly of great importance. The analysis of this paper shows that construction of such an interpretation poses almost intractable difficulties. Because neither of these two central elements can be abandoned without dealing a grievous blow to the doctrine itself, the interesting question is whether there exists a way of diluting historical materialism, which is not tantamount to abandoning it altogether, which can make the idea of justice have some real bite.