LIBERTARIAN COMMUNISM

Marx, Engels and the Political Economy of Freedom

Ernesto Screpanti

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Also by Ernesto Screpanti

THE FUNDAMENTAL INSTITUTIONS OF CAPITALISM

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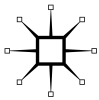

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We are not among those communists who are out to destroy personal liberty, who wish to turn the world into one huge barrack or into a gigantic workhouse. There certainly are some communists who, with an easy conscience, refuse to countenance personal liberty and would like to shuffle it out of the world because they consider that it is a hindrance to complete harmony. But we have no desire to exchange freedom for equality. We are convinced . . . that in no social order will personal freedom be so assured as in a society based upon communal ownership.

(*Communist Journal*, 1847, 292)

Hence personal freedom becomes possible only within the community.

(Marx and Engels, 1845–46, 5, 78).

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Contents

Introduction

The breakdown of the 'communist' regimes in Eastern Europe, far from knocking down the world communist movement, has instead liberated it. A series of contemporary experiences of struggles by the people, from Chiapas in Mexico to Argentina, from Nepal to Darfur, not to mention the wider no-global movement, are showing it is no longer true that the spectre of communism is haunting Europe. In fact nowadays it is haunting not just Europe, but the entire world.

Neither should one believe that Marxism is in crisis, unless one is afflicted by the breakdown of the monolithic 'certainties' of a Third International utopian Marxism which finally arrived at working only as an ideology of State capitalism. In reality such a kind of 'Marxism' had already been disparaged by many theoretical elaborations developed in relation to the liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Rather, we are today observing a proliferation of Marxisms, and especially a change in the militants' attitudes towards political divergences. The Marxists of today tend to ascribe a great value to the richness and the diversity of interpretations and philosophical orientations. And this is by no means a cause of crisis.

But the most interesting fact, in the communist movement landscape and the Marxist thought galaxy, is a basic characteristic of theoretical elaborations and political positions which is common to a great part of militants and activists: the libertarian vocation. And the need of rediscovering the theoretical foundations for a politics of liberation is more and more widespread.

The present book is intended to meet that need; obviously not with the pretension to set out a complete and general theory of liberation, but certainly in the attempt at bringing to light the libertarian components of Marx's and Engels' thought. Personally I consider it as a first contribution to the development of a wider scientific elaboration which can only come forward as a process of collective research.

Looking back, it seems that good old utopian socialism has taken a striking revenge over scientific socialism. In the form of the theory of justice it is now taught in the best universities, and has even achieved the honour of a Nobel prize. One might be tempted to rejoice in reflecting on this product of historical nemesis, given the poor results of the Third International applications of Marxism. And it would be cold comfort for

anyone observing that the social-democratic applications of some forms of utopian socialism have not performed any better, at least with regard to the overcoming of capitalism.

However it may be argued that what failed in the various twentieth-century attempts to build real 'socialism' is precisely a certain kind of *utopian Marxism*, namely, the humanist philosophy that dominated the international workers' movement starting with the Second International. That same philosophy is at the core of most theories of justice and utopian socialism doctrines of the last two centuries.

A theory of justice, or a utopian socialism, is a philosophy of the good society defined on the ground of a normative criterion of goods distribution. The distributive criterion has a normative character in that it applies to an ideal model of society that serves as a prescriptive base for improving the real one. The strength of the normative message necessarily depends on an ethical principle that lies at the very basis of the model of society. But ethical principles must have an absolute value; they cannot be relative to social subjectivities. Otherwise they lose all capacity to justify the model of good society in universalistic terms. *And precisely this is their utopian character*.

The main weakness of the theories of justice stems from these requisites of absoluteness and universality of ethical principles. Because of them, the theories of justice contradict the most fundamental axiom of modernity, the *libertarian principle*, also known as the *postulate of ethical individualism*: each individual is free to think autonomously about what is to be considered the public good. Not only are State laity and the independence of politics from religion founded on this principle, but also the sole reasonable justification for democracy. Only if the diverse ethical opinions of citizens are considered equally legitimate, so that one head counts the same as another and is entitled to one vote, is it admissible for public choices to be made through majority rule. Any theory of justice, insofar as founded on an absolute ethic, clashes with the libertarian principle and encounters serious difficulties in justifying democracy as a method of public choice. An ideal society which is considered good because it is just will tend to generate a doctrine of the ethical State. But who can guarantee that the State ethic is shared by all citizens or even only a majority of them?

Starting with the Enlightenment, many philosophers believed the problem could be solved by assuming that ethical principles are somewhat rational and therefore accessible to man with the correct use of reason, that they can even be demonstrated *more geometrico*. It was supposed, for instance, that they are inscribed in the 'law of nature', in a 'natural human

essence', in an innate 'moral sense', in a 'categorical imperative' or simply in 'Reason'. What really counts is that man can acquire knowledge of ethical principles by using reason or even through 'moral intuition'. This is the sense of the cognitive approach to moral philosophy.

Many of the contemporary theories of justice, both utilitarian and Kantian, implicitly or explicitly adopt a cognitive approach to justify the universal foundations of the invoked principles of justice. Some of them, for instance, make a clear distinction between *personal* and *ethical* preferences. The former are those that express the actual motivations of real individuals, are influenced by social positions and class interests and vary from individual to individual. The latter are formulated with *correct reasoning* by people located in a heavenly 'original state' or placed behind a 'veil of ignorance' as to their social positions. The reasoning whereby people would define ethical preferences is correct because it is not affected by the need to protect the vested interests established in the real world. Then, it is proved that the principle of justice inscribed in ethical preferences is of an egalitarian type: by using the enlightened reason enjoyed in the 'original state', nobody would want to run the risk of finding himself in the shoes of the most wretched of men; everybody would like to live in a world where all people are in some way equal.

The problem is that there is no guarantee that citizens in the real world vote on the basis of a common ethical ordering, i.e. that they are inspired by their 'rational' *ethical* preferences. In fact, given the usual assumption of rational self-interested behaviour, it is highly probable that citizens vote on the grounds of their heterogeneous *personal* preferences. Moreover, if it is acknowledged that these preferences are not fully exogenous, but may be influenced by cultural and political factors, it should be recognized that the personal preferences of many individuals may be manipulated by power-endowed agents. Thus what guarantees that democracy will give rise to an egalitarian ethical State?

This is why many reformers or revolutionaries are inclined to justify attribution of power to groups of enlightened philosophers, let's say, a vanguard of professional politicians or intellectuals who, by studying the history of Western philosophy, have acquired a proletarian and universal class consciousness before and better than the proletariat itself. Since the 'universal class' achieves man's self-consciousness as a moral being, its class consciousness must embody a universal principle of justice. Social equality ensues from the fact that self-consciousness of human essence is achieved by any individual through recognition of the other as identical to himself. He who holds this kind of consciousness has a moral duty to educate the members of the universal class who are still immature, and even the duty

to impose on them a behaviour appropriate to their being. Every model of an ideal society founded on a theory of justice lays itself open to justification of political philosophies that are potentially anti-democratic and anti-libertarian.

Now, what do Marx and Engels have to do with all this? Well, they have a lot to do with it! The profound sense of their criticisms of Hegel's philosophy of State and utopian socialism must be grasped in their rejection of any ethical and normative approach to revolution. This is quite explicit, for instance, in their attacks on Proudhon, a revolutionary who wanted to reform society in the name of *Justice*. The materialist conception of history brings Marx and Engels to deny the possibility of rationally defining an absolute ethic on which to found a principle of justice. They are clearly not cognitivist in ethical matters. That is why it might be useful to study them today. We might glean some ideas on the way the politics of liberation can go out of the dead end in which it was driven by Kant, Hegel, Bentham and their epigones of nowadays.

But – one might ask – is it not true that the communism of Marx and Engels is a model of the good society? In point of fact the distributive criterion to give 'to each according to his needs' seems to presuppose an egalitarian theory of justice if it is interpreted as a normative principle. Moreover, the ethical foundations of that theory can be traced to a sort of young-Hegelian philosophy that identifies man's universality in his species-being consciousness, that is, in his awareness of belonging in an *essential* way to the human species. Now, this is precisely the early Marx's philosophy. But it is precisely the overcoming of this philosophy that paves the way for the emergence of the mature Marx's and Engels' scientific approach.

It might be rebated that a widespread contemporary interpretation of the Marxist theory of communism is presented in terms of a conception of the good society intended as a just setting, but avoids tracing ethical foundations in Kant's and Hegel's philosophies. This interpretation is proposed, especially in so-called analytical Marxism, by economists of vaguely liberal-socialist orientation, who present it as a radical version of a distributive egalitarianism derived from utilitarian tradition. Some students believe a utilitarian ethic is less absolutist than a Kantian or Hegelian one. This is an ungrounded belief, as proven by the rigorously cognitive approach through which John Harsany, perhaps the most refined utilitarian theoretician of justice, tries to account for the formation of egalitarian *ethical preferences*.

At any rate, the utilitarian interpretations of Marx's and Engels' theory of communism also come up against other analytical difficulties, besides those associated with negation of the libertarian principle. I will try to

prove that these interpretations are unacceptable above all because they are contradictory.

The adoption of a utilitarian ethic as an interpretive base for Marx's distributive criterion – 'from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs' – clashes with the observation that this criterion could lead to an inefficient allocation of resources, as explicitly recognized by Engels. Thus one has to admit that such a kind of communism fails to live up to its promises: because of inefficiency it might not succeed in satisfying some needs which could well be satisfied with available resources. A doctrine of allocation which, precisely because it aims to satisfy all needs, may prevent fulfilment of some of them, is basically inconsistent. In addition, one must consider the critique which might be raised from an evolutionary point of view. A system that systematically produces inefficiency may not be evolutionally robust and stable. It might succumb to a political shock that leads to an improvement in efficiency, or to a diffusion of institutions that eliminate some of the causes of inefficiency. In other words, communism intended as an egalitarian and just allocation of welfare cannot be thought of as a rational and realistic objective of social evolution.

Is there any hope of finding a way out of this difficulty by enriching utilitarianism with a solidarity ethic? Undoubtedly the hypothesis that human beings are moved by altruistic sentiments rather than by personal interests would solve many analytical difficulties, since it would remove the incentive problem: if the demand for goods is socially responsible and supply takes the form of a gift, why should there be any difficulties over distribution and allocation? Yet, although well-founded in the humanist philosophy of the young Marx, this way out is unacceptable from a Marxist point of view, because it is inconsistent with the social philosophy developed in the materialist conception of history. In particular it recalls a pessimistic metaphysics of human nature, i.e. a kind of philosophical anthropology which, by positing the real man as an essentially egoistic being, requires postulation of the birth of a New Man, a subject endowed with altruistic sentiments and Promethean abilities, as a necessary condition for the transition to communism.

Another way out, which has also been explored by Marx and Engels, appeals to the Saint-Simonian utopia of omnipotent technical progress. If productive forces develop without limits, sooner or later the kingdom of scarcity will give way to the land of Cockaigne. At that point there will no longer be any sense in speaking of allocative inefficiency. If we set robots to clean the toilets and allow human beings to dedicate themselves to creative and gratifying activities, while the growth of productivity at last makes it possible to satisfy every human need, what is the point of limiting the

demand for goods and stimulating the supply of abilities through the incentive principle? But then one might ask: what is the point of struggling for communism if the truly important revolutionary activity is that undertaken by engineers in the R&D departments of capitalist multinationals? At any rate, this 'solution' is unacceptable for a Marxist particularly because it contradicts Marx's view that human needs are not natural data, but are socially determined and tend to develop with the capacity to satisfy them. If technical progress, besides continually creating new products, also creates the needs for them, the land of Cockaigne will never be reached. However there is no doubt that if one is prepared to combine Saint-Simonian technological optimism with Franciscan anthropological pessimism (present man is marked with original sin, New Man redeems himself by restricting his needs to the essential), then one could prove the feasibility of a just society in which a meagre social welfare is distributed in an egalitarian way. But I doubt this is the idea of communism that Marx and Engels have in mind.

Finally there is a fundamental methodological reason that makes a concept of communism unacceptable when defined simply by the principle of distribution according to needs. In Marx's approach a mode of production is determined by the kind of social relations of production and not by that of the forms of distribution. Income or welfare distribution is only conceived as a consequence of production conditions. Marx criticizes John Stuart Mill precisely for his opinion that it is possible to change income distribution in a system without changing production relations. One can therefore see the absurdity of attributing him a purely distributive vision of communism.

So, Marx's and Engels' theory of communism cannot be interpreted as a doctrine of the good society based on an egalitarian philosophy of justice. Then, once I have clarified what communism is not, I will try to reconstruct what, *in my opinion*, is the most interesting *part* of the theory of proletarian revolution developed by Marx and Engels: the doctrine of a liberation process. The first italicized words, in the above sentence, should not be necessary in a hermeneutic era like the present. I have used them merely to clarify that I make no claim to establishing what Marx really said. In fact, it is the latter italicized word that makes the former necessary. Marx certainly says what I make him say, but he also says other things he should not have said. Thus the reader is warned: I do not ask him just to read my essay; I also ask him to make a choice. After all, there is more than one Marx; and each of us takes the one he deserves.

I will try to furnish the philological coordinates of this choice by showing that on the theme of communism there are three different and

irreconcilable personalities in Marx: besides the humanist philosopher who attempts to endow the unleashed Prometheus with good communitarian sentiments, and besides the philosopher of history who expects him to be liberated by the deterministic laws of technical progress, there is the philosopher of praxis. This is the theoretician of communism as 'the real movement that abolishes the present state of things'. Thus I feel compelled to say that, if I have no intention of establishing what Marx really said, it is only in the sense that I want to let him say what he says as a Marxist, placing him in contradiction with the humanist and economicist philosopher. In fact the theory of communism as liberation was entirely developed by the mature Marx within the materialist conception of history and in strict relation to the political praxis of the liberation movements of his times. The dialectic philosophy of Man and the Saint-Simonian philosophy of history, on the contrary, are residues of an early formation which was still innocent of the materialist conception of history and virgin of political experience. I realize that this rereading may encounter some resistance. But I feel encouraged by the finding of Althusser, according to whom the Second and Third International Marxism developed precisely the humanist and economicist components of Marx's thought, that is the least Marxist – an opinion that enables me to account for the basic reasons for that possible resistance.

Now, to avoid any misunderstanding, two issues should be clarified. The first attains to the problem of economic efficiency. I do not believe that communism is inefficient. I take a more subtle view: if one interprets the theory of communism as a welfarist doctrine of justice, then the criterion of distribution according to needs must be intended as a *normative* and general principle. Consequently one cannot avoid the conclusion that an economic system regulated by that criterion is inefficient because it violates the incentive principle. However, if the communist theory is intended as the doctrine of a liberation process, then the distribution criterion takes on a *descriptive* rather than a normative value, and loses generality; moreover the very problem of efficiency assumes secondary importance over that of the liberation of the oppressed; finally, and most important, one might reach the conclusion that the incentive principle becomes irrelevant vis-à-vis another factor of efficiency. If workers are freely able to reorganize the productive process, they will presumably tend to adopt labour practices that allow them to solve efficiency problems, especially those caused by information asymmetries, better than a capitalist system would do. In particular the incentive problem could be solved by resorting to a personal need for self-realization and recognition rather than by maximization of profits.

The second issue to be clarified concerns the problem of inequality. The view that the theory of communism should not be intended as a doctrine of justice does not imply any anti-egalitarian prejudice. I do not argue that a communist society is not a society of equals. I only hold that the social drive to communism comes from the liberation movements of the oppressed classes and that the main political motive behind those movements is emancipation. But the conquest of freedom by the oppressed may also involve an increase in economic and social equality, possibly the elimination of all forms of inequality. In fact, since the oppressed are a majority group in any society based on exploitation, their liberation may be achieved through a democratic redistribution of freedom and its political and economic conditions. In this light, the principle of equality must be interpreted in the same way as the principle of distribution according to needs: it does not hold true as a normative principle, given that communism is not postulated as a just society; it should rather be intended as a descriptive assertion.

Finally a few comments about two particularly complex philological problems: that of the homogeneity of Marx's and Engels' positions and that of their relationship with Hegel. The theory of communism was developed in strict collaboration between the two revolutionaries, but was based on non-identical philosophical positions. How can it be reread without impairing the merits of either? The simplest way would seem to be that of complying with a scholastic tradition that avoids making any distinction by virtue of the idea that something like a standard Marx–Engels theory exists. An equally simple road would be one that points exclusively to Marx, leaving Engels merely to marginal comments. The former road is practicable because the two of them wrote several important works together and also because various works written personally by each of them tended reciprocally to influence the other. Yet it exposes us to the risk of concealing the differences in approach which sometimes exist and somehow divide the two thinkers. The latter is seemingly more reliable, but could induce us to attribute to Marx various theses which were mainly developed by Engels, who moreover would suffer a wrong if it were not acknowledged that he made a decisive contribution precisely to the elaboration of the theory of communism as a liberation process.

Fortunately the problem, which seemed unsolvable at the outset of this research, gradually worked itself out during the course of the study. In fact, despite the differences in philosophical approach, Marx's and Engels' positions on the theory of communism rather tend to converge. This convergence does not imply a perfect coincidence, obviously. To start with, Marx's theorization of freedom outshines Engels' both in extension and

in depth. Then there are themes, like that of the workers' self-management, which are particularly emphasized by Marx but somewhat alien to Engels' thought. Yet a strong commonality of general views does exist. I believe this occurred because the theory developed during their maturity was produced in close contact with the revolutionary environments in which they moved and was built up under the impulse and urgency of problems of an eminently political nature rather than on the basis of philosophical presuppositions. Thus I could solve the problem by focusing on the commonality of political views and sidelining any difference in philosophical orientation – a less approximate method than one might think at first sight, given that the theory of communism is essentially a political doctrine.

Now let's come to Hegel. This is a particularly disquieting ghost, since his complex and articulate notion of freedom lends itself to be used as a reading grid for other theories, over which the shadow of his ill repute is easily cast. Some sort of hegelization can be easily attempted with Marx and Engels, since even in the works of their mature years they frequently enjoy using rhetoric expedients and stylistic habits that echo Hegelian dialectics, and since in their early works, before they had developed their original materialist theory of liberation, they talk of freedom in more properly Hegelian terms, but especially since Marx remains rigorously Hegelian at least in the self-understanding of his own method, which he represents in terms of abstract–concrete dialectics.

It is well known that Hegel's conception of freedom is as rich as it is ambiguous. It accounts for the history of humankind as a history of the development of liberation, whilst politics and law are conceived as disciplines dealing with the construction and guarantee of freedom. It was in fact quite a progressive theory for the times, one that endeavoured to take advantage of the best achievements of Enlightenment. Nevertheless Hegel can not avoid seeing the light of Reason at work in what he believes to be the most advanced political reality of his times, to the point that he has no qualms in theorizing private property as an unavoidable foundation of economic freedom, and even Prussian monarchy as a form of guarantee of civil liberties.

It is easy to see that the Marx and Engels who talk of freedom inherited several problems from their most loved and hated philosopher. It is not true that they just 'coquetted with the modes of expression peculiar to him' (Marx, 1867–94, I, 35, 19). Indeed they assimilated from him not only stylistic vices and clichés, but also a much deeper endowment: philosophical language, and consequently many conceptual schemes. They go on using that language also when they write about economics and politics.

And even when they try to criticize Hegel they are compelled to do so by remaining within his universe of discourse. This resulted in serious incongruence and ambiguity. So much so that many students saw in Marx's and Engels' theory of freedom the philosophical foundation of Soviet totalitarianism almost in the same way as they themselves had seen the philosophical justification of Prussian monarchy in Hegel's.

This problem has to be worked out to get a grasp of the real meaning of the theory of communism. I will try to do it in two ways. First of all, I will compare Marx's and Engels' positions with Hegel's whenever I feel it necessary to account for some ambiguity. By interpreting the theory of the two revolutionaries as a critical surmounting of that of the professor, I will seek to give them their due, even when they themselves are not fully aware of it; I will do this by bringing to light the substantial differences that are sometimes overshadowed by the similarity in language with Hegel.

Secondly, I will endeavour to reformulate the theory by ignoring Hegel altogether; which I will do in the last two chapters. There, by using an analytical apparatus developed in contemporary science, I shall present my interpretation of the Marxist theory of freedom in a rigorous way, showing that it is wide-ranging and profound. I do not believe that this translation into modern English implies betrayal. Rather I am convinced that it will serve to restore to liberation movements a theoretical instrument of self-understanding which essentially coincides with that developed by Marx and Engels. In this way I intend to make a contribution to help Marxists regain what was theirs from the very beginning but was stolen from them by the utopian Marxists of the twentieth century.

For it is time for the communists to decide to reconquer freedom. First of all in the sense of realizing that communism is a theory of liberation. And if it is true that to conceive a libertarian declination of communism is a heretic venture against Marxist tradition, then one must have the courage to face the consequences of this transgression. If nothing else, one must have the intellectual honesty to restore to Marx and Engels what is theirs.

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Part I
A Theory of Welfare?

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1
Communitarian Communism

Marx and Engels as moralists

A first question to raise, in evaluating Marx's and Engels' theses on communism, is whether they are founded on a theory of justice. Endless debates have taken place on this subject, which however I do not intend to review here.[1] In my opinion those who give a positive answer to the question are just as right as those who give a negative answer, although the latter more so than the former.

A theory of justice must be a doctrine of the distribution of economic resources which invokes universal moral principles, e.g. principles that hold: 1) for all people independently of the particular interests of this or that sector of society; 2) for all human societies independently of the historical conditions in which they take place. If the moral principles are aimed at pursuing individual welfare, we have a welfarist theory of justice. Given the materialism of Marx and Engels, this is the theory most frequently attributed to them.

In support of an interpretation of Marx and Engels as moralists, one must recall their analysis of exploitation as a fact that recurs in all economic forms known in history and particularly in the capitalist mode of production. There is exploitation when a subject appropriates the product of labour of another subject without fair compensation. It is difficult to resist the temptation to consider exploitation as a form of injustice. In the capitalist mode of production exploitation is mainly perpetrated through the institutions that regulate the employment contract and that entail extraction of surplus value in the production processes which use wage labour. Often, not content with developing a purely scientific analysis of exploitation, Marx and Engels go on to associate some rather strong moral judgements with the observations and conclusions of that analysis.

They argue, for instance, that exploitation is 'robbery', 'embezzlement', 'looting', 'spoils', 'fraud', 'theft', that 'the worker is robbed of the objects most necessary not only for his life but for his work' (Marx, 1844b, 3, 272) and that 'the theft of alien labour time . . . is the basis of present wealth' (Marx, 1857–58, 29, 91). And a strong impression of moral indignation emerges from reading even many of their most analytical pages, so much so that one has difficulty in separating scientific criticism of political economy from moralist criticism of capitalism.

Equally harsh are the value judgements expressed by Marx and Engels when they study political oppression. There is oppression when a subject determines or influences or conditions the behaviour of another subject. Human oppression emerges not only in the exercise of political functions of State apparatuses, but in all situations in which a social actor exercises power over another individual, for instance, in a capitalist factory, in which the workers are subjected to 'capital despotism'. It is well known that already in their early works Marx and Engels see power, especially that exerted by a State apparatus, as the consequence of a particular form of alienation in which human beings become slaves of the product of their activity. In the subjugation to power people lose not only their autonomy but also their identity as human beings.

To grasp the core of the moralist premises of Marx's philosophical anthropology one must go back to his early writings in economics, and particularly to his theory of alienation. In *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* Marx (1844b) does not restrict himself to analysing the alienating effects of wage labour, but develops this kind of investigation by eliciting strong moral judgements, as can be seen in the words I have italicized in the following passages:

> The *devaluation* of the world of men is in direct proportion to the increasing value of the world of things . . . So much does objectification appear as loss of the object that the worker is *robbed* of the objects most necessary not only for his life but for his work (272). The worker becomes a *servant* of his object . . . the more values he creates, the more *valueless*, the more *unworthy* he becomes; the better formed his product, the more *deformed* becomes the worker; the more civilised his object, the more *barbarous* becomes the worker (273). It is true that labour . . . produces beauty – but for the worker, *deformity*. . . . It produces intelligence – but for the worker, *stupidity*, *cretinism* . . . In his work, therefore, [the worker] does not affirm himself but *denies himself*, does not feel content but *unhappy*, does not develop freely his physical and mental energy but *mortifies his body and ruins his mind*

> . . . External labour, labour in which man alienates himself, is a labour of *self-sacrifice*, of *mortification* (274). What is animal becomes human and *what is human becomes animal* (275).

I will later show that the critique of alienation is based on a universal notion of human nature. Certainly it could be observed that Marx's and Engels' moralism is expressed only in negative terms, that is, in a *critique* of capitalism and the values of bourgeois society; or that the universal principle with which Marx defines human nature in *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* is the product of an early work written under the influence of a certain Hegelian idealism. Yet that primitive notion of human nature seems to be the basis of a peculiar conception of communism put forward in later years, for instance in *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, a conception of communism as good society, as a social form that restores man to his proper universal essence, that liberates the 'integral man' and distributes goods on the grounds of a principle of justice.

Egalitarian justice

In a letter to Bebel of 1875, in which he faces the same kind of problems tackled by Marx in *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, Engels (1875, 24, 71) says that

> the concept of a socialist society as a realm of equality is a one-sided French concept deriving from the old 'liberty, equality, fraternity', a concept which was justified in that, in its own time and place, it signified a *phase of development*, but which, like all the one-sided ideas of earlier socialist schools, ought now to be superseded.

Various interpreters argued that Marx would disagree on this, for *Critique of the Gotha Programme* would seem to reveal that his thought includes a conception of communism as a just society based on a principle of equality.[2]

The most classic of Marx's definitions of communism can be found in this work: 'From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs!' (Marx, 1875, 24, 87). It is not an original idea. Marx seems to have borrowed it from Louis Blanc. It can, however, already be found in Renaissance utopian thought, e.g. in Anton Francesco Doni (1964, 50): 'Everybody brought the fruit of his labour, and took what he needed.' But traces of it can also be found in the Bible: 'All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and

goods, they gave to anyone as he had need' (*Acts*, 2, 44–5). I have recalled the origins of the communist distributive principle because I want to make clear that it was not usually justified in terms of a principle of distributive justice. Rather it referred to a Christian ethic of solidarity and brotherhood. And precisely as a principle of brotherhood it was assimilated by part of French socialism. For example, although Saint-Simon favoured a distribution based on abilities, the Saint-Simonian Leroux proposed one based on needs.[3]

Strangely enough, once established as a Marxist definition of communism, this distributive criterion has instead been interpreted as applicable in a just society, where justice is determined by an egalitarian ethical principle. Sometimes Marx himself seems to reason in those terms. In fact he arrives at formulating the communist distributive criterion on the grounds of a critique of a certain meritocratic theory of justice, and more precisely, one that posits that each person should be rewarded according to his work, i.e. the *incentive principle*: 'The right of the producers [to receive means of consumption] is proportional to the labour they supply' (Marx, 1875, 24, 86). This principle is not good because it establishes 'a right to inequality' (ib.), and contradicts what seems to be a superior ethical principle: 'Right by its nature can exist only as the application of an equal standard' (ib.). Then he observes: 'unequal individuals . . . are measurable by an equal standard only insofar as they are made subject to an equal criterion, are taken from a certain side only' (ib., 86–7). Since men are unequal, for instance because they have different needs, then, labour productivities being equal, in a communist society 'one will in fact receive more than another, one will be richer than another, etc. To avoid all these defects, right would have to be unequal rather than equal' (ib., 87). It seems here that Marx does not want to question the *principle of equality* as a criterion of justice; rather he maintains that this principle cannot be put into practice by limiting valuation to a single characteristic of individuals, let's say, their labour capacity, so that true equality can be achieved only by considering all the aspects of individual differences, different personal endowments and different needs. This superior form of equality implies that, from any one-sided point of view, as for example, income distribution, people are treated unequally. In other words it seems that here Marx is implicitly invoking a principle of justice higher than the meritocratic one (Elster, 1985, 222). After all, already in *The German Ideology* Marx and Engels (1845–46, 5, 537) have put forward the distributive criterion 'to each according to his need' starting from a principle of equality: it is considered superior to the criterion of distribution according to abilities because it implies that 'a *different form of activity*, of labour,

does not justify *inequality*, confers no *privileges* in respect of possession and enjoyment'.

I do not believe that Marx and Engels reason in terms of any principle of justice and below I will try to justify this conviction. However, for the time being let's accept the idea that the communist distributive criterion is founded on a superior principle of justice.

Then it is evident that the egalitarian criterion cannot apply to income. Incomes, in communism, are differentiated and independent of work performances because needs are different. Thus it must apply to the satisfaction of needs. In other words, it must refer to equality of welfare.[4] Which reminds us of various eighteenth-century egalitarian theories of a utilitarian flavour. Already Beccaria had established that the aim of public authorities is to maximize social welfare: 'the greatest happiness divided by the greatest number of people'. The principle was then developed by classical utilitarianism, starting with Bentham, on whose theoretical system Marx and Engels (1844, 4, 131) acutely observe that 'English communism' is founded. Utilitarianism is a special form of welfarism, in which individual welfare is assumed to be cardinally measurable in terms of utility.

A utilitarian interpretation of the theory of communism is appealing.[5] In weak support of it comes the idea that revolution takes place in the *interests* of the proletarians, who represent, at least in principle, the great majority of the people. Moreover communism, according to a certain Marxian view, would bring about emancipation of people belonging to the bourgeoisie and other social classes, besides the workers. So it would maximize the welfare of all people. Finally there is the opinion of Engels' (1847a, 6, 96) that 'every individual strives to be happy'. Thus the objective of 'the greatest happiness divided by the greatest number of people' seems to be compatible with communism. With *certain particular hypotheses*, this theory might well justify an egalitarian distribution of welfare while complying with a criterion of economic efficiency and without refuting the incentive principle: if the postulate of decreasing marginal utility applies to all the individual utility functions and if a fundamental equality of human beings is hypothesized, i.e. all individuals have similar ability endowments and utility functions, then it is easy to arrive at the conclusion that an egalitarian distribution of welfare is not only just, but also one that maximizes social welfare.

There are strong motives for rejecting a utilitarian interpretation of Marx's and Engels' theory of communism. To start with, their philosophical formation is far removed from eighteenth-century materialism while their reading of the English classical economists is clearly alien and

somewhat hostile to any form of Benthamian utilitarianism. After all, Marx and Engels (1845–46, 5, 413) believe that 'utility theory [is] a mere apologia for the existing state of affairs'. But there is more to it than that. The fact is that the two German philosophers are perfectly aware of the limitations of those *certain particular hypotheses* required to justify egalitarianism of welfare. They know, for instance, that the personal abilities and needs of human beings differ. In *Critique of the Gotha Programme* Marx (1875, 24, 86–7) explicitly recognizes 'the unequal individual endowment and thus productive capacity of the workers', i.e. that they 'would not be different individuals if they were not unequal'. To be precise, first of all, people have different personal abilities: 'one man is superior to another physically or mentally and so supplies more labour in the same time, or can work for a longer time'. Moreover people are different because they have different needs: 'one worker is married, another not; one has more children than another, etc., etc.' Obviously the *etc. etc.* must be stressed here. But already in *The German Ideology* Marx and Engels (1845–46, 5, 537) recognize that the existence of 'differences of brain and of intellectual ability' vis-à-vis 'any differences whatsoever in the nature of the stomach and of physical needs', tend to give rise to distributive effects which are incompatible with communism.

Moreover they realize that the implementation of an egalitarian distributive principle in societies made up of different individuals could lead to a transgression of the incentive principle and thus cause inefficiency. As Engels states in *Description of Communist Colonies*:

> When one talks to people about socialism or communism, one very frequently finds that they entirely agree with one regarding the substance of the matter and declare communism to be a very fine thing; 'but', they then say, 'it is impossible ever to put such things into practice in real life' . . . Incidentally, if one goes into this objection somewhat more deeply, one finds that it is made up of two further objections; these are, firstly: no workers would be prepared to carry out the menial and unpleasant manual tasks; and secondly, with everyone having an equal claim to the communal possessions, people would quarrel about these possessions, and in this way the community would break up again.
>
> (Engels, 1845b, 4, 214)

His reasoning is faultless. Without the incentive principle, by which personal income is an increasing function of individual production contribution, labour effort cannot be efficiently allocated: there will be an excess demand for labour for the more humble and unpleasant jobs and an excess

supply for the more agreeable. Furthermore, since the incentive principle also implies that goods can be obtained only by paying their value, decommercialization of goods leads to excess demand for most of them.

The argument concerning the inefficiency of equality should not be underrated. An interpretation of the communism theory as a welfarist doctrine of justice is untenable precisely for this argument. On the one hand it would give strength to those liberalist economists who maintain that a trade-off exists between efficiency and equality, on the other it would back up those critics of communism who argue about its *impossibility*. Why impossibility? Because, assuming that human beings always tend to opt for the best, it would be easy to claim that something better than communism might exist and consequently that this kind of society cannot be considered the ultimate end of social evolution. Many contemporary evolutionary economists would say that a communist society would not be evolutionally robust and stable, in other words, resistant to external shocks and to the invasion of institutions and organizational forms which are more efficient from the point of view of the human aspiration to improvement.

An enlightened liberal who has read Rawls might reason in the following way. Let's assume that communism has been achieved. Goods and talents are allocated so that they tend to equalize welfare among individuals, although in an inefficient way. Then a reallocation of resources would help to make some people better off without making anybody else worse off. Now apply Rawls' 'principle of difference': inequalities are allowed if they contribute to improve the living conditions of those who are worse off. Thus a capitalist should be allowed to set up a firm which, whilst making profits, pays an increased wage to at least one worker. If the profits rise more than the worker's wage, inequality will increase, yet nobody will be worse off and at least one worker will be better off. Alternatively, if one does not like the reintroduction of capitalism, apply the principle of difference by paying the most talented workers a productivity-based wage rate. Thus a kind of socialism would emerge in which work effort is stimulated and production increased. Then the better-paid workers would be taxed and the public revenue so collected could be used to improve the welfare of the disabled. From a welfarist point of view this kind of socialism would be better than communism in terms of maximization of social welfare. And it could not be rejected from an egalitarian point of view; for Rawls' theory of justice, which cannot be criticized on the grounds of efficiency considerations, is held as one of the most egalitarian on the market: under reasonably realistic assumptions, it has stronger redistribution implications than utilitarian theories.

The difficulty stems from a fundamental problem that originates from the very idea that communism is a system of justice in welfare distribution. The communist allocation criterion separates reward from performance and purports to achieve maximum satisfaction of needs. Yet, because of the separation, it gives rise to an inefficient allocation of resources. Allocation inefficiency, in turn, implies that there are some needs which could be satisfied, given the available resources, but are not satisfied on account of the allocation criterion. Thus what communism seems unable to do is to maximize welfare by giving 'to each according to his needs'. In other words, communism intended as welfarist theory of justice is a contradiction in terms.

But yet another difficulty mars the theory of communism when interpreted as a doctrine of justice: it appears to contradict Marx's critique of capitalism as a system of exploitation. If exploitation is unjust because it consists in the expropriation of surplus value produced by the workers, then a just society should give 'to each according to his work', i.e. it should grant each worker the entire product of his labour activity. This distributive criterion is consistent with the incentive principle and is postulated by Marx as a condition for the allocation that operates in the lower phase of communism. A system that complies with the incentive principle would be efficient. And it would also be just, by the same token that exploitation is considered unjust. However, if a society without exploitation is just, then upper phase communism might not be so. In fact, if each person obtains goods according to his needs and each supplies work according to his abilities, then communism would be none other than the highest fulfilment of that model of exploitation of the talented which so irritates the liberalist philosophers.[6] If capitalism is a system in which the capitalists exploit the workers, then communism is one in which the untalented exploit the talented.

Should we then reject Marx's and Engels' theory of communism? I do not think so. It must be made clear, however, that it is not a theory of justice; which means it must be cleansed of all elements of utilitarian ethic, for instance, of the idea that a superior distributive principle requires that 'right by its nature can exist only as the application of an equal standard' (Marx, 1875, 24, 86).

The New Man

The fact that an ethical element is present in Marx and Engels is also proved by their propensity to overcome the above mentioned difficulties with a flight toward millenarianism, and, more precisely, by resorting to a great 'optimistic' narrative of history and human perfectibility.

The first revolutionary doctrine in history, a philosophy embodying the spirit of Christian utopia (Bloch, 1995; 2000), was put forward in the twelfth century by Gioacchino da Fiore. According to the Calabrian abbot history evolves through improvement and in three phases: those of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. In the third phase, or Third Kingdom, humankind enters an era of peace and brotherhood by reorganizing social life in such a manner as to do away with wealth and poverty and consequently the fight over what is mine and yours. Moreover, as the very word of God anticipates, transition to the Third Kingdom cannot take place painlessly. The Apocalypse, according to Gioacchino, must be read not as a prophecy of the end of the world but as the narration of the social and spiritual labours through which the Second Kingdom will generate the Third from its own flesh.

Among the spiritual labours there is one of primary importance. In fact, not only is private property a consequence of the original sin, as the *Decretum Gratiani*[7] asserts, but human nature itself is stained by this terrible primeval transgression. For such a reason it is not possible to enter the Third Kingdom without a radical regeneration of the human being: 'among the deeds of the Holy Spirit [there is one] which realizes the destiny of men. I mean the formation of the *new man*' (Gioacchino, 1975, 65). The New Man is a mythical figure present in all eschatological philosophies of revolution. And it is a figure essential to every pessimistic conception of human nature. Precisely because man is wicked his regeneration is required as a condition for revolutionary salvation.

Not by chance have I quoted Gioachino da Fiore's philosophy of history, nor was it mistakenly considered by Ernest Bloch as the first progressive and revolutionary philosophy of modern thought. It was in fact extremely influential in the late Middle Ages and, although it was finally retracted by the Church, it still continued to pervade much of Christian social thought for a long time. It was disseminated all over Europe by the Franciscans and various sects of heretics – Fraticelli, Begards, Beguines, Lollards – and inspired many proletarian revolts which marked departure from the Middle Ages, that of friar Dolcino, that of Cola di Rienzo, the French *Jacquerie*, the English insurrection of John Ball and the Ciompi tumult in Florence. Then, with humanism, it invaded secular intellectual circles and, through Renaissance and Protestant utopian thought, it finally reached the Enlightenment and modern political philosophy. There still are ample traces of it in the conceptions of history of Lessing, Schelling, Fichte, Hegel, Comte, as well as in the Marxist dialectics of the three stages of communism and of the landing of history to 'final' communism (Cohn, 1957, chap. 5).

As a matter of fact, the New Man sometimes crops up even in the theory of the two German revolutionaries. For instance Engels (1847b, 6, 353) says that 'the common management of production by the whole of society and the resulting new development of production *require* and also produce quite different people' (note the word I have italicized). But already two years earlier he had reflected on the regeneration effects of communitarian life:

> We also see that the people who are living communally live better with less work, have more leisure for the development of their minds, and that they are better, more moral people.
>
> (Engels, 1845b, 4, 227)

Quotes of this tenor can be found in various works of Marx and Engels, even in those written in their mature years. I think, though, that the mythology of the New Man and the Third Kingdom is fundamentally alien to the mature thought of the two German revolutionaries, who matured precisely by rejecting all metaphysical notions of human nature. According to them, man is neither good nor evil in nature because he does not live in nature. Human 'nature', for Marx and Engels, is *plastic*, i.e. strongly influenced by the economic, social and cultural contexts in which man is historically placed; but it is *self-poietic* too, in that the economic, social and cultural contexts are in turn determined by human actions.[8] According to them the transition to a better mode of social organization such as communism would contribute to liberate men, also through a surmounting the division of labour and the related single-sidedness of personal characters. But they do not appear to believe too deeply in the birth of the New Man as *a necessary spiritual precondition* of communism.

However there is no doubt that this mythology, as well as its moralist and millenarian implications, is present in many utopian Marxists. It would be easy to quote Ernest Bloch himself or Ernesto Che Guevara. Instead, I will limit myself to recalling that Lenin (1968, 43), in his most utopian work, *State and Revolution*, after declaring that the proletarian revolution will be the work of humankind 'as it is now, with human nature that cannot do without subordination, control and "managers" ', states that communism will be realized when 'people will *grow accustomed* to observing the elementary conditions of social existence *without force and without subjection*' (ib., 68). In Lenin there is a rather tepid version of this mythology. But, to grasp the end to which it might eventually lead, one has only to look at what the most utopian currents of

Marxism have to say. As Prestipino (2002, 214) argued, our gaze should be fixed on 'the future kingdom of freedom of the Son of God, on the third kingdom, on Gioacchino da Fiore', and even on 'John the apostle of the spirit'.

The 'New Man' was one of the most diehard and widespread myths in twentieth-century utopian Marxism. We had to wait for feminist deconstruction to understand that it is an idealist absurdity with strong authoritarian and moralist implications (Lonzi, 1974, 123–4).

The Hegelian origins of Marx's New Man

Robert Tucker (1969) suggested that to understand Marx's theory of communism it is necessary to retrace its Hegelian origins. I think this suggestion is misleading, albeit not wholly unfounded. It is misleading because it focuses interpretive interest on Marx's early works and on an aspect of his philosophy that should be considered residual rather than fundamental, an aspect which is extraneous to the materialist conception of history. At any rate it is worthwhile recalling this aspect, so that it can be isolated when it re-emerges in the interpretation of the theory of freedom. It consists in a vision of history as a dialectical process of self-production of man as a Species-being. Man realizes himself in creation, in a dynamic relationship with nature which is also a social relationship among men – a relationship in which material and social objects operated by men are transformed and finally produced as a collective work of the human genre. The history of Man is the history of production, but also, until now, the history of alienation. In capitalism economic alienation emerges in relation to private property, and the objectification of man in work activity becomes the estrangement of man from himself. The proletarian revolution overcomes this spiritual muddle and opens the doors to communism by transforming the value relations of commodities into transparent social relations among human beings, by liberating man from subordination to private property and eventually allowing him to realize himself, to fulfil himself as a self-aware species. Human nature is transformed: the individual becomes a being who is an integral man in that he is a self-producing subject who recognizes himself in others.

This vision is clearly present in *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, but never completely disappears from Marx's philosophical production. It is in his early philosophy that the core of Marx's ethic must be traced: *an ethical principle emerging from the definition of the should-be of human nature*. Alienation is evil because it mortifies man by removing him

from his inner essence. This – says Marx (1844b, 3, 275–8) – is only to be found in identification with the human species and is a universal property:

> Man is a species-being . . . also because he treats himself as the actual, living species; because he treats himself as a *universal* and therefore a free being (275). In estranging from man (1) nature, and (2) himself, his own active functions, his life activity, estranged labour estranges the *species* from man. It changes for him the *life of the species* into a means of individual life (276). An immediate consequence of the fact that man is estranged from the product of his labour, from his life activity, from his species-being is the *estrangement of man* from *man* (277). We must bear in mind the previous proposition that man's relation to himself only becomes for him *objective* and *actual* through his relation to the other man. (278)

Man is a 'species-being' (*Gattungswesen*). For Hegel, he is *real, actual*, rather than just existent, accidental, ostensible. He is actual in that he recognizes himself as a universal subject. According to Hegel, reality or actuality (*Wirklichkeit*) is the union of universality and particularity. Without this union, a thing may exist, have existence (*Dasein*), but will remain something unreal. Thus actual man is not so much a natural individual conditioned by needs and appetites; rather he is a subject who recognizes himself in another subject and is recognized by the other, he is the spirit *in itself* who, being *for the other* too, becomes *in itself and for itself*. The human being as a subject is not what he appears to be in the narrow corporeity of his empirical and individual life; quite the contrary, he is a being who *becomes* actual through a process of departing from himself and returning to himself, in other words, through recognition of his own universality. This process is set in motion by identification of the other as substance of human nature.

The young Marx's New Man is not unlike this. After all, the 10th thesis on Feuerbach explicitly enunciates the point of view on which the theory of this Marx (1845, 5, 5) is founded: 'The standpoint of the old materialism is civil society; the standpoint of the new is human society, or social humanity' – clearly a universal point of view.

Accordingly, communism would be a communitarian kind of social organization:

> *Exchange*, both of human activity within production itself and of *human products* against one another, is equivalent to *species-activity*

> and species-spirit, the real, conscious and true mode of existence of which is *social* activity and *social* enjoyment. Since *human* nature is the *true community* of men, by manifesting their *nature* men *create*, produce, the *human community*, the social entity, which is no abstract universal power opposed to the single individual, but is the essential nature of each individual, his own activity, his own life, his own spirit, his own wealth.
>
> (Marx, 1844–45, 3, 216–17)

A 'true community' is an organization structured by an organic cohesion and not by an anarchic and competitive assemblage typical of markets and bourgeois civil society. It consists of social relations regulated not by formal rules, but rather by a spirit of solidarity and altruistic motivations that induce individuals to recognize their essence in sociality. A notion of communism as a communitarian association crops up in most of Marx's early works and clearly emerges in two important writings of 1843–1844: *The Jewish Question* and the *Critical Marginal Notes on the Article 'The King of Prussia and Social Reform. By a Prussian'*.

In the former article there is an abrasive critique of the rights of man and the citizen as formal guarantees of liberty and as consequences of the separation of the State from civil society. The rights of man attain to the individual as a member of civil society, whilst a citizen's rights attain to him as a member of the State. In a later chapter I will show that Marx's critique of these rights may be interpreted as an implication of a more extensive and advanced notion of freedom than the liberalist one. Here I must instead observe that, perhaps more legitimately, it may be interpreted as founded on a communitarian notion of communism. This notion has given rise to understandable critiques from some philosophers[9] who observed the inconsistency of founding a more advanced doctrine of freedom and human emancipation on a model of ideal society placed beyond the rule of law: since rights are guarantees of freedom, one may conceive a revolutionary process that strengthens, extends and multiplies them, not one that nullifies them. On the contrary, Marx sometimes seems to think that a more human society needs no legal or political guarantee of freedom. What kind of emancipation would be ensured in this way? Here it is:

> *All* emancipation is a *reduction* of the human world and relationships to *man himself*. Political emancipation is the reduction of man, on the one hand, to a member of civil society, to an *egoistic*, *independent* individual, and, on the other hand, to a *citizen*, a juridical person. Only

> when the real, individual man re-absorbs in himself the abstract citizen, and as an individual human being has become a *species-being* in his everyday life, in his particular work, and in his particular situation, only when man has recognised and organised his 'forces propres' as *social* forces, and consequently no longer separates social power from himself in the shape of *political* power, only then will human emancipation have been accomplished.
>
> (Marx, 1843b, 3, 168)

Then, in *Critical Marginal Notes* Marx returns to his rebuke of political separation and advocates a community wherein man recognizes himself as a moral being:

> But the *community* from which the worker is *isolated* is a community the real character and scope of which is quite different from that of the *political* community. The community from which the worker is isolated by *his own labour* is *life* itself, physical and mental life, human morality, human activity, human enjoyment, *human* nature. *Human nature* is the *true community* of men.
>
> (Marx, 1844a, 3, 204)

The young Marx locates the community beyond the rule of law because he conceives it as a society based on an ethical-anthropological principle which is universal and stronger than any legal codification: the principle of solidarity, not to speak of 'some love of mankind' (ib., 202), or even 'the brotherhood of man' (Marx, 1844b, 3, 313). Here are the ethical and political modes of man's self-creation. Communism takes on the meaning of a social system founded on a genuine relationship of man with his own essence:

> This relationship also reveals the extent to which man's *need* has become a *human* need; the extent to which, therefore, the *other* person as a person has become for him a need – the extent to which he in his individual existence is at the same time a social being.
>
> (Marx, 1844b, 3, 296)

The other person who becomes a need for man? What on earth does he mean? The young Marx explains it in the only possible way – revealing the secret of love lurking behind his analytical iciness:

> The direct, natural, and necessary relation of person to person is the *relation of man to woman* . . . In this relationship, therefore, is *sensuously*

> *manifested*, reduced to an observable *fact*, the extent to which the human essence has become nature to man, or to which nature to him has become the human essence of man.
>
> (Marx, 1844b, 3, 296–7)

In *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* Hegel had singled out three spheres of human action: family, where social relations are based on love in a sort of 'particular' altruism; civil society, where, on the contrary, social relations are governed by the market, mediated by money and based on generalized egoism; the State, that is, a subject which, by pursuing the collective good, expresses a 'universal' altruism. Marx criticizes this doctrine by showing that the State, since it separates political action from social action, is only abstractly the embodiment of general interest. This abstraction is political alienation, and is overcome only when there is a complete identification of civil society and the State – a moment in which, together with the separation of the State, the particularity of civil society is also overcome. Thus the State dissolves itself in communism through abolition of the conflict of the particular interests that emerge from the market. In communism personal relations return to being founded on values which differ from those of money, just as in the family. Communism is none other than the transformation of the whole of humankind into a single family, a community in which man finds himself as in a family – the family of the Species-being. In fact, 'in contrast with the estate *whose ethical life is natural*, the estate of family life, it is only in civil society that *family life* becomes the life of the family, the *life of love*. The former is rather the *barbarism* of private property *against* family life' (Marx, 1842–43, 3, 99).

The philosophical bases of Marx's moralism can be traced back to a humanist doctrine of Feuerbachian origin, formulated within a notion of society which is still Hegelian. Actually, when Marx writes of the civil society in criticizing Hegel's philosophy of the State, he writes in strictly Hegelian terms: it is not the place in which typically capitalist class relations are built up; rather it is the place of individualist disintegration of community, of the emergence of egoistic interests; of the isolation of human monads; it is not the battlefield where the class conflict between capital and the proletariat takes place, but that of the *bellum omnium contra omnes* and market relationships. In criticizing the Hegelian philosophy of right Marx slips somewhat unwittingly into a critique of individualist values of a civil society intended as intrinsically bourgeois, the *bürgerliche Gesellschaft*. This moralist critique stems from an analysis of economic, political and religious alienation as estrangement of universal human essence. We thus assist at the construction of a moral philosophy on the ground of a peculiar philosophical anthropology with a strong humanist

flavour. It is here that we uncover the moral roots of Marx's critique of bourgeois society as well as the ethical foundations of the theory of communism as 'appropriation of the human essence'.

The young Engels, more so than Marx, stresses the moral implications of this conception of communism. He feels a strong need to justify historically the emergence of a new communist moral and to do it within a teleological view of history which is still fully Hegelian:

> We lay claim to the meaning of history; but we see in history not the revelation of 'God' but of man and only of man. We have no need, in order to see the splendour of the human character, in order to recognise the development of the human species through history, its irresistible progress, its ever-certain victory over the unreason of the individual, its overcoming of all that is apparently supernatural, its hard but successful struggle against nature until the final achievement of free, human self-consciousness, the discernment of the unity of man and nature, and the independent creation – voluntarily and by its own effort – of a new world based on purely human and moral social relationships – in order to recognise all that in its greatness, we have no need first to summon up the abstraction of a 'God' and to attribute to it everything beautiful, great, sublime and truly human.
>
> (Engels, 1844, 3, 464)

How can the moral foundations of this 'new world' be brought out? Well, perhaps in a less refined but certainly more straightforward way than Marx, in 1847 Engels attempts to get to the heart of the problem by postulating an ethic foundation of the communist society on the ground of a definition of human nature.[10] He seems to have understood that the new communitarian man should be conceived as a subject moved by sentiments which combine utilitarian motivations with a solidarity vocation:

> In the consciousness or feeling of every individual there exist certain irrefutable basic principles which, being the result of the whole of historical development, require no proof . . . For example, every individual strives to be happy. The happiness of the individual is inseparable from the happiness of all, etc.
>
> (Engels, 1847a, 6, 96)

Whereas Marx, when criticizing the bourgeois ethic for its egoistic content, seems to evoke an alternative society exclusively cemented by solidarity sentiments, Engels understands that a new society of this kind cannot

avoid appealing to utilitarian motivations, that is, to the happiness of the individual. How could communism be conceived as a good society if it were unable to do the good of the people? And could it be conceived as a just and egalitarian society if it did not succeed in equalizing the individuals' welfare and happiness? And why should we aspire to this state of justice if people were not moved by the search for happiness?

So far we have confined ourselves to the definition of the anthropological foundations of ethic. We have not yet singled out the basic normative principle in which this consists. It is interesting to note that this principle is never explicitly defined by Marx and Engels, even in those works which are more strongly influenced by Feuerbach. In their writings we find moral judgements, besides the formulation of their anthropological foundations, but not the revelation of the moral principle itself. Therefore we must content ourselves with an 'implicit morality', as observed by Luporini (1971, xlvii), who in fact, not by chance, retraces it in the early works. Luporini argues that the principles of this morality must be found in Kant, in the norms that posit man as an absolute end.[11] And he quotes those passages where Marx: observes that in the society studied by economists individuals become reciprocally a means of each other; he stigmatizes the private man, as an atom of civil society who considers other men as a means; he criticizes the rights of citizens in that they degrade the political community to a mere means for the preservation of the egoistic man; finally he invokes the 'categorical imperative' to overthrow all social relations in which man is mortified and subjected. It would appear that for Marx the categorical imperative is based on human essence which, though, contrary to Kant and in keeping with Hegel, is not defined a-historically, but is postulated as a should-be to be realized dialectically in the future history of the human species.

It is evident that the New Man, a subject who is at the same time a hedonist and an altruistic moral being, is able to work out both problems of a welfarist theory of communism. In fact superior men, those endowed with a superior moral sense, men who recognize their humanity in their relationship with others, in their need for others, will have no difficulty in giving spontaneously according to their abilities and in demanding only what they really need. In this light, one could conceive a communitarian economy as the generalization of a 'third sector', a post-modern version of the Third Kingdom, a sort of all-encompassing confraternity of charity. There will be no excess demand and supply of any good because everybody will want and offer precisely what the community has knowingly planned. The problem of efficiency is solved. Moreover, since goods are offered voluntarily as gifts, in a society free from commodity fetishism

and market exchange, nobody will feel exploited in consuming less than he has produced. And the problem of exploitation of the talented is solved too.

Thus it would seem that by enriching utilitarian ethic with solidarity all theoretical problems of communism would be resolved. But this is an unacceptable solution for a proper Marxist approach for two reasons: a philosophical and a political one. First, the 'optimistic' mythology of history as a necessary road to communism is an expression of a pessimistic view of human nature, a view that attributes humanity to man not for what he actually is, for what he is in his finiteness, but for what he might be, for what he is potentially: the *real*, *actual* humanity of man is identified in a possible, and only philosophically necessary, future transfiguration which negates his present reality, his actual *existence*. Second, this mythology drains politics of any value. In fact, if a spiritual revolution is required as a condition for communism, then we must commit ourselves in charitable and educational deeds, in other words, in the no-profit sector. The proletariat, as a universal class, would emancipate humankind by starting a charity revolution and abolishing itself as an aggregate of egoist individuals.

I would like to stress that this seemingly sceptical conclusion in no way disclaims the conviction that a social organization which is more advanced and more cooperative and rational than capitalism might favour the development of less opportunistic and less greedy human attitudes and behaviour – changes, which are, however, within the reach of human beings as we actually know them here and now. It refutes, instead, the thesis whereby these changes imply a redeeming mutation of human nature and especially the idea that a radical regeneration of man is a necessary precondition for the transition to communism.

The dialectics of communism

In the young Marx's philosophy communism is deduced as emerging from a dialectic process in which the history of human self-creation is fulfilled. To understand this peculiar opinion, it is necessary to call attention to a mysterious aspect of Marx's theory of alienation, that is, the thesis by which

> *Private property* is thus the product, the result, the necessary consequence, of *alienated labour* . . . *Private property* thus results by analysis from the concept of *alienated labour*, i.e., of *alienated man*, of estranged labour, of estranged life, of *estranged* man.
>
> (Marx, 1844b, 3, 279)

How strange! One would rather be inclined to believe that private property generates expropriation and alienation. Yet Marx is adamant: 'though private property appears to be the reason, the cause of alienated labour, it is rather its consequence' (ib.).

To grasp the reasons for his conviction, one must go back to two sources of classical liberal thought, two sources which Marx draws from Hegel. On the one hand there is the view that labour activity is 'appropriation' of nature through objectification, or alienation, of human capacities; on the other, there is the Hegelian theory, which however goes back to Locke, which justifies private property as founded on the appropriation of the product of labour. In this light, the worker produces goods of which he is the legitimate owner precisely because he has produced them with his own labour. However, as Marx observes, the wage worker does not appropriate the goods he produces. Alienation is not just objectification. More properly it is expropriation: firstly, of the product of labour; secondly, of labour activity, finally, of the species-being essence of man. Therefore ownership is seen as a negation of labour precisely because it is negation of human essence. So, by unmasking the vision in which alienation *appears* to be a derivation of private property, Marx builds a dialectical contradiction whereby, on the contrary, it is private property that is deduced as an antithesis of the 'human labour' thesis, the negation of 'human essence'.

After which, appears the synthesis, i.e. '*communism* itself because of its character as negation of the negation, as the appropriation of the human essence through the intermediary of the negation of private property (ib., 313).[12] The quotation, however, goes on clarifying that this is 'not yet the *true*, self-originating position but rather a position originating from private property' (ib.). In fact this first negation of negation is not the end of history, but only the beginning. Communism, in turn, passes through three dialectic phases, 'crude', 'political' and 'true' or 'genuine' communism.

To tell the truth, Marx's treatment of these three forms is rather cursory. Following a suggestion by Luporini (1971, lxvi–lxviii), we could try to put some order into them by using certain ideas proposed by Marx (1843c, 3,141–4) in a letter to Ruge of September 1843, in which the triad is presented in terms of the distinction among three principles: a 'communist', a 'socialist' and that of a 'world aware of its own consciousness'. The first principle 'is itself only a special, one-sided realisation' (ib., 141) of the second; this, 'in its turn is only one aspect that concerns the reality of the true human being' (ib.); the third is the dream 'of possessing something of which it has only to be conscious in order to possess it in reality' (ib., 144), and thus the world of full self-consciousness. One could then surmise

that 'crude' communism is the abolition of private property through the institution of 'communal property', or the suppression of private capital through the creation of 'communal capital', but in a human context in which civil society has not yet overcome the particularity of egoistic interests, 'general envy', and 'greed'. 'Crude' communism reduces all human beings to the condition of a worker. In a general levelling, 'it negates the personality of man in every sphere' (Marx, 1844b, 3, 295) and, by imposing 'equality of wage', it even tries 'to disregard talent, etc., in an arbitrary manner' (ib., 294). The second form, 'political' communism, is described rather fleetingly by Marx, and certainly it is difficult to grasp its characteristics (Rossi, 1974, 494). We could try to overcome the difficulty by relating this form to that which Marx, in his letter to Ruge, calls a 'socialist principle', a principle embodying the image of a civil society that politicizes itself in the effort to become more human. It seems that 'political' communism (or the socialist principle) is dialectically opposed to the 'crude' one in the sense that it aims at the 'reintegration or return of man to himself' (Marx, 1844b, 3, 296), but without abolishing private property, whilst the 'crude' one aims at exactly the opposite, namely, the abolition of private property without overcoming alienated labour. Now, these dialectic moments are '*actual*' albeit still partial. What they lack, to complete and overcome themselves, is the theoretical dimension. Certainly reason tries to break through them. However it is well known that 'reason has always existed, but not always in a reasonable form' (Marx, 1943c, 3, 143). And here 'the critic' puts in an appearance: he relates to the reality of the 'socialist principle' and then, 'by raising the representative system from its political form to the universal form and by bringing out the true significance underlying this system, the critic at the same time compels this party to go beyond its own confines' (ib., 144). Clearly this is a critic who is preparing to become a conscious revolutionary. Here is his duty: 'we develop new principles for the world out of the world's own principles . . . we merely show the world what it is really fighting for, and consciousness is something that it has to acquire, even if it does not want to' (ib.). Thus at last reason attains a reasonable form and true communism is achieved, i.e. a society that takes on 'the form corresponding to man who has become conscious of himself' (ib.).

Thus true communism appears as the end (in both senses) of history, the supreme realization of the process in which man succeeds in producing himself. Then 'man produces man – himself and the other man' (Marx 1844b, 3, 297) at the moment he consciously reappropriates his own human essence. So one must not ignore the dialectic nature of the process whereby true communism plays this eschatological function: it

realizes human essence because it is the negation of the negation of the negation of the negation of human essence. Dal Pra (1965, 241–2 *et passim*) shows that in *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* Marx produces a theory of alienation which, while deriving from Feuerbach the thesis that human subjectivity must be anchored to the real world, and while endeavouring to go beyond Hegel, fails to develop a properly scientific analysis of historical processes, but remains at least partially conditioned by the Hegelian vision of a logical-dialectic process which is aprioristically determined by the dynamics of negation of negation.[13]

True communism is characterized both as the end of history and as a product of historical necessity, a goal of human destiny wherein all contradictions are dissolved, including that between the essence and the existence of man and between necessity and freedom (Sekelj, 1984, 360). And *re*volution takes on the meaning of a *re*turn of man to his proper human essence. In fact the end to which history tends and which gives it significance is

> *communism* as the *positive* transcendence of *private property* as *human self-estrangement*, and therefore as the real *appropriation* of the *human* essence by and for man; communism therefore as the complete return of man to himself as a social (i.e., human) being – a return accomplished consciously and embracing the entire wealth of previous development. This communism, as fully developed naturalism, equals humanism, and as fully developed humanism equals naturalism; it is the genuine resolution of the conflict between man and nature and between man and man – the true resolution of the strife between existence and essence, between objectification and self-confirmation, between freedom and necessity, between the individual and the species. Communism is the riddle of history solved, and it knows itself to be this solution.
>
> (Marx, 1844b, 3, 296–7)

Then the proletarian revolution takes on a strong eschatological meaning: it is the process of the final emancipation of man from particularity and egoism. Through the abolition of classes man eventually succeeds in realizing himself as a moral and universal being, by overcoming all forms of alienation and inauthenticity linked to private property and the conflict of interests. If, for Hegel, Christianity was an unsuccessful liberation, communism of the young Marx was liberation finally achieved, but liberation in the typical Hegelian sense of 'the true resolution of the strife . . . between freedom and necessity' (Marx, 1844b, 3, 296). The

demiurge of this revelation is the proletariat, the only social class capable of achieving the position of a universal class.

The notion of 'general' or 'universal class' also comes from Hegel, who applies it to the 'bureaucracy', the class which, by governing the State, pursues the common interest of the entire society, unlike the other classes which are moved only by particular interests. As I will show in detail below, Marx sharply criticizes this view by observing that bureaucracy in reality makes the State its own particular interest. However, especially in his early works, he proposes another version by arguing that the true universal class is the proletariat. In fact he conjectures that this class must be

> a class of civil society which is not a class of civil society, an estate which is the dissolution of all estates, a sphere which has a universal character by its universal suffering and claims no *particular right* because no *particular wrong* but *wrong generally* is perpetrated against it; which can no longer invoke a *historical* but only a *human title*.
>
> (Marx, 1843a, 3, 186)

Now, apart from the miracle of dialectics, which succeeds in turning a thing into a class of civil society which is universal in that it is not a class of civil society, a few inconsistencies can be observed in this thesis from the point of view of the materialist conception of history: 1) the proletariat is a universal class not by *historical* entitlement, that is, for what it is historically, 2) but rather by *human* entitlement, that is, for what it should abstractly be according to a peculiar philosophy of human nature which defines man as a 'species-being'; 3) the historical condition of the proletariat is an *absolute injustice*, which implies the postulation of a state of absolute justice realizable beyond human history (or prehistory). There is no doubt that the notion of the proletariat as a universal class remains internal to the conceptual tradition of the Hegelian inheritance (Avineri, 1968, 140).

Riccardo Guastini (1974, 190–3) brought to light the profound Hegelian roots of the thesis on the proletariat as a universal class.[14] He noted that in his works of 1842–43 Marx has not yet defined the notion of social class as a scientific category, nor has he defined classes on the ground of the structure of the capitalist mode of production; and nor has he even developed the notion of wage labour with any precision, let alone the theory of exploitation as a process of extraction of surplus value from the production process. Therefore, when he talks of the proletariat, especially in the *Introduction* to the *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law*, he does it using philosophical concepts of a humanist kind: 'injustice', 'misery', 'alienation'.

In other words, he focuses on the 'essence of the proletariat' rather than on the proletariat, and talks of it in negative terms, that is, as the negation of the humanity of man. It is the *inhumanity* of the proletariat, rather than its location in the capitalist production process, that makes it a revolutionary class and, above all, makes it the precursor of human emancipation (Luporini, 1971, lix). Thus the contradiction it expresses is not yet conceived as the opposition between an exploited and an exploiter class. Rather it is viewed as the purely philosophical contradiction between human essence and a predicate, private property, which dominates it despite having being produced by it. The very notion of private property is conceived in sheer philosophical terms as the negation of human essence, rather than as a condition of capitalist domination in the production process. Only for these reasons is it possible to define the proletariat as a universal class, that is, a class which can advance a right of primogeniture on the ground of a purely 'human' title precisely because it is dispossessed of any property: it is the constitutionally revolutionary 'universal subject' which realizes the communitarian destiny of man by negating itself (Finelli, 2004, 302–5). Perhaps, better than any other interpreter, Jean Hyppolite (1955, 141) grasped the Hegelian roots of the notion of the proletariat as a universal class: 'in the proletariat, whose contradiction is the expression of a contradiction of the *whole* bourgeois society, Marx finds the leverage for "disalienating" man. It is through the proletariat that the Idea becomes real. Thus Marx did not completely abandon the Hegelian philosophy, he merely tried to incorporate Idea and Reality more firmly in the human subject.'

Here I must clarify that the philosophy of the proletariat as a universal class invested with a humanitarian historical mission is soon overcome by Marx and Engels. Even if subsequently they sometimes talk of a 'historical mission' of the proletariat, already in the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* they make it clear that the revolution will be carried out by a class which is 'really revolutionary' only because capitalist accumulation swells its number while augments its oppression and exploitation, so that at the end it will discover it has nothing to lose but its fetters. And it will be moved by no other motive than a *particular* class interest: 'the proletarian movement is the self-conscious, independent movement of the immense majority, in the interest of the immense majority' (Marx and Engels, 1847–48, 6, 495), not of humankind.

2
The Communism of Abundance

Marx and Engels as amoralists

No, it cannot be done like that. Communism cannot be founded on a welfarist approach to justice, even if reinforced with an essentialist anthropology and an ethic of solidarity. It would not work, unless an ideal human being is assumed. And anyway, Marx and Engels did not think of it in that way, except in their early works. So, let us start again.

There are no doubts about the existence of a moralist soul in Marx and Engels. But I doubt that the most genuine part of their philosophy is to be found here, in Kant, Hegel, Feuerbach. Marx and Engels are scientists too, amoralist thinkers to whom a parallel with Machiavelli and Spinoza would do more justice. And let it be clear that the reference to the Florentine chancellor and the Dutch 'dead dog' is by no means casual. As I will better argue below, Marx and Engels share with Machiavelli and Spinoza a certain kind of ethical relativism which seems to be at the ground of a peculiar 'genealogy' of moral and right of their own:

> Starting with Machiavelli, Hobbes, Spinoza, Bodinus and others of modern times, not to mention earlier ones, might has been represented as the basis of right. Thereby the theoretical view of politics was freed from morality.
>
> (Marx and Engels, 1845–46, 5, 322)

There is no doubt this is Marx's and Engels' conviction too. They themselves tell us of 'having learned from hundreds of earlier writers that right originated from force' (ib., 324).

Now it should be observed that in many cases the most moralist quips found in the mature works of Marx and Engels are little more than

rhetorical expedients, in others even tactical concessions and compromises,[1] but more often they are words that are almost slips of the pen with no scientific value. Engels (1872–73, 23, 381–2) seems close to apologizing for them when, in criticizing a Proudhonian writer, he observes that

> while in everyday life, in view of the simplicity of the relations discussed, expressions like right, wrong, justice, and sense of right are accepted without misunderstanding even with reference to social matters, they create, as we have seen, the same hopeless confusion in any scientific investigation of economic relations.

As to their rhetorical and tactical use, Engels concedes that it might be efficacious in the political ambit. For instance he argues that the demand for equality by the revolutionary workers might have a sense as an 'agitational means', but immediately clarifies that its actual content is

> the *abolition of classes*. Any demand for equality which goes beyond that, of necessity passes into absurdity . . . The idea of equality, both in its bourgeois and in its proletarian form, is therefore itself a historical product . . . It is therefore anything but an eternal truth.
>
> (Engels, 1876–78, 25, 99)

It must be borne in mind that equality is the principle of justice from which almost all radical critics of capitalism drew inspiration. Engels explicitly declares it is not a principle of universal justice. At any rate, beyond those 'concessions', there are numerous arguments in which Marx and Engels refuse to adhere to a theory of justice and to furnish any moral justification for their political and scientific positions.

On the problem of exploitation, for instance, Marx is very clear in establishing that there is no sense in considering the wage labour condition as just or unjust. In a capitalist economy the price of labour power is fixed in the market. In a reproduction equilibrium a 'just' wage is one which ensures reproduction of the labour force as a function of capital accumulation. Marx argues that the only way to give a sense to the expression 'just wage' in the analysis of capitalism is by considering it an equilibrium value. In a competitive equilibrium the 'law of value' holds, i.e. there is no unequal exchange and any commodity is paid for at its true value. The hypothesis of equal exchange is crucial. Marx is quite explicit:

> This sphere that we are deserting, within whose boundaries the sale and purchase of labour power goes on, is in fact a very Eden of the innate rights of man. There alone rule Freedom, Equality, Property and Bentham.

> Freedom, because both buyer and seller of a commodity, say of labour power, are constrained only by their own free will. They contract as free agents, and the agreement they come to, is but the form in which they give legal expression to their common will. Equality, because each enters into relation with the other, as with a simple owner of commodities, and they exchange equivalent for equivalent.
>
> (Marx, 1867–94, I, 35, 186)[2]

Wage is nothing less than the value of labour power, the equivalent of the cost of production of labour capacities. The worker cannot be considered as defrauded when he is paid at the value of his labour power, just as a farmer cannot be considered as defrauded when the potatoes he sells are paid at the value of their cost of production.

As to the theory that someone attributed to Marx – that exploitation is 'theft' – let me recall it is well documented in his *obiter dicta*. Yet he rejects it without hesitation:

> What '*a deduction from the worker*' is, deduction from his skin, etc., is not evident. At any rate, in my presentation even 'profit on capital' is in actual fact *not* 'a *deduction* from, or robbery of, the worker'. On the contrary, I depict the capitalist as the necessary functionary of capitalist production and demonstrate at great length that he not only 'deducts' or '*robs*' but enforces the *production of surplus value*, thus first helping to create what is to be deducted; what is more, I demonstrate in detail that even if *only equivalents* were exchanged in the exchange of commodities, the capitalist – as soon as he pays the worker the real value of his labour-power – would have every right, i.e. such right as corresponds to this mode of production, to *surplus-value*. But all this does not make 'profit on capital' the '*constitutive*' *element* of value but only proves that the value not '*constituted*' by the labour of the capitalist conceals a portion which he can appropriate 'legally', i.e. without infringing the law corresponding to the exchange of commodities.
>
> (Marx, 1879–80, 24, 535–6)

The political economy critic argues that there is no sense in speaking of distributive justice from a meta-historical viewpoint, as some natural law philosophers often do, but that justice must always be defined in relation to some historically determined production conditions. He does this, for example, in criticizing an attempt by Gilbart to justify the rate of interest with natural law:

> To speak here of natural justice, as Gilbart does, is nonsense. The justice of the transactions between agents of production rests on the fact that

> these arise as natural consequences out of the production relationships. The juristic forms in which these economic transactions appear as wilful acts of the parties concerned, as expressions of their common will and as contracts that may be enforced by law against some individual party, cannot, being mere forms, determine this content. They merely express it. This content is just whenever it corresponds, is appropriate, to the mode of production. It is unjust whenever it contradicts that mode. Slavery on the basis of capitalist production is unjust; likewise *fraud* in the quality of commodities.
>
> (Marx, 1867–94, III, 37, 337–8)

In this passage I have italicized the word *fraud* for reasons I will clarify later. In the meantime I must point out that Marx has no difficulty in recognizing that income distribution in a capitalist economy *may* be just precisely in an ethical sense. However he immediately makes it clear that it is a bourgeois ethic, a conception which is in point of fact adequate to the capitalist mode of production because it is determined by it:

> Do not the bourgeois assert that present-day distribution is 'fair'? And is it not, in fact, the only 'fair' distribution on the basis of the present-day mode of production? Are economic relations regulated by legal concepts or do not, on the contrary, legal relations arise from economic ones?
>
> (Marx, 1875, 24, 84)

Summing up, when Marx studies a capitalist economy, he uses the terms 'just' or 'fair' in three different senses: 1) as an equilibrium value, since the values determined without unequal exchange are fair; 2) as congruent, since the legal categories that are compatible with the mode of production in which they hold are fair; 3) as ethically valid, although in a relative sense, i.e. in the sense that the distributive criteria in a given economic form are just if they result from the ethical principles determined in that form. Three different senses, but quite compatible with each other and consistent with the materialist conception of history.

Now return to the word 'fraud' italicized in the preceding quotation from *Capital*. In putting forward the thesis whereby Marx maintains that income distribution in a capitalist economy may be 'just' precisely in an ethical sense, I also italicized the word '*may*'. What contributed to rock the boat in the debate on Marx's moralism is the fact that the political economy critic frequently insists on the ideological character of certain historically determined doctrines of justice. For example he observes that the theory of slavery in ancient societies was based on a racist ideology which considered

slaves as naturally inferior beings. He also ridicules the liberalist thesis according to which the concentration of wealth in modern societies is only the result of the economic agents' past behaviour in regard to saving and work decisions – a thesis whereby the very rich of today are well off only because their forebears saved and worked hard. It was not difficult to scorn this ideology, as Marx did in the chapter on *Primitive Accumulation*, by noting the great number of historical events involving brutality and subjugation which led to the appropriation of ancient fortunes. What can be deduced from this kind of observation? That Marx criticizes capitalism and the ancient mode of production from a moral viewpoint which is superior to that of the historically determined ethic? Certainly not. Otherwise one has to believe that in his opinion, contemporary capitalist exploitation was caused by the ancient barbarian invasions and is condemnable for that reason.

Marx argues that capitalist exploitation proper takes place in the production process and not in the 'sphere of circulation'. Thus, to study it at the maximum level of abstraction, he assumes that commodity exchange, including that of labour power, occurs in accordance with ethical and legal norms that regulate the good functioning of markets, such as that regarding the exchange of equivalents. This kind of exploitation is fundamental and constitutes social relations *typical* of the capitalist mode of production. It arises even in the absence of 'frauds', violent subjugation and ideological deception. This does not mean there is no fraud, extortion, illegal brutality or ideological counterfeit in capitalism. The fact that Marx sometimes insists on the over-exploitation that emerges from certain kinds of illegal or immoral practices does not mean he criticizes it from the point of view of a universal ethic. What he tries to do, in these cases, is simply to show that the economic practices of the capitalists and the ideologies of their sycophants are not up to the expectations of bourgeois morals.

Bearing all this in mind, it is possible to account for some of the *seemingly* moralist judgements found in Marx's later works. Buchanan (1982, 53–6) argued that Marx often produces a form of 'internal' critique, i.e. he criticizes practices and ideologies of the *real* bourgeois society by showing how they conflict with bourgeois ethic. Although this is a sensible observation, it fails to grasp the substance. The level of analysis of 'internal' critique must be carefully distinguished from the more profound and general one in which Marx investigates capitalist exploitation by observing it at the maximum level of abstraction, that is, by assuming equal exchange and compliance with ethical and legal rules. At this level of analysis Marx uses a model of *ideal* capitalism, that is, he analyses a 'pure' mode of production.

The critique of bourgeois ideology takes place at a level of investigation which is less abstract and less fundamental than the level at which the social relations of production are studied. It takes place at a level of 'superstructure' deconstruction rather than of 'structure' analysis.

Turner (1990) argued that the critique of typical liberalist ideology – namely, the ideology which presents economic relations as founded on the equality and freedom of all social agents – ends up by bringing to light its unavoidable 'performative' contradiction. It appears that capitalism does not practice what it preaches: the existence of exploitation seems to demonstrate that the capitalist mode of production is not really that world of equality and freedom it claims to be. Thus, according to Buchanan and Turner, Marx is conducting, among other things, a moralist critique *of capitalism* starting from bourgeois ethic itself.

In my view, things are quite different. What Marx tries to do, at the level of investigation in which he criticizes bourgeois ideology, is to prove that, behind the social relations that appear to an ideologically conditioned consciousness as egalitarian and free relations, is concealed the reality of exploitation and domination. Marx's critique brings to light not the fact that capitalism does not practice what it preaches, but rather the fact that its ideologues preach everything except what the capitalists practice: they describe a world of equality and freedom by focusing on market social relations, concealing in this way the substance of the real relations that arise in the production process. And note that Marx does not say that those market relations are not in fact based on equality and freedom. Quite the contrary, he asserts precisely this: the market process in a competitive system is in principle based on equal exchanges and therefore

> the reciprocal satisfaction of [the exchangers'] wants by means of the physical difference of their labour and their commodity makes their equality a relation filled with social content.
>
> (Marx, 1858, 29, 472)

> Hence equality and freedom are not only respected in exchange which is based on exchange values, but the exchange of exchange values is the real productive basis of all *equality* and *freedom*.
>
> (Marx, 1857–58, 28, 176)

The point is that, behind market exchanges, a productive process takes place in which the real social relations of production are established: and the despotism of capital and labour exploitation take place in that process. Thus the bourgeois ideology does not lie, or say things contrary

to reality. Yet it only says some things, those which have to appear to the conscience as the only true ones and which are the only true ones from a bourgeois viewpoint. Instead it conceals the things which are, let's say, removed from reified consciousness. And since the ideology of the dominant class is the dominant ideology, even the working class is led to believe that the sole truth is that in which the bourgeois ideologues believe. Well, the unmasking of this 'contradiction' between what is preached and what is practised might seem a moralist critique of capitalism based on the assumption of the values preached by the capitalist ideology. In reality it is in no way a moralist critique. It is only a method of deconstructing ideology aimed at liberating revolutionary praxis from its paralysing power.

Against utopian socialism

The practical relevance of the critique of ideologies can also be deduced from the fact that Marx and Engels feel the need to address it in particular to some socialist thinkers, those through whom the bourgeois ideology finds its way into the workers' movement. One cannot avoid noting, for instance, the scornful tone of their criticism of various versions of petty bourgeois 'utopian socialism'. Equally derisory is the critique of Lassallian ideas that appears in the Gotha Programme. In all these cases, the judgements take on different slants, ranging from ridiculing all attempts to regenerate the human race on the grounds of superior moral principles to the observation that those attempts are mere figments of the imagination produced by minds clouded by the dominant ideology. What Marx and Engels try to do in these cases, is to fight bourgeois ideologies even when they reappear in modified form within the revolutionary movements.

But the philosophical interest of these criticisms is deeper than may appear from their political value, for Marx's and Engels' ethical relativism unmistakably emerges here. Any theory of justice is strongly condemned in the following reflection: 'Have not also the socialist sectarians the most varied notions about "fair" distribution?' (Marx, 1875, 24, 84). A theory of justice cannot be relative: it must be absolute, since it is based on universal moral principles. Yet the very fact that so many widely differing theories exist, proves that in reality they are just ideal deformations of particular points of view and material interests. A sort of theorem of the impossibility of moral philosophy is present in this reflection. Marx and Engels do not just reject a particular theory of justice, let's say, a bourgeois one, because they do not accept its basic principles. They reject the very conviction that there is a sense in moral philosophy. After all, there

should be only one such philosophy, given that moral principles can only be defined by *abstracting* from vested interests and from history. On the contrary, as the 11th thesis on Feuerbach states, 'the philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways'. The fact that many philosophies of justice exist proves that impartial principles cannot be defined, in other words, absolute justice cannot be conceived. Marx's italicization is meaningful: philosophers do not describe the world or explain it scientifically. Likewise, the members of 'socialist sects' are unable to grasp any universal principle of justice internal to the law of Nature or Reason or any other transcendental Being. The term 'interpreted', as used here by Marx, has a strong taste of subjectivity. In fact philosophers interpret the world 'in various ways', i.e. from different viewpoints; in the same manner, socialist sectarians entertain the most diverse notions of distributive justice.

Engels has precisely the same idea:

> The conceptions of good and evil have varied so much from nation to nation and from age to age that they have often been in direct contradiction to each other . . . What morality is preached to us today? There is first Christian-feudal morality . . . Alongside [this] we find the modern-bourgeois morality and beside it also the proletarian morality of the future . . . three great groups of moral theories which are in force simultaneously and alongside each other. Which, then, is the true one? Not one of them, in the sense of absolute finality . . . But when we see that the three classes of modern society, the feudal aristocracy, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, each have a morality of their own, we can only draw the one conclusion: that men, consciously or unconsciously, derive their ethical ideas in the last resort from the practical relations on which their class position is based.
>
> (Engels, 1876–78, 25, 86–7)[3]

To get a better grasp of this viewpoint, it might be useful to recall Hegel's distinction between morality (*Moralität*) and customary ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*).[4] The former concept defines universal and abstract rules of conduct as they present themselves to subjectivity; the latter the ethical values objectively manifested in a specific and historically determined community. Hegel criticizes Kant for the excessive importance he attributes to morality in the foundation of the categorical imperative, a foundation he judges to be too weak precisely because of its formal and abstract character, but he does not give up the hope that morality and ethical life may eventually converge through a dialectical process.

Now, on the ground of this conceptualization one can say that for Marx and Engels only customary ethical life exists, or rather: many ethics. These certainly represent an objective reality in that they regulate social life and individual behaviour in any particular mode of production, and precisely for this reason they are relative to the modes of production from which they emerge, i.e. they are part of the historically determined totalities in which the modes of production consist. Morality, on the contrary, cannot be objective because it is defined abstractly, i.e. by abstracting from real history. Thus Marx and Engels, like Hegel, reduce morality to subjectivity, but, unlike him, they annihilate its reality. In fact Hegel's 'subject' is a hypostatized abstraction located out of real time and space. The mature Marx and Engels bring the subjects down to earth, decline them in the plural and identify them with the concrete individuals existing in the phenomenal world. As a consequence, morality, precisely because it is an expression of concrete subjectivities, loses all ontological foundation: it just cannot exist because it claims to be universal when it is merely an expression of subjectivities. In fact the individual subjects can only express partial viewpoints emerging from the particular interests and ethical values in which they are embedded.

Marx's and Engels' refusal to justify communism with a moral theory of justice is expressed in quite explicit terms in their polemics against Proudhon. Marx criticizes the French socialist, among other things, precisely because he wants to found his 'mutual society' on an ideal of justice:

> Proudhon begins by taking his ideal of justice, of 'justice éternelle', from the juridical relations that correspond to the production of commodities . . . Then he turns round and seeks to reform the actual production of commodities, and the actual legal system corresponding thereto, in accordance with this ideal . . . Do we really know any more about 'usury', when we say it contradicts 'justice éternelle', 'équité éternelle', 'mutualité éternelle', and other 'vérités éternelles' than the fathers of the church did when they said it was incompatible with 'grâce éternelle', 'foi éternelle', and 'la volonté éternelle de Dieu'?
>
> (Marx, 1867–94, I, 35, 95–6)

A similar criticism of Proudhon is put forward by Engels (1872–73, 23, 377),[5] who also explains that it is a criticism which can be raised against any theory of revolution that appeals to universal principles of justice. After recalling that 'we describe . . . economic relationships as they are and as they are developing, and we provide the proof, strictly economically, that their development is at the same time the development of the elements

of a social revolution' (ib.), and after making clear that 'the economic relations of a given society present themselves in the first place as *interests*' (ib., 379), Engels accuses Proudhon of asserting that society is moved by *'Justice'* rather than interests, and then writes:

> People forget that their right derives from their economic conditions of life, just as they have forgotten that they themselves derive from the animal world . . . This justice is but the ideologised, idealised expression of the existing economic relations, now from their conservative, and now from their revolutionary angle. The justice of the Greeks and Romans held slavery to be just; the justice of the bourgeois of 1789 demanded the abolition of feudalism on the ground that it was unjust . . . The conception of eternal justice, therefore, varies not only with time and place, but also with the persons concerned, and belongs among those things of which Mülberger correctly says, 'everyone understands something different'. (ib., 23, 381)

Thus we arrive at what seems to me to be the principal argument in support of an interpretation of Marx and Engels as amoralists. As claimed by Wood (1972; 1979; 1984) and Miller (1984), *a normative approach to economic and political problems is quite alien to the edifice of the materialist conception of history*. For the two German revolutionaries, history is the history of class struggle, of development of productive forces, of changes in production relations. In any given society there are social classes with certain interests, classes whose actions are moved by material factors, not by ideal principles. The ideas produced in the struggles take the form of ideologies and world views. They represent society by looking at it from particular points of view, not on the grounds of universal presuppositions, even if people often try to give a general value to those points of view. That is why there are so many: because there are many conflicting interests. They also serve as practical instruments in politics, struggles and hegemony and could even serve as instruments for the scientific understanding of reality. But it is a science of history, economy and society, not of ethical truth. Well then, whether it is a positive science (in the best case) or an ideological deformation (in the worst), a world view can only have pragmatic and epistemic, not normative, value. And, at any rate, the possible normative implications of a doctrine would at most be the product of its political value.

Miller (1984, 45) clarified that Marx is not a cognitivist: he does not believe that any disagreement over the objectives of human actions can be resolved with the use of reason. In effect, one of the deepest criticisms raised

by Marx and Engels against utopian socialists in the *Manifesto* is that they aspire at

> representing, not true requirements, but the requirements of Truth; not the interests of the proletariat, but the interests of Human Nature, of Man in general, who belongs to no class, has no reality, who exists only in the misty realm of philosophical fantasy.
>
> (Marx and Engels, 1847–48, 6, 511)

And since the utopian socialists have achieved the Truth, 'how can people, when once they understand their system, fail to see in it the best possible plan of the best possible state of society?' (ib., 515). This presumption of reaching an absolute ethical truth with the use of reason only conceals a 'systematic pedantry', and a 'fanatical and superstitious belief in the miraculous effects of their social science' (ib., 517). Two peculiar characteristics make eighteenth-century socialism utopian: 1) the pretension to establish an absolute ethical truth to use as a foundation of a theory of justice; 2) the pretension of being able to achieve this truth in a cognitive approach. That is why this socialism is 'utopian' in the worst sense of the word, i.e. in the sense of 'unrealistic' and 'absurd': not because it tries to project or forecast new forms of social life, but because it tends to present them as the truth of a rational 'new social Gospel' and of a scientifically founded 'New Jerusalem' (ib., 515–16).

It is interesting to note that Marx and Engels, who are still quite reluctant to 'writing receipts for the cook-shops of the future' (Marx, 1867–94, I, 35, 17), show some admiration not only for the 'critical element' contained in utopian models, but also for 'the *practical measures* proposed in them – such as the abolition of the separation of town and country, of the family, of the carrying on of industries for the account of private individuals, and of the wage system, the proclamation of social harmony, the conversion of the functions of the State into a mere superintendence of production' (Marx and Engels, 1847–48, 6, 516). I emphasized the expression *practical measures* because I think it may be read, besides in contrast with 'critical element', also in the sense that it is not a *normative* proposition. In fact, if a cognitive approach to ethic is rejected, one cannot presume to rationally single out absolute normative criteria to reform society. Thus those 'practical measures' are appreciated by Marx and Engels not because they *prescribe* a model of social organization, but because they *describe* the consequences of certain political and social changes that arise out of revolution: 'all these proposals point solely to the disappearance of class antagonisms' (ib.).

Twenty years later, in *Antidühring*, Engels returns to the critique of the cognitive approach in ethical matters:

> Now it is a remarkable thing that it is precisely in this sphere that we most frequently encounter truths which claim to be eternal, final and ultimate and all the rest of it. That twice two makes four, that birds have beaks, and similar statements, are proclaimed as eternal truths only by those who aim at deducing, from the existence of eternal truths in general, the conclusion that there are also eternal truths in the sphere of human history – eternal morality, eternal justice, and so on – which claim a validity and scope similar to those of the insights and applications of mathematics. And then we can confidently rely on this same friend of humanity taking the first opportunity to assure us that all previous fabricators of eternal truths have been to a greater or lesser extent asses and charlatans, that they all fell into error and made mistakes.
>
> (Engels, 1876–78, 25, 83)

Precisely in the introduction to *Antidühring* Engels sets out his version of the theorem of the impossibility of moral philosophy. The cognitive approach to the theory of justice is identified in the following way:

> This mode of outlook is essentially that of all English and French and of the first German socialists, including Weitling. Socialism is the expression of absolute truth, reason and justice and has only to be *discovered* to conquer all the world by virtue of its own power. (ib., 20)

The word *discovered* I have italicized ironically refers to a pseudo-scientific method. The theorem asserts that human reason has no power to make those 'discoveries' and therefore that a theory capable of grasping the absolute truth of justice is impossible.

Proof:

> Absolute truth is independent of time, space, and of the historical development of man; (ib.)

however

> absolute truth, reason, and justice are different with the founder of each different school; (ib.)

it follows that

> there is no other ending possible in this conflict of absolute truths than that they shall be mutually exclusive one of the other. (ib.)

Explanation: Why is a theory of justice impossible? Because of the subjective character of the value judgments on which each founder of a moral philosophy tries to ground his ethical propositions:

> Each one's special kind of absolute truth, reason, and justice is again conditioned by his subjective understanding, his conditions of existence, the measure of his knowledge and his intellectual training. (ib.)

This is the crucial point. An ethical proposition is a value judgement; it consists in the attribution of value to a form of behaviour. And values do not exist objectively, but are only assessments that express the viewpoints of human subjects. The 'correct reasoning' whereby the objective truth of ethical principles should be 'discovered' cannot be formulated basically for two reasons: because social agents are driven by a variety of particular interests and objectively conditioned by 'the practical relations on which their class position is based' (ib., 87); because the reason of a moral philosopher is influenced by 'his subjective understanding' (ib., 20). In other words, morality is not a matter of objective rational knowledge. Absolute ethical principles cannot be achieved with the use of reason. After all, 'if it were such an easy business there would certainly be no dispute at all over good and evil; everyone would know what was good and what was bad' (ib., 86).

If Marx and Engels are not cognitivists, then their positions in moral philosophy are reducible to an approach of negative critique. Something more, however, can be said about Marx, namely, that he is, according to Ricoeur, a hermeneut of suspicion and, according to Gramsci, a philosopher of praxis. Both his explanations and critiques aim to interpret, understand, deconstruct, never to reflect reality as in a mirror. And they aim to *interpret* because they want to change reality:[6] If it is true that the philosophers have only interpreted the world in different ways, the point is that it has to be transformed. Precisely because the interests of various social classes may be fundamentally irreconcilable, in the end the decisive argument is the 'critique of arms'. In the relationship between the economic structure and the political-ideological superstructure of a social formation, it is not that the superstructure cannot affect the structure or that it is just a reflection of it. The fact is that ideas, norms and institutions have a sense and can be understood only as parts of a totality of relations wherein the interests

and economic relationships are crucial and fundamental. Thus the great legal and religious doctrines embodying the power apparatuses of each era cannot have an absolute value, despite the fact that they claim precisely that. They have a sense within the social formation they express and therefore they always have a historically determined value. The truths they assert are relative, partial, transient.

One can understand why revolutionary movements, according to Marx and Engels, are not really moved by an aspiration to justice, by moral values transcending class interests, in other words, by the intention to realize a just world. Rather, they are moved by the interests of particular classes. This was the case when the *ancien régime* was overcome under the impulse of the bourgeoisie emerging from capitalist development. This will be the case when capitalism is overcome by a proletarian revolution. It is true that the bourgeoisie strove to present its own partial interests as general interests of the whole society. It is also true that, in this endeavour, the production of illuminist philosophies with wide-ranging normative implications played an essential role. But that does not mean that the moral principles behind those philosophies have in fact an absolute value. Likewise, if the proletariat aspires to freeing the entire society by freeing itself, this has a sense only because it represents the great majority of society and, by abolishing all social classes, it tends to become the totality of society. It is not however true that the viewpoint of a majority expresses universal moral principles, not least because, as I have shown above, the idea of a 'universal class' is unacceptable in a materialist conception of history. The proletarian revolution is only 'the self-conscious, independent movement of the immense majority, *in the interest of the immense majority*' (Marx and Engels, 1847–48, 6, 495), not of the whole society; and it is really moved only by a particular interest, even if preponderant, as shown in the words I have italicized in the quotation. To achieve liberation, the proletariat does not need to camouflage its aspirations with philosophical, moral or religious doctrines of transcendental value. It only needs an effective scientific theory of the reality in which it acts.

The land of Cockaigne

If it is not possible to found the theory of communism on a utility and/or a solidarity ethic, then is it possible to found it on a non-normative approach that however preserves some welfarist implications? It is here that another millenarian myth comes on to the scene – the mythology of the land of Cockaigne, a land where nobody works yet everybody eats, the kingdom

of abundance. Marx and Engels took some trips to this fabulous land. Here is Engels' account:

> The development of large-scale industry [creates] capital and productive forces on a scale hitherto unheard of and the means are available to increase these productive forces in a short time to an infinite extent.
>
> (1847b, 6, 349)

> This development of industry will provide society with a sufficient quantity of products to satisfy the needs of all. (ib., 352)

Marx (1875, 24, 87) is equally optimist:

> After the productive forces have also increased with the all-round development of the individual, and all the springs of common wealth flow more abundantly – only then can the narrow horizon of bourgeois right be crossed in its entirety and society inscribe on its banners: From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs!

Here two conditions are enucleated for the realization of communism: the development of human all-roundness and the growth of productive forces. Let me focus on the latter, for the moment. This is a rather widespread view in Marxist thought, much more widespread than the eschatology of the New Man. It is anchored to the idea that capitalist production relations, once they reach a certain phase of development, become factors of hindrance to further growth of productive forces, and that this makes the proletarian revolution an evolutionary necessity. After the revolution, production will be organized on an increasingly wider scale since it can be rationally planned so as to enliven the increasing returns to scale and get rid of all waste, to the point of eventually producing a superabundance of goods. In this way, all the inefficiency problems of communist allocation would appear to be easily resolved. If production and productive forces grow to 'an infinite extent', why should there be any excess demand for goods?

Now let me consider the other condition. The one-sidedness of human faculties will be overcome and an all-round development of individuals, besides heightening their productivity, will render labour activity more and more agreeable, and transform it into a basic need. Marx never specifically explains the meaning of the all-roundness of human personality.

He is often accredited with a famous passage from *The German Ideology* which has caused much embarrassment to Marxist interpreters:

> As soon as the division of labour comes into being, each man has a particular, exclusive sphere of activity, which is forced upon him and from which he cannot escape. He is a hunter, a fisherman, a shepherd, or a critical critic, and must remain so if he does not want to lose his means of livelihood; whereas in communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, shepherd or critic.
>
> (Marx and Engels, 1845–46, 5, 47)

The embarrassment stems not so much from the bucolic nature of the society in question, as from the fact that Marx here seems to replicate the opinion of a utopian socialist, Charles Fourier, he later criticizes precisely because of his 'childishly naïve aspiration to reduce labour to 'pure fun, pure amusement' (Marx, 1857–58, 28, 530). On the other hand, taking this description as a metaphor adaptable to an industrial society, one must consider the possibility of an individual learning to become a pilot, a heart surgeon, a chemical engineer, a piano player and a Marxologist in order fully to develop his character.

Terrell Carver (1998, 104–7) has found a suitable way of interpreting the passage and so relieved us of this embarrassment. He noted that the above passage was written almost entirely by Engels and that Marx tried to correct it by adding phrases on 'criticise after dinner', 'critic' and 'critical critic'. We can only imagine what happened. Engels gave vent to his youthful utopian passion and Marx, with a few words, gave him a friendly rap over the knuckles, thus transforming his idyllic slip-up into an ironic lashing.

At any rate, Engels, who is more prone than Marx to invent 'receipts for the cook-shops of the future', is not deterred, and many years later, in *Antidühring* (1876–78, 25, 277–83), he goes back to the problem and proposes a more realistic solution, envisaging things like job-rotation in factories, reductions in labour time, overcoming the separation of town and country by the rural localization of factories, superseding the division between intellectual and manual work through attribution of at least one manual and one intellectual job to each individual. Now, the most

interesting feature of Engels' new thesis is its descriptive rather than normative value: it is a description of the consequences of the workers' liberation from capitalist domination (ib., 186). Of less interest is its claim to be the description of a process made necessary by technical progress, as 'the machinery itself rebels against this anachronism' of 'fossilised specialisation' (ib., 280).

Engels here refers to Marx's analysis of the technological revolutions brought about by the development of large-scale industry, revolutions that would cause 'variation of work, consequently fitness of the labourer for varied work, consequently the greatest possible development of his varied aptitudes' (Marx, 1867–94, I, 35, 490). These effects would make it necessary

> to replace the detail-worker of today, crippled by life-long repetition of one and the same trivial operation, and thus reduced to the mere fragment of a man, by the fully developed individual, fit for a variety of labours, ready to face any change of production, and to whom the different social functions he performs, are but so many modes of giving free scope to his own natural and acquired powers. (ib., 491)

This is a more generic receipt than Engels'. Marx is not saying that technical progress renders job-rotation necessary in a given production process. Rather he says that technical change 'incessantly launches masses of capital and of workpeople from one branch of production to another' (ib., 489). Therefore his fully developed individual might simply be a person who is able to change his job frequently during his lifetime, an ability that may also be acquired through the 'theoretical and practical' education developed in a communist society (ib., 491).

A problem of interpretation remains open: whether the transformation of work is fruit of the growth of productive forces or rather the consequence of a change in production relations. In the former interpretation the task of man's regeneration and work transformation is assigned to technical progress intended as a deterministic and socially neutral process. And I have already observed that Engels (1876–78, 25, 280) in particular develops the idea that the expansion of productive forces makes necessary 'an organisation of production in which . . . productive labour, instead of being a means of subjugating men, will become a means of their emancipation, by offering each individual the opportunity to develop all his faculties, physical and mental, in all directions.' In other words it is technical progress that brings about the development of human all-roundness.

Summing up, it seems that Engels' vision, rather than Marx's, tries to solve the inefficiency problem of a welfarist theory of communism by resorting to the land of Cockaigne. It is evident that, if technological growth eventually succeeds in rendering work activity varied and agreeable, no excess demand of human resources should arise. It is not important to establish whether enjoyment of work will emerge from its function of self-realization (like writing a book) or from its capacity to give pleasure in itself (like reading a book) (Elster, 1986). The essential point is that, if labour activity is gratifying, everybody will give the best of their abilities independently of how much they are rewarded economically. Then the maximum social satisfaction will be attained through a distribution that equals the satisfaction in consumption (included enjoyment in work activities) for all individuals, so that each will receive according to his wishes.

Certain doctrines of Saint-Simon and Owen immediately spring to mind. I will deal with the Welsh communist below in this chapter. As to the French 'socialist', he had in fact formulated a sort of technocratic and deterministic anticipation of the materialist conception of history. According to him, the evolution of humankind advances through a succession of construction and destruction phases. There is construction when the social structure is consonant with the progress made in the fields of knowledge and technology. In this case political institutions are conducive to human progress. However if they continue to survive when the technological and scientific bases of human society have changed, if they withstand the necessary transformations, then they cease to be functional, giving rise to an inevitable destructive mutation. Saint-Simon expected human salvation from a kind of political organization that would assign power to the *industriels*, i.e. the entrepreneurs, the engineers, the bankers. These would plan social production in a rational way, thus favouring the greatest development of productive forces. Yet association in itself has a purely instrumental value. If enlightened dictatorship of the *industriels* is the most suitable State to favour technical progress, then this is the best possible type of organization. It is the development of productive forces that emancipates humankind.

In support of a notion of communism as a land of Cockaigne, a famous passage from the *Grundrisse* is often quoted in which Marx seems to give vent to a prophetic inspiration. It is worthwhile quoting it at length, not least to pay homage to its poetic value.

> But in the degree in which large-scale industry develops, the creation of real wealth becomes less dependent upon labour time and the quantity of labour employed than upon the power of the agents set

in motion during labour time. And their power – their POWERFUL EFFECTIVENESS – in turn bears no relation to the immediate labour time which their production costs, but depends, rather, upon the general level of development of science and the progress of technology, or on the application of science to production. . . . Real wealth manifests itself rather – and this is revealed by large-scale industry – in the immense disproportion between the labour time employed and its product, and similarly in the qualitative disproportion between labour reduced to a pure abstraction and the power of the production process which it oversees. Labour no longer appears so much as included in the production process, but rather man relates himself to that process as its overseer and regulator . . . He stands beside the production process, rather than being its main agent. Once this transformation has taken place, it is neither the immediate labour performed by man himself, nor the time for which he works, but the appropriation of his own general productive power, his comprehension of Nature and domination of it by virtue of his being a social entity – in a word, the development of the social individual – that appears as the cornerstone of production and wealth. The *theft of alien labour time, which is the basis of present wealth*, appears to be a miserable foundation compared to this newly developed one, the foundation created by large-scale industry itself. As soon as labour in its immediate form has ceased to be the great source of wealth, labour time ceases and must cease to be its measure, and therefore exchange value [must cease to be the measure] of use value. The *surplus labour of the masses* has ceased to be the condition for the development of general wealth, just as the *non-labour of a few* has ceased to be the condition for the development of the general powers of the human mind. As a result, production based upon exchange value collapses, and the immediate material production process itself is stripped of its form of indigence and antagonism. Free development of individualities, and hence not the reduction of necessary labour time in order to posit surplus labour, but in general the reduction of the necessary labour of society to a minimum, to which then corresponds the artistic, scientific, etc., development of individuals, made possible by the time thus set free and the means produced for all of them . . . The development of fixed capital shows the degree to which society's general science, KNOWLEDGE, has become an *immediate productive force*, and hence the degree to which the conditions of the social life process itself have been brought under the control of the GENERAL INTELLECT and remoulded according to it. It shows the degree to which the social productive forces are produced not merely

> in the form of knowledge but as immediate organs of social praxis, of the actual life process.
>
> (Marx, 1857–58, 29, 90–2)

The passage seems to give a description of a very advanced form of communism[7] wherein living labour is no longer a source of wealth (for instance, a system based on the production of robots by means of robots), and therefore exchange value has ceased to be a measure of use value (i.e. prices are nil). If use values are not expressed in exchange values, it means that there is an excess supply of all goods. Here is the kingdom of abundance. A variant of this model of final communism might predict necessary labour to be reduced to a minimum rather than zeroed, as in the case in which robots need to be reset by men from time to time. However it must be free labour because, if it were paid for, commodities would have a cost and could not be offered at zero price. After all, if this kind of labour too were gratifying, why could it not be undertaken for nothing? Thus the land of Cockaigne abolishes all forms of scarcity and does away with labour or, alternatively, transforms it into a purely playful and artistic activity. One cannot exclude the idea that the sometimes feverish mind of Marx was excited by this kind of dream.

However it is possible, and more sensible, to put forward another interpretation. Marx is not saying that the input of necessary labour is zeroed. He only says that 'the creation of real wealth becomes less dependent upon labour time and the quantity of labour employed than upon the power' of technical progress embodied in machines. Therefore the employment of living labour is not wiped out. It is only reduced to a very low level. This is why there is an 'immense disproportion between the labour time employed and its product', that is to say, labour productivity is very high; which is a result of the productive use of science. In this context, labour values, intended as the quantities of labour embodied in commodities, are perfectly defined. They precisely measure the direct and indirect labour inputs necessary to produce goods and, in an economy without profits, they coincide with the cost of production. Then Marx says that 'labour time ceases and must cease to be its measure'. *Its* measure of what? Evidently of *wealth*, i.e. of the array of material goods produced. The term 'wealth' in classical English economics and in Marx's scientific language does not mean 'value'. It means 'profusion of real goods'. Thus it should be noted: Marx is saying that, in a productive context of high labour productivity, there is no sense in measuring the magnitude of 'wealth' in terms of labour input. In actual fact, this kind of measure, by reducing the net output to living labour,[8] would produce a disconcerting

result: it would express enormous wealth in terms of extremely low value. Marx, at any rate, is not saying that it is not possible to measure the *value* of output in terms of embodied labour. What he really argues is that in this situation exchange value *must* cease to be the measure of use value. That is, goods are no longer sold on a market. He does not explain why this is so. He does not say that some kind of historical process will give rise to this transformation. Nor does he say that the transformation will take place *as a consequence* of that enormous technical progress. He only says that, in those conditions of technological development, capitalism and the market must be superseded by a form of communism in which commodities and markets no longer exist, and where, as a consequence, goods have no exchange value. This does not imply that goods are produced at no cost, nor does it imply that all forms of scarcity are done away with. Such a type of communism is perfectly compatible with that to which Marx refers in *Capital* and *Critique of the Gotha Programme* and Engels in *Antidühring*, namely, a society in which market exchange is abolished, but goods are still allocated and distributed on the ground of their embodied labour:

> After the abolition of the capitalist mode of production, but still retaining social production, the determination of value continues to prevail in the sense that the regulation of labour time and the distribution of social labour among the various production groups, ultimately the bookkeeping encompassing all this, become more essential than ever.
>
> (Marx, 1867–94, III, 37, 838)

This communism is not the land of Cockaigne for it makes use of necessary labour. There is no doubt that Marx and Engels have undergone some Saint-Simonian influence, and that they sometimes dream of that country. But it is evident that a purely technological 'solution' to the allocative problems of communism is unacceptable from a Marxist point of view. To start with, the land of Cockaigne, too, induces downgrading of political action. Why should one commit oneself to class struggle if liberation of the oppressed is ensured by technical progress? Would it not be a better choice to go to work in the R&D departments of capitalist multinationals? Or on the Stock Exchange control committees or with the antitrust authorities, where one could contribute to remove the obstacles that production relations oppose to the development of productive forces? Or even in the major banks, where, according to Saint-Simon, the rational planning of production takes place?

Yet there are some deeper motives that induce us to reject this 'solution'. It is entirely dominated by a certain technological determinism that nourishes a vision of human history as a one-way process and a conception of communism as a necessary outlet for technical progress. The new social organization would emerge as a consequence of the incessant growth of productive forces. The various production relations established from time to time in human evolution succeed so long as they favour that growth. When they are no longer functional to it, they are superseded and substituted by new kinds of production relations. Communism enters the realm of possibility the moment that capitalism, after having almost fully accomplished its task of transforming monkey into man, exhausts its driving force. Communism, once realized, releases those very energies which render it technically feasible and efficient.[9]

Engels, moreover, especially in *Antidühring*, develops a theory of the State which is strongly impregnated with economism and technological determinism. Historically, the State grew up because of low labour productivity and the necessity to ensure, using violence, the attribution of surplus to the ruling classes. However the technological progress brought about by capitalism would give rise to an unlimited growth of productivity, thus rendering more and more superfluous the maintenance of an oppressive political apparatus. With the advent of communism private property would be abolished and the means of production would be nationalized. As an effect, an unprecedented burst of productive forces would ensue, so that the State would become superfluous and eventually would dissolve by becoming the owner of all means of production.

Note that this version does not resort to ethic to solve the problem of communism, neither a utilitarian or a solidarity ethic. It rejects any normative notion of communism, only to slip into a positive and positivist approach based on a deterministic and economicist philosophy of history.

A man rich in needs

But there is more than that. The doctrine of a communism of abundance contradicts the most solid and innovative part of Marx's anthropology, i.e. the idea that human nature is socially, economically and culturally conditioned in history. It can work only within a naturalist notion of man, a conception which dehistoricizes his needs and aspirations. In fact, not even the growth of productivity *ad infinitum* can succeed in fully satisfying all human needs, if these, in turn, develop in relation to the growth of production. And this is precisely Marx's conviction: human needs are not given, are not determined by nature, but are a function of

the capacity to satisfy them. Capitalist development always creates new goods together with the need for them:

> Production, on the other hand, produces consumption by creating the definite mode of consumption, and also by creating the incentive to consumption, the very capacity to consume, as a need.
>
> (Marx, 1857–58, 28, 31)

> As the ceaseless striving for the general form of wealth, however, capital forces labour beyond the limits of natural need and thus creates the material elements for the development of the rich individuality, which is as varied and comprehensive in its production as it is in its consumption, and whose labour therefore no longer appears as labour but as the full development of activity itself, in which natural necessity has disappeared in its immediate form; because natural need has been replaced by historically produced need. (ib., 251)

Thus needs are historically produced by capitalist development. It is important to understand that Marx values this process positively. In the continuous expansion of the variety of human needs he sees a form of personality enrichment:

> The production of surplus value based upon the increase and development of the productive forces, requires production of new consumption, so that the sphere of consumption within circulation is enlarged, as that of production [of absolute surplus value] was enlarged before. Firstly, quantitative increase in existing consumption; secondly, the creation of new needs by the propagation of existing ones over a wider area; thirdly, production of new needs and discovery and creation of new use values . . . Hence the development of the natural sciences to their highest point; the discovery, creation and satisfaction of new needs arising from society itself; cultivating all the qualities of social man and producing him in a form as rich as possible in needs because rich in qualities and relations – producing man as the most total and universal social product possible (for in order to enjoy many different kinds of things he must be capable of enjoyment, that is he must be cultivated to a high degree) – all these are also conditions of production based on capital. (ib., 235–6)

I doubt if an apologist of the bourgeoisie was ever able to sing such high praise of capitalist accumulation. And note that Marx is not simply saying

that capitalism is 'progressive' in that it heightens the growth of productive forces. He is saying much more: that capitalism creates a man who is rich in his ability to enjoy and 'rich in qualities and relations' and 'cultivated to a high degree' and that it creates him like that because it makes him rich of new needs. This seems all the more surprising, for Marx knows very well that capitalism stimulates the demand for goods by manipulating tastes, that in the sphere of consumption there is at work

> a hypocritical pretence of bourgeois 'philanthropy', which in general consists in fobbing the workers off with 'pious wishes' [and that] each capitalist certainly demands that his workers should save, but only his own, because they confront him as workers; but by no means the remaining world of workers, because they confront him as consumers . . . He therefore tries to find all kinds of means to spur them on to consumption, to endow his commodities with new attractions, to talk the workers into feeling new needs.
>
> (Marx, 1857–8, 28, 217)

He also knows that in the bourgeois society consumption and the satisfaction of human needs are not the goal of production, but, quite the contrary, that production is the end of consumption and 'wealth the end of production' (ib., 411). However this is a secondary aspect of the process of the spiritual enrichment of the 'social man'. It is secondary because it is the price to be paid *transitorily* in order to obtain a permanent result. In fact the stimulus to the growth of workers' needs 'is an essential moment of civilisation, and upon which rests the historical justification but also the present power of capital' (ib., 217). Obviously the process continues beyond capitalism. And once 'the narrow bourgeois form is peeled off, what is wealth if not the universality of the individual's needs, capacities, enjoyments, productive forces, etc., produced in universal exchange?' (ib., 411). In other words, by virtue of the growth of productivity triggered by capitalism, the 'social man' is capable of broadening his own 'spiritual' qualities over and over again.[10] The superseding of capitalism does not interrupt the process of social construction of personality on the ground of the expansion of needs, rather it enhances it because in communism 'the worker's conditions of life would improve, and his aspirations become greater' (Marx, 1867–94, I, 667).[11] Besides that, it turns the worker into a more conscious being, to the extent that, by bringing production and technical progress under the control of the producers, it enables all the individuals to consciously develop their own 'superior' needs and to

freely construct their own personality. In the higher phase of communism needs are not limited in a Franciscan way; quite the contrary, they are liberated and multiplied; they become less standardized and more personal; they become 'free needs' of the individual (Heller, 1976). It follows that scarcity can never be fully eradicated. This being so, the communism of overabundance is highly improbable.

Moreover – let me say in passing, although I will return to this issue later – I do not share the interpretation according to which human personality expansion is caused by a neutral technical progress. According to Marx, a situation in which work becomes 'the first necessity of life' refers to changes that involve not only the productive forces but above all production relations. In this view, it is communism, not machines, that enables reorganization of work activity and enrichment of personality, rendering both more all-rounded and consequently more gratifying. But the type of man that emerges from the change is unlike Saint-Simon's obedient producer. His salient characteristic is not so much an individual attitude at doing the utmost to heighten the means of production efficiency. Rather it is an autonomous development of personality and a liberation of the individual capacity to create and enjoy. This kind of person does not live in the land of Cockaigne for he realizes himself even in hard work. Thus he should be left out of it.

Note that I am not denying that technical progress is incessant; nor that a more rational organization than capitalism may contribute to accelerate it; and nor even that technological evolution might facilitate labour allocation in a communist society. After all, what's wrong in imagining a world in which many unpleasant and repetitive jobs are assigned to robots? What does not convince me, is the idea that the realization of communism depends basically on the activity of engineers. But, in particular, I reject the conviction that this realization is improbable. Marx and Engels believed it possible in the nineteenth century, the Florentine Ciompi attempted to achieve it in the fourteenth century. Why should we relegate it to science fiction? This would in fact be the inevitable consequence of adopting a notion of communism as an evolutionary welfarist theory of history: if we aspire to an egalitarian setting that maximizes social welfare by abolishing scarcity, then, since needs grow continually with productive forces, we will always be compelled to shift ahead the horizon of its possibility.

Summing up, it must be said quite plainly that Marx and Engels are not theoreticians of the land of Cockaigne, although they did tack around those shores. Certainly they are strongly convinced that the passage to communism will bring about a reorganization of production leading to a

substantial attenuation of the scarcity problem through productivity growth and waste reduction, yet they do not think scarcity will ever be completely eliminated, even in the higher phase of communism. Three arguments of prominent theoretical value further demonstrate this conclusion.

First of all, the conviction that labour will not be eliminated in communism. It will become freer, more gratifying, and offer greater opportunities for self-realization, it might even become a primary need. But it will still be hard work, an activity necessary to produce useful goods, and thus necessary labour. It will not become sheer play. Which implies that goods are scarce. Further confirmation of the conviction about the permanence of necessary labour is also seen in that concerning the desirability of reducing working time. If there was no longer any scarcity and work was reduced to mere playful and artistic activity, why should we aspire to reduce working time?

Secondly, Marx is convinced that even in communism it is necessary to save to satisfy future needs. He says so in *Capital* and in *Critique of the Gotha Programme*. And he says so in *Grundrisse* too, precisely a few lines below the passage where he seems to fantasize a kind of communism without labour and 'without value':

> The part of production aimed at the production of fixed capital does not produce immediate objects of enjoyment or immediate exchange values; at least it does not produce immediately realisable exchange values. *So it depends upon the level of productivity already attained . . . that an increasingly large part of production time is employed in producing means of production*. This presupposes that society can wait.
>
> (Marx, 1857–58, 29, 92–3)

So it presupposes that society needs to save. Well, saving decisions, whether private or collective, are economic choices made necessary by the scarcity of goods (Buchanan, 1982, 169). In fact they serve 'to constantly expand reproduction to the extent dictated by social needs' (Marx, 1867–94, III, 37, 863). Therefore higher-phase communism is not the kingdom of overabundance.

Finally it must be noted that Marx and Engels pay some attention to the ecological problem, showing a certain awareness of the scarcity of natural resources. Obviously one cannot expect advanced environmental sensibility from students who lived at a time when many European countries were going through their industrial takeoff stage and who perceived industrialization as a necessary condition for labour emancipation. Yet it must be recognized that, precisely in relation to their study of the

capitalist system, Marx and Engels show that they are quite immune to the industrialist ideology of their times. Marx knows that

> all progress in capitalistic agriculture is a progress in the art, not only of robbing the labourer, but of robbing the soil; all progress in increasing the fertility of the soil for a given time, is a progress towards ruining the lasting sources of that fertility. The more a country starts its development on the foundation of modern industry, like the United States, for example, the more rapid is this process of destruction. Capitalist production, therefore, develops technology, and the combining together of various processes into a social whole, only by sapping the original sources of all wealth – the soil and the labourer.
>
> (Marx, 1867–94, I, 35, 508–9)

This occurs because capitalism exploits natural resources with the object of profit and without developing social consciousness of the man-nature relationship. Instead

> from the standpoint of a higher economic form of society, private ownership of the globe by single individuals will appear quite as absurd as private ownership of one man by another. Even a whole society, a nation, or even all simultaneously existing societies taken together, are not the owners of the globe. They are only its possessors, its usufructuaries, and, like *boni patres familias*, they must hand it down to succeeding generations in an improved condition.
>
> (Marx, 1867–94, III, 37, 763)

Engels is no less sensitive to environmental problems and argues that a society aware of the man–nature relationship will solve these problems by urban–rural planning:

> Abolition of the antithesis between town and country is not merely possible. It has become a direct necessity of industrial production itself, just as it has become a necessity of agricultural production and, besides, of public health. The present poisoning of the air, water and land can be put an end to only by the fusion of town and country; and only such fusion will change the situation of the masses now languishing in the towns, and enable their excrement to be used for the production of plants instead of for the production of disease.
>
> (Engels, 1876–78, 25, 282)

Moreover, in a letter to Kautsky of February 1881 Engels (1881, 46, 57) shows he is aware of the demographic problem, that is, of 'the abstract possibility that mankind will increase numerically to such an extent that its propagation will have to be kept within bounds,' and maintains that only a communist society will be able to put this policy into effect.

I am not interested here in investigating the theoretical bases for a Marxist approach to ecology.[12] I have touched on this argument only to show that Marx and Engels know of the existence of a fundamental question of the scarcity of natural resources and therefore that they are not guilty of the ingenuousness of pretending to solve the allocative problems of communism with the utopia of the land of Cockaigne.

A world in which every possible human need can be satisfied by virtue of technical progress which expands production without limits cannot exist for two fundamental reasons: because needs expand together with production and because only a limited quantity of natural resources are available. In fact, according to Marx and Engels, among the policies aimed at solving the allocative problems of communism there are: urban–rural planning, collective saving, demographic control and the reduction of working time.

A digression: 'English communism'

There have been communist thinkers who went in search of the Third Kingdom in the land of Cockaigne. According to these voyagers it is not necessary to restrict needs to the essential in a Franciscan way. It is sufficient to curb them 'internally', by getting rid of the superfluous ones. But they can remain rich. Obviously, in this case it is necessary to distinguish superfluous needs from genuine ones; hence the necessity to appeal to some doctrine of human nature that defines what is genuine and what is not.

As far as I know, the most ambitious attempt at elaborating a theory of needs whereby the superfluous ones can clearly be distinguished from the basic ones has been made by Doyal and Gough (1991). They define 'basic needs' as objective and universal necessities of life common to all human beings. Moreover, by decreeing that all men have a right to satisfy basic needs, they build a theory of justice which, although they explicitly declare not Marxist, is in fact shared by many utopian Marxists of today. The distributive criterion 'to each according to his needs' should be a principle of justice applicable to an ideal welfare State that aims at maximizing the basic needs satisfaction of all people.

The theories of justice of this kind must also presuppose that people have a certain ethical disposition of fairness, otherwise it is not possible to

account for their ability to limit their requests to society by adjusting them to those which society can legitimately satisfy. After all, who decides about which needs must be considered basic for all men? Doyal and Gough? The Central Planning Authority? Certainly not. The citizens themselves will make this decision. Therefore people must have ethical preferences that are somewhat universal. Not only this, but the individuals must be endowed with altruistic sentiments, so that they can give the best of their abilities spontaneously to society. According to Preve (1997, 21), for instance, higher-phase communism requires 'an internal limitation of needs' and presupposes Epicure's and Spinoza's philosophical wisdom. But Epicure's model implies friendship or, better still, a society of friends. Personally I find it somewhat difficult to unearth this philosophical wisdom in the mature Marx, who rather thinks that production determines consumption, whilst the growth of productive forces helps to enrich human personality by expanding 'rich' needs. If communism contributes to the building of an all-round personality, it is not because it induces people to Epicurean wisdom, but because it puts productive organization and the guidelines for the growth of technical progress in the hands of free and associated individuals.

At any rate, since this interpretation of communism is rather widespread nowadays, it is worthwhile giving a rough outline of it. I will try to do it by retracing its origins in the thought of Robert Owen, the 'utopian socialist' who 'proceeded from *Bentham's* system to found English communism' (Engels and Marx, 1844, 4, 131). Owen is held in high consideration by the young Marx and Engels, who find in his thought 'the teaching of *materialism* as the teaching of *real humanism* and the logical basis of *communism*' (ib.). Even Bentham receives some praise from the young Engels (1844, 4, 528), who annexes him to 'the property of the proletariat'; this because, despite his having 'a school within the Radical bourgeoisie, it is only the proletariat and the Socialists who have succeeded in developing his teachings a step forward'.

The interest in Owen's thought shown by some present-day radicals may also be justified by the fact that, among the three 'utopian' socialists most appreciated by Marx and Engels (the other two being Fourier and Saint-Simon), he is the only one who did not become an 'antique'. His doctrine is in fact still alive, for example in the world cooperative movement. Nor should we forget that at least two streams of contemporary radical thought can be traced back to the British communist's philosophy, although not everybody would be prepared to admit it. I am thinking of certain tendencies of the green movements who propose to solve ecological problems by the limitation of consumption; not to mention certain welfarist theories of justice developed within so-called 'analytical Marxism'.

Owen's (1842, V, 58–9) utilitarianism is clear: 'man desires to be happy', therefore 'each nucleus of society will be founded and entirely constructed on this principle. THE HAPPINESS OF ALL will be the end and object of every portion of this re-organization, through the whole extent of society.' In the New Moral World the 'united interest and feeling will combine to ensure the well-being and happiness of one and all over the world', better still, 'man's well-being and greatest happiness' (ib. 63).

The achievement of maximization of welfare for *everyone*, however, is not so easy in a world of scarcity and egoism, for each individual would tend to privately appropriate as many resources as possible in order to maximize personal happiness. If the world is structured in such a way that, by virtue of the market and private property, it is possible for some people to pursue their own goals to the detriment of others, then much of the population may live in poverty and may be unable to achieve the greatest happiness. Thus a 'perfect' world must eradicate all inequality and establish a 'fair' distribution of happiness; which can be obtained by 'a never-ceasing supply of wealth for the use and enjoyment of all, and the right of each to produce and enjoy his fair share of it' (ib., xxii). It will be an egalitarian justice: in the new society 'any inequality of condition will consequently cease' (ib.).

Now it is well-known that a utilitarian social welfare function is able to justify egalitarian redistribution policies under two conditions: 1) human beings must be fundamentally equal, or at least very similar, in endowments and tastes; 2) marginal utility must be decreasing.[13] Owen sensed the importance of these two hypotheses.

Obviously one cannot expect too much of the principle of decreasing marginal utility, since it was defined with some precision only in the late nineteenth-century marginalist revolution. Bentham came close to defining it, and so too did Owen:

> Each individual is so organized, that impressions, which at their commencement, and for a limited time, produce agreeable sensations, will, if continued without intermission beyond a certain period, become indifferent, disagreeable, and ultimately painful. (ib., I, 3)

As if to say that, if a person carries on eating one sweet after another, the utility of the last sweet eaten continually decreases and may eventually become negative. Let me recall that this axiom implies that redistributing income from the rich to the poor *may* raise the summation of their utilities, so that an egalitarian distribution may attain maximization of social welfare.

I say 'may' because, as already argued above, if the endowments and utility functions of human beings are different, the desired result might not be ensured. Owen was aware of the problem. And he knew 'that the organization of no two human beings is ever precisely similar at birth' (ib., I, 1). Then it is here that education must intervene. Obviously 'nor can art subsequently form any two individuals, from infancy to maturity' (ib.); yet, according to Owen,

> the constitution of every infant, except in case of organic disease, is capable of being formed into a *very inferior*, or a *very superior*, being, according to the qualities of the external circumstances allowed to influence that constitution from birth. (ib.)

Now, by means of education and a shrewd reorganization of society, 'all will become superior, physically, intellectually and morally' (ib., xxv). The natural inequality of people can never be completely eliminated; yet it can be much reduced through pedagogical and political institutions. Owen had a rougher and stronger idea than Marx about the protean disposition of human nature. According to him, man's personality is essentially malleable, and can intentionally be reformed by society, precisely through education.[14]

If human beings can be reformed to make them similar, they are nevertheless still at least slightly different, and the problem remains: what prevents the egoism of the strong from maximizing their own welfare to the detriment of the weak? From this derives the necessity to mould all individuals to become superior beings, not only physically and intellectually, but also and particularly 'morally'. Owen's perfect society is a New *Moral* World, one wherein 'the sympathies of human nature will be rightly directed from infancy and will engender a spirit of benevolence, confidence and affection, which will pervade mankind' (ib., xxvi). So 'happiness will not be purchasable, except by a reciprocity of good actions and kind feelings' (ib., xxiv). Here is Owen's New Man. And it is here that we must look for that 'real humanism' component of his doctrine which the young Marx and Engels like so much. As I have argued above, a utilitarian philosophy enriched with a solidarity ethic is sufficient to justify a doctrine of communism as a society oriented towards egalitarian justice.

Yet Owen did not content himself with remoulding man and society to obtain maximization of welfare through egalitarian distribution. He also wanted the new society to make social welfare grow rapidly by means of technical progress. The Third Kingdom was not enough for him. He also wanted the land of Cockaigne. Accordingly, in his view, science and

technical progress will develop in every direction (also because private appropriation of intellectual products will be abolished and their maximum diffusion favoured), so that 'wealth and scientific knowledge will be obtained and made abundant for the most ample use and gratification of all' (ib., xxiii). Not only this, but 'wealth of all kinds will be so delightfully created *in greater abundance than will ever be required*' (ib., xxiv). It seems that the New Moral World will evolve toward a system that enjoys an excess supply of every good. This is the land of Cockaigne.

In reality the Welsh communist believed that not all desires deserve to be satisfied. Besides, he wanted his model to be realized soon, and was convinced this could be done in the Great Britain of his times. Industry and technical progress, backed by social reorganization and education, would make it possible to satisfy at least genuine needs immediately. And this presupposes a theory of needs that distinguishes between genuine and unnatural ones.

A theory of this kind was outlined by John Gray (1825), a 'Ricardian socialist' of Owenist faith. Man has two kinds of desires; those that pertain to him as an animal and those that pertain to him as an intelligent being. The latter, in turn, are divided into two kinds: congenital ones and those which are acquired through education, habits and environmental influence. Well then, man must only develop his natural needs, even among those pertaining to him as an intelligent being. Thus genuine needs are the natural ones, both physical and intellectual (like the desire for knowledge). The aim of human development is to fully satisfy these needs.

Now it seems there is a sort of an *embarras de richesse* in Owen's model, for his new world is conquered through a moral as well as a technological revolution. One might ask: what need is there for the New Man if there is technical progress? Or, alternatively: what is the need for a land of Cockaigne if social reorganization produces a New Man capable of morally limiting his own needs to natural ones? In other words, Owen's model of communism is overdetermined: it contemplates more factors of welfare than are necessary. Equally overdetermined are those modern theories of justice – radical or 'Marxist' – which try to combine the New Man myth with that of the omnipotence of technical progress.

At any rate, Owen's approach is fundamentally different from Marx's. For the German communist a distinction between natural and superfluous needs is not relevant. Quite the contrary, he maintains that human needs, far from being determined naturally, are formed socially. Even 'subsistence' needs depend on the habits and customs of a society. All the more so are the 'superfluous' and 'free' ones which develop in a communist

world. According to Marx, as I argued in the preceding section, the consumption model typical of a communist society is prompted not by sober poverty, but by unrestrained wealth of needs. It is like a postmodern Macondo: 'it is the economy of the superfluous: all necessary needs are abolished and all superfluous needs are developed'.[15] It is the liberation of desires, the resurrection, not the mortification, of the flesh.

Part 2
A Theory of Freedom

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3
Freedom and the Individual

The three faces of Marx

In the previous chapters I first argued that there is a moralist Marx and a moralist Engels and that it is possible, albeit unwarranted, to interpret their theory of communism as founded on a universal philosophy of justice and human essence. I showed not only that the writings of the two revolutionaries are full of moral condemnations of capitalism, but also that in their early works they set out a solidarity ethic which is founded on a humanist ontology of the social being characterized by many a feature of an essentialist metaphysics. However I also argued that an amoralist Marx and an amoralist Engels exist, and that these should be our heroes, but not as economicist philosophers of history. I showed that they explicitly refuse to base their analysis of capitalism and their political positions on any moral philosophy or theory of justice, even an egalitarian one. Is it then true that a paradox emerges here as a consequence of a genuine contradiction of convictions (Geras, 1980, 6)?

How can this problem be tackled? Let me make it immediately clear that, from a practical point of view, there is only one solution. Those who want to continue to use Marx's and Engels' theory as a guide for the study of capitalism and the politics of communism have to make a choice: either they side with Gioacchino da Fiore or with Machiavelli. From a theoretical point of view, though, the paradox solution is not so easy, for it has to be accounted for. I do not think it is possible to find a way out of the difficulty by maintaining that the refusal to criticize capitalism on the ground of a universal ethic of *justice* is compatible with the adoption of a universal ethic of *freedom*, as Lukes (1985) argued. This is because the materialist Marx and Engels reject ethic *tout court*, not a particular ethic (Geras, 1980, 6); they reject any extra-historical viewpoint.

The solution to the dilemma was found by Louis Althusser when he proved that an epistemological break separates the young from the mature Marx. Undoubtedly it is easy to observe that the evidence in support of the existence of a Marxian ethic emerges from a reading of early works. It is more difficult to single out the exact breaking point. The *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* come mostly before his moment of maturity, while *The German Ideology*, where Marx and Engels criticize Feuerbach's humanism and essentialism (Fineschi, 2006, 91–5), comes mainly after it. Philosophically, though, it is possible to be more accurate: the watershed lies within the *Theses on Feuerbach*.[1] In particular I would like to call attention to the passage between the 10th and the 11th theses. Whilst the latter founds the philosophy of praxis scientifically, the former posits an anthropological presupposition for the 'new materialism', namely 'human society or social humanity'.

It is interesting to note that the epistemological break was preceded by a sharp change in political orientation.[2] The Marx and Engels who wake up to politics and to journalism from a liberalist stance are imbued with humanist philosophy. In their maturing process they become communist. Yet in the period, let's say, of their intellectual adolescence, they are still humanist philosophers,[3] and devotees of a 'petty-bourgeois communism' (Althusser, 1976a, 69). The fully mature Marx and Engels are instead social scientists and political revolutionaries, and supporters of a 'proletarian communism' (ib.). Luporini (1971, lxxxvii) talked of a 'new or second communism', and insisted on the fact that the epistemological break 'is not just a split with Feuerbach's humanism, but with his essentialism' (ib., xli).

I have no intention here of going too deeply into reconstructing the roots of Marx's and Engels' humanism, if nothing else because I wish to deal with the theory of libertarian communism, and I think this should be entirely attributed to the approach prevailing in their mature works. Yet I feel I must make at least a few brief comments. Their humanist approach could be referred back to a philosophical combination I will define as the 'Hegel–Feuerbach–Rousseau complex'. There is undoubtedly a strong link with Hegel's and Feuerbach's philosophies which were at the basis of the two revolutionaries' formation. From this current of thought comes the definition of human nature as founded on an identification with the human species, the conception of history as a process of self-realization of the true human essence and a notion of communism as a communitarian recognition of social humankind. Akin to the latter vision is also Rousseau's conception of 'general will' as an expression of a cohesive and humanly organic society in which collective interests prevail over individual ones, a concept to which both the thesis on the reabsorption of

the political sphere into civil society and that of the connection between private property and alienation might also be traced back.

It seems legitimate to speak of Promethean humanism (Jervolino, 1996, 48), a philosophy which sees social relations as cemented by a kind of solidarity emerging from a change in human nature. The young Marx's New Man appears, insofar as he is an individual, as the bearer of a solidarity ethic; but insofar as he is identified with the human species, as the demiurge of self-production of the subject. Here one faces the idea of the birth of a Subject who, by recognizing his universal essence, writes his name in history in the capital letters to which a creator is entitled: he is a New Man in that he makes himself a Real, an Actual Man in Hegel's sense, a universal subject. He is a subject who makes history by creating himself and, in so doing, gives a sense to it – the eschatological sense of a revolutionary realization of human essence.

After the epistemological break, though, two different theoretical approaches come to light, not just one – two approaches which, although divergent, remain strongly intertwined with each other. The first is developed especially by Engels, and takes the form of an economicist historicism, akin to a vaguely positivist philosophy. The second is predominant in Marx, and consists of an anti-humanist approach of a critical and scientific kind, a sort of 'practical materialism'[4] or philosophy of praxis of the kind later developed by Gramsci.

Economicist historicism can be traced back to a certain tradition of pre-Marxist socialism, both in the utilitarian and Ricardian version of English communism and in the organicistic version of French socialism. Thus one could speak of a 'Ricardo–Owen–Saint-Simon complex'. Here the vision of socialism prevails as a society which redistributes collective welfare in an egalitarian way (Owen), heightens productive growth through central planning, extinguishes the State by reducing politics to the administration of things; also a conception of history is cultivated as an evolutionary process sustained by neutral technical progress (Saint-Simon).[5] Nor should we forget the legacy of economic determinism and naturalism that Marx and Engels receive from the English classical economists, especially Ricardo and the Ricardian socialists. This legacy is revealed especially in the study of those 'laws of movement' which claim to account for the inevitable transformation of production relations into a form of final communism on the ground of the evolution of productive forces. Capitalist development creates the 'objective' and 'subjective' conditions for its own superseding. On the one hand it expands productive forces by making production more and more a 'social' process; whilst, through the law of increasing concentration and centralization of capital, it creates the conditions for

its rational control. On the other hand it generates the social class that is compelled by its very material existence to become aware of its own historical mission. This is a possible interpretation of 'the real movement which abolishes the present state of things': the capital's strength of self-negation. In this concept the superseding of capitalism is inscribed in its laws of economic evolution; and the subject of transformation is left to act, almost an acted subject, in the shade of the role assigned to it by the historical process produced by those objective laws of movement.[6] Whilst solidarity and Promethean humanism nourish the myth of the Third Kingdom and the eschatology of New Man, economicist historicism lurks behind the myth of the land of Cockaigne.[7]

On the contrary, critical and scientific anti-humanism does not seem to have any clear source of inspiration in preceding philosophical traditions,[8] and rather appears to be an original conception of Marx. And those who insist on the strength of the 'three sources' of Marx's thought – Hegelian philosophy, French socialism, and English economics – should reflect on the following fact: the formation of Marx's original thought passes through the writing of three books of criticism of Hegel's and young-Hegelian philosophy, two books of criticisms of (mainly French) socialism and four voluminous books of criticism of political economy, not to count the critical content of the innumerable series of published and unpublished notebooks, articles and papers he has left us.

The original Marx is the scientist who subtitles his major work 'critique of political economy' and studies capitalism on the basis of a deconstruction of the scientific categories of bourgeois economics. He is the critic of ideologies and the philosophies of justice. But he is also the student of the political history of his times and especially the revolutionary militant, the politician who makes science by interpreting the real movements which transform the world, the exponent of a party who tries to grasp the sense of revolutionary class action, the student of the Paris Commune who defines communism by reflecting on the concrete actions of the communards, the leading member of the League of Communists and the International Workingmen Association who writes their programmes, statutes and inaugural addresses on the base of the indications emerging from the activities of the organizations and movements.

For this personality of Marx, theory *is* praxis, and praxis is not an action of the spirit. Theory is the science which tries to understand the sense of collective action, and therefore tends to develop it into effective action; it is an activity that confines 'its scientific investigations to the social movement created by the people itself' (Marx, 1874–75, 24, 521). In this approach, Communism is not the model of an ideal society. It is not a

state or an end toward which the world tends. It is not inscribed in the laws of movement of the economy. And the revolutionary agent is not a universal subject objectively posed by those laws. Quite the contrary, it is a set of concrete individuals who unite and organize themselves to change their living conditions. Science makes them agents who are more aware and renders their action more effective.

In this conception the idea of a principle of camaraderie as the cement of social action reappears, but now it is no longer a form of universal ethic in which the communitarian consciousness of a self-creating Prometheus is realized; rather it consists in tangible forms of social cohesion that appear in the encounters, the organizations, the conversations expressed in the revolutionary praxis of exploited and oppressed men and women, people who aspire to liberate themselves from despotism and exploitation, not to go beyond their own finiteness.

Recent research has endeavoured to bring to light the origins of Marx's philosophy of praxis, and little wonder that in the end the most frequently recalled names are those of Aristotle, Machiavelli and Spinoza.

Aristotle's authority is explicitly acknowledged by Marx on several occasions, especially in the works of his maturity. Nowadays many Marxists think that Marx's theory of value is more indebted to the Greek thinker than to Hegel, so much so that it has been argued that Aristotle's philosophy provides appropriate access to the hidden inner structure of Marx's thought (DeGolyer, 1992). The distinction between use value and exchange value, as well as that between the Commodity-Money-Commodity exchange and the Money-Commodity-Money exchange come from Aristotle. In greater depth, one may glimpse Aristotle's influence in the way Marx investigates the relationship between value form and its content. As I will show later in this chapter, Aristotle's theory of material cause constitutes an essential part of Marx's scientific method.[9]

As to Machiavelli, Marx does not seem to acknowledge him as a great authority on his own thought, except in his aetiological approach to ethic. However, to understand the Machiavelli one can find in Marx it is not sufficient to focus on the theoretician of the political use of ethic, the scientist of State power and the philosopher of republicanism. It is necessary to grasp the intimate link existing between the politician and the scientist. His essentially revolutionary character was well understood by Gramsci (1975, 1601) and, following his lead, by Althusser (1999), who saw him as the founder of a political science which is a *philosophy of praxis*, i.e. a theory that, just as in Gramsci, takes the form of a 'political manifesto', as part of the practical solution of a problem determined by precise historical circumstances. It is no coincidence that the 'modern prince' represented the

central allegory of Gramsci's Marxism. It seems to me, though, that what deeply unites Machiavelli to the mature Marx is the rejection of any philosophical anthropology. The Florentine chancellor, like the German revolutionary, does not believe in any essence of human nature. He thinks instead that there are some collective traits of people's characters and behaviours which change in time with the transformations in institutional contexts in which the concrete members of specific societies act.

Coming to Spinoza, Marx finds in his philosophy the theoretical foundations for a scientific analysis of society. Whilst he does not follow him in his attempt to rationally found morality, he does however share with him the relativist approach to customary ethical life. In particular he appreciates his propensity to study the human world in scientific terms, to explain 'the world from the world itself', to investigate the State on the basis of 'reason and experience', but especially to reduce ethic to its ideological functions, to the concrete impulses and power relations of the social agents. Moreover he shares with him the dedication to democracy and freedom. And probably his critique of Hegel's philosophy of right is based on an assimilation of Spinoza's democratic theory, which he studied in 1841. Nor can it be excluded that the rational nucleus which the mature Marx rediscovers in Hegel is traceable to the Dutch philosopher (Bongiovanni, 1987). Then, enlightening is Rubel's (1985, 388–9) thesis about a Spinozan influence on the way Marx overcomes Feuerbach's 'contemplative materialism' to arrive at a 'new materialism' based on the philosophy of praxis. And engaging is Pascucci's (2006) suggestion of linking Marx's theory of revolutionary praxis (*umwälzende Praxis*) to Spinoza's conception of historical virtuality.[10]

An important trait that Marx has in common with Machiavelli and Spinoza is his rejection of any political metaphysics. All three authors tend to incline towards an analysis of the real processes by which the dialectics of State and masses, prince and people, *imperium* and *multitudo*, produces revolutionary dynamics and gives rise to multifarious forms of polity – an analysis that results in a realist theory of republican democracy and justification of the 'right to revolt'.

Thus one might be tempted to envisage an 'Aristotle–Machiavelli–Spinoza' complex to characterize Marx the scientist and the revolutionary and distinguish him from the humanist and economicist philosopher. Perhaps it is better to resist this temptation, since an affinity or influence relationship does not have the strength of one of direct filiation, like that which links him to Hegel and Ricardo, for example. Yet who would bet on the opinion that the teachers an author cites most frequently are precisely those to whom he is most indebted?

At any rate it is ascertained that there are not just two personalities in Marx. There are three: a humanist moral philosopher, an economicist philosopher of history and a critical scientist. Yet things are not quite so clear cut and simple. One should not believe that the humanist view disappears completely after the epistemological break, nor should one hope that the two forms of anti-humanism of maturity can be easily separated. One must therefore take care in dealing with the residues of pre-scientific positions when they materialize in the mature works, on the one hand, and in distinguishing the economicist thinker from the scientist, on the other.

Nor should one believe that the ideas developed in his early works are irrelevant for an understanding of scientific thought. In reality almost all the main theoretical problems of communism are already defined in the works written between 1842 and 1845 and, even if most of the theses and solutions proposed in that period cannot be accepted without the benefit of inventory, it remains true that they open up prospects to be explored in his later works and that therefore these cannot be fully understood by disregarding the former. Moreover, some important doctrines expounded in his early works, like the theory of alienation, are reproposed in later years, although with some substantial changes.[11] And it is also true that without attentive consideration of his early writings and their methodology, the itinerary which brings Marx to historical materialism appears incomprehensible (Cerroni, 1972, 201).

Four passages in particular are truly important in understanding how Marx's early research paves the way to the achievements of his maturity. First, construction of the materialist conception of history would not have been possible without the critique of Hegel's inversion of the subject–predicate relationship, a critique developed entirely in Marx's early period under the influence of Feuerbach. Secondly, a theory of participatory democracy like that emerging from his reflections on the Paris Commune would not be understandable if it had not been preceded by the critique of Hegel's philosophy of right from the viewpoint of 'true democracy' as a process of 'self-determination of the people'. Thirdly, it seems that the ethical individualism developed by Marx in the works of his maturity, as well as his refusal to attribute universal value to any theory of justice, were preceded and prepared by the critique to the rights of man set out in *The Jewish Question* (Buchanan, 1982, 163–4). Finally, it should be noted that the critique of Hegel's conception of the State universality is a basic premise to an analysis of the capitalist State as a non-neutral power and as an institution functional to class domination (Tucker, 1980, 70).

Summing up, I would say that one should not be too embarrassed by the fact that more than one Marx exists. Rather, one should be worried if this

were not the case. If it is understandably necessary to render consistent the doctrine of a prophet, why is it necessary to do the same for a man of science and politics? Precisely because he took Marx the scientist and the revolutionary seriously, Louis Althusser did not hesitate to bring some of his inconsistencies to light. After all, the words of Agnes Heller (1976) remain true, namely that, to make Marx the thinker of a coherent system, means removing what represents the source of his greatness.

The individualist foundations of communism

The epistemological break thesis is important because it provides an instrument that allows Marx himself to work out some of the contradictions in his thought. One such contradiction concerns his conception of the social being, which at times appears founded on an individualist principle and at others reveals an holistic approach.

The conviction that Marx is an anti-individualist might seem justified by the many critiques he raises against various Robinsonades and individualist philosophies of his times (Forbes, 1990, 22–7, 43–4), for instance, Stirner's theory of the Ego or Bentham's theory of *homo oeconomicus*. And it might be reinforced by observing his insistence on the social influences endured by an individual's character and behaviour. It is then easy to slide from this observation to a critique of the totalitarian implications of an anti-individualist conception of the social being. When the human subject is defined by his species-being essence, society is seen as an emerging reality that totally prevails over the individuals. Society forms and determines man and gives him a sense as a subject of history, namely, the sense of a subject who exists as such only as human species. In this view communism is none other than a society cemented by communitarian links in which men at last recognize their nature of species-beings, beings who *belong* to the human family.

Now, there is no need to attempt to expound a new critique against this vision; suffice it to refer to that developed by Marx and Engels themselves, who reject precisely the anti-individualist implications of Promethean humanism in *The German Ideology*. Without denying the material and cultural influences experienced by individuals in social relations and historical circumstances – on the contrary, clearly highlighting them – Marx and Engels are quite explicit in establishing the principle that men exist and count as individuals and not as cogs in a wheel or cells in an organism.

> Individuals have always and in all circumstances 'proceeded *from themselves*', but since they were not *unique* in the sense of not needing any

> connections with one another, and since their *needs*, consequently their nature, and the method of satisfying their needs, connected them with one another (relations between the sexes, exchange, division of labour), they *had to* enter into relations with one another. Moreover, since they entered into intercourse with one another not as pure egos, but as individuals at a definite stage of development of their productive forces and requirements, and since this intercourse, in its turn, determined production and needs, it was, therefore, precisely the personal, individual behaviour of individuals, their behaviour to one another as individuals, that created the existing relations and daily reproduces them anew.
>
> (Marx and Engels, 1845–46, 5, 437)

In the foregoing chapters I referred to Marx's and Engels' refusal to define human nature in naturalistic and metaphysical terms, and I argued that in their view this 'nature' is historically conditioned, since it is plastic and self-poietic at the same time. To say it is plastic does not mean to say that the individual does not exist as an autonomous agent; it only means recognizing that he is not an atom, a sheer Ego, the absolute subject of Stirner's philosophy or the perfectly self-determined *homo oeconomicus* of utilitarian philosophy, in other words, a Robinson Crusoe. The existence of the individual as a social agent is not done away with, rather it is defined in the context of historical and social conditioning which affects his development and his forms of consciousness. One of the greatest achievements of capitalism, according to Marx, is the liberation of man from the 'naturalistic' fetters of pre-modern societies. But the individual so liberated remains conditioned by social relations which are no less strong merely because they are impersonal. Capital and the market depersonalize human relations, yet they do not generate atoms of consciousness.

Obviously, if this were all that mattered, i.e. the social influence on the formation of the individual's character and behaviour, it would be difficult to justify an individualist ontology of the social being, and the structuralists, the historicists and the romantics would be right in seeing Marx's individual as none other than a product of overwhelming social forces. But this is not all that matters, for the human being is an active producer of social conditions. Marx is clear on this point, which is one of his basic postulates: men have self-poietic abilities, in other words, people are actors of social transformation. And if he maintains they can become historical agents through collective action, this does not mean that the individual exists only as a manifestation of a collective entity: the universal class, the human species, etc. In fact the social relations of which

the class or humankind or any other aggregate entity consist are constituted by individuals 'proceeded *from themselves*', in other words: 'it was, therefore, precisely the personal, individual behaviour of individuals, their behaviour to one another as individuals, that created the existing relations and daily reproduces them anew' (ib.).[12]

Note that this concept has a sense, in a materialist approach, only if it presupposes complete rejection of the idea that a 'Subject' of 'History' exists, a subject definable as a collective entity. Hegel's conception of the conscious self-creation of Man is refuted. The hero of the mature Marx is not the Man who makes History; rather it is the multiplicity of men (plural and with a small letter), the variety of agents who act as concrete individuals. The historical process evolves as a result of their deeds. Action is exercise of choice and decision, teleological activity. It is moved by goals. And only individuals can posit the goals of their actions. In this sense one can say individuals 'proceed from themselves': in the sense that they themselves define the ends of their actions. All the organizations and social aggregates 'act' only insofar as they aim to realize the aspirations of individuals. These are not necessarily the aspirations of *all* the individuals who belong to them. In fact not everyone has the same opportunities of choice and the same amount of freedom. The goals of the people participating in a collective action may be heterogeneous, so that those of an organization or a movement are the undoubtedly complex result of the 'the personal, individual behaviour' of their members. This behaviour creates 'the existing relations', but not necessarily in a rational way and at times not even in a fully conscious way. Therefore collective action does not inevitably always succeed in realizing the individuals' ends, nor are its results always reducible to rational design. This is why history is an open and unforeseeable process that cannot be read as an 'Object' produced by the 'Human Subject'. People make history, but, since they make it as individuals, it cannot be interpreted as the product of Reason, nor can it be seen as always corresponding to the expectations of its agents.

Thus it can be said that although Marx's social ontology considers individuals as intrinsically social beings, it maintains that the fundamental entities of society consist precisely in individual agents (Gould, 1978, xii, 1–2). The *scientific value* of Marx's discourse emerges from the analysis of social structures intended as relations among individuals; its originality consists in not ignoring the influences of the structures themselves on the individuals' behaviour. But precisely the individualist notion of the social being, by constituting the axiomatic base of a scientific investigation of capitalism, helps to minimize the risk of falling back into holistic mysticism.

It is well known that one of the themes in which this kind of risk is greater is the formation of class consciousness – a crucial theme in a theory of communism as a liberation process. The humanist philosophy of a self-producing species-being and of the proletariat as a universal class whose essence is intrinsically revolutionary, takes the emergence of consciousness for granted. On the contrary, an analysis which poses the practical issue of emancipation of the exploited must acknowledge the *problem* of the formation of class consciousness as the crucial problem in political theory. This is because the power structure and cultural superstructures of capitalism tend to induce individuals to interiorize the dominant ideologies. Therefore a scientific approach to this problem must begin from the observation that 'human individuals are not just *embedded* in the social relations generated by their associated life: they interiorize the relations by which they are conditioned . . . It is pointless to refer to proletarian class consciousness and to deal with its formation (which is the formation of the consciousness in each *single* individual, as Gramsci well understood), ignoring this problem of interiority' (Luporini, 1971, lxxxvi). It is a problem of how to encourage the liberation processes of individuals firstly from ideological domination. In fact the problems of interiority pertain to the determination of the goals and motivations of individual actions. A holistic notion of the Subject of History, by taking these goals and motivations as presupposed, reduces to a philosophy of history that serves only to remove a practical and scientific problem which is crucial in liberation processes.

In the very definition of communist society the mature Marx repeatedly makes it clear that this kind of society enables human beings to realize themselves as 'universally developed individuals' (Marx, 1857–58, 28, 99), persons who are free precisely as individuals. It is interesting to note that the individualist concept on which Marx bases his new theory of communism is set out in those parts of *The German Ideology* in which Feuerbach is criticized:

> The communal relation into which the individuals of a class entered, and which was determined by their common interests as against a third party, was always a community to which these individuals belonged only as average individuals, only insofar as they lived within the conditions of existence of their class – a relation in which they participated not as individuals but as members of a class. With the community of revolutionary proletarians, on the other hand, who take their conditions of existence and those of all members of society under their control, it is just the reverse; it is as individuals that the individuals

> participate in it. For it is the association of individuals (assuming the advanced stage of modern productive forces, of course) which puts the conditions of the free development and movement of individuals under their control . . . Communism differs from all previous movements in that it overturns the basis of all earlier relations of production and intercourse, and for the first time consciously treats all naturally evolved premises as the creations of hitherto existing men, strips them of their natural character and subjugates them to the power of the united individuals. . . . The reality which communism creates is precisely the true basis for rendering it impossible that anything should exist independently of individuals, insofar as reality is nevertheless only a product of the preceding intercourse of individuals.
>
> (Marx and Engels, 1845–46, 5, 80–1)

Incidentally, I would like to observe that here, unlike in his early works, Marx begins to treat communism as a movement rather than an ideal state. I will return to this point below. For the time being I will clarify another aspect of the new concept, one that emerges in a semantic shift on the notion of 'community'. The mature Marx no longer talks of the 'community' as a just society inspired by moral principles grounded on the human essence, i.e. a kind of *ideal* society wherein man can recognize himself as a moral being. Rather he deals with it as a *factual* reality and a social *process*. To be precise, he makes a crucial distinction between what he calls 'illusory community' (ib., 83) and what he calls 'real community' (ib., 78). Now, discounting the residual of Hegelian language that lingers here, one could say that Marx's illusory community is far from being an unreal thing. Rather it is a kind of social relation in which the individuals are placed in a capitalist society 'as average individuals' who live 'within the conditions of existence of their class – a relation in which they participate not as individuals but as members of a class' (ib., 80). The illusory community is made up not of 'individuals as persons', but by scarcely autonomous 'average' men. The 'real community', on the contrary, is a kind of social relation resulting from the practices of individual agents who struggle to conquer their own autonomy and subjectivity: 'in the real community the individuals obtain their freedom in and through their association' (ib., 78). This is 'the community of revolutionary proletarians', to which people participate 'as individuals', and through which they 'take their conditions of existence' under their control (ib., 80). This form of community is regarded as a *real* fact rather than an ideal model in that it is intended as the *process* of association through which the proletarians struggle to realize themselves as 'persons'. People liberate themselves

by uniting in a process of struggle aimed at transforming the conditions of their existence. The ultimate motivation of the actions that activate that process is not justice or welfare or 'general interest', but is the individuals' drive for liberation. Note that communism is now seen as the world of *individual* freedom already in the process of its doing. That which Marx elsewhere, using typical Hegelian language, calls a 'class for itself' and which appears to be intended as a collective subject holistically emerging over the proletarians who belong to it, is seen here as a social being who is an agent merely insofar as produced by the individuals' actions: 'it is as individuals that the individuals participate in' their 'community of revolutionary proletarians'; and 'it is the association of individuals . . . which puts the conditions of the free development and movement of individuals under their control' (ib., 80). The infamous class for itself is none other than the associations of individuals who act to liberate themselves.

But the originality and depth of Marx's social ontology does not just lie in the postulate by which the fundamental elements of society are the socialized individuals. It also lies in the consequent evolutionary implication of this postulate, that is, in the idea that individuals *become* social *agents* in the historical process.[13] Marx in fact, both in *The German Ideology* and in *Grundrisse*, investigates the historical conditions within which there emerges the possibility of liberation, intended as construction of individual autonomy. In the latter work, for instance, Marx (1857–58, 28, 95) describes three different kinds of social relations and presents them as 'stages' of social development: those based on 'personal dependence', which hold in pre-capitalist societies; those consisting in 'personal independence *mediated by things*' and made possible by generalized mercantile exchange; and those consisting in 'free individuality, based on the universal development of the individuals and the subordination of their communal, social productivity'. In communism, at any rate, exchange is not abolished. Rather, a new form is realized which is superior with respect to the one prevailing in capitalism, in other words, 'the free exchange of individuals who are associated on the basis of common appropriation and control of the means of production' (ib., 96) is realized. In this view communism is seen as the stage of a historical process of man's liberation from dependence relationships. I believe this theory should be appreciated both as an evolutionary ontology of the social being and as a political theory of the conditions of liberation.

At ontological level there is a vision of the individual agent's formation as a historical development – a vision whereby the liberation process through which the human being passes during the course of history is envisaged as a movement of the growth of individuation. According to

Forbes (1990, 33) the merits of Marx's scientific ontology resides in the fact that, rather than being restricted to assuming the existence of the individual agent, it tries to account for his historical evolution toward more and more advanced forms of autonomy. Marx's conception of man's history sees it as the history of personality evolution, the history of an individual agent who, as a person, becomes increasingly rich spiritually and, as a social agent, increasingly autonomous politically. In pre-capitalist societies people were part of ostensibly natural communitarian aggregates, family, tribe, ethnic group, feud, within which almost every kind of individual autonomy was wiped out. Even personal identities were shattered by the social roles and the power mechanisms that reduced people to work as cells in an organism. Capitalism supersedes all that. Through the anarchy of markets it transforms those cells into social atoms, organic cohesion into mechanic interaction; through the freedom of contract it generates the 'free' individual; through the declarations of human rights it constitutes the 'equal' individual; through technical progress it creates an individual who is 'rich in needs'. In this way it poses the conditions for the liberation of individuality. But only the conditions. It does not abolish social classes, let alone power relations, either in the factories or in society at large. And whilst it facilitates the power accumulation of individuals in the dominant classes, it crushes those in the dominated classes by relegating them to roles determined by the social division of labour in the 'illusory communities'. It makes them 'average', scarcely autonomous individuals. Yet not desperate. In fact the condition of a subject endowed with freedom of contract in civil society, as well as that of a subject endowed with political rights in the State structure, constitute the social and political bases for *individual* liberation.

It is here that the political implications of the theory come to the fore. It is possible to read the historical process of individuation as a condition of a political process of liberation. The human being who is oppressed, exploited, reified by capitalism is able to free himself, to change from being an 'average' into a 'personal' individual. He does so by autonomously creating his own economic and political 'associations' – organizations which, within the capitalist mode of production, take the forms of struggle and transformation instruments. This is how communism matures from the very outset of the struggle for its realization. From this point of view, communism is the form of social cohesion in which human individuality can express itself in all possible richness and freedom. Only those individuals that capitalism has contributed to free legally, culturally, and, in particular, socially, from the ties of personal subordination (patriarchy, slavery, serfdom, etc.) are truly able to free themselves by acting

as originators of their own associative practices. But capitalism also produces the material conditions for liberation. It does so mainly by developing productive forces.

> On the one hand, we have a totality of productive forces, which have, as it were, taken on a material form and are for the individuals themselves no longer the forces of the individuals but of private property, and hence of the individuals only insofar as they are owners of private property. Never, in any earlier period, have the productive forces taken on a form so indifferent to the intercourse of individuals *as* individuals, because their intercourse itself was still a restricted one. On the other hand, standing against these productive forces, we have the majority of the individuals from whom these forces have been wrested away, and who, robbed thus of all real life-content, have become abstract individuals, who are, however, by this very fact put into a position to enter into relation with one another *as individuals*.
>
> (Marx and Engels, 1845–46, 5, 86–7)

The distinction Marx and Engels make in *The German Ideology* between 'personal' and 'average' individuals is meaningful. The former human type is the agent who liberates himself through the social relations he creates autonomously; the latter is the one who undergoes all the conditioning of the social roles in which he is embedded. Now, although this distinction is undoubtedly based on 'a historical fact', it is 'a distinction . . . which each age itself makes from among the different elements which it finds in existence' (ib., 81). So it is understandable that, already in the capitalist mode of production, some actors are able to act as personal individuals, free agents. Capitalists, for instance, have this ability, for they have decision-making power in the labour process. But the workers too may have it, namely when they set up their autonomous 'associations'.

Thus the individual–society relationship is seen as determined not only historically, but also and especially *politically*. The individual, as a worker, always starts 'with himself'. Yet, in a capitalist society, he starts in fetters, i.e. as an 'average' individual who is not fully autonomous, as a barely free agent, in other words, as an actor who is strongly conditioned by the social relations in which he is embedded. It is only when he decides to free himself that he enters into self-constituted social relations, into associations and movements whose dynamics are determined by the motivations of 'personal individuals'. It would be an error to believe that, from a political point of view, the difference between 'personal' and 'average' individuals passes through a moment that marks the time boundary

between before and after the revolution. Rather, this is a difference that characterizes the transition from a personal condition of subjection to one of practical opposition to it – a shift which may occur at any time.

The theoretical bases of Marx's individualism are posed in *The German Ideology* and developed in *Grundrisse*, two eminently philosophical works. Yet they are not lost when philosophy gives way to politics. Especially in his works on the Paris Commune Marx restates his individualist theses on the ground of observation of a real process of proletarian emancipation. He interprets the French revolutionary process precisely in terms of an individual liberation process. The Commune in fact 'represents the liberation of "labour", that is the fundamental and natural condition of individual and social life' (Marx, 1871a, 22, 491). Nor is this the pure and simple observation of a laboratory experiment. The leader of the International intervenes in the process, at least in the 'theoretical struggle'. And in criticizing, for example, the positions of certain 'positivist proletarians',[14] he argues that 'the form of social property which makes property the attribute of labour, far from creating individual "moral constraints" will emancipate the "morals" of the individual from its class constraints' (Marx, 1871a, 22, 505).

Social structure and individual agency

Now we are better able to understand Marx's conception of the social being. To straighten out the problems entwined in this issue, it might be useful to distinguish the ontological from the axiological and methodological levels of the theory. Then Marx's approach may be interpreted as based on a *materialist* and *institutionalist* stance at ontological level and a *relativist* one at axiological level – at any rate, a clearly individualist view at both levels, whilst it remains somewhat more undefined at the methodological level.

1. *Ontology* deals with the explanation of the nature of society. This is the field where the distance that Marx puts between himself and Hegel is greatest, given his strong and clear materialism and anti-logicism. Therefore I find the attempts made to reconstruct Marx's ontology in dialectic terms are scarcely enlightening.[15] The attempts based on Aristotle are more interesting.

Carol Gould (1978) argued that in the categorization of society and the individual, Marx gives priority to the latter by considering human nature, as it emerges from social relations, as a *second substance*. A 'first

substance' – Aristotle maintains in *Categories* – is the 'single thing', 'this something' (*tòde ti*), this particular individual; a 'second substance' instead is what pertains to the genre or the species. Gould's attempt is intriguing and even telling, if taken as a metaphor, but is hardly credible on philosophical grounds.[16] The arguments Aristotle develops in *Categories* refer to problems of a linguistic and logical nature, but have no ontological value, and cannot be used to account for Marx's ontology, unless one wishes to run the risk of falling back on some form of logicism. The idea is that a second substance can be used as a predicate to qualify a first substance, but is not a material substance as the subject of the predicate. First substances instead are things that cannot be taken as predicates of any subject, in other words, they are what constitutes irreducible reality. This however does not mean that 'second substances' are less real than the 'first' ones. Now, for the mature Marx, the individuals as particular and empirical beings are the primary ontological bases of the social being. Their sociality can be seen as a predicate of their material reality. Yet it cannot be considered as less real than their physical substance.

I am more convinced by some recent attempts at rereading Marx in the light of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* and *Nicomachean Ethics*.[17] These attempts focused particularly on the theses about the value form Marx develops in the first chapter of *Capital*, but are also useful in reconstructing the more general ontology of the social being. Bhaskar (1975, 22, 195) suggested that to understand reality one can use Aristotle's theory of causal explanation, especially the theory of 'material causes'. In Marx there are many cases of explanation based on material causes. When we talk of the material cause of a thing we refer to what is necessary for that thing to have the form it has, to the 'material' which makes up the thing. Thus one can say a table is made of wood, and that water is made of hydrogen and oxygen. One can also say that a capitalist firm is a set of contract nexuses between legal persons, or that a social class is a set of individuals who share the characteristics of one of the partitions of society. Note however that the validity of these propositions does not imply the validity of the following: the properties of a table result from the summation of the properties of the pieces of wood of which it is made up; the properties of water result from the summation of those of hydrogen and oxygen; the value of a firm results from the summation of the values of its contracts; the dynamism of a social class coincides with the behaviours of all the individuals who are part of it.

The propositions attaining to material causes constitute the most elementary type of scientific explanation, but also the most fundamental. In this approach Marx's social ontology can be enucleated with the following abstract and general proposition: a society is the set of all the individuals

who are in the social relations that characterize it. But of course it is necessary to descend to lower levels of abstraction.

In reality on this ground Marx addresses two fundamental problems: (a) at the highest level of abstraction, the problem of the formulation of an ontology of the social *being*; (b) at a lower level of abstraction, that of the elaboration of a political sociology of the social *agent*.

1(a). Marx's position on the former problem can be interpreted by resorting to the idea of a stratified structure of reality, as put forward by some contemporary scholars.[18] In this view 'reality is irreducibly layered, with physical, molecular, organic, mental, human individual and social levels. Everything belongs to a level and each level has, within certain limits, its own autonomy and stability. However, each layer is linked to, and dependent upon, other layers' (Hodgson, 2006, 9). At each layer of reality some specific properties emerge which are not reducible to those of the lower layer units. Nevertheless these have ontological priority over the superior layer, which cannot exist if they do not exist: water has properties which belong neither to hydrogen nor to oxygen, but could not exist if hydrogen and oxygen did not exist. In this approach a society cannot be entirely reducible to the individuals who belong to it, and yet cannot be thought of as having ontological priority over them: if the individuals did not exist, society could not exist. There can be no other starting point for a materialist ontology of the social being. Marx puts it like this:

> To begin with, the subject to be discussed is material production. Individuals producing in a society – hence the socially determined production by individuals is of course the point of departure. (1857–58, 28, 17)

Marx's ontology of the social being is also clearly expressed in a famous *Letter to Annenkov* (1846, 38, 96) where he defines society as the result of the interactions of individual agents: 'what is society, irrespective of its form? The product of man's interaction upon man.' Note the sidereal level of abstraction defined by the proviso: 'irrespective of its form'. This level of Marx's discourse is fundamental in understanding the reasons behind his individualism. And it is important to realize that his position emerges from the materialist critique he raises against Hegel's idealistic holism. I will examine this problem in greater depth in the next section.

Marx's philosophy of the social being is rough ground. His viewpoint dramatically changes after superseding Feuerbach, yet some residue of ambiguity remains. It might seem difficult to accept an individualist

foundation of social ontology, given the *young Marx's* thesis whereby 'the essence of man is not an abstraction inherent in each single individual. In reality it is the combination of social relations' (Marx, 1845, 5, 4). After all, when he talks of the individual, Marx often refers to an actor he calls a 'social individual'. Thus it might seem easy to reject an individualist ontology by arguing that the individual is always determined by society, i.e. an entity which has ontological priority over him. Some believe this difficulty can be overcome by maintaining that individuals are created by society to the same extent that society is created by them. But this argument is unacceptable, since a theory that generates infinite regress fails to explain anything. The basic point, from an ontological point of view, is that a society cannot even be imagined by abstracting from the existence of individuals. And the obvious observation that no single individual can exist as a social agent outside society cannot be used to deny that society cannot exist without individuals, i.e. that it has no ontological priority over the combination of all the individuals.[19]

1(b). The proposition according to which individuals have ontological priority over society does not mean that their behaviour cannot be influenced by the relations and institutions in which they are embedded. But an analysis of this kind of influence and, more generally, of individual–society interactions cannot be developed on the ground of simple philosophical abstraction.

At a lower level of abstraction Marx deals with the problem of individual–society interactions in terms of a complex scientific discourse that has a *sociological*, a *political* and a *historical* component.

> If we consider bourgeois society in the round, it is always society itself, i.e. man himself in his social relations . . . The immediate production process itself appears here merely as a moment. The conditions and objectifications of that process are themselves, to an equal degree, moments of it, and *it is only individuals that appear as its subjects; yet individuals in relations to one another*, which they reproduce just as much as they produce them anew.
>
> (Marx, 1857–58, 29, 98)

Note that the lower level of abstraction is now identified by the sentence 'if we consider bourgeois society'. The phrase I have italicized clearly identifies the sociological component of Marx's approach to the study of social agency. Society is not a simple array of isolated individuals. It consists of

the relations that arise among them. It is the result of their actions and reactions. But they are not atoms of consciousness: their behaviour, their character, their beliefs are influenced by the specific historical–social context in which they act. Particularly when he talks of bourgeois society Marx endeavours to qualify the definition of individual agent by specifying the class dimensions of the social relations within which people operate. The individuals he takes into consideration are not abstractly legal or moral beings: they are agents who work in a well-determined social context. This clearly emerges from a critique Marx (1857–58, 28, 195–6) raises against Proudhon.

> Proudhon, for example, replies to Bastiat by saying . . . : 'For society the distinction between capital and product does not exist. This distinction is a purely subjective one, existing only for individuals.' Thus it is precisely the social aspect which he calls subjective and the subjective abstraction which he calls society. The distinction between product and capital is precisely that, as capital, the product expresses a specific relation belonging to an historical form of society. This so-called consideration from the point of view of society means nothing more than to overlook precisely the differences which express the social relation (relation of civil society). Society does not consist of individuals, but expresses the sum of the relationships and conditions in which these individuals stand to one another. As if someone were to say: for society, slaves and CITIZENS do not exist: both are men. They are both men, if we consider them outside society. To be a slave and to be a CITIZEN are social determinations, relations between human beings A and B. Human being A as such is not a slave; he is a slave in and through society. Mr. Proudhon's remarks about capital and product mean that in his view there is no distinction between capitalists and workers from the point of view of society.

Note that Marx is not actually saying that 'society does not consist of individuals'. He is saying that it does not consist of abstract individuals, undetermined men. Once the level of analysis is identified as that of the study of the bourgeois society, it is no longer possible to talk generically of 'men', for they are such only 'outside society'. Instead the investigation must refer to concrete individuals by characterizing them on the ground of the specific social relations which they create.

This approach may be defined as 'institutional individualism' or perhaps 'individualistic institutionalism'.[20] It maintains that material, social, political and cultural circumstances do affect the formation of character,

attitude and preferences of individuals. Man's nature is influenced by the conditions of his existence. To be precise,

> men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past.
>
> (Marx, 1852a, 11, 103)

The term 'institution' must be intended here in a broad sense, namely as a synthetic expression denoting all the 'circumstances' and the 'traditions' that influence the social agent, including ethical and legal norms, as well as the knowledge, the rules and the practices associated with the use of productive forces. The notion of 'institution' is particularly appropriate because, as used in social sciences, it refers to objective symbolic structures whose relevance is identified precisely in their capacity to influence the individuals' character and behaviour and whose existence – or rather, whose evolution – can be accounted for only on the ground of individual action.

The human being, for Marx, is a social agent in that he is able to contribute to the production of social relations and structures. Yet not all individuals are endowed with this ability to the same extent. Some people have more freedom and more power than others. The capitalists make the decisions in the production process and are in a position to determine State action and basic public choices. The workers, on the contrary, have no freedom in the production process and no economic and political power in society and the State. They belong to 'illusory communities' in which they behave as 'average' individuals, particles of hetero-directed masses. As long as they comply with their social roles, their ability to contribute to social production is somewhat limited.

However they may decide to change their lives. When they do so, they produce their own autonomous associations – parties, unions, cooperatives etc. – through which they endeavour to act as autonomous social agents. Organized class struggle is the peculiar way in which the workers overcome their condition of alienated instruments of capital valorization to become 'personal' individuals.

Here the *political* component of Marx's ontology comes to the fore, and this is the most important of all. The sociological component explains how the social agents act in a well-determined institutional context, and therefore it would appear unable to justify an individualistic approach. Then why is it that the adjective rather than the noun must be italicized in the expression 'individualistic institutionalism'?

The fact is that *the social agent is an agent only in that he is moved by intentions*. A bee in a beehive is not a social agent. A worker in a human society is. Why? Because a man is moved by a purpose of his own. Here is how Marx explains it:

> A bee puts to shame many an architect in the construction of her cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality. At the end of every labour process, we get a result that already existed in the imagination of the labourer at its commencement. He not only effects a change of form in the material on which he works, but he also realises a purpose of his own that gives the law to his modus operandi, and to which he must subordinate his will. And this subordination is no mere momentary act. Besides the exertion of the bodily organs, the process demands that, during the whole operation, the workman's will be steadily in consonance with his purpose.
>
> (Marx, 1867–94, 35, 188)

Marx uses the same reasoning to argue that the workers construct communism by creating their own autonomous associations. In a political community the revolutionary proletarians 'take their conditions of existence and those of all members of society under their control . . . It is as individuals that the individuals participate in it.' In this way the communist movement 'overturns the basis of all earlier relations of production and intercourse, and for the first time consciously treats all naturally evolved premises as the creations of hitherto existing men' (Marx and Engels, 1845–46, 5, 80–1).

It is in this sense, therefore, that the individual agent has priority over the social structures in which he acts. Structures and institutions may condition and constrain him as much as you like, but structures have no consciousness, no ideal representation ability, no purposes and intentions which are not reducible to those of at least some of the individuals who take part in them. Only individuals have these abilities, only they are social *agents*. Only they may operate to transform the material, social and political world according to a purpose. In this sense it is correct to say that 'the agency of individuals does not arise out of their relations but rather is a precondition for their entering into relations' (Gould, 1988, 112). This aspect of Marx's individualism is very important, for it justifies scientifically communism intended as the 'real movement which abolishes the present state of things'. If social dynamics were not activated by the conscious actions of individuals, social structures could not be transformed

in a communist sense. That is why communism is fundamentally individualist. It

> overturns the basis of all earlier relations of production and intercourse, and for the first time consciously treats all naturally evolved premises as the creations of hitherto existing men, strips them of their natural character and subjugates them to the power of the united individuals. . . . The reality which communism creates is precisely the true basis for rendering it impossible that anything should exist independently of individuals, insofar as reality is nevertheless only a product of the preceding intercourse of individuals.
>
> (Marx and Engels, 1845–46, 5, 80–1)

Finally, the historical component of this analysis of social agency takes the form of a theory of history as a process of human individuation. The material and cultural circumstances, the facts and the traditions which condition human nature do not take place once and for all, but continually evolve under the drive of human action. Precisely against Feuerbach, Marx (1845, 5, 4) observes that 'the materialist doctrine concerning the changing of circumstances and upbringing forgets that circumstances are changed by men'. Thus, by *institutional individualism* I intend a conception of the social being which defines human agency in individual terms and his nature as historically conditioned by the institutional context in which the individuals are embedded and to which they give shape. And since the formation of this context develops in history, the constitution of the individual as a social agent takes on the meaning of a growth process. In the course of human history the social agents, and an increasing number of them, become always better defined as conscious and free individuals.

2. Now consider the *axiological* level of discourse. It pertains to the basic values that give sense to social practices. There is no doubt that the mature Marx's position in this field is relativist. Men are moved by interests. In pursuing their ends they act collectively, but the resulting social values are the product of *individual* values. Capitalism (with its State) is not an ethical state. Its sense is the result of the values held by the individuals who meet and clash in civil society. And the individuals may even be 'average', conditioned and scarcely autonomous, but they act and give sense to their own actions as individuals anyway.

Not even communism can be conceived as an ethical state. As a liberation process, its sense is that posed by the 'personal' individuals who

struggle for emancipation. Intended as a form of 'real community', it is only the result of the actions of the people who found it. The values that constitute the sense of community and association are not inscribed in a transcendent potentiality of human essence; rather, they are set by the limited and heterogeneous people who participate in them. Its moral implications can only be defined in the negative: 'rendering it impossible that anything should exist independently of individuals'. Marx and Engels are absolutely clear on this thesis. In *The German Ideology*, for instance, they violently attack the quixotic blunders of the 'dogmatic' revolutionaries who see revolution as an act of Man's moral regeneration:

> the communists do not oppose egoism to selflessness or selflessness to egoism, [they] do not preach *morality* at all . . . They do not put to people the moral demand: love one another, do not be egoists, etc.; on the contrary, they are very well aware that egoism, just as much as selflessness, is in definite circumstances a necessary form of the self-assertion of individuals. Hence, the communists by no means want . . . to do away with the 'private individual' for the sake of the 'general', selfless man . . . Communist theoreticians, the only communists who have time to devote to the study of history, are distinguished precisely by the fact that they alone have *discovered* that throughout history the 'general interest' is created by individuals who are defined as 'private persons'.
>
> (Marx and Engels, 1845–46, 5, 247)

Note that the 'communist theoreticians' are those who study history,[21] who are interested in a scientific investigation of the practices of 'determinate individuals', rather than in the philosophy of history, moral philosophy and the fate of the 'species-being' or the 'universal class'. Precisely because communism is not a moral doctrine, its realization cannot be an ethical state. And precisely because it does not derive from an essentialist philosophy of human nature, it rejects the dogma of a 'general interest', even a class interest, which is not reducible to private ones. There is no public interest which has not been 'created' by individuals as 'private persons'. And there is no collective good that objectively dominates the peoples' values, even in communism. Better than that: a communist society, 'far from creating individual "moral constraints" will emancipate the "morals" of the individual from its class constraints' (Marx, 1871a, 22, 505). This is what I mean by *ethical individualism*.

Tucker (1980, 65) observed that Marx's individualist approach is justified by a conception of communism as a liberation process; and that precisely this conception renders Marx's individualism radically different from that

of liberalist thought. Marx in fact criticizes liberalist individualism, both contractarian and utilitarian, because of its tendency to lay foundations on a notion of the individual as an abstract entity, i.e. an agent defined by abstracting from society and history, and counteracts it with an analysis of the individual as an agent who is strongly conditioned by historically determined social relations. On the ground of this critique, he brings to light the ideological value of liberalist thought, its inclination to talk of liberty as a purely formal aspect of legal institutions. On the contrary, the concrete individuals considered by Marx may enjoy different quantities of real freedom as functions of the class relations in which they take part. Capitalists have freedom in the production process; not the workers. Capitalists have great freedom in the consumption sphere; the workers have very little. But the individual considered by Marx, unlike that of the liberalist thinkers, is a dynamic subject, an agent who can modify the distribution of freedom and, in doing so, can change the social structure.

3. Finally let me briefly touch on the *methodological* level of discourse. Since methodology lies outside the field of investigation of my research, I will limit myself to only a few observations. At this level Marx remains rather ambivalent. In many cases his analyses seem to follow the lines of a holistic approach, for instance when they deal with the 'general intellect', the 'class for itself', the 'universal class' and his historical mission, all collective entities Marx sometimes treats as subjects who are absolutely emergent over the individuals who are part of them. In other cases, particularly when dealing with the role of the State and ideology in consolidating and legitimizing the power of capital, Marx seems to indulge in functionalist rationalizations.

More often, though, he reasons in terms referable to a *methodological individualism* approach: the working class moves as a class, but its movement can be *explained* on the ground of the interests, motivations and actions of the workers who unite in a political initiative; capital revolutionizes the world by accumulating and self-valorizing, but the laws of its accumulation can be *understood* by referring them to competitive processes in which individual capitalists operate. On the other hand, the seemingly functionalist explanations of the State and ideology are rarely elaborated within a teleological vision of history, at least by the mature Marx. Rather they are referred to the specific material interests and political actions of the social agents.

At any rate, some methodological ambiguity remains. But it is not a great problem. In principle one cannot be a holist at methodological level if

one is an individualist at ontological level. In the practice of scientific research, though, particularly in view of the complexity of the real world and the limitations of scientific reason, I do not see why one should not indulge in some form of methodology of aggregates and in many simplifications of the micro- and macro-foundation kind. After all, if ontological individualism is strongly qualified in institutionalist terms, then one can accede to a weak variant of methodological individualism. I am thinking of an approach that does not reject aggregate analysis, does not posit that collective agents do not exist, and does not pretend that social arrays are reducible to the *summation* of their parts. This approach only demands not to deny that the movements of social aggregates *be explainable* by reducing them to the actions and interactions, as complex as you like, of the individual agents participating in them. Non-additive effects and externalities are fully recognized.

Marx's methodological individualism is of a special kind, in that it avoids any form of psychological reductionism and simplification while refusing to treat the individual as an abstract entity postulated by a philosophical anthropology, to which he rather tends to prefer sociological explanations of the economic, political and cultural interactions.

Society and the individual in Hegel and Marx

To get to the core of Marx's most abstract social ontology it might be useful to take a look at the way it emerges as a critical overcoming of Hegel's philosophy.[22] In *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, Hegel introduced the notion of 'second nature', a nature that consists of the collective ethos, the set of moral norms that rule and *constitute* those social relations through which individuals become real or actual men. The ethos is manifested in men's character in the form of 'virtue', and this 'represents nothing more than the simple adequacy of the individual to the duties of the circumstances [*Verhältnisse*] to which he belongs' (§ 150). An aspect of what Marx would classify as a superstructure is presented by Hegel as constitutive of human nature; so that man, as an individual, takes on the meaning of an 'accident' of the group to which he 'belongs'. Thus the objective Spirit, as manifested in the ethos, has ontological priority over the individuals whose life it rules. As a spiritual substance, it is the actual universal; whilst a concrete man, as an empirical particularity, is only an 'outward appearance' of it (§ 154). This is why 'if it is simply *identical* with the actuality of individuals, the ethical [*Sittliche*], as their general mode of behaviour, appears as *custom* [*Sitte*]; and the *habit* of the ethical appears as a *second nature* which takes the place of the original and purely natural

will and is the all-pervading soul, significance, and *actuality of individual existence* [*Dasein*]' (§ 151). I have italicized the last words to emphasize the idea that the second nature constitutes the reality, the actuality of individuals.

Marx rebels precisely against this kind of idealist holism. For him, as for Aristotle, man is a 'political animal', a social being; yet sociality, as an expression of human condition, can only be defined with reference to social relations which are *historically determined*. This is not the sociality of man as a species-being, of humankind abstracted from history, of a universal essence of the subject. Rather it is a sociality modelled by specific production relations and by the ethical norms, the political structures and the ideological apparatuses associated with them. It does not constitute the essence of the individual, it does not constitute the individual.

To grasp the meaning of this opposition between Marx and Hegel, it is necessary to understand the different way they conceptualize a social relation. In the definition of a social relation three elements should be considered: the individuals who participate in it, the nature of the relation and the consciousness the individuals themselves have of it. The choice of attributing ontological priority to the individuals or to their relation depends on the role attributed to the consciousness they have of it.

According to Hegel, the individuals who assume a role in a relationship are almost mystically created by a spiritual link which is based on reciprocal recognition and which takes the form of an 'internal' social relation. A classic example is the servant–master relationship, where the latter is a master because he is recognized as such by the former. Another meaningful example is offered by the notion of the State as an embodiment of public interest and an expression of Man's universal consciousness. The empirical individuals who interact in civil society as egoistic agents are not 'actual' men, nor true social agents, because they are not conscious of their own universality. Man becomes 'actual' through the State, the social relationship *par excellence*, which, by regulating civil society, constitutes the agents as universal subjects.

Going still deeper, it should be understood that man becomes 'actual' through a relation and its recognition. The particular man, the concrete individual, starts from the position of a being *in himself* and becomes a subject who is self-conscious of his universal human essence only after having placed himself in a relation in which he is *for the other*. Then the recognized relationship, the awareness of being in relation with another who is identical to his own essence, generates the being *in himself and for himself*. So the relationship, due to the spiritual substance it originates, assumes priority over the individual elements that are part of it. This is a

clearly holistic position. And it is so in that the essence of the subject is defined in idealistic terms. The individual is a universal subject only because he participates in a relation of which he is aware. The consciousness expressed in the relation, and then the recognized relation itself, constitutes man as an 'actual' subject. Outside the relation this subject does not exist, for he is unable to appropriate his own essence.

Marx's approach is radically different. The real relationships that render the individual social are invoked by him not to obliterate the individual's ontological priority, but to characterize the social agents as historically defined empirical beings. For him 'individuals enter into relation with each other only as determinate individuals' (Marx, 1857–58, 28, 101). His Aristotelism is the result of a mindful overtaking of Hegel on a crucial question. His materialist stance brings him to use a notion of 'social relation' which is alternative to Hegel's notion of 'internal relation'. Social relations are objective and are determined by the behaviours of concrete agents. These behaviours and these agents enter into relations which constitute the 'economic base' of a social formation. It is they who generate social relations, not the other way round. The reciprocal recognition of roles in relationships takes place in the sphere of subjectivity and pertains to the forms of thought in which ideological superstructures are expressed. In fact 'relationships can naturally be expressed only in ideas' (Marx, 1857–58, 28, 101). Social relations are not mental representations in the first instance, rather they are real facts. Recognition of the relations is 'expressed' as a mental facts, but is not generated as such. In this approach the existence and the recognition of a relation cannot take ontological priority over the existence of the agents and the material conditions that produce them. The opposite thesis reveals a vice of idealism in which dominating classes might even be interested in the construction of their ideology:

> philosophers have seen the peculiarity of modern times in the individuals' being dominated by ideas . . . From the ideological standpoint, this mistake was the easier to make because that domination of relationships (that objective dependence, which incidentally is in its turn transformed into certain personal relationships of dependence, only divested of all illusion) appears in the consciousness of individuals themselves to be the rule of ideas, and the belief in the eternal validity of these ideas, i.e. of those objective relationships of dependence, is OF COURSE in every way reinforced, sustained, drummed into people by the ruling classes. (Marx, 1857–8, 28, 101)

The thesis that the people who participate in a relationship and the relationship itself are not constituted by the ideas emerging in accounting

for the relationship is an unavoidable thesis for a theory which maintains that history is made by real men and women rather than by the Idea. According to Marx a master is a master not because he is recognized as such by a subordinate worker, and even if he is not recognized. He is a master not for subjective and spiritual motives, but for solidly objective reasons attaining to the distribution of wealth and power. For Marx it is not the exploitation relationship that generates the owner; rather it is the owner, the capitalist, who originates the exploitation relationship: he does it in the moment he rents a labourer and sets him to work.

As shown by Dumont (1977), the materialist overturning of holism into an individualist approach emerges with sufficient lucidity in Marx's critique of Hegel's theory of the State. The State's universality, for Marx, is only superficial appearance, in reality it is a product of political alienation and ideology. The State, far from embodying man's universality and constituting conscious social subjects, is in reality an expression of particular interests (mainly those of 'bureaucracy', in early works; those of capital and the ruling class, in mature works). True social relations are constituted in class struggles that occur in civil society, in struggles where individuals pursue their material interests through the action of social aggregates. The consciousness of social relations, whether false or scientific, serves as an instrument of struggle. It also acts through the ideological role of the State, but does not have any metaphysically constitutive function with respect to the individuals and their interests. So unessential is the ontological value of the State, that in a communist society, where classes and exploitation relations are abolished, the State is dissolved or, rather, is reabsorbed in civil society itself.

An understanding of the distinction between 'base' and 'superstructure' might be useful to fully comprehend Marx's individualist ontology. The economic base of a mode of production is made up of individuals and the social relations they create. In contrast to Hegel, the subjective recognition of social relations plays no role in their constitution, to the point that consciousness may take the form of both scientific knowledge and a vulgar apologetic deformation. This means that a relation is a real relation independently of the way people recognize and understand it. And it also means that the subjects who produce relations may do so independently of the consciousness they have of them, and that therefore their existence as social agents is prior to the consciousness emerging from their relations. At another level of social interaction there is determination of the ideas by which people account for their relations and may attempt to change them. But the *mental* facts whereby relationships are expressed in the form of ideas are ontologically subordinate with respect to the *real* facts whereby the individuals constitute the relations. It is because of the

superstructural nature of the consciousness of relations that these cannot be intended as having ontological priority over the individuals.

To avoid any misunderstanding I must repeat that here I am talking of the ability of the consciousness of a relation to construct ontologically the subjects who take part in it. If I say that Marx rejects this conception when he locates ideological facts in the world of superstructures, I am not arguing that he excludes that men's ideas may affect reality. Indeed his scientific and political work would have no sense if he thought it were not possible to use ideas and knowledge to try to modify the reality of social relations. But in this case it is just a matter of the capacity of ideas to justify the intentions that move social agents to undertake actions. Reasons, motivations, beliefs and theories contribute to materially produce social relations. There is no doubt that through various mediations and causal nexuses ideas can bring about a change in reality. But that is just the point: the material ability of concrete men to trigger causal processes, not the magic capacity of the consciousness of social relations to construct metaphysically 'actual' men. As Boyd (1991, 144) points out: Ideas are 'metaphysically innocent'. This means that 'they affect the causal structure of the world only via the operation of the intermediary causal mechanism which supervenes on the causal structures . . . and not also in some additional way studied only by philosophers practicing conceptual analysis'.

Summing up, what radically divides Marx and Hegel in the field of social ontology is the different mode in which they order the three levels of human action – individual, social and cultural. The human essence is identified by Hegel in a spiritual substance consisting in the consciousness of universality. This consciousness originates in the formation of a recognized social relation, so that the individual as a subject is constituted by the 'internal' relation itself. It is a manner of thought that arises in the 'mist-enveloped regions of the religious world' and that produces that form of idealistic reification whereby 'the productions of the human brain appear as independent beings endowed with life, and entering into relation both with one another and the human race' (Marx, 1867–94, I, 35, 83). For Marx, on the contrary, 'the ideal is nothing else than the material world reflected by the human mind, and translated into forms of thought (ib., 19). Consciousness manifests itself in a mental world, that of ideological superstructures, which has no metaphysically constitutive function in social relations, but rather takes the form of arrays of non-univocal mental derivations and instruments of social action. The foundations of superstructures consist of the economic bases in which social relations are created by empirical social agents. Since consciousness does not have any constitutive function in social relations, these cannot

take ontological priority over the individuals who produce them. At the bottom of Marx's individualist ontology there is materialism and the rejection of Hegel's idealism.

Which freedoms?

The lower and higher phases of communism described by Marx in *Critique of the Gotha Programme* have successively been conceptualized by much of utopian Marxism as two different forms of social organization and have thus been redefined. Nowadays they are known respectively as 'socialism' and 'communism'.[23] Few students have perceived the theoretical problem engendered by the redefinition. In fact this lexical evolution is not devoid of theoretical meaning. It reflects a political vision strongly impregnated with economism in that it focuses entirely on distribution and allocation criteria: 'to each according to his productive contribution' would be the criterion prevailing in socialism, 'to each according to his needs' would be the one ruling in communism. These are two *radically* different types of economic organization; for the former presupposes a kind of resource allocation based on the incentive principle, whilst the latter is characterized precisely by the superseding of this principle.

Yet Marx does not consider them as two alternative forms of organization. He only sees them as two stages of growth of the same social-economic formation: communism. And he is explicit in arguing that the distributive criterion is not essential for defining communism:

> It was in general a mistake to make a fuss about so-called distribution and put the principal stress on it . . . The vulgar socialists (and from them in turn a section of the Democrats) have taken over from the bourgeois economists the consideration and treatment of distribution as independent of the mode of production and hence the presentation of socialism as turning principally on distribution.
>
> (Marx, 1875, 24, 87–8)

It is evident that, for Marx, the distributive criterion is not essential in characterizing communism and that the essential must be found elsewhere. In some fundamental sense the two kinds of organization, although different in terms of distribution, must consist of the same thing. In other words the theory of communism is not a doctrine of the good society founded on distributive justice. What is it then? What do the lower and higher phases of communism have in common which is so fundamental as to downgrade the differences in the forms of distribution and allocation?

The answer to this question emerges with clarity in Marx's and Engels' mature works: 'Communism is the doctrine of the conditions for the emancipation of the proletariat' (Engels, 1847b, 6, 341). It is a theory of freedom. In which sense? Here it is:

> Personal freedom becomes possible only within the community. In the previous substitutes for the community, in the state, etc., personal freedom has existed only for the individuals who developed under the conditions of the ruling class, and only insofar as they were individuals of this class . . . In the real community the individuals obtain their freedom in and through their association.
>
> (Marx and Engels, 1845–46, 5, 78)

For the moment I have no intention of getting myself mixed up in the philosophical debates on Marx's theory of freedom.[24] In this section I will only try to make Marx and Engels speak for themselves and to enucleate the core of their ideas. In the next chapter I will endeavour to interpret them. And the core seems to be reducible to four different definitions of freedom. This is intended as:

1. Self-government of the producers
2. Capacity for self-realization
3. Faculty of choice
4. Self-government of the commune.[25]

1. Here is the *first definition*:

> The self-government of the producers (Marx, 1871c, 22, 332); free and associated labour . . . this is Communism (ib., 335); a social system in which the labourers work for their own account.
>
> (Marx, 1867–94, III, 37, 87)

To grasp the meaning of this notion of freedom one must comprehend Marx's analysis of the employment relationship in a capitalist economy – a relationship instituted with an employment contract, the exchange of wage labour. In the market a worker 'sells himself and, indeed, sells himself piecemeal. He sells at auction eight, ten, twelve, fifteen hours of his life' (Marx, 1847a, 9, 203). Legally in an employment contract the worker undertakes an obligation to obedience and so generates the capitalist's power of command in the labour process:[26] this is why 'the system of wage labour is a system of slavery' (Marx, 1875, 24, 92). A capitalist purchases the use value of labour power and therefore a prerogative to use the

labourer. This is a *subordinate* worker and, as such, must be subject to the despotism of capital in the factory:

> By the co-operation of numerous wage labourers, the sway of capital develops into a requisite for carrying on the labour process itself, into a real requisite of production. That a capitalist should command on the field of production, is now as indispensable as that a general should command on the field of battle . . . The connexion existing between their various labours appears to them, ideally, in the shape of a preconceived plan of the capitalist, and practically in the shape of the authority of the same capitalist, in the shape of the powerful will of another, who subjects their activity to his aims. If, then, the control of the capitalist is in substance twofold by reason of the twofold nature of the process of production itself – which, on the one hand, is a social process for producing use values, on the other, a process for creating surplus value – in form that control is despotic.
>
> (Marx, 1964, I, 35, 335–7)

Where does this despotism come from? It comes from the fact that, by virtue of the worker's obligation to obedience, in a factory 'the employer combines in his own person the parts of legislator, judge, and executor' (Marx, 1871c, 22, 339), so that he establishes a 'wage-slavery' (ib., 335). The theory of the wage relationship as an institution which generates the despotism of capital and the subjugation of workers is assimilated by Marx very early in his economic studies. In his notes on *Wages* of 1847, for example, he considers 'wages themselves in the essence of their evil, that my activity becomes a commodity, that I become utterly and absolutely for sale' (Marx, 1847b, 6, 436). And it will remain a constant in all his investigations on the employment relationship. In his *Workers' Questionnaire* of 1880, he first solicits the interviewees to 'state the rules and the penalties for breach of them established by your master for the government of his wages-labourers', and then asks them whether in the factory 'they are only permitted to be the obedient "subjects" of their master' (Marx, 1880a, 24, 333–4).

If wage-work is a fundamental institution of capitalism, communism can be realized only by abolishing it. In communism the labourers are not subordinate workers. They are free in that, to accede to the means of production, they are not compelled to undertake an obligation to obedience. Therefore the production process will be managed by workers who 'freely associate' and govern themselves.

Herbert Marcuse retraced the origin of this notion of freedom in Marx's critique of Hegel's philosophy. Individual freedom, according to Hegel (1991, §§ 34–81), implies a domination of the things appropriated

by man and presupposes and generates private property. This institution, in turn, gives rise to contract law, by which the owners recognize their reciprocal rights. An individual may exert domination not only of external objects but also of himself, and therefore can sell or alienate part of his time in the form of labour services (ib., § 43). An act of sale of labour services is a manifestation of individual freedom. Marx however observes that, in the 'labour market', the people who are 'free' (i.e. deprived) of wealth ownership are virtually *compelled* to alienate their own autonomy.[27] Freedom of contract for them turns into the necessity to accept a relationship of subordination. Thus the employment contract which, according to Marx, is the basis of labour exploitation and freedom loss, represents the fundamental model of bourgeois relationships. Through the wage labour relationship the capitalist's freedom produces the worker's slavery. The truth of this form is its negation (Marcuse, 1999).

One must not think that Marx adopts a notion of negative freedom intended as the condition of people who are not dominated by another person. In the next section I will touch on the limits of the negative freedom doctrine. In the meantime, let me clarify that the first definition refers to an institutional condition necessary for the exercise of effective freedom: only if the institutional bases of capitalist domination are abolished will the worker be able to operate as an autonomous decision-making agent in the productive process.

Already in this definition Marx is quite clear and explicit in outlining the social dimensions of freedom. Although he talks of the freedom of individual agents, he does not refer to abstract individuals. He talks of workers, concrete persons historically and institutionally defined as members of a particular social class. And he distinguishes them from the individuals of the dominating class precisely on account of the distribution of freedom: the capitalists have it, the workers do not. The distinction is obfuscated by market relations, wherein all people appear as agents equally endowed with freedom of contract. Yet Marx brings to light the class differences in the distribution of freedom precisely through an analysis of exchange relations and a deconstruction of the ideologies built thereon:

> In a developed system of exchange (and this appearance leads democracy astray) . . . the individuals appear to be independent . . . appear to collide with each other freely, and to exchange with each other in this freedom; but they appear independent only to those who abstract from the conditions, the conditions of existence, in which those individuals come into contact with each other (. . . A closer investigation of those external relationships and conditions shows, however, that

> it is impossible for the individuals of a class, etc., to overcome them en masse without abolishing them. A single individual may by chance cope with them; the mass of individuals dominated by them cannot do so, since the very existence of that mass expresses the subordination, and the necessary subordination, of the individuals to it.) These external relationships, far from abolishing the 'relationships of dependence', merely dissolve them into a general form; they are rather the elaboration of the general foundation of relationships of personal dependence . . . Relationships can naturally be expressed only in ideas . . . From the ideological standpoint, this mistake was the easier to make because that domination of relationships . . . appears in the consciousness of individuals themselves to be the rule of ideas, and the belief in the eternal validity of these ideas, i.e. of those objective relationships of dependence, is OF COURSE in every way reinforced, sustained, drummed into people by the ruling classes.
>
> (Marx, 1857–58, 28, 100–1)

One thing is very clear here and deserves to be emphasized: whereas the entire oppressed class cannot free itself from those material relations of dependency without suppressing their conditions, the single individual 'may cope with them' and become effectively free by jumping into the dominant class. In fact, before communism, as Marx and Engels (1845–46, 5, 78) already make clear in *The German Ideology*, 'personal freedom has existed only for the individuals who developed under the conditions of the ruling class, and only insofar as they were individuals of this class'. Communism abolishes social classes thus setting all people free, and it does so by creating the conditions for the producers' self-management.

2. The *second definition* states:

> A. Smith has no inkling that the overcoming of these obstacles is in itself a manifestation of freedom – and, moreover, that the external aims are [thereby] stripped of their character as merely external natural necessity, and become posited as aims which only the individual himself posits, that they are therefore posited as self-realisation, objectification of the subject, and thus real freedom, whose action is precisely work.
>
> (Marx, 1857–58, 28, 530)

In the capitalist firm all production decisions, choice of techniques, organization, labour times and rhythms, investment decisions, etc. are made by the capitalist. The workers only have to execute them. They might resist them, but cannot make them. The workers' activities do not imply any ability of choice, they are hetero-directed activities, alienated work. In a self-managed firm, on the contrary, all production decisions are made by the workers, or by delegates who express the will of the workers themselves and are controlled by them. Evidently labour changes its meaning in this case. The workers work for themselves and choose the techniques, labour times and rhythms, even the innovations. And 'if, for example, the workers assert in their communist propaganda that the vocation, designation, task of every person is to achieve all-round development of all his abilities' (Marx and Engels, 1845–46, 5, 292), then it cannot be excluded that they may eventually succeed in re-organizing the productive process so as to transform labour activity into an action of self-realization, an action through which they can express their personality. Labour may become less fastidious and less frustrating; it may become an activity in which the worker expresses his creative abilities and develops an all-round personality.

It is interesting to note that here Marx is not attributing his own philosophical preferences to the workers, nor is he presenting a philosophical anthropology of his own as if it were that of the subjects he is studying. Rather, he is defining the workers' preferences on the ground of an assumption that is justified by an observation of what the workers themselves say.[28] In fact the scientific nature of Marx's and Engels' political participation in the revolutionary movement of their times is revealed in their attempts to understand the workers' life experiences and aspirations to emancipation, as well as the revolutionaries' conjectures on alternative ways of life, and then in the attempt to elaborate those experiences and conjectures theoretically so as to return them to the movement as scientific knowledge. This method is justified by the conviction that the emancipation of the oppressed must be accomplished by the oppressed themselves (Geoghegan, 1987, 31).

It is evident that freedom intended in this manner is not the way out of production and scarcity, nor is it the entrance to the kingdom of the unconditioned Absolute. The mature Marx is not influenced by the Greek and Christian vision of human essence as a spiritual substance in respect of which labour activity and material things represent condemnation and negativity. Wage work is un-free not because it is conditioned by natural and technological constraints, but because it is hetero-directed activity. Thus liberation does not pass through the abolition of toil and obstacles. Rather it manifests itself by reconducting toil and obstacles within a sphere

of activity governed by the workers themselves. The workers' ends remain ontologically undefined: they are not postulated by a philosophy of the human essence; instead they are determined by the empirical individuals who express themselves in labour activity.

One might be tempted to see a residue of Hegel's notion of freedom here. Indeed a certain ambiguity of Hegelian origin is present. According to Hegel, man realizes himself in labour because, on the one hand, he identifies himself in the other men with whom he cooperates and, on the other, he becomes acquainted with the world by establishing his power over it. Man's universality is achieved through negation of particularity, in a *necessary* process of actuation which is intrinsic in his own nature. This necessity is freedom because realization is not determined by external forces, but is a form of self-development of the subject. Now, only a being who knows his own potentialities and those of the world is able to transform his existence into a condition of self-realization. The reality which is understood and appropriated with labour becomes a conquest of a conscious subject. The freedom of the subject consists in the comprehension and domination of what he effectively is. Thus true liberty, according to Hegel, is not an attribute of a subject insomuch as he is a particular individual, but an attribute of the objective truth that this subject holds.

A similar conception is undoubtedly present in the young Marx, but is superseded after the epistemological break, when the workers are considered free not because they act according to a determinate goal, but simply because their actions are determined by themselves in pursuing goals which they themselves have chosen.[29] After all, if men are looked upon as particular and empirical individuals, instead of embodiments of the Subject, there is no way of reducing their heterogeneous goals to an absolute truth, nor can their realizations be intended as necessitated by an internal law of the Spirit. Thus it is easy to understand the importance of the fact that labour's goals are inferred from the workers' motivations rather than being hypostatized as an intrinsic property of human nature. Freedom as self-realization means that people are free not because they realize themselves, but because they have the faculty to do so; not for the particular goals of their productive decisions, but because they themselves decide their own goals. Unlike in Hegel's conception, in that of Marx it is essential that the subjects of freedom are defined as concrete individuals, that is, as historically determined agents who decide the goals of their own actions, and not as embodiments of a self-realizing Spirit or Human Species.

If this aspect of Marx's notion of freedom is clearly understood, it is possible to come to terms with a problem brought to light by Gould (1978, 111–16), namely that the definition of freedom as self-realization seems to refer both to a 'capacity' and to an 'activity': the capacity to

decide the goals of an action and the activity of creation in pursuing the goals. This is the residue of ambiguity which is present in Marx. Now, the second notion certainly prevails in Hegel. Self-realization is actualization of a potentiality. The Subject is free in the act in which he consciously realizes himself, not because he can arbitrarily choose what is to be realized. And if this act is labour, then man frees himself in labour. Therefore even a slave, according to Hegel, participates in human freedom. He does it because he realizes himself by working, and despite the fact that he works under the command of a master. There is nothing arbitrary, according to Hegel, in the self-realization process. There is only the transformation of a necessary potentiality into a consequent act of will. This prevalence of a notion of freedom as activity, as actualization, derives from the conviction that the Spirit contains all of its determinations, and that the unfolding of these is an internal necessity (Gould, ib., 115). Such a road is precluded to Marx, for his decision-making agent is an empirical individual, a finite and limited being, and not the embodiment of the Spirit. The capacity to decide the goals of his own actions has no necessary content, the end of the action is not presupposed in human nature. Thus, on the one hand, it is evident that action itself cannot be intended as a simple act of will which recognizes a necessity, so that freedom cannot consist of the action in itself. On the other, it is equally evident that, since the choices of action are not predetermined, freedom will consist only in the range of choice opportunities which are *ex ante* open to action. In other words, only the notion of freedom as capacity, as an array of possibilities, is compatible with a theory developed on the ground of a materialist critique of Hegel. On the contrary, the *act* of self-realization must be intended only as a concretization of the chosen goals, and not as freedom. As Marx points out, it is a 'manifestation of freedom', a realization in a labour activity, not freedom itself. In this fundamental sense the notion of self-realization as a *possible* expression of freedom, as developed by the mature Marx, is different from the Hegelian one as a *necessary* recognition of man's universality. In Marx – it must be stressed, even though at variance with what he himself sometimes lets slip – the individual is free not because he realizes a determinate end, but because he himself can choose his ends.

3. Now consider the *third definition*:

> It is the worker himself who turns the money into whatever use values he wants, buys the commodities he wants with it, and as an owner

> of money, as a buyer of commodities, he stands in exactly the same relation to the sellers of commodities as any other buyer. The conditions of his existence – and also the limited extent of the value of the money he has acquired – naturally compel him to spend it on a rather restricted range of means of subsistence. Nevertheless, some degree of variation is possible here, such as e.g. newspapers, which form part of the necessary means of subsistence of the English urban worker. He can save something, form a hoard. He can also waste his wages on spirits, etc. But in acting this way he acts as a free agent.
>
> (Marx, 1863–66, 34, 438)

The passage continues: the worker 'is himself responsible for the way in which HE SPENDS HIS WAGES. He learns to master himself, in contrast to the slave, who needs a master.'[30] Thus the worker, who is not free in the production process, where he undergoes the capitalist's despotism, may be so in the consumption sphere, albeit within the narrow limits determined by his wage. With this definition we enter the field of consumption choices and, more generally, life enjoyment outside the productive process. Freedom in this sphere consists of the capacity to choose the goods to enjoy. In a capitalist economy the freedom of choice of goods and life projects is very limited for the workers, given the level of their incomes. In other words, this freedom of the workers is strongly constrained by their low incomes and their limited wealth. Not only can they not buy a Ferrari car like that of their master or afford holidays in the Caribbean, but they also cannot invest in enriching their personality, attending long-term, expensive schools or cultivating interests in music and literature. On the contrary, in a communist society, where the workers produce for themselves and not to increase the capitalists' wealth, the social product is plausibly distributed in a more egalitarian way and the workers' average incomes are higher than those earned in a capitalist economy. Moreover it can be assumed that the workers decide to use an increasing portion of productivity to reduce their labour time. Even if work becomes more gratifying, one does not live for work alone. If their leisure time increases together with their income, people can significantly broaden their field of choice of enjoyment goods and life projects. Finally one must not forget that in a capitalist economy the nature of consumption goods is decided by the capitalists and often imposed on the consumers through the induction of conditioned needs. On the contrary, in an economy where people decide for themselves what to consume and what to produce, technical progress will probably evolve in such a way as to exalt the individuals' genuine capacities of enjoyment – genuine, not because

they are inscribed in an imaginary 'human nature', but simply because they are autonomously determined by the individuals themselves.

4. Finally, here is the *fourth definition*:

> Freedom consists in converting the state from an organ superimposed upon society into one completely subordinate to it.
>
> (Marx, 1875, 24, 94)

> Freedom in this field can only consist in socialised man, the associated producers, rationally regulating their interchange with Nature, bringing it under their common control . . . But it nonetheless still remains a realm of necessity.
>
> (Marx, 1867–94, III, 37, 807)

These two seemingly different definitions in fact say the same thing. The latter postulates that freedom reduces to social control over the limitation that nature poses on the productive force of labour. The realm of material necessity cannot be ignored, so that self-realization capacities and freedom of choice must undergo some limitations anyway. I cannot become a good piano player if I do not study for at least ten years. I do not create a masterpiece of a product in my firm if nobody will then like it or want to buy it. Moreover there are many legal limitations: I cannot smoke in a public room. Finally, other limitations are of a strictly cultural nature: I cannot show my smile to the world if I am an Afghan woman. Now, in a society based on oppression people must suffer many constraints which are extraneous to their will and are imposed by obscure and uncontrollable forces. On the contrary, natural, legal and cultural limitations in a society of free individuals are defined as emanating from the will of people. Society might allow me to smoke marijuana, but might forbid me to use heroin. Both norms, though, both the authorization and the prohibition, have been decided by an authority that emanates from my will. Thus the constraints that the authorities remove or impose must be taken as politically determined by myself. In this sense I cannot be considered as oppressed by an extraneous force if I confine my choices to the opportunities defined by these norms. In the productive process I may realize myself in creating a work of art, but the resources I use must be employed to produce goods that satisfy someone's needs. Producing for others means that I am subject to limitations determined by the desires

of others. And I am no less free if I voluntarily decide to work for others besides myself and therefore accept to render my actions compatible with the requirements of society.

Hence the definition of freedom as self-government states that people are free if the constraints they undergo, whether natural, technological, cultural or legal, are determined by themselves. And since these constraints act as limitations to the choices of a whole community, their control can only be collective. It follows that, if all the individuals have to be free in this sense, all must participate in the public decision-making process. In other words freedom as self-government implies democracy. The pledge to democracy in Marx and Engels is an implication of their stance for freedom.[31]

The collective determination of constraints does not mean they can be fixed arbitrarily; if for no other reason because at least technological and natural constraints consist of strictly objective limitations. Public control, in this case, implies the use of technological knowledge and the development of technical progress in view of a slackening of constraints, i.e. of the expansion of freedom. In this sense freedom as self-government 'means nothing but the capacity to make decisions with knowledge of the subject . . . Freedom therefore consists in the control over ourselves and over external nature, a control founded on knowledge of natural necessity' (Engels, 1876–78, 25, 105–6).[32]

Note that in all four definitions the notion of 'freedom' is presented as *definiens* of that of 'communism'. However there is a famous definition of communism which seems completely to ignore the notion of freedom:

> Communism is for us not a *state of affairs* which is to be established, an ideal to which reality [will] have to adjust itself. We call communism the *real* movement which abolishes the present state of things.
>
> (Marx and Engels, 1845–46, 5, 49)

I will deal with the political meaning of this thesis in another chapter. For the moment I would like to observe that it abstracts only ostensibly from the notion of freedom. In fact it should be interpreted as a description of the process of freedom expansion implied in the fourth definition, which is preceded by the statement:

> With [the civilized man's] development this realm of physical necessity expands as a result of his wants; but, at the same time, the forces of production which satisfy these wants also increase.
>
> (Marx, 1867–94, III, 37, 807)

Freedom as capacity of self-realization in labour activity and faculty of choice of life projects cannot be an absolute freedom. At any given time choices must bend to material necessities and objective limitations: existing techniques and resources, available means of production, quantity of goods produced, available leisure time, legal norms, etc. Now all these constrictions may be relaxed as time passes and freedom may therefore grow. According to Marx, this expansion process may be accelerated if the economy is placed under the rational control of the people. And control can only be collective, for the macroeconomic dynamics, the rhythm and direction of technical progress, the coordination of single productive units and the forms of social life have to be regulated. In this approach, communism is seen not only as a system of maximum equal freedom for everyone, but also as a process of rapid expansion of freedom. So that it can then be intended as a real movement supported by well-defined social and political forces who act and fight for the growth of freedom.

If one understands that Marx's conception of freedom emphasizes the *process* of liberation rather than the ideal *state* of freedom distribution, it is possible to come to terms with a problem emerging from the fourth definition. Whilst the other three define freedom in terms of the objective opportunities from which people can make their choices, the fourth seems to focus on a subjective factor: the awareness of contributing to determine the limits of choices. There seems to be some inconsistency with a conception which, as I will show in the next section, justifies a purely *objectivist* notion of freedom. But the difficulty disappears as soon as the fourth definition is interpreted in dynamic rather than static terms. It says not only nor so much that people *feel* free because they are subjectively aware of contributing to determine the limits of their own opportunities. Rather, it states that they *are* free in that they contribute to expand choice opportunities through the democratic process. And this is undoubtedly an objective process.

What is freedom?

The notion of 'freedom' is quite complex and rather thorny. Not by chance the most diverse political positions have been founded on it. And several moral philosophies have been used to define it. Thus it is understandable that Marx's conception may suggest contrasting interpretations. Nor is it difficult to find justifications for sundry interpretations by appealing to various philosophical influences exerted on Marx, like those of Kant, Rousseau, Spinoza, but especially Hegel.

To account for the interpretation I propose here, I must first call attention to the fact that all the definitions of freedom in the preceding section are taken from Marx's and Engels' mature works. Then, later in this section, I will explain what freedom is. But before doing this, I will try to clarify what it *is not*, which I will do by referring to some propositions of the young Marx on the theme of freedom.

What contributed to muddy the waters of Marxist political philosophy is the fact that Marx speaks a great deal about freedom even in his early period, and not only in the years when he directs a liberal newspaper, but also during the years of his 'communist humanism'. Now, the young Marx speaks of freedom using the typical father Hegel's language, and indeed it seems that, on the theme of freedom, he is quite unable to commit the premeditated parricide before 1845. Communism is conceived by him as the ultimate achievement of human liberation, that same liberation which Christianity, according to Hegel, had missed; thus liberation in the properly Hegelian sense of 'the true resolution of the strife . . . between freedom and necessity' (Marx, 1844b, 3, 296). This is the freedom achieved by entry into the kingdom of the spirit's unconditional absolute, when man attains the consciousness and the will of his own universality as a species-being. The collective 'rational control' of nature and society is a form of this freedom.

Some Marxist believers – those who cannot tolerate the existence of contradictions and epistemological breaks in the word of the Prophet – in an effort to reconstruct his single and consistent conception of freedom, tried to build that consistency precisely on Hegel. After all, the Hegelian origins of the young Marx's conception cannot be ignored.[33]

Not surprisingly, though, some of the most illuminating Hegelian reconstructions of Marx's conception of freedom are those proposed by non-Marxist thinkers. Particularly interesting is the interpretation put forward by Walicki (1988, 1995), an ardent Popperian critic of Marx. His work is to be recommended above all for two special merits. First, he follows the lead of most Hegelian–Marxists by misreading, i.e. by twisting the mature Marx's scientific theory so as to make it serve the philosophy of the young humanist. Secondly, at variance with the Marxists, he brings to light the totalitarian political implications of the young Marx's reading of Hegel's conception of freedom. A similar operation is attempted by Heller (1988) who, by attributing to Marx a strongly Hegelian-flavoured notion of *absolute* freedom, ends up discovering that communism can only be realized in the land of Cockaigne, where all forms of scarcity and man's dependency on nature are overcome. Finally Femia (1993, 157–62) endeavours to retrace the roots of Marx's 'intrinsically totalitarian vocation' in

the holistic vision of human nature that emerges in some early works, especially *The Jewish Question* and *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*.

The basic reason for the totalitarian connotations of the Hegelian–Marxist notion of freedom must be retraced in the definition of the subject of freedom as a self-producing collective agent, the 'species-being', the 'social humanity', the 'class for itself', the 'universal class'. If one believes that man is free, not when he is personally able to make his own life choices and participate as an autonomous individual in public choices, but only when he achieves the self-consciousness and realizes the potentiality of a species who can dominate nature, it is not difficult to arrive at the conclusion that public and private choices must be made by a *political body*, an enlightened and active vanguard, that has achieved that consciousness. Then the common individuals, the workers and the citizens, if they do not wish not to be free have only to try to develop a peculiar kind of 'will of necessity', namely, to understand and accept the reasons of that vanguard.

Thus we need to free Marx from Hegelianism, the critical scientist from the humanist philosopher, if we really want to understand *what freedom is*. Fortunately, a rigorous scientific method for analysing freedom has now been developed, through which it is possible to clarify many seemingly obscure aspects of Marx's theory and, at the same time, bring to light its depth and topicality.

That scientific method emerged from the debates prompted by a book by Isaiah Berlin (1969)[34] and his postulation of two notions of 'freedom': negative and positive. In a fundamental contribution Gerald MacCallum (1967) clarified that much of the fog obfuscating that notion derives from faulty definitions and that a correct definition requires three elements to be specified, namely, the *subject*, the *field of choice* and the *impediments* to freedom. In other words, in order to be able to speak consistently of freedom it is necessary to ascertain *who* is free, *from* what, *of* doing what.[35] As Van Parijs (1995, 18) puts it, when you talk of 'freedom as individual sovereignty', you have to talk of it as 'freedom *from* and freedom *to*'. The subject might generically be defined as a *decision-making agent*. In a more precise analysis he can be characterized by specifying his social, political and cultural features. The field of choice is defined as the *array of goods or actions* which might be chosen by the individual. The impediments are specified in terms of all possible *limitations to choices*. These, by defining the field, determine the *opportunity set* available to the individual. Freedom is the *faculty to choose* goods and actions within a given opportunity set. The wider the set, the greater the freedom. So defined, freedom is an objective reality: it depends on the real conditions

and circumstances under which the individual can make choices, it does not depend on his psychology. A woman compelled to wear a chador is not as free as one who is not subject to this constraint, independently of any conviction she may have that it is right to wear it.

I will use this approach in an attempt to bring to light the core of Marx's conception of freedom by abstracting from the shades of his philosophical language. And I will begin with the observation that Marx is one of the few scientists of his times who address the problem by defining with some precision the subjects of freedom with their opportunity sets and the constraints that bind them.

As to the subject, Marx always refers to the individual, but not in generic and socially neutral terms. Reference to the individual as an agent of choice is explicit in the second and the third definitions of freedom mentioned above. One understands that it is implicit in the first and the fourth as soon as one reflects on the fact that the decision-making agent is not an undetermined person. Marx always specifies his basic social features and presents him as a wage worker. In fact communism as a process and as a movement concerns the liberation of the proletarians, and only when it is conceived as a society in which the social classes have been abolished can it refer to more generic 'producers', 'socialized men' or 'civilized men'.

Obviously nothing prevents us from referring freedom to social *aggregates* like classes or the society at large. But then it is evident that these are aggregates of individuals who act in concert and who make decisions, albeit collective, on an individual base anyway. 'Free and associated labour' is none other than groups of workers who freely associate, whilst 'self-government of the producers' is only a result of the decisions autonomously made by the workers. It is in capitalism that human beings are overwhelmed by economic conditions that strongly limit their freedom of choice. Instead communism 'for the first time consciously treats all naturally evolved premises as the creations of hitherto existing men, strips them of their natural character and subjugates them to the power of the united individuals', therefore 'the reality which communism creates is precisely the true basis for rendering it impossible that anything should exist independently of individuals' (Marx and Engels, 1845–46, 5, 81).

The set of choice opportunities is described by Marx in a complete way, that is, as a result of the interaction of three scenarios of human action attaining respectively to the production, consumption and political spheres – three fields of social action which completely span the domain of action possibilities.

In the productive sphere production decisions are made which are evidently subject to limitations attaining to technology (the techniques in use and the dynamics of technical progress), the economic structure (the demand for goods and the industrial organization) and the financial system (the purchasing power required to mobilize resources). In the consumption sphere the choices of life projects and enjoyment are made, and the main impediments pertain to disposable income, wealth and leisure time. The political sphere, on the other hand, is conceived by Marx as not separate from the other two, but rather as one that permeates both, since collective choices are made in it, i.e. the choices concerning whatever regulates social, economic and cultural relations. This is the sphere where the institutional conditions of all opportunity sets are determined. Whilst freedom consists in the capacity for self-realization and the faculty of choice respectively in the production and consumption spheres, in that of political decisions it takes on the meaning of self-government. In the next chapter I will try to go further into the study of the way communism shapes the three spheres of social action.

4
The Emancipation of Labour

Self-management of the producers

The constraints on productive choices are *prima facie* the same in communism as we would find in a capitalist economy, since limitations depending on technology, industrial organization and scarcity would remain in force anyway. Yet Marx tries to highlight the qualitative change that would ensue from communism. Capitalists make choices to increase profits and the value of capital, and are unconcerned with the substance of the use values they produce and the quality of labour activity except insofar as labour productivity and commodity saleability are involved. When a firm's governance setting changes, the hierarchy of values presiding over productive choices changes too. If production decisions are made by the workers, the quality of labour becomes a superior motive and the development of human personality and creative abilities enters the field of choice. Opportunity sets widen considerably, for the workers take choice options into account (as for example working in a more satisfying way) which the capitalist firm tends to rule out. Moreover, since the workers produce indirectly for themselves in a communist society, the producer and the consumer cease to be two extraneous entities. Thus the quality and nature of commodities, as well as the direction of technical progress, take on another significance; and this change too may contribute to widen production opportunity sets.

The problem arises of defining the most suitable institutional forms for a communist productive organization. Marx and Engels put forward two different suggestions which many scholars considered contradictory: the workers' self-management in the form of a cooperative firm, and central planning. It can be realized that they are not necessarily in contrast with each other if it is observed that they emerge from two theoretical exigencies

which are both stringent from the viewpoint of a theory of communism as freedom (Jossa, 2006, chap. 2). On the one hand, there is the necessity to ensure 'self-government of the producers', that is, their decision-making autonomy in the productive sphere, with abolition of subordinate labour and the opening of production opportunity sets to the workers' free action. On the other, there is the necessity to determine and slacken opportunity set constraints through political self-government.

The former exigency can only be satisfied by assigning production choices to the workers themselves and abolishing the *power* hierarchy of capitalist firms. Its substitution with a new power hierarchy of a bureaucratic kind would certainly be a false solution. The self-managed firm emerges as the best solution to this problem. The necessity for organizational coordination would not disappear, but this would be ensured by a purely technical structure which would be devoid of all despotic implications. The directors would be agents of the workers: they would report to them, they would be elected, controlled and dismissed by them; all decision objectives would conform to the workers' wills and choices.

On many occasions Marx declares he is in favour of the cooperative system. For instance in the *Inaugural Address of the Working Men's International Association* he says that

> there was in store a still greater victory of the political economy of labour over the political economy of property. We speak of the co-operative movement, especially the co-operative factories raised by the unassisted efforts of a few bold 'hands'. The value of these great social experiments cannot be over-rated. By deed, instead of by argument, they have shown that production on a large scale, and in accord with the behests of modern science, may be carried on without the existence of a class of masters employing a class of hands; that to bear fruit, the means of labour need not be monopolised as a means of dominion over, and of extortion against, the labouring man himself; and that, like slave labour, like serf labour, hired labour is but a transitory and inferior form, destined to disappear before associated labour.
>
> (Marx, 1864a, 20, 11)

Note that here Marx appreciates the cooperative movement not for reasons of distributive justice. He judges it to be superior and qualitatively different from capitalism precisely because it represents a form of organizational autonomy of the workers through which their oppression and exploitation are abolished. And in *Critique of the Gotha Programme* Marx (1875, 24, 94) insists that 'as far as the present co-operative societies are

concerned, they are of value only insofar as they are the independent creations of the workers and not protégés either of the governments or of the bourgeois'.[1]

Marx's interest in the cooperation solution goes back to the 1860s. It is likely that a decisive contribution to the awakening of this interest matured in his interactions with French and English communists in the years when the foundation of the First International was being prepared. Then the Communard experiment served to consolidate it.

As to Engels, he himself declares he is in favour of the cooperative system. He does so in a letter to Bebel of January 1886, where he shows himself to be a supporter of workers' cooperatives on state-owned land, which he regards as 'socialist measures conducive to the downfall of capitalist production' (Engels, 1886b, 47, 388). But already in *Antidühring* (1876–78, 24, 296) he reveals that he considers the Owenian type of cooperation as a form of transition to communism. Worthy of note is the fact that Engels arrives at fully accepting the cooperative solution with a reflection on the Paris Commune, to be precise, with a reflection on Marx's reflections on the Commune. In fact he writes in *Introduction to the 'Civil War in France'*:

> [The Commune] ordered a statistical tabulation of factories which had been closed down by the manufacturers, and the working out of plans for the operation of these factories by the workers formerly employed in them, who were to be organised in co-operative societies, and also plans for the organisation of these co-operatives in one great union.
>
> (Engels, 1891, 27, 185)

And three pages below he observes:

> The most important decree of the Commune instituted an organisation of large-scale industry and even of manufacture which was not only to be based on the association of the workers in each factory, but also to combine all these associations in one great union; in short, an organisation which, as Marx quite rightly says in The Civil War, must necessarily have led in the end to communism. (ib., 27, 188)

A cooperative system presupposes the firms' decision-making autonomy and therefore involves the market. It is well known that Marx and Engels are not too fond of the market. It is true that their analysis of market dynamics and malfunctioning is based on observation of the *capitalist* exchange process. Yet undoubtedly they criticize the market as such,

both for the anarchy and waste it causes and for its commodity fetishism effects, and often they give the impression of believing the market can only be capitalist and that communism presupposes its overcoming. But there is more to it than that. Marx and Engels appear unable to understand that self-management and cooperation are incompatible with a system of central planning in which all production decisions are concentrated in the hands of the state apparatus. Moreover, they appear unable to understand that the autonomy of cooperative firms requires the use of contract relations which presuppose some form of mercantile exchange. For instance, they do not appreciate the arguments of the anarchist Proudhon and the Saint-Simonian Buchez on the possibility of developing cooperation within a market system.[2]

In Third International Marxism there was a tendency to downplay Marx's and Engels' appreciation of workers' self-management, notwithstanding Lenin was an enthusiastic supporter of cooperatives. Instead, various arguments of Marx and Engels were emphasized in which the two German revolutionaries show they have faith in State ownership and central planning as the unavoidable road to workers' emancipation. Little thought has been given to the fact that the two roads may be complementary rather than contrasting. For instance, the means of production in self-managed firms may be in part publicly and in part privately owned, and the latter may be partly cooperative capital and partly externally financed. Fortunately, beginning with years following the second world war, scientific research has clarified that self-management and 'market socialism' are fully compatible with a communist approach.[3]

Now I do not want to enter a seemingly endless debate, therefore I will limit myself to making a few observations which will be sufficient to set the problem aside so that I can then go ahead with an analysis of the conditions of freedom in the production sphere. First of all I would like to stress that there is undoubtedly a contradiction between the theory of cooperation and rejection of the market system,[4] and that this contradiction can only be overcome by renouncing one of the two proposals. Secondly I think it is necessary to discount some residual Feuerbachian humanism which is still present in Marx's theses on commodity fetishism. If we take men for what they are and not for what they would be after the birth of a New Man who recognizes his own essence in the human species, I do not see what is wrong in conceiving a cooperative firm which produces to sell its products to another cooperative firm.

Moreover, one should reflect on an argument put forward some time ago by an ultra-liberalist with a subtle mind. I refer here to Friederich von Hayek (1995), according to whom the market is more efficient than

central planning because it favours a better use of *local* information. Most of the knowledge required for an efficient allocation of resources is dispersed in the minds of the individual decision-making subjects, both consumers and firms. No 'Minister of Production' is able to acquire such knowledge with any degree of precision – either knowledge pertaining to the firms' technologies or that concerning the consumers' tastes – simply because information is revealed in the very acts of choice of the individual decision-making agents.

However, the great philosopher of 'negative' freedom failed to grasp an idea that Marx and Engels have put forward with some strength: that efficient allocation does not require access to local information and knowledge alone; *general* information and knowledge are no less important, and markets are lacking precisely in the provision of this kind of information. Neither a single consumer nor a single firm has an accurate knowledge of aggregate demand, the future cost and availability of strategic resources, oligopolistic distortions, environmental and technological externalities, the social utility of public, common and merit goods, the best way to cope with the effects of information asymmetries, etc.[5] Nowadays even many liberalist economists have recognized that the market produces various kinds of allocation and coordination failures. To work out this kind of problem the intervention of a central decision-making body is required, one that is able to collect *general* information, process it in the pursuit of public goals and adopt the required political measures. Keynesian policies are only a partial example of this type of government involvement. More generally, the intervention of a *public* decision-making agent is required who tackles macroeconomic problems as political issues. Is it possible to reconcile the necessity for such global action with the freedom of microeconomic self-management? Marx has no doubts:

> If co-operative production is not to remain a sham and a snare; if it is to supersede the Capitalist system; if united co-operative societies are to regulate national production upon a common plan, thus taking it under their own control, and putting an end to the constant anarchy and periodical convulsions which are the fatality of Capitalist production – what else, gentlemen, would it be but Communism, 'possible' Communism?
>
> (Marx, 1871c, *22*, 335)

The idea of regulating national production according to a common plan recurs in several of the mature Marx's works, even in *Capital* and *Grundrisse*. Does this mean that Marx intends to assign the task of directing

all productive firms to the State? It is quite possible. As usual, Marx does not indulge in any details when describing alternative worlds, and in dealing with central planning he often limits himself to asserting that it would establish a rational control of production. He never discusses the specific methods and mechanisms of planning (Ollman, 1977, 13). And since the factory is seen as the place where coordination is realized according to a precise plan, one might think that he thought it possible and desirable to plan a socialist economy as though it were one enormous single factory. This interpretation however clashes with what Marx says about a form of planning implemented by united cooperative associations. Thus his theses might more plausibly be interpreted in the sense that central authorities control and govern some fundamental economic parameters, leaving the associated producers free to choose what and how to produce. In reality this *must* be so, if one gives the highest value to the producers' autonomy and self-realization capacity (Elster, 1985, 455).

Nowadays it would be called 'democratic planning' and would consist of a planning system arising out of the demands and delegated wills of the local production units. By uniting and interacting, these generate the public agent qualified to pursue the general interest which local decision-making units are unable to achieve individually. Nothing to do with the *Gosplan*.[6] Walicki (1988, 44) is clear-sighted when he argues that Marx's ideal is a sort of *democratic* planning which combines industrial democracy in the firm with political macroeconomic control.

In what way is 'planning' communist? In a twofold way. First of all it is a method of widening freedom by loosening the economic constraints produced by market failures. A self-managed firm which can obtain more abundant resources and more advanced technologies and which can expand its production without running the risk of having to waste it, on the one hand sees its production opportunity set widen, while on the other it can augment incomes and therefore slacken the budget constraints of its members. Secondly, if it is democratic planning it is a form of political self-government: the technological, industrial and financial constraints endured by the firm are not imposed by the blind forces of the market, but are also the result of democratically made public decisions; they are not forms of coercion for the workers, but rather forms of expression of their will.

It might be useful here to say a few words to bring this problem up to date in the light of twentieth-century debate on socialist economic calculation,[7] as well as on the experience of the USSR and other 'centrally planned' economies. There is no doubt that a certain Marx*ist* theory of central planning reveals a determinist approach to economic policy. The

basic idea is that an economy is regulated by objective laws which not only can be known scientifically, but can also be rationally dominated. The classical economists had elaborated the notion of *natural prices*, which are those that clear the markets and warrant an equilibrated reproduction of the economy's industrial structure. Of course they knew that markets never clear, but they believed that there are only small microeconomic disequilibria and that (disequilibrium) *market prices* undergo slight oscillations around natural ones, so that it is reasonable to study economic laws assuming that disequilibrium movements are always regulated by equilibrium conditions. Successively the neoclassical economists, especially Walrasian, pushed this simplification so far as to identify market prices with equilibrium ones. Now, if one thinks the general equilibrium of a real economy can be figured out rationally and represented mathematically, it is not difficult to conceive a planning procedure that substitutes the market as a mechanism for the determination of equilibrium values and quantities. From this point of view it is easy to imagine a political system in which a computer can be used to do what the market does, with the additional advantages of doing away with a great deal of inefficiency and ensuring 'rational control of the economy'. It might seem a scientific way of realizing the idea of reducing State action to the 'administration of things' or the 'superintendence of production'. This way of thinking is consistent with Marx's economic theory. Marx, the student of labour values and production prices, of reproduction schemes and the law of increasing centralization of capital, is actually convinced of the rationality of the capitalist firm. Why then should he not be convinced of the rationality of an alternative mode of production wherein the 'general intellect' passes under the control of a class consciousness which, by becoming State, transforms policy into an administrative fact?

However, Marx has also produced an antidote to this determinist presumption. Unlike the classical economists, he develops a realist theory of market anarchy according to which disequilibrium situations are viewed as structural and of great magnitude, and able to generate macroeconomic instability effects like general crises of realization, overproduction, disproportion and liquidity. It is a view of market dynamics that places Marx on a track that dramatically diverges from the classical and neoclassical roads.[8]

This kind of approach looks at the economic system as the realm of chaos, a *process* that, at least in a 'short period' which might be quite long, moves in disequilibrium and generates systematic phenomena of coordination failures – a process in which equilibrium values play no role.

Many kinds of externalities, information asymmetries, increasing returns to scale, monopolistic positions, environmental degradation, decision-making uncertainty, dynamic and structural instability, power conflicts, resource rationing, etc. etc., are typical manifestations of the complexity and anarchy of the real markets. One might add Herbert Simon's considerations on bounded rationality and the impossibility of maximizing behaviour. It is clear that the Marxists who look at the world in this way[9] can only smile at the idea of a kind of central planning which ensures rational control of the economy and reduction of policy to the administration of things, not to mention the use of computers in substitution for the market.

Nevertheless one cannot avoid the conclusion that political control of economic dynamics is all the more necessary, not only to correct any flaws of the market, but just to make it work decently. However, one has to abandon the determinist impudence which makes central planning a manifestation of a Reason which achieves absolute knowledge and power. What is really necessary is *political* action in the most genuine sense of the word, that is in the sense of public choices which, although shrewd, remain heterogeneous, discretional, imperfect, sub-optimal and even conflicting. This should not only induce the communists to substitute the expression 'planning' with 'economic policy', but should also compel them to qualify it with the adjective 'democratic'.

I cannot close this discussion without devoting a few words to the idea that in a communist society policy is reduced to the administration of things or the superintendence of production or to a routine matter. This is an idea that Marx and Engels assimilate from Saint-Simon, who associated it with that of State dissolution. It is present mainly in Engels, although Marx is not wholly immune from it. For instance in *Notes on Bakunin's Book 'Statehood and Anarchy'* he says that

> The character of an election does not depend on this name but on the economic foundation, the economic interrelations of the voters, and as soon as the functions have ceased to be political, 1) government functions no longer exist; 2) the distribution of general functions has become a routine matter which entails no domination; 3) elections lose their present political character.
>
> (Marx, 1874–75, 24, 519)

But already in the *Manifesto* Marx and Engels (1847–48, 6, 516) show to appreciate the ideas of those utopian socialists who advocate 'the conversion of the functions of the State into a mere superintendence of

production'. The conviction that public choices may be reduced to administration facts deserves critical evaluation. If it is interpreted in an economicist mood it can only arouse some perplexity. And there is no doubt that this interpretation is at least in part justified by the idea that central planning ensures a rational control of the economy, an idea which is present both in Marx and Engels. The latter is explicit in appreciating Saint-Simon's contribution on the issue (Engels, 1876–78, 25, 247) and argues that the transformation of politics into administration is induced by technical progress which, by causing a tendency towards an increase in the size of firms and the formation of monopolistic positions, makes it necessary, in the interests of the community, to reduce all means of production to public ownership. After that 'the government of persons is replaced by the administration of things, and by the conduct of processes of production' (ib., 268). This is how the State will start to 'die out'.

Now the idea is not just naïve, nor is it criticizable only because it reveals subjection toward a certain form of Saint-Simonian technological determinism. Jon Elster (1985, 458) observed that it is criticizable above all because it contradicts the democratic principle. If public choices are reducible to administrative facts, they will be implemented on the ground of efficiency and rationality criteria. Then what need is there for participatory democracy and self-government of the producers? Will general elections serve to select the right decisions in a rational way, and therefore unanimously, at least in principle? But who guarantees that the citizens will vote in a rational way? And who guarantees that all those who vote in a rational way have the same interests, preferences and ethical values? Then would it perhaps not be better completely to abolish the State's democratic ambitions and hand over collective decisions to a central body who only has to account to Reason? And if the citizens are heterogeneous, rational or irrational as may be, which of them will be favoured by Reason in the administration of things? The majority? Then democracy cannot be done away with. Democracy is in fact a method for regulating political conflict in a way that no central body can do through administrative acts. Clearly, if this interpretation of the administration thesis is valid, we have an illustration of the poor lesson Marx and Engels receive from their economicist background.

However another interpretation can be put forward by arguing that Marx and Engels are in fact trying to emphasize the truly democratic nature of the government who 'administers' production. In other words, they are trying to say that in a communist society political control boils down to control over things *rather than persons*. Indeed Engels (1876–78, 25, 267) maintains that a fundamental political condition underlies this

kind of State dissolution: '*the proletariat seizes political power*'. And, to be utterly explicit, he argues that in this way 'the political authority of the State dies out' (Engels, 1880, 24, 325). Marx too is quite explicit in the above-quoted passage. It is worth observing that he is criticizing Bakunin, who believed that Marxists intend popular government as a rule exerted by a restricted group of leaders, albeit elected by the people, and who maintained that this kind of democracy would entail an increase in State power. Against this 'democratic twaddle' Marx puts forward the argument that a proletarian democracy does not produce any increase in State power. Quite the contrary, he suggests that a participatory democracy creates the *substantial* conditions for democracy, so that in communism 'the distribution of general functions has become a routine matter which *entails no domination*' (Marx, 1874–75, 24, 519). Thus the relevant aspect of reducing policy to administrative acts or a routine matter must be found in the fact that in a really democratic regime political activity '*entails no domination*'. In other words, the proletarian revolution and democracy eliminate the authoritarian character of government action by transforming it into administrative acts. What really counts is not so much that it is the administration of things, as that it is not the administration of persons.

In conclusion it cannot be excluded that, although the theoretical implications of the latter interpretation clearly contrast with those of the former, they are both valid interpretations, in other words, that Marx and Engels do have a contradictory attitude on this theme.

To each according to his needs

People make choices outside the production sphere too. I call them 'consumption' choices, but I use this expression in a very broad sense, to the point of including in the concept of 'consumption' leisure, love, religious practices and many other things you cannot buy in a supermarket. More generally it can be said that the field of 'consumption' (or 'circulation' – as Marx calls it) is the ambit of human activity where people make the choices for life projects.

There are many different types of constraint on the opportunity sets in this sphere. There are *budget* constraints, which are determined by individual incomes, wealth endowments and commodity prices. The higher my income the greater is the bundles of goods I can choose. The lower the price of books, the higher the number of books I can buy. The lower the cost of schooling, the vaster the education opportunities I can benefit from. Moreover, the more intense the technical progress, the faster is the growth rate of opportunities.

Time constraints are very important. If I work eight hours a day, I will have little time to devote to literature and theatre-going. This kind of constraint is restrictive independently of budget ones. I can earn a high income, but if I work eight hours a day I cannot study to become a piano player.

Furthermore there are legal and cultural constraints. Many things cannot be done because the law prohibits them; others because religion forbids them. This kind of constraint is very important, but, due to lack of space, I will touch on them only briefly. After all, my main objective – explaining how communism works in the 'consumption' sphere – can be achieved by confining investigation to budget and time constraints.

There are many ways in which communism can help to increase freedom of choice in the 'consumption' sphere. To start with, it contributes to weakening the budget constraints of many individuals by abolishing capitalist profit, redistributing incomes in a more egalitarian way and thus raising those of the poorer classes. This is a case of redistribution of freedom.

Another method for expanding freedom in the 'consumption' sphere is to favour technical progress and orienting it in the direction preferred by the consumers. Here democratic political economy plays a fundamental role. A community may invest resources in scientific research so as to obtain continual increases in labour productivity and in the quantity and variety of goods. Not only do productivity increases contribute to slacken budget constraints, but innovations can be utilized by people to enrich their personality through an expansion of their desires and the capacity to satisfy them.

Increases in labour productivity can in part be used to loosen time constraints, that is, to reduce labour time and increase leisure time. Already in a capitalist economy this kind of measure assumes the meaning of a communist conquest. In fact it serves to expand the workers' freedom. And it does so in several ways. First of all, it reduces the amount of time that the workers are obliged to endure the capitalists' despotism. Secondly, it raises the amount of leisure time[10] available to the workers, thus increasing their capacity to live their life in a more relaxed way. Finally it slackens the time constraint on consumption choices, thus enabling people to widen their opportunity sets overall and therefore develop the conditions for an improvement of human abilities. Marx has no doubts about the liberating value of this kind of provision:

> Beyond [the realm of necessity] begins that development of human energy which is an end in itself, the true realm of freedom . . . The shortening of the working day is its basic prerequisite.
>
> (Marx, 1867–94, III, 37, 807)

I referred to the fact that a cut in commodity prices expands the opportunity sets of all individuals because it enables them to buy more commodities with a given income. Now I must observe that many goods may be offered at a political price: either below cost or even nil. I call these *social goods*. As an example, just think of goods like education, health services, safety, roads, justice, forests, water. In the next chapter I will give a precise definition of them. For the moment suffice it to know they are those goods Marx considers necessary 'for the common satisfaction of needs' (1875, 24, 85) or for the satisfaction of the 'general and common wants of the country' (1871b, 22, 537). It is well known that the market often fails in the allocation of social goods. It fails either because these cannot be produced profitably as private goods or because they cannot be produced privately to the quality and quantity suitable for social requirements. Thus public intervention is required. The public sector will produce or have produced the democratically decided quantity of social goods and will offer them at a political price. For the sake of simplicity I am only considering *pure* social goods here, those which are offered free,[11] for instance medical care and education. Well, people will see their opportunity sets expand enormously, both because these goods can be obtained free, and because the income so liberated can be used to buy other goods. It is interesting to observe that social goods are distributed on the ground of the communist principle: to each according to his needs. People who need more medicines obtain more, those who want to study more can do so, those who wish to enjoy a beautiful landscape of unpolluted woods and mountains can do so at will by virtue of a communist ecological policy.

On several occasions, when Marx and Engels are required to give indications on what a government who aims to construct communism should do, they address the issue of social goods and the public sector. Already in 1848, in *Demands of the Communist Party in Germany*, they propose nationalization of 'railways, canals, steamships, roads, the posts etc.', besides the creation of a system of universal and free education (Marx and Engels, 1848, 7, 4). Similar proposals are put forward in the *Manifesto* and in *The Civil War in France*. Then, in the *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, Marx suggests that part of the national product in a communist society should be subtracted from private production and used to create a fund 'intended for the common satisfaction of needs, such as schools, health services, etc. From the outset this part grows considerably in comparison with present-day society and it grows in proportion as the new society develops' (Marx, 1874, 24, 85).

The problem arises of how to finance the production of social goods. These in fact cannot be produced without costs. The solution proposed

by Marx and Engels was revolutionary for those times: 'the introduction of steeply graduated taxes, and the abolition of taxes on articles of consumption' (Marx and Engels, 1848, 7, 4), or 'a heavy progressive or graduated income tax' (Marx and Engels, 1847–48, 6, 505).[12] This is not a purely tactical proposal. There is a precise theory behind it. Engels (1845a, 4, 254) justifies it on the ground of a communist principle: 'in this way, the burden of public administration would be shared by everyone according to his ability'. Now I do not wish to split hairs on the distinction between taxable ability and productive ability. Suffice it to have affirmed the principle, so as to make it clear that, precisely as a matter of principle, social goods are allocated with the criterion 'from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs'. After all, is it not true that the public sector allocates and furnishes goods outside the profit system and in contrast with the incentive principle?

Thus an allocation criterion, which might cause some perplexity in a welfarist approach to the good society, becomes perfectly understandable when justified within a theory of communism as freedom. This argument must be emphasized. Allocation of social goods, as well as any other redistributive intervention of the welfare State, should not be intended as instruments aimed at maximizing collective welfare, not least because it is not a foregone conclusion that they will succeed.[13] From a communist point of view the offer, say, of public education and ecological policy, does not just try to augment the citizens' satisfaction. Fundamentally it aims to expand their freedom by redistributing it. So one can see the importance of the definition of the subject of freedom. It is senseless to talk of freedom without making it clear whose freedom we are referring to. Margaret Thatcher was not lying when she said she wanted to increase freedom by reducing taxes and public expenditure. But she would have been more trustworthy if she had said she wanted to expand the freedom of the citizens who pay higher taxes, i.e. the richer and freer people, by reducing the freedom of the poorer and less free individuals. On the contrary, as I have already observed, Marx and Engels are very clear on this. They always explicitly define the class dimensions of freedom distribution; they talk of the liberation of exploited and oppressed people. Now we see they do so by considering a new dimension in the analysis of social distribution of freedom and oppression: the asymmetry of this distribution is manifested in the 'circulation' sphere and in the choice of life projects, besides the production sphere.

In closing this section I must return and insist on a crucial theoretical problem pertaining to the definition of communism. The distribution criterion based on satisfaction of needs, if intended as a principle of justice,

contradicts the scientific foundations of Marx's analysis – an analysis that sees *production relations* as the determinant causes of the forms of distribution. A definition of communism in terms of distributive justice would be confined to the distribution sphere and would be silent on the production bases of communism. Therefore those who intend communism as an ideal society which is just in that it distributes welfare equally on the ground of the *normative* principle of need satisfaction, commit a theoretical error similar to the one Marx attributes to John Stuart Mill and to 'vulgar' socialists: the error of believing that distribution can be modified without altering production conditions. According to Marx (1867–94, III, 37, 868),

> definite forms of distribution thus presuppose definite social characteristics of production conditions, and definite social relations of production agents. The specific distribution relations are *thus* merely the *expression* of the specific historical production relations.

I have italicized the words 'thus' and 'expression' to make it clear that the distribution forms are explained as derived from those of production and that there is no sense, in Marx's view, in talking of a mode of production only on the ground of distributive criteria. If capitalism is defined in terms of social relations of production, the same must be done with communism. A distributive notion of communism is far removed from Marx's scientific analysis not only because it is based on a normative approach that presupposes absolute and a-historical ethical principles, but also because it contradicts the analysis of modes of production on the ground of social relations of *production*.

Marx considers 'vulgar' those socialists who believe that capitalism can be overcome through changes confined to income distribution, and in *Critique of the Gotha Programme* he explains the nature of their error:

> It was in general a mistake to make a fuss about so-called distribution and put the principal stress on it. Any distribution whatever of the means of consumption is only a consequence of the distribution of the conditions of production themselves. The latter distribution, however, is a feature of the mode of production itself . . . The vulgar socialists (and from them in turn a section of the Democrats) have taken over from the bourgeois economists the consideration and treatment of distribution as independent of the mode of production and hence the presentation of socialism as turning principally on distribution.
>
> (Marx, 1875, 24, 87–8)

The communist distributive criterion can be fully understood only if referred to a wider and deeper conception that defines communism as a mode of production, as a system of social relations of production that determines the conditions of the workers' control of production activity. Therefore a definition of communism as a system of production self-managed by the workers must be considered as more fundamental than one that intends it as a system of egalitarian distribution of welfare. Distributive egalitarianism has to be viewed only as *a consequence*, *an expression*, of the workers' liberation.

It should be clear now that Marx's assertion on distribution according to needs is devoid of any normative value. Rather it is a descriptive proposition, a theorem illustrating the distributive consequences of the change in production relations that take place in the passage from capitalism to communism.

True democracy

In 'production' and 'consumption' activities freedom is measured by the width of opportunity sets. These are bounded by technological, economic, natural, institutional and other kinds of constraints, many of which are determined by political action. Individual freedom in the political field does not consist of a particular kind of opportunity set, but in the capacity of people to participate in the decision-making process through which the institutional constraints of all sets are determined. In this sense it is correct to speak of freedom as self-government. The constraints people have to cope with in their everyday choices of production, consumption and life enjoyment, are not experienced as though imposed by an extraneous force. They are rationally[14] perceived as autonomously determined by the people themselves. In communism the constraints on individual freedom are defined, slackened and removed through norms and political provisions that redistribute freedom, extend and realize civil and social rights and favour the growth of productive forces. As already said, freedom so conceived implies that there is democracy, i.e. that those norms and political provisions are determined by the people themselves.

In *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law* Marx attacks Hegel for having conceived the State as a political subject that is abstractly the embodiment of a society's common good. Since it is in fact separate from civil society, it not only leaves this in its condition of a class society dominated by the *bellum omnium contra omnes*, but above all precludes political self-government of citizens. The overcoming of this separation

occurs through a revolutionary process that abolishes the State. What kind of process is it?

> In democracy the political state, which stands alongside this content and distinguishes itself from it, is itself merely a *particular* content and particular *form of existence* of the people . . . In democracy the state as particular is *merely* particular; as general, it is the truly general, i.e., not something determinate in distinction from the other content. The French have recently interpreted this as meaning that in true democracy the *political state is annihilated*. This is correct insofar as the political state qua political state, as constitution, no longer passes for the whole . . . In democracy the *abstract* state has ceased to be the dominant factor . . . The *political* republic is democracy within the abstract state form. The abstract state form of democracy is therefore the republic; but here it ceases to be the *merely political* constitution.
>
> (Marx, 1842–43, 3, 30–1)

Thus the revolutionary process is a democratic process. And it is evident that by democracy, better still, 'true democracy', Marx means something more than what is commonly meant:

> The question here is not whether civil society shall exercise the legislative power through representatives or by all individually; the question is rather one of the *extension* and greatest possible *generalisation* of *election*, both of the right to *vote* and the right to *be elected* . . . Or, the *election* is the *immediate*, *direct* relation of civil society to the political state – a relation that is not *merely representative but actually exists*. It is therefore self-evident that *elections* are the chief political interest of actual civil society. Civil society has *really* raised itself to abstraction from itself, to *political* being as its true, general, essential mode of being only in *elections unlimited* both in respect of the franchise and the right to be elected. But the completion [*Aufhebung*] of this abstraction is at the same time the transcendence of the abstraction. In actually positing its *political existence* as its *true* existence, civil society has simultaneously posited its civil existence, in distinction from its political existence, as *inessential*; and the fall of one side of the division carries with it the fall of the other side, its opposite. *Electoral reform* within the *abstract political state* is therefore the demand for its *dissolution* [*Auflösung*], but also for the *dissolution of civil society*. (ib., 120–1)

In true democracy the civil society, by 'positing its *political existence* as its *true* existence', dissolves the 'abstract political State' by revolutionizing

itself. It is not just a question of electoral reform. Reducing Marx's democratic fervour to the claim of universal suffrage would be an unjustified trivialization. Through electoral reform the citizens conquer democracy. But history does not end here. Rather it begins here. In fact, once legislative power is conquered, the citizens will use it to revolutionize society. According to Marx (ib., 57) 'the legislature . . . has made the great, organic, general revolutions'. With true democracy it will make them by modifying both social and political structures.

A truly democratic State will intervene in production, economic and social relations, to transform them according to the will of the citizens. These, in Marx's view, are mostly proletarians. And therefore they will use political power to abolish social classes. True democracy is the form of a civil society which becomes politicized in order to change itself. It is the political action of the people who revolutionize civil society.

Moreover true democracy intervenes on the State structure itself. It attacks the State – that State which dominates civil society and legitimizes its class structure. In his essay of 1842–43 Marx identifies the 'bureaucracy' as the class which dominates the State: 'the bureaucracy has the state, the spiritual essence of society, in its possession, as its *private property* . . . In the case of the individual bureaucrat, the state objective turns into his private objective' (ib., 47). This critique must be intended as referring to the whole political class. In fact Marx maintains that the plague of authority lies not so much in the abuse of power, as in the political hierarchy itself, 'as if the hierarchy were not the chief abuse' (ib., 52)! The power of hierarchy must be abolished. And it will be abolished through true democracy, self-government by the people.

It should be noted that in this work Marx uses the term 'bureaucracy' not in the modern sense of an apparatus of public employees charged with technical and administrative functions, but rather to define the political body which holds both *legislative* power and *executive* power, a body which is 'bureaucracy twice, once as representing the monarch and again as the representative of the people' (ib., 124). According to Hegel, deputies are not the representatives of the voters' will and interests, but spokesmen of a general interest of the community; and Marx (ib., 122) observes: 'from which once again it is supposed to follow that the deputies do not stand in the position of "mandatories" '. This is how the ruling class (the 'bureaucracy') as a *social* body separate from society is formed: 'the separation of the political state from civil society appears as the separation of the deputies from their mandators' (ib., 123). As Zolo remarks (1974, 83–4), Marx stigmatizes the danger of electoral delegation in a representative system.[15] He foresees the possibility of constituting a political class

separate from society – the possibility that the citizens' political delegates become autonomous to some degree in respect of their principals.

The *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law* was written precisely in the period when Marx was beginning to mature his communist position[16] and is something like the *Ur-text* of the *political* theory of Communism. If not its foundation, it is its immediate premise (Luporini, 1971, lxiv). As Avineri (1972, 51) observed, what Marx calls 'democracy' in this work is not substantially different from what he later calls 'communism', i.e. a society in which private property and the State are abolished. In other words the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* is already contained in the *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law*.[17] However the theses set out in this essay will be successively developed in two different directions.

In his works of 1843–44 Marx goes further into the arguments which hold that 'it is only in civil society that *family life* becomes the life of the family, the *life of love*' (Marx, 1842–43, 3, 99). These, as I observed in Chapter 1, are the works in which a humanist ontology of the social being is proposed, an essentialist conception of human nature as a 'species-being' and a Promethean conception of communism as a community founded on a solidarity ethic. Now I would like to recall the critique on the rights of men and citizens that Marx develops in *The Jewish Question*. These rights are seen as an instrument for protecting the egoistic man's private sphere. They do not modify civil society, but legitimize it, leaving it as it is. For instance, they give man the liberty of religion not freedom from religion, the liberty to own, not freedom from ownership. According to a certain interpretation, Marx here proposes an alternative notion of human emancipation: that of a community in which man overcomes egoism by recognizing himself as a member of the human species. This sort of community seems to go beyond the rights of men and citizens: what need is there for rights that protect the spheres of egoistic action when egoism no longer exists? In utopian Marxism communism will be fully realized when people will 'learn to work for society *without any standard of rights*' (Lenin, 1968, 78).

However another interpretation is possible, although perhaps a little forced if one takes these texts literally, but which is legitimized by the theoretical development of the mature Marx. His criticism of the rights of men and citizens does not aim at their negation. This is testified by the many occasions on which Marx and Engels have been involved in the strenuous defence of some so-called bourgeois rights, not just in their early period when they were writing for a liberal newspaper but also when they work as revolutionary communists. Carver (1998, 122–3), on

the ground of an extensive reading of Marx, made a list of 'bourgeois' rights he supports: representative and responsible government, popular participation in any level of government, periodic elections, universal suffrage, multi-party system, independent judiciary, free legal assistance, complete separation between the State and the Church, protection of the citizen from religious and anti-religious oppression, free education, free thought, freedom of the press without censorship, public assistance for the handicapped, progressive taxation, national independence.

The interesting point is that 'bourgeois' rights are seen by Marx and Engels not as manifestations of a universal natural law but rather as conquests of the workers' movement in its struggle for liberation:

> With great effort and great sacrifices [the German workers] had won the degree of freedom of the press, of association and assembly which they enjoyed. It was a continuous struggle, but in the end victory always remained on the side of the workers . . . The German workers have proved just how much constitutional liberties are worth when the proletariat takes them seriously and uses them to combat capitalist domination.
>
> (Engels, 1879, 24, 251)

Thus, interpreted in this way, that early critique was trying to bring to light not the uselessness of the rights of men and citizens as instruments of liberation, but only their insufficiency:

> *Political* emancipation is, of course, a big step forward. True, it is not the final form of human emancipation in general, but it is the final form of human emancipation *within* the hitherto existing world order. It goes without saying that we are speaking here of real, practical emancipation.
>
> (Marx, 1843b, 3, 155)

The fact is that freedom of religion, for instance, does not free men from the material conditions of misery, uncertainty and ignorance that generate the need for peoples' opium. Communism, on the contrary, cannot leave civil society unaltered. The self-government of people intervenes in social and economic reality to remove the condition for that need, to abolish the misery, ignorance and alienation which drive men to feel the need for religious practices. Thus freedom of religion is not abolished.[18] However it must be accompanied by other rights, those we now call 'social rights', as for example the right to education and the right to health,

which help human beings to construct their autonomy.[19] According to Cerroni (1972, 207–8), Marx in fact appreciates the rights of citizens, and not only because they represent an advancement with respect to feudal privileges, but also and especially because political emancipation and the equality of all people from a legal point of view serve to bring to light the inessentiality of the separation between the social and political spheres. The liberation that emerges from overcoming this separation is a kind of action the mature Marx considers to be an inevitable consequence of the communist revolution.

In the *Manifesto* Marx and Engels (1847–48, 6, 498) declare that 'the immediate aim of the Communists is the same as that of all the other proletarian parties: formation of the proletariat into a class, overthrow of the *bourgeois* supremacy, conquest of political power by the proletariat', and then make it clear that the first step of the revolution will be 'to win the battle of democracy' (ib., 504). The meaning of 'winning the battle of democracy' is clarified by Engels in the *Principles of Communism*, a work Marx used to draw up the *Manifesto*:

> What will be the course of this revolution? . . . In the first place it will inaugurate a *democratic constitution* and thereby, directly or indirectly, the political rule of the proletariat.
>
> (Engels, 1847b, 6, 350)

It will be better clarified later in *The Civil War in France*, where Marx turns himself into a pupil of the Communards. Here the Commune is interpreted as 'the political form at last discovered under which to work out the economical emancipation of Labour' (Marx, 1871c, 22, 334), or as

> the reabsorption of the State power by society, as its own living forces instead of as forces controlling and subduing it, by the popular masses themselves, forming their own force instead of the organized force of their suppression – the political form of their social emancipation.
>
> (Marx, 1871a, 22, 487)

The Commune experience is highly appreciated by Marx for the indications it provided on the *political* aspects of the communist revolution. Its *economic* and *social* lessons, on the other hand, were barely significant; but this is understandable, given the experiment's limitations in time and space. Before the foundation of the Commune Marx is rather sceptical on the communist perspectives of a Paris revolution (Marx, 1870, 22, 269; Wolfe, 1967, chap. 6). On the one hand he thinks such an

experiment would be doomed to defeat, given the political and military conditions in which it was carried out; on the other he is not so convinced of the anarchist and federalist doctrines that were dominant in the French workers' movement of those times. These doctrines envisaged the revolution as a process of federal constitution of free communes. History has confirmed the validity of the former grounds for preoccupation. As to the latter, history itself forced Marx to a change of opinion.

Before the advent of the Commune Marx and Engels had developed a rather centralist position and already in 1850 they pronounced themselves in favour of a revolutionary process based on 'the most determined centralisation of power in the hands of the state authority' (Marx and Engels, 1850, 10, 285). The influence exerted by Blanquism on this position has been recognized by several students.[20] The Commune induced a change of ideas in Marx and Engels. Extremely meaningful is their appreciation of the Communard experiment precisely with regard to its associative and federal ambitions, as I will show below. We have here a demonstration of Marx's and Engels' ability to build the theory of communism on the ground of the political experience of the revolutionary movement.

What was defined as 'true democracy' in 1842–43 and 'democracy' *tout court* in 1847, reveals itself in 1871 to be a model of participatory democracy. One of its fundamental conditions is universal suffrage. Marx is an admirer of Athenian democracy, but is not so ingenuous as to believe that communism can be realized in the modern world through direct democracy. Some form of delegation is inevitable. What cannot be accepted is that parliamentary deputation is used to deprive the people of a true ability for self-government, as occurs in liberalist democracies. According to Marx, the Commune proceeds by

> doing away with the state hierarchy altogether and replacing the haughteous masters of the people by its always removable servants, a mock responsibility by a real responsibility, as they act continuously under public supervision.
>
> (Marx, 1871a, 22, 488)

Here there is a return to the idea that hierarchy is the 'chief abuse' – an idea Marx had set forth in the *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law*. Just as there is also a return to the idea that 'haughteous masters of the people' ('bureaucracy' in the 1842–43 essay) constitute themselves as an authority who usurps a dominating position in society, as a political body which holds the essence of the State because

this is subtracted from real popular control. The thesis whereby the capitalist State is ruled by a political class, a 'state hierarchy', a 'trained caste' of 'state parasites' (Marx, 1871a, 22, 488) which superimposes civil society even in the presence of some formal requisites for representative democracy, is developed by Engels with some precision on the ground of a reflection on Marx's writings on the Paris Commune:

> What had been the characteristic attribute of the former state? Society had created its own organs to look after its common interests, originally through simple division of labour. But these organs, at whose head was the state power, had in the course of time, in pursuance of their own special interests, transformed themselves from the servants of society into the masters of society. This can be seen, for example, not only in the hereditary monarchy, but equally so in the democratic republic. Nowhere do 'politicians' form a more separate and powerful section of the nation than precisely in North America. There, each of the two major parties which alternately succeed each other in power is itself in turn controlled by people who make a business of politics, who speculate on seats in the legislative assemblies of the Union as well as of the separate states, or who make a living by carrying on agitation for their party and on its victory are rewarded with positions . . . We find here two great gangs of political speculators, who alternately take possession of the state power, and exploit it by the most corrupt means and for the most corrupt ends – and the nation is powerless against these two great cartels of politicians, who are ostensibly its servants, but in reality dominate and plunder it.
>
> (Engels, 1891a, 27, 189)

In the Commune, which no longer is 'a state in the true sense of the term' (Engels, 1875, 24, 71), the 'cartels of politicians' disappear, and this occurs because the political delegates are permanently under the people's control. Here is the real meaning of the thesis on State dissolution in a communist society. It is not a question of abolishing the State in general,[21] but of changing its nature by placing it under real popular control:

> The few but important functions which still would remain for a central government were not to be suppressed, as has been intentionally misstated, but were to be discharged by Communal, and therefore strictly responsible agents. The unity of the nation was not to be broken, but, on the contrary, to be organized by the Communal constitution, and to become a reality by the destruction of the State power which claimed

> to be the embodiment of that unity independent of, and superior to, the nation itself, from which it was but a parasitic excrescence. While the merely repressive organs of the old governmental power were to be amputated, its legitimate functions were to be wrested from an authority usurping pre-eminence over society itself, and restored to the responsible agents of society.
>
> (Marx, 1871c, 22, 332–3)

In other words the dissolution of the State has a twofold meaning: on the one hand, it is the abolition of the class of professional politicians; on the other it is the abolition of the repressive, anti-proletarian and anti-democratic State functions; it is not the elimination of all its public functions. Marx is explicit:

> It is one of the absurdities to say, that the Central functions, not of governmental authority over the people, but necessitated by the general and common wants of the country, would become impossible. These functions would exist, but the functionaries themselves could not, as in the old governmental machinery, raise themselves over real society, because the functions were to be executed by *communal agents*, and, therefore, always under real control.
>
> (Marx, 1871b, 22, 537)

Engels, in *Introduction to 'The Civil War in France'*, gives us an exact idea of the meaning of 'shattering of the State' when he makes it clear that essentially two goals have to be achieved: 1) elimination of the repressive and anti-proletarian apparatus; 2) elimination of the political class. Note that not just the bourgeois politicians or the bourgeoisie representatives have to be removed but rather the *professional politicians* as such,[22] even those who present themselves as representatives of the working class, as can be deduced from the words I have italicized in the following passage:

> From the very outset the Commune was compelled to recognise that the working class, once come to power, could not go on managing with the old state machine; that in order not to lose again its only just conquered supremacy, this working class must, on the one hand, do away with all the old repressive machinery previously used against it itself, and, on the other, safeguard itself against *its own* deputies and officials, by declaring them all, without exception, subject to recall at any moment.
>
> (Engels, 1891a, 27, 189)

Marx's criticism of the functional division of legislative, executive and judicial powers has also been misunderstood by some interpreters. The early Marx's ideas on this issue reflect some influence from Hegel, who was a critic of the functional division of powers. His mature works, though, reveal a view which is rather different from Hegel's. Particularly in his essay on the Paris Commune Marx really wants to question two things: on the one hand, the tendency to render executive power independent of legislative power, that is, of popular control;[23] on the other, the proliferation of many bodies of professional politicians, judges, administrators, bureaucrats, who superimpose popular power and disavow the substance of democracy. All the State administrators must be elected, according to Marx, and constantly subjected to popular control, so that no body of separate and powerful politicians can be formed. And as to judicial power, far from proposing to suppress its independence, Marx observes that the Commune, on the contrary, tried to ensure its real independence from executive power:

> The judicial functionaries were to be divested of that sham independence which had but served to mask their abject subserviency to all succeeding governments . . . Like the rest of public servants, magistrates and judges were to be elective, responsible, and revocable.
>
> (Marx, 1871c, *22*, 332)

In other words, Marx develops not so much the idea of abolishing the functional division of powers as that of establishing the supremacy of legislative power and the subordination of the executive to the legislative. As to the judicial power he opposes its subordination to the executive. These ideas should be interpreted in the light of Marx's conviction that the domination of State power over society must be abolished. In the Commune 'State hierarchy' disappears because democracy is not expressed 'once in three or six years' (ib., 333) on election day alone. Self-government[24] of the popular masses is the specific political form of communism, for people participate permanently in public choices in this kind of democracy, delegate representatives with formal instructions (*mandats impératifs*), control them continually and can dismiss them at any time.

Then Marx observes that in the Commune all functionaries are paid worker wages and 'the vested interests and the representation allowances of the high dignitaries of State disappeared along with the high dignitaries themselves' (ib., 331). In this way, one of the incentives of the political 'profession' is done away with; but perhaps not the most important,

for it is well known that real politicians are moved by a vocation or even by 'ethical' motivations. Certainly salary cuts do not eliminate the political profession's main incentive, i.e. power. Then Marx makes it clear that in the Commune the majority of delegates consist of 'working men, or acknowledged representatives of the working class' (ib.). This reveals that salary cuts, although justified by the principle 'equal pay for equal labour-time', are not just advocated for trivial reasons of income redistribution. What really counts is the euthanasia of professional politicians: the workers' political representatives are workers who, in a certain period of their life, carry out a mandate received from the people, but who still remain workers without becoming professional politicians.

Marx has no doubts on the necessity to abolish the ruling class and on the ability of the workers to exert control on their own cooperatives and their State. When Bakunin argues that the workers who take political offices cease to be workers, Marx answers: 'no more than a factory owner today ceases to be a capitalist when he becomes a municipal councillor'. And when Bakunin insists that the workers delegates will no longer represent the people, but only themselves, Marx rebuts: 'if Mr. Bakunin were familiar even with the position of a manager in a workers' co-operative factory, all his fantasies about domination would go to the devil' (Marx, 1874–75, 24, 520).

The dictatorship of the proletariat and universal suffrage

Among the most vituperated of Marx's political theses is that on the 'dictatorship of the proletariat', which has certainly been misinterpreted and also on account of the depravities perpetrated in its name in the twentieth century. Marx and Engels see the liberalist State of their times as a business committee of the bourgeoisie. It should be remembered that the two revolutionaries lived in England during its liberal but not yet democratic era (Selucky, 1979, 60). The State was a business committee of the bourgeoisie, not only *de facto*, but also *de jure*, in the forms of timocracy with franchise reserved for the wealthy classes – forms that prevailed in Great Britain and all the advanced capitalist countries of Europe for much of the nineteenth century. In this kind of State 'the Government, placed under parliamentary control' was in fact substantially and fundamentally 'under the direct control of the propertied classes' (Marx, 1871c, 22, 329). Thus the universal suffrage is presented in *The Civil War in France* as a political reform replete with revolutionary potentialities. It would enable replacement of dictatorship of a minority (the bourgeoisie) with dictatorship of the majority (the proletariat). So dictatorship of the

proletariat is none other than an expression for majority rule. As Selucky (1979, 63) observes, since the proletariat would constitute the majority of the population, the principles of democracy suggest that proletarian dictatorship is none other than majority rule. In other words, the term 'dictatorship' in this expression must not be intended as the definition of a form of government, a kind of totalitarian government.[25] It must be intended as a specification aimed at bringing to light the *social* implications of true democracy. This, as an expression of the majority will, in a class society appears as dictatorship of the *proletarian* majority. Marx observes that, in a participatory democracy like the Commune, majority rule is used to revolutionize society and the economy. Whilst the bourgeois minority uses the State to secure its class supremacy, the proletarian majority uses democracy to abolish classes and liberate the producers from the capitalists' domination. In this sense it is true that Marx identifies proletarian dictatorship with the broadest form of democracy (Preve, 2005, 5). True democracy, for him, is a form of dictatorship in the sense that it uses the coercion of the overwhelming majority of the people's will to modify production relations and overcome capitalism. Yet any form of antidemocratic government, of intimidation of citizens, of freedom restriction, of leaders' domination, is in strong contrast with this notion of 'dictatorship' (Gottlieb, 1992, 36). Thus the thesis on the dictatorship of the proletariat is a reformulation of the arguments put forward in the *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law* on the overcoming of the separation between the State and civil society (Zolo, 1974, 171) through the construction of a true democracy.[26] Any interpretation of the theory of proletarian dictatorship as an expression of the power of an enlightened vanguard is guilty of Hegelianism and has to reckon with Marx's criticism of Hegel's State philosophy (Tucker, 1980, 71), not to mention the view that the emancipation of proletarians has to be achieved by the proletarians themselves.

To prove Marx's totalitarian inclination a passage from *Political Indifferentism* is often quoted:

> If the political struggle of the working class assumes violent forms and if the workers replace the dictatorship of the bourgeois class with their own revolutionary dictatorship, then they are guilty of the terrible crime of *lése-principe*; for, in order to satisfy their miserable profane daily needs and to crush the resistance of the bourgeois class, they, instead of laying down their arms and abolishing the State, give to the State a revolutionary and transitory form.
>
> (Marx, 1873, 23, 393)

Certainly, the idea of 'crushing the resistance' might well make one shudder. But note that in this passage, where Marx ironically summarizes some anarchist arguments, the 'terrible crime' consists in a *lése-principe*. Which principle Marx is talking about? He explains it a few lines earlier. According to the anarchists

> workers must not struggle to establish a legal limit to the working day . . . They must not even exert themselves in order legally to prohibit the employment in factories of children under the age of ten . . . They thus commit a new compromise, which stains the purity of the eternal principles. Workers should even less desire that, as happens in the United States of America, the State whose BUDGET is swollen by what is taken from the working class should be obliged to give primary education to the workers' children. (ib., 392)

The sarcastic tone of this tirade against a certain anarchist contempt toward politics is pushed to the point of taking the United States as an example of proletarian dictatorship. And note that the lese-principle is not that of private property or that of limited government. Rather it is that of anarchist sermons against the workers' participation in political action. What Marx says in the latter passage is that the 'violent form' of political struggle is none other than that taken by any laws imposing compulsory education, a reduction in working time or the prohibition of child labour. And should not a limited government 'crush the resistance' of citizens who violate these laws?

One must not however think that Marx uses the term 'dictatorship' merely as a linguistic provocation. As a matter of fact, 'the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat' is presented in the *Critique of the Gotha Programme* (1875, 24, 95) as a political form which is only valid in a transition period. In communism a freedom is realized which 'consists in converting the state from an organ superimposed upon society into one completely subordinate to it' (ib., 94). Now, in the more advanced capitalist societies, like Switzerland and the United States, the State has already realized 'the old democratic litany familiar to all: universal suffrage, direct legislation, popular rights, a people's militia, etc.' (ib., 95). These 'litanies' were part of the 'French workers' programmes under Louis Philippe and under Louis Napoleon', and Marx reproaches the compilers of the Gotha Programme for lacking the courage to ask for them in the Germany of the 1870s. Certainly 'they are a mere echo of the bourgeois People's Party' (ib.). Yet 'all those pretty little gewgaws rest on the recognition of what

is called sovereignty of the people and hence are appropriate only in a *democratic republic*' (ib.). The point is that

> even vulgar democracy, which sees the millennium in the democratic republic and has no suspicion that it is precisely in this last form of state of bourgeois society that the class struggle has to be fought out to a conclusion – even it towers mountains above this kind of democratism [of the Gotha Programme] which keeps within the limits of what is permitted by the police. (ib.)

In other words, Marx argues that the form of democratic republic which is typical of modern constitutional States must not be seen by the workers' movement as a point of arrival. Rather it is a point of departure for the communist revolution. It is the proper form within which a decisive act of class struggle is accomplished. At the very moment when a republican democracy is achieved proletarian dictatorship can begin. And it seems Marx has no doubts whatsoever that weapons will have to be used. After all he could not have forgotten the carnage caused by the bourgeoisie in reaction to the first Parisian experiments of proletarian democracy in 1848 and 1871. A true democracy takes the form of a violent dictatorship from a bourgeois point of view because it does not leave production relations unaltered but uses majority power to abolish classes, that is, to expropriate the expropriators. It is necessarily 'violent' against the dominating class that has to be abolished. And it would be so even if bourgeois reaction remained within the boundaries of republican legality. All the more so, then, if legal power had to cope with the bourgeoisie's attempts at bloody reprisals like those of June 1848 and May 1871.[27]

To grasp the sense in which the dictatorship of the proletariat is a dictatorship one must reflect on Marx's conviction that the State cannot be neutral with respect to civil society and class struggle (Buchanan, 1982, 70). In a capitalist society the State is an instrument of bourgeois power. In a communist society it is an instrument of popular power. This is why dictatorship of the proletariat is conceived as being typical of a transition phase: it lasts as long as social classes exist. When it has fully accomplished its task of abolishing class divisions, participatory democracy will cease to be a dictatorship, but not because the fundamental State function no longer exists, rather because the class privileges over which the overwhelming majority of the population exerts democratic dictatorship no longer exist.

The idea that republican democracy is the specific form of proletarian dictatorship may nowadays seem somewhat far-fetched and a little too lenient. But I would like to emphasize that, before the Russian revolution,

this was common knowledge among all the Marxists, and even Lenin (1968, 59) had no difficulty in recognizing 'that the democratic republic is the nearest approach to the dictatorship of the proletariat'.

Now, universal suffrage is a basic institution of republican democracy. That is why Marx has always considered the demand for this right as one of the worker movement's fundamental revolutionary claims. He begins to mature some suspicion about the possibility of an anti-democratic use of universal suffrage when he reflects on Louis Napoleon's methods of power seizure. *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, where Marx describes those methods, is an important work in that it develops a new notion of 'State hierarchy'. Now Marx builds on the idea that universal suffrage, which is a necessary condition for popular power, is not however sufficient. He discerns three novelties in State evolution which set the ball rolling towards the establishment of a 'democratic' form of contemporary capitalist States. The first is that the extension of the right of vote to all citizens can be used as an instrument for gathering consensus to the capitalist system rather than as a means of proletarian power. The second, that in the consensus formation process the State takes on an ideological function of primary importance in that it may succeed in presenting the interests of the dominating class in preserving the *status quo* as interests of the whole society. The third, that the ruling class can become independent of the bourgeoisie, that is, it can establish itself as a 'parasitic body' which controls the State as an agent of the people. The State becomes formally autonomous from capital and the political class is no longer directly controlled by the bourgeoisie.

> This executive power with its enormous bureaucratic and military organisation, with its extensive and artificial state machinery, with a host of officials numbering half a million, besides an army of another half million, this appalling parasitic body, which enmeshes the body of French society like a net and chokes all its pores, sprang up in the days of the absolute monarchy . . . Napoleon perfected this state machinery . . . Only under the second Bonaparte does the state seem to have made itself completely independent.
>
> (Marx, 1852a, 11, 185–6)

This however does not make the State less conducive to the interests of capitalist accumulation; quite the contrary, it can make it more conducive insofar as the 'State hierarchy' acquires powers enabling it to impose on the bourgeoisie itself some choices that the capitalists as individuals or small groups moved by particular interests are unable to make

autonomously.[28] The substance of the capitalist State is now identified by Marx in its function of serving the general interests of capital even against the particular ones of the capitalists: 'Every *common* interest was straightway severed from society, counterposed to it as a higher, *general* interest, snatched from the activity of society's members themselves and made an object of government activity' (ib., 186).[29] As observed by Poulantzas (1968, 281), Marx and Engels think of Bonapartism as a characteristic typical of the capitalist State. A similar idea is put forward by Zolo (1974, 164), who argues that Bonapartist power is the pure form of bourgeois domination in that it is based on the formal autonomy of the political apparatus from production relations and class struggle; as such it is a rule rather than an exception in modern States.

Nevertheless Marx insists on considering universal suffrage an unavoidable objective of political struggle in view of the seizure of power of the popular masses.[30] Notwithstanding having perceived that the bourgeoisie and the ruling class could make anti-democratic use of a plebiscite, he maintains the conviction that universal suffrage will serve to educate the people (Marx, 1850, 10, 137) and continues to believe that this right may be dangerous for the bourgeoisie:

> Bourgeois rule as the outcome and result of universal suffrage, as the express act of the sovereign will of the people – that is the meaning of the bourgeois constitution. But has the constitution any further meaning from the moment that the content of this suffrage, of this sovereign will, is no longer bourgeois rule? Is it not the duty of the bourgeoisie so to regulate the suffrage that it wills the reasonable, its rule? By ever and anon putting an end to the existing state power and creating it anew out of itself, does not universal suffrage put an end to all stability, does it not every moment question all the powers that be, does it not annihilate authority, does it not threaten to elevate anarchy itself to the position of authority? (ib., 131)

As the right of vote is progressively extended in the main capitalist countries, Marx becomes increasingly aware of the fact that universal suffrage can be used as 'an instrument of deception' for the workers. Nevertheless he always sticks to the idea that it can be transformed 'into an instrument of emancipation'.[31] Thus he remains convinced that, despite its possible misuse, universal suffrage is an indispensable instrument of proletarian dictatorship. This demolishes the State but does not abolish democracy. Quite the contrary, it achieves true democracy, on the one hand, by abolishing the political power of the State, its separateness

from civil society and its subordination to professional politicians; on the other, by building the economic bases for an effective exercise of self-government of the producers. In fact 'the character of an election does not depend on this name but on the economic foundation, the economic interrelations of the voters' (Marx, 1874–75, 24, 519).

In interpreting Marx's essay on the Commune, Engels (1891a, 27, 190–1) speaks of 'this shattering [*Sprengung*] of the former state power and its replacement by a new and truly democratic one,' and then laughs at

> the Social-Democratic philistine [who] has once more been filled with wholesome terror at the words: Dictatorship of the Proletariat. Well and good, gentlemen, do you want to know what this dictatorship looks like? Look at the Paris Commune. That was the Dictatorship of the Proletariat. (ib.)

But already two years after the defeat of the Paris revolution the General explains very clearly what the Commune is not:

> Since Blanqui regards every revolution as a coup de main by a small revolutionary minority, it automatically follows that its victory must inevitably be succeeded by the establishment of a dictatorship – not, it should be well noted, of the entire revolutionary class, the proletariat, but of the small number of those who accomplished the coup and who themselves are, at first, organised under the dictatorship of one or several individuals. Obviously, Blanqui is a revolutionary of the old generation. These views on the course of revolutionary events have long since become obsolete.
>
> (Engels, 1873, 24, 13)

The political substance of the Commune as an exemplary experience of proletarian democracy is identified by the General many years later: 'almost only workers, or recognised representatives of the workers, sat in the Commune', and their decisions 'provided a necessary basis for the free activity of the working class' (Engels, 1891a, 27, 185). The revolution which generates participatory democracy is an act of self-liberation.

The liberation movement

> In place of the old bourgeois society, with its classes and class antagonisms, we shall have an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all.
>
> (Marx and Engels, 1847–48, 6, 506)

This definition of communism is crucial: it gives sense to all the others to be found in Marx and Engels. In fact, why should the talented work in such a way as to enable the untalented to fully satisfy their needs? And why should firms be managed by the workers? And why should a truly democratic State practise euthanasia of professional politicians? Let me point out that this definition does not appeal to any theory of justice or any kind of ethic, either welfarist, Kantian or solidarity-based. It is a definition founded instead on what we might call a '*principle of freedom': communism is a system of maximal equal freedom for all*.

Here freedom is not considered an instrumental good, as in most liberalist thought since Adam Smith's times, as for instance, that condition of free competition which would be conducive to an efficient allocation of resources. Rather it is conceived as an end in itself, the real reason behind revolutionary action. Only in view of this end is there some sense in adopting the allocation criterion which asks each to give according to his ability and enables each to obtain according to his needs. Resource allocation becomes instrumental with respect to the objective of freedom. And only for this reason is there any sense in claiming the workers' self-management. Co-operative labour is invoked not so much for its capacity to regulate production in a more effective way than the capitalists do, as for its function of abolishing 'wage slavery' and transforming labour into a free activity.

Marx and Engels also wrote that:

> Communism is for us not a *state of affairs* which is to be established, an *ideal* to which reality [will] have to adjust itself. We call communism the *real* movement which abolishes the present state of things.
>
> (Marx and Engels, 1845–46, 5, 49)

This second definition seems to contrast with the preceding one, which would appear to postulate precisely an ideal state. In reality, far from being inconsistent with that definition, it contributes to clarify it. Whilst the former serves to exclude that communism is founded on an ethical theory of justice, the latter denies it is based on any philosophy of history. The latter founds communism as a political theory: it describes it as a political process of change moved by subjects whose goals are interpreted by the former definition. In this process the oppressed class fights to modify the criteria of goods allocation and those of power distribution so as to achieve maximum freedom. Liberation is not an ideal: it is the material drive which urges the proletarians to struggle.

The notion of Communism as a movement rather than an ideal state is the most important sign of the epistemological break which made Marx and Engels pass from moral philosophy to science, a passage that takes place for the first time in *The German Ideology*.[32] Note, by the way, that most of the quotations underlining the new conception are taken from their mature works: treatises on the critique of political economy or essays on political reflections and proposals.

In their early works Marx and Engels had worked around a solidarity ethic, endeavouring to found it on an essentialist and universalist notion of human nature as species-being. Man is really himself only when he recognizes himself in others, when he identifies his own essence in others. As soon as he achieves this recognition he becomes a Promethean subject who produces himself as a universal and self-conscious being. Communism therefore is none other than that state of affairs in which human beings collectively achieve such recognition, the state in which men eventually appropriate their human essence. It is a communitarian kind of social organization in which human relations are cemented by a sentimental bond, a certain love for humankind, which makes the individual a moral being, and makes legal and political institutions superfluous. In this conception communism is an *ideal state*: 'state' in contrast with movement, that is, a human condition perfectly realized in the form of a social setting; 'ideal' in contrast to empirical, i.e. a situation which is alternative to that observed in history. The humanist ethic produces a philosophy of history in which history itself takes on the meaning of construction of human self-consciousness. Its immanent end is what determines its end: the realization of the ideal communist society.

All this is overcome in the political and critical works of Marx's and Engels' maturity. Now they develop a science intended as a 'philosophy of praxis'. They try to learn from the revolutionary movements, in which they actively participate. They study their dynamics, they interpret their aspirations, they capture their political proposals and, on these grounds, they write their programmes. At the same time they study the classical economists with the intention of deconstructing their conceptual categories so as to free the revolutionary movements from the ideological obstacles which hinder and obscure their actions. And they investigate the capitalist economy to understand the 'anatomy of civil society'. The new science participates in the praxis that changes the world. It is important to emphasize that in this view the theory of communism ceases to be a utopian model of society reorganization and man regeneration. Instead, as the theory of proletarian liberation, it confines 'its scientific investigations to the social movement created by the people itself'

(Marx, 1874–75, 24, 520). The ideas of the communists are no longer the produce of a philosopher's invention. Marx and Engels no longer superimpose their philosophical convictions on the workers' preferences, but rather try to comprehend the preferences expressed by the workers themselves in the course of their struggles. Now the active scientific subjects are

> the workers [who] assert in their communist propaganda that the vocation, designation, task of every person is to achieve all-round development of all his abilities.
>
> (Marx and Engels, 1845–46, 5, 292)

As a consequence communism ceases to be conceived as a 'state of things', a model of social organization that has to be realized in the future to give sense to the history of humankind. History has no other sense than that given to it by real human beings who exist here and now and express themselves in class struggle. Marx refuses any pretension of 'writing receipts for the cook-shops of the future' because he knows that the future state to which these struggles will lead is unknown, nor can their outcome be forecast on the ground of deterministic laws of the economy. In this sense the existing communism is 'the *real* movement which abolishes the present state of things'. And history will not end once communism is 'realized', whatever that may mean. After all, if it is not a state, but a process, it cannot be realized once and for all. The abolition of social classes will not put an end to history. Rather it will mark the beginning of an era in which '*social evolutions* will cease to be *political revolutions* (Marx and Engels, 1845–46, 6, 212). The communist doctrine is none other than the theory of the process of liberation.

Part 3
A Reformulation

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5
Foundations of the Liberation Theory

'Possibility means freedom'

In the previous chapters I have proposed a rereading of Marx's and Engels' theory of communism. In this chapter and the next I am going to present a rewriting. I will attempt a reconstruction which is not a simple reformulation of traditional thought in a new language. It is a selective reconstruction, in the sense that it selects a particular component of that thought, the one I judge to be the most valid, and sidesteps others I consider not so interesting. After all, it is not reasonable to expect complete consistency in a thought that evolved over two long lives of research and struggle and underwent the most disparate intellectual influences and political stimuli. In reality, it is possible to obtain consistency, but only if one is prepared to make extensive use of hermeneutic scissors. In fact, the only consistency possible is that deriving from an attempt to rebuild round a scientific core of that thought, expunging the components that contrast it.

If nothing else, in this way it is at least easy to say clearly what the theory of communism *must not be*. My selection has induced me to make drastic deductions from the influence Marx and Engels received from Hegelianism and Saint-Simonism. The former deduction has enabled me to ignore anything that is reducible to the humanist philosophy of the early Marx and Engels. The doctrine of communism must not be the philosophy of a new man who produces himself by building a community of fraternal love, who gives sense to history by realizing it as a dialectical process of conscious self-fulfilment of the human species, who at last achieves absolute freedom intended as the will of necessity. The latter deduction, on the other hand, has enabled me to remove the economicist component of Marx's and Engels' thought. From this point of view, one could say that the theory of communism must not be a determinist philosophy of history

as an evolutionary process ruled by neutral and redeeming technical progress. I reject the idea that institutions and social relations always tend to adapt functionally, albeit discontinuously, to the development of productive forces. I consider unacceptable a theory of communism that forecasts its unavoidable advent on the ground of some objective laws of economic and technological evolution and reduces political actions and institutions to mirror-like superstructures whose change is necessarily and endogenously determined by structural mutations. Finally I reject the argument whereby the freedom realized by communism is that state of maximum welfare ensuing from the abolition of scarcity and entry into the kingdom of abundance.

Cleansed of these two components, Marx's and Engels' theory of communism acquires a logical consistency which will be all the more welcome to contemporary scientists and militants in that it puts it on an equal footing with recent achievements of scientific research and the current aspirations of liberation movements. It will be the theory of a political process intended as a result of the actions of heterogeneous social agents, conflicting groups and classes, who fight to expand their freedom. The actors of the political process are empirically real persons, finite beings, individuals endowed with bounded rationality, limited power, limited abilities, yet persons who try to enhance their creative faculties through collective action. Their struggles do not always necessarily produce consequences which come up to their aspirations. Therefore the historical path emerging from those actions and conflicts will be open, unforeseeable and devoid of any meta-historical sense.

In this approach freedom must be intended not as the property of a collective and universal subject, but as a set of choice faculties available to concrete individual agents. It is subject to specific constraints of a physical, economic, normative and cultural nature. Then communism is none other than the real movement that abolishes the present state of things under the impulse of human aspiration to freedom. It is carried out through processes which are essentially political and which work, on the one side, by modifying the constraints in such a way as to redistribute freedom from those who have more of it to those who have less, and on the other, by slackening them so as to augment everyone's choice opportunities.

The reformulation I am about to present is a formalization which takes advantage of the most recent progress in economic and philosophical analysis, but which nonetheless is still quite simple.[1] And I want to repeat that in the approach I follow, freedom is intended as the faculty of choice according to MacCallum's (1967) proposal. In particular I will use a formulation taken from economic theory, according to which in

talking of freedom it is necessary to define the *subject*, the *space* and the *constraints* on choices. Constraints bind spaces so as to determine *opportunity sets*. The extent of the opportunity sets is a measure of freedom.

Economic research has arrived at postulating some axioms and proving some theorems that make it possible to talk accurately of freedom in a theoretical context that is not welfarist, not consequentialist and not subjectivist.[2] It is not welfarist because social states are not evaluated in terms of welfare or utility. It is not consequentialist because freedom is not considered as a means of achieving other ends. It is not subjectivist because freedom is taken into consideration independently of individual preferences. In reality it is strongly objectivist as it abstracts from all psychological characteristics of persons. It is even possible to abstract, as I will do in this chapter, from the degrees of rationality of individuals, as well as their motivations and beliefs.

A theory conceiving freedom as an objective possibility and defining it in terms of faculties of choice, even though it has recently been elaborated in a scientific context far removed from Marxism, is perfectly compatible with that developed by Marx and Engels. The fact that a relevant part of contemporary radical thought is moving in this direction is significant.[3] And even if it is true that not all Marxists were able to follow the road opened up by Marx and Engels, it is also true that there are some who did not allow themselves to be led astray by Second and Third International utopian Marxism. By way of example I will quote an enlightening passage from Gramsci in which, as can be seen from the sentences I have italicized, freedom is defined precisely as an objective possibility and, consequently, is considered measurable.

> Possibility is not reality: but it is in itself a reality. Whether a man can or cannot do a thing has its importance in evaluating what is done in reality. *Possibility means 'freedom.'* The *measure of freedom* enters into the concept of man. That the objective possibilities exist for people not to die of hunger and that people do die of hunger, has its importance, or so one would have thought. But the existence of *objective conditions, of possibilities or of freedom* is not yet enough: it is necessary to 'know' them, and know how to use them.
>
> (Gramsci, 1971, 360)

Freedom in the production sphere

To analyse the conditions of freedom in the production sphere it is necessary to investigate the choice context existing in a firm. I will start by

considering a capitalist firm in which two subjects are present: a capitalist and a wage worker. Decisions are made by the capitalist.[4] Initially I will assume there is no perfect competition and that there is a given stock of fixed capital. Production decisions refer to the choice of techniques, that is, to the choice of the combinations of fixed capital, circulating capital and labour. I will ignore all constraints of an institutional and cultural nature and focus on the three decisive economic ones concerning finance, technology and the market.

The financial constraint consists in the availability of finance and therefore fixed capital. The technological constraint is determined by technical knowledge, whilst the market constraint is represented by the prices of goods.[5] The capitalist's opportunity set consists of all the techniques which can be used without producing losses. One may choose a technique that maximizes profits, but also techniques that yields profits lower than the maximum. After all, nothing is known of the capitalist's psychology, talents, calculation abilities and motivations. Nor are we interested in knowing them, since what we want to identify is the magnitude of his choice freedom in purely objective terms. Techniques causing costs which are higher than revenues cannot be chosen because they bring about losses and compel the firm to go out of market. Those implying costs which are lower than the minimum cannot be chosen because they are not allowed by the available technology. But costs depends on the input prices too. Thus a cut in wages or an input price reduces production costs and widens the opportunity set. An inefficient use of labour or of another input implies the choice of a technique which reduces profits. Among the firms' opportunities there are the choices concerning the level of production, but there are a minimum and maximum production level, which are those that can be achieved without losses. Thus the capitalist's freedom in the productive process is represented by an opportunity set which is the greater the more abundant is finance availability, the less competitive is the market and the more extended is technological knowledge.

In a capitalist firm a worker has no freedom, for he has signed an employment contract whereby he agrees to execute the capitalist's orders in the labour process. He can only obey and carry out his job by using the means of production provided by the capitalist and producing the quantity and quality of output decided by the latter. For the moment I assume the worker has no hidden information and practises no resistance to the capitalist's command.

Now consider a firm managed by the worker. Things change radically. To facilitate comparison with the capitalist firm, I am assuming that technology and fixed capital are the same in both firms.[6] I also assume that

the market structure is the same, so that the output and technical input prices are the same too. But labour is no longer a simple item of cost in a self-managed firm and therefore variable costs are not the same in the two kinds of firm. One might think that in order to continue to produce autonomously, the self-employed worker has to earn a minimum income, a sort of a *self-management reservation income*, on which the worker himself has no possibility of choice. This income should be paid monthly or weekly, for it serves to guarantee minimum consumption. And since it would be paid during the production process it could conventionally be likened to a minimum direct cost. Thus it contributes to determine the level of minimum costs. If, as it is reasonable to assume, the self-management reservation income is lower than the subordinate worker's wage, then the self-employed worker's minimum costs are lower than the capitalist's.

Choices are made by the worker. The magnitude of his freedom is represented by an opportunity set which is positive and therefore greater than the subordinate worker's, which in principle is empty. Moreover it is greater than the capitalist's too, for minimum costs are lower in the self-managed firm than in the capitalist one. Obviously the self-employed worker may decide to pay himself a fixed monthly income higher than the minimum one. But this decision is part of his opportunity set and contributes to define his choice freedom. Thus there will be a part of the self-employed worker's opportunity set that contains techniques which can be chosen by him because the payment of an income higher than minimum is not a cost constraint for him. I call this the 'excess opportunity set of self-management'. The capitalist has no access to this set because the worker's wage is a cost for him anyway. Such an excess opportunity set may be more or less extended. If the self-employed worker is prepared to continue to work only if his minimum income is equal to the wage, then the excess opportunity set of self-management is nil, in which case the self-employed worker will have the same freedom as the capitalist. Finally note that, if the self-management excess opportunity set is positive, that is, the minimum costs of the self-employed worker are lower than the capitalist's, the worker also has a greater range of choices on production levels and therefore on the quantity of labour that can be used. This occurs because the minimum production level yielding no profits is lower in the self-managed firm than in the capitalist, whilst the maximum is higher.

Oligopolies and monopolies have unpleasant consequences from a social viewpoint. On the one hand they enable producers to make profits by exploiting consumers, besides subordinate workers; on the other they make it possible to pay differential wages to workers working in different

firms and industries. It is also well known that in a 'free' market, i.e. an unregulated market, there can be no perfect competition, if for no other reason because heterogeneity of the techniques used in different firms continually generates oligopoly situations. A truly democratic government might wish to intervene in the market to eliminate the unpleasant effects of oligopoly and monopoly. Suppose it is able to do so through institutional measures that compel capitalist firms to equal output prices to minimum average costs and to pay the same wage to all the workers. And imagine that in this system there are both capitalist firms and self-managed firms. The output price is obviously the same for both kinds of firm.

Now the capitalist firm can only survive by using techniques efficiently. It will make neither profits nor losses (including the rate of interest in the costs), and the sole technique it can use is the one corresponding to the level of output in which the price is equal to the minimum cost – the only feasible output level. The capitalist's opportunity set has been zeroed and his freedom magnitude has become nil. However the institutional change has not zeroed the excess opportunity set of self-management. Therefore a self-employed worker still has wide choice freedom. The maximum income he can earn is equal to the wage of the subordinate worker, but he can enjoy more freedom than him and the capitalist.

This example obviously represents a limit case because perfect competition, as I have already said, is practically impossible to achieve. Certainly, however, it is more easily approached in a *well regulated market* than in an unregulated one. Therefore it is not a limit case devoid of explanatory power. Actually it enables us to compare a system controlled by the capitalists with one controlled by the people so as to bring to light a fundamental distinguishing characteristic. In a well regulated market which approaches perfect competition the self-employed workers cannot earn more than the subordinate workers. So one can see that the sole true advantage offered by self-management pertains to the distribution of freedom. Whilst the capitalist is free and the worker is not in a 'free' oligopolistic market, the self-employed worker is free and the capitalist is not in a well regulated market. Moreover, if self-employed workers use techniques efficiently, their incomes will be uniform and equal to those of the wage workers. In other words, there will be equality of all workers' incomes while the capitalists' ones will be nil. But the self-employed workers have the opportunity to organize work as they like, even if they might pay for the use of this privilege with a reduction in income. This latter condition, though, holds true only in the case in which there are no information asymmetries, as I will show in a moment.

What happens when many workers participate in a self-managed firm? As an extreme case, assume there is full team production, that is, all the workers in the firm have to work in concert in such a way that it is impossible to identify the personal contribution made by each. In this case decisions cannot be made autonomously by any single worker. They must be made collectively. Presumably the workers will agree to make them through majority rule, thus giving rise to an industrial democracy regime. Since everybody accepts the democratic rule freely and since anybody can participate with a vote in the decision-making process, choices will be made by the workers anyway, and these will not be oppressed by any authority. This is true even if the workers elect a manager to whom they delegate part of their decision powers. If the manager diligently carries out the workers' mandate and is constantly controlled by them, the firm remains a democratically self-managed concern and the workers' freedom is not done away with.

Team production poses the problem of hidden action and information. Some workers may be tempted to act slyly and try to unload part of their fatigue on their colleagues. Thus in a self-managed firm, as in a capitalist firm, the necessity for control arises; and control has a cost. In the simplifying hypothesis that control costs are the same in both kinds of firms, the self-managed workers will enjoy anyway greater freedom than the capitalists by the width of the self-management excess opportunity set. If, instead, the control costs are lower in the self-managed firm, the co-operators' freedom will be even higher.

The possibly greater freedom of the self-managed workers may be used to make their work less frustrating and to transform it into a self-realization activity. In the extreme case of perfect competition with no asymmetric information, this use of freedom will be paid for by reductions in income. The self-managed workers who wish to make their work more agreeable have to accept to earn lower incomes than a wage. However there will be no need for these income cuts if there are information asymmetries and control costs are lower in the self-managed firms than in the capitalist ones. The significance of this conclusion deserves to be emphasized. As I will argue in the next chapter, the workers of a co-operative tend to commit themselves more strongly and to behave more loyally. At the same time it will be easier and less costly to discourage the opportunists in a co-operative than in a capitalist firm. It is precisely this kind of advantage that enables co-operators to reorganize work and render it more satisfying without being compelled to accept income cuts. Thus the co-operators may earn more than the wage workers even though the work they carry out is more satisfying.

Freedom in the consumption sphere

Now consider the choices made outside the production sphere. The decision-making agent is a consumer. Choices concern the bundles of goods an individual is able to consume. The individual's freedom will be higher the wider the range of things he can choose to do. And these may even be things that have no price or market, such as entering a party or a church, or making a subversive speech in a public park. There are many kinds of constraints – legal, institutional, cultural – that are much more complex than a simple budget constraint. However, for the purposes of my analysis, there is no need to create additional complications. So, to start in the simplest possible way, I will first consider a case in which the consumption opportunity set is only bounded by a budget constraint.

I will illustrate the theory by using some easy examples. Consider the options open to an individual with a given income. He can choose to consume all the bundles of goods he can buy by spending entirely his income, but also bundles that imply a lower expenditure, that is, as Marx says, those he can buy by 'wasting' part of his wage. The set of all bundles that can be chosen by a consumer with a given income is his consumption opportunity set.

Freedom is not something that is or is not there. It can be there to a greater or lesser extent. The wider the opportunity set (the higher the level of income), the more there is of it. And this implies that in the consumption sphere too the distribution of freedom is a matter of class: a rich man is freer than a poor one. Freedom can be extended in several ways. One way is to raise income, another is to introduce new goods.

Now consider a legal constraint, for instance, a law introducing compulsory education. It seems to limit choice freedom. If the good 'education' is a *private* good consisting of years of education, and the State imposes ten as compulsory, the opportunity set of all individuals immediately shrinks, for they cannot choose to send children to school for less than ten years. However consider that many limitations to present-day choice freedom serve to raise that of the future. A boy who is compelled to study is not free to play in the fields. But education will enable him to extend his future freedom considerably by giving him access to choices that are unavailable to the uneducated. Certain limitations to some individuals' freedom serve to increase that of others. Compulsory education limits the present freedom of parents but extends the future freedom of their children.

For some goods like subsistence products, constraints may depend on physical or cultural factors. An opportunity set restriction determined by

a subsistence constraint can be interpreted as a limitation of freedom caused by need. If the subsistence needs are such that a poor individual can scarcely buy them by spending his entire income, his opportunity set dramatically shrinks, for his income does not enable him to choose bundles different from the subsistence one. A poor person may have no freedom at all: his freedom has been zeroed by need. The 'freedom from need', Gramsci's 'freedom not to die of hunger', consists in the removal of this limitation. It may be achieved by increasing money income, but in other ways too.

One way of expanding freedom is to cut the price of goods, even to zero, in which case they become 'social goods'. I define them as goods offered at zero price (pure social goods) or at a lower than cost price (spurious social goods). 'Private goods', on the other hand, are those which can be offered at profitable prices. A public decision is sufficient to transform a private good into a social good. Environmental policy, justice, health, education, railways, science, culture, television, Internet: these are all goods that can be easily offered as social goods. Some of them are public goods, others are common goods, still others are merit goods, many of them are publicly-provided private goods.[7]

Pure social goods are offered free without exclusion to all citizens who request them. If a certain good is provided as a pure social good the budget constraint ceases to bite on it. It is evident that the transformation of a private good into a social good greatly expands freedom, if not of all the people, certainly of the most disadvantaged. From a consumer viewpoint any pure social good is a free lunch: you can get what you need without paying for it. Thus it is distributed on the ground of the criterion: 'to each according to his need'. *Rationed* social goods are a partial exception, one of which will be mentioned in the next section.

However a social good is not a free good from the supplier's point of view, for it cannot be produced without costs. The problem is: how can the production of social goods be financed? Nowadays a method recommended by Marx and Engels is adopted all over the world: progressive taxation. Suppose taxes are at least not regressive: people pay tax in non-decreasing proportion to their income or wealth. If taxable ability is an increasing function of the ability to produce income or wealth, then social goods are financed on the ground of the criterion 'from each according to his ability'.[8]

Summing up, it can be said that social goods, which are offered to expand the individuals' freedom, are allocated on the ground of the communist criterion 'to each according to his needs, from each according to his ability'. It is necessary to clarify that this allocation criterion is here justified not

by a welfarist theory of justice, but by a non-consequentialist theory of freedom. The allocation criterion loses all normative value, not only because it is released from all ethical justification, but also because it is explained as an implication of a process of freedom redistribution. And since this process is seen as the outcome of a social conflict in which classes compete for resources and opportunities without claiming to realize any form of universal justice, the very criterion of allocation takes on the meaning of a simply descriptive notion: it explains what happens as a consequence of freedom redistribution processes, it does not establish what should happen if a superior principle of justice were implemented.[9]

The positive rather than normative nature of the communist allocation criterion was brought to light by Buchanan (1982, 83–4). Heller (1987, 203) suggested that the criterion of distribution according to needs has a 'regulative' function, meaning that it aims at *partially* regulating welfare sharing in a 'just' society. 'Justice' however is not seen by her as founded on an absolute ethic. Rather it is intended as a historically and socially relative form of fairness, one which is democratically determined by common people and not by the 'Social-being'. I said 'partially' because regulation of consumption according to needs only applies to social goods. This view is perfectly compatible with Marx's. Then the positive nature of the communist allocation criterion is revealed in its theoretical function of describing the way a post-revolutionary society *might* decide to regulate some aspects of welfare distribution. I say *might*, and not *must*, because there is no compelling universal ethic behind the possible democratic choices of citizens.

Liberated time

Opportunity sets in the consumption sphere can be bounded by time availability, besides a budget constraint. A time constraint is determined by the quantity of time available for the enjoyment of goods and by the 'minimum time use rates', that is, the *minimum* quantities of time required to consume a unit of each good. If the budget constraint were ignored and only the time constraint were taken into account, the opportunity set would be represented by all bundles of goods that can be enjoyed by using available time. An individual may use time efficiently, in which case he may have access to all possible bundles at the minimum time use rates, but he might choose to enjoy bundles of goods by means of time use rates which are higher than the minimum, in which case he would be taking things easy: this too is a manifestation of freedom.

Income and time constraints must be taken into account together. If both of them are bounding, the opportunity set is represented by the intersection of the opportunity sets bounded by either of them. Usually both constraints bound the worker's consumption choices, for both his income and his leisure time are rather low. A worker might obtain an increase in freedom by means of a reduction in labour time with a *given income*. His time constraint would slacken and the opportunity set would widen. Also note that, when both constraints are bounding, a wage increase contributes to expand freedom. Moreover an increase in hourly wage might contribute to expand freedom also because it would enable the worker to increase leisure by reducing labour time.

However it is not true that both constraints are bounding in general. This does not happen in the case of a very rich person, for instance. In fact there are physical limits to time availability, whilst there are no limits to income increases. Thus a rich person, even if he does not work, might have to face a time constraint on life enjoyment which is stricter than the budget constraint. This person would be unable to spend all his income in sustaining consumption activity simply because he would not have enough time. The opposite case is that of a very poor, let's say unemployed, person, who might have a lot of time to enjoy his life but would not have the money to do so.

Leisure time, for a worker, is time *liberated* from alienation, since alienated labour is work activity carried out under the command of a capitalist.[10] It is interesting to observe that a reduction in labour time is a *social* good, and of a very special kind, if it is guaranteed as a right, i.e. if it is fixed by the law without wage cuts. In fact the resulting leisure time is accessible to all workers without excludability and without rivalry: no worker can be excluded; whilst the greater amount of leisure time for each does not reduce the quantity available to others. Thus it is a *pure* public good. The monthly wage must not be reduced, otherwise the workers would be paying to obtain this good, and non-excludability would be lacking. Any worker not prepared to pay for a reduction in work time would look for a second job or would do overtime work, and consequently would be excluded from access to the increase in leisure time.

Legal sanction is necessary if this good is to be enjoyed by all, as John Stuart Mill (1970, V, 329–30) had already perceived. In fact, suppose an employment *contract* establishes that a worker, *if he so wishes*, can obtain a reduction in labour time from eight to seven hours a day leaving his daily wage unchanged. Many workers would probably try to monetize this concession by continuing to work eight hours a day with an increased wage. Owners would prefer to employ workers of this kind, with the result

that eventually most workers would continue to work eight hours a day. Thus the only way to obtain a real reduction in work time for all is to impose it by law and withdraw it from individual choice. In other words, coercive State intervention is required to face a free rider problem, just as usually occurs with public goods. It might seem paradoxical that, to obtain an increase in freedom for all, it is necessary to eliminate a choice opportunity for each. But this occurs with many social goods. Just think of compulsory education, compulsory vaccinations, compulsory insurance. In the case of reductions in work time the free rider problem would arise because many workers are not fully free from need, so that their apparent freedom to choose to work more would result in greater power for the capitalists who employ them and therefore less real freedom for the workers.

This is a special kind of social good for other reasons too. To start with, it is a *rationed* social good, i.e. one which is supplied to all workers but in a limited quantity, in the example: only one more hour of leisure time a day. In other words it is not a good which can be obtained by each according to his needs.

Moreover enjoyment of this good feeds freedom not only in the same way as any other social good, i.e. by slackening income constraint on the demand for a particular good, say leisure time, but also because of its intrinsic property, namely, that of being time available to make and realize choices. Since the consumption of all goods dissipates time, any increase in the time available for life enjoyment loosens the time constraints on many other goods, and widens the overall opportunity set.

Thus fighting to obtain a reduction in work time as a social good means fighting to conquer freedom raised to the power of three: less excludability in access to leisure time, more time available to make choices and less time dedicated to alienated work.

A third reason why this public good is special is that it cannot be spurious as regards non-rivalry. This property is either there or it is not. It cannot be there in varying degrees. When a law reduces the working day by one hour, the greater availability of leisure time for each worker in no way limits its availability for the others.

In fourth place, although this good may be spurious insofar as non-excludability is concerned, here again there is a special characteristic. Once it has been decided that all workers have a right to one more hour of leisure time a day, the decision about how to make them pay for it still remains open. If the daily wage is not cut, as I have assumed above, non-excludability is complete. But if the wage is cut it means that the workers have to pay a ticket to obtain the good. Many workers in financial straits

might be tempted to look for another job to do during their leisure time. Thus, the higher the ticket, i.e. the stronger is the wage cut, the greater the excludability in the enjoyment of leisure time. In other words this social good is special in the way it is financed. The part which is not financed with wage cuts could be paid by the capitalists with profit reductions.[11] If profits are a function of the capitalists' ability, the workers' increases in leisure time will be funded by each (capitalist) according to his ability. If, instead, that part is paid by the State and financed with progressive taxation, the cost of the social good will be borne by each citizen according to his taxable ability (which is also an increasing function of profits). Therefore this good will be offered all the more consistently with the communist principle the less it is paid for by wage cuts. *The workers who fight to obtain labour time reductions without wage cuts fight for communism*.

Finally this is a very special public good for yet another reason: it is not altogether 'public'. In fact not all the citizens enjoy it. Only the workers can obtain it as a public good. The capitalists, for instance, enter the factory as free decision-making subjects: they make productive choices. Their activity in their firm is free. Therefore a reduction in work time for the employees is not a good for the capitalists. In other words this is a *class public good*.[12] Here is a case in which the distinction between the privileged and the disadvantaged takes on a more specific class attribute than that between the rich and the poor. Now the privileged are the capitalists and the disadvantaged are the workers. So the struggle to obtain more of this particular social good is also a struggle against capitalist exploitation.

6
The Politics of Communism

Class conflict and the choice opportunities of life projects

One condition for a good to become a social good is that the community recognizes a social need for it and establishes that everyone has a right to satisfy that need. Now the recognition of a right presupposes the emanation of a constitutional law that institutes at least a formal liberty.[1] An amendment of a constitutional law may define a dimension of the citizens' choice freedom. But it might happen that this freedom is only formal. For instance, the *liberty to receive an education*, as sanctioned by a constitution, does not enable all citizens to choose to study as they may wish, for education is costly. If the opportunity set of a person (given his income and the price of goods) is so narrow that he is prevented from being able to choose to study as he wishes, then this liberty is only formal for him. However if the constitution institutes the *right to study*, then it obliges the State to create the effective conditions to enable all citizens to receive an education.

A liberty becomes a real freedom if citizens are endowed with the means to obtain the goods in which that freedom can be manifested. One way of achieving this result is to offer the goods as social goods and fund them with taxes. Thus it becomes necessary to implement policies, i.e. ordinary laws, regulations, government actions, aimed at realizing the constitution through the organization of production, distribution and financing of the good. Policies transform rights and liberties into real freedoms.[2]

A declaration that establishes a freedom cannot come from the market, i.e. from the place of individual transactions. Persons interact in the market through *transaction institutions* that set up *reciprocal* prerogatives and obligations. Transaction institutions have no constitutional power. In the ambit of political relations, instead, citizens interact through *normative institutions* that do have the power to set up liberties, rights and obligations

which are valid *erga omnes*. Normative institutions generate the political structure of a society (Screpanti, 2001). All social acts and conflicts aimed at realizing rights and therefore financing social goods, are political acts and conflicts.

Now consider the case of two individuals, a poor one and a rich one, and assume that the need for a certain good, for instance water, is the same for both individuals. It may happen that the poor individual has such a low income that he cannot choose to consume water in the desired quantity. Suppose a parliament decides that water is a merit good and that it must therefore be accessible to everybody. A law transforms it into a social good with zero price and finances it with a tax imposed on the rich man, whose income is thus reduced. After the reform the poor man's opportunity set has been widened while the rich man's has perhaps been narrowed.[3]

Evidently this is a conflicting redistribution of freedom. To widen that of the poor man, the rich man's income, and presumably his freedom too, have to be reduced. Probably the privileged classes will oppose such a reform. By and large it can be said that communism growth processes will not take place without conflict. And there will be more than one battlefield.

The first one is constitutional. The disadvantaged classes will try to obtain laws that increase the number of social goods. They struggle to expand the freedom of the majority of citizens. They are – let's say – constitutionally libertarian. They are also constitutionally democratic if the majority of people belong to the classes who gain some advantages from social goods and the redistribution of freedom, which is what normally occurs in all capitalist countries, where income distribution is highly skewed. The privileged classes, on the contrary, are constitutionally conservative. They are more interested in defending law and order than in expanding freedom of the majority of citizens by redistributing it. They are interested in defending the existing law and order because, in securing the existing distribution of wealth, they protect the freedom of the privileged classes.

Battles in the constitutional field involve the interpretation of existing laws, beside the emanation of new ones. The political role of the supreme courts is fundamental, for constitutions have to be interpreted to create rights and justify consequent government and legislation provisions. Political choices and ordinary laws presuppose more or less extensive interpretations of constitutions. There must be liberty to study? Well – say some – then the State should ensure free books, free schools, grants, etc. No – say others – for freedom to study must not be intended as a right to assistance; everyone is free to study, but by paying with his own money.

Another important battlefield involves social and fiscal policies. The government and parliament decide which freedoms must be accessible

to all and which to the privileged classes alone. By setting up a national health service that offers free medical care, parliament decides that the right to health must be available to all citizens, regardless of their financial condition. In this way it realizes a piece of communism by extending freedom. Obviously most privileged persons will object, as they have to pay for freedom expansion of the poor.

Now consider the case of spurious social goods. Administered prices are paid to obtain them, so they are supplied in conditions of partial excludability. The higher the price, the more excludable and the less social are the goods. On the other hand, if a long queue is required to obtain a certain service, the good is offered in conditions of partial rivalry. The longer the queues, the stronger the rivalry. Struggles over degrees of excludability and rivalry regard the quantity of public resources invested for the supply of social goods; and it easy to understand the fronts along which the social classes line up to decide how to distribute the tax burden. More public expenditure and more progressive taxes, so as to obtain more freedom for the poor – demand the communists. Less taxes and less progressive, so as to maintain more freedom for the rich – insist the conservatives.

Since the majority of citizens have an income that is lower than the average in all capitalist countries, a freedom expansion process would appear to be able to advance by simply resorting to democratic weapons. In point of fact history shows that the welfare State has progressed in all capitalist countries on the surge of democratic movements. Theory, on the other hand, shows that this development implies a growth of communism already within a capitalist mode of production.

This comes as no surprise. A pure mode of production is an ideal type. In reality it cannot exist. Pure modes of production have never been observed in history. More or less extensive forms of capitalism existed within the ancient and feudal modes of production. Just think of the Roman empire or the bourgeois Communes of the late Middle Ages. So, why cannot forms of communism be present within economic systems that are fundamentally capitalist?[4] After all, so long as it is a kind of communism confined to the consumption sphere, capitalism does not seem to encounter great difficulties in tolerating this enclave.

The change in production relations

The point is that the growth of communism in the consumption sphere does not modify fundamental social relations, the relations established in the production process, and therefore does not eradicate social classes. The problem of realizing communism intended as self-management of

the producers remains. What forms can 'the real movement that abolishes the present state of things' assume in this field? How effective can a change be if it remains confined to a particular sphere of social action without involving any of the others, including the political sphere? And how likely is it that a radical transformation of production relations will occur through the market processes and the democratic apparatuses admitted in typical modern capitalist systems? In other words, is a gradual revolution possible? Nowadays many intellectuals and politicians tend to give an affirmative answer.

I do not intend to address the general problem of revolution here. I only wish to prove the failings in the gradualist thesis, which I will do by bringing to light its inability to understand something that Marx had clearly seen: there can be no radical change in production relations without seizure of political power.

The possibility of a gradual revolution is often argued by resorting to two hypotheses in particular. The first envisages the development of a co-operative sector and hinges on the conviction that self-managed firms are more efficient than capitalist firms. Co-operative companies already exist in many capitalist countries. Just as many no-profit organizations exist which produce goods outside the capitalist system and often on the ground of a solidarity ethic which is the opposite of that sustaining profit maximization. Co-operative firms seem to be more efficient than capitalist ones at least in dealing with information asymmetries in the productive process. On the other hand, it is also true that, for the supply of certain special goods like services to persons, art and science activities, environmental care, etc., organizations that do not appeal to acquisitive behaviour are more suitable than capitalist ones.

The reason for the greater efficiency of self-managed firms can be explained in the following way. In a capitalist firm the workers are not interested in working hard for they do not appropriate the advantages of their work, i.e. profits. Furthermore, by the same token, the workers are not interested in controlling their colleagues, even if the cost of peer pressure is very low. This cost is low because every worker can carefully observe his colleagues close at hand and knows his job. There are five effects that help to deal with opportunism in a self-managed firm.[5] First, the workers can reorganize the labour process and make it more varied, agreeable and even replete with opportunities for self-realization (*participation* effect).[6] Second, it is easier for a self-managed firm to give rise to spontaneous solidarity among its co-operators inducing them to avoid opportunistic behaviour (*loyalty* effect). The conflicting character of a capitalist firm tends instead to induce workers to develop class solidarity

in shirking: faced with a colleague who shirks work, a worker may tend to imitate him rather than to become a blackleg. Third, workers are spurred to exert pressure on lazy colleagues when the shirking of one increases the fatigue of the others (*contrast of unloaded fatigue* effect). Two other effects can be added to these three, if it is assumed that the workers of a co-operative are endowed with a special kind of class consciousness which makes people aware of the fact that 'the free development of each is a condition for the free development of all'. The first is a *direct residual claimant* effect: there is no incentive to shirk in a self-managed firm, for the advantages of hard work accrue to the workers themselves. The second is a *peer pressure* effect: since the advantages of reciprocal control accrue to the workers, they are motivated to exert it.[7]

The gradualist thesis in this field argues that, by virtue of its greater efficiency, the co-operative sector is evolutionally stronger than the capitalist sector. Just give it time. Sooner or later the less efficient firms, i.e. the capitalist ones, will be driven out of the market by the competitive process, so that in the end there will be a self-managed economy that has sprung up quite spontaneously.

Another hypothesis of gradualist revolution evokes certain transformations that involve the governance structures of large concerns. Due to both the sharp increase in the size of firms and the capitalists' propensity to diversify risk, there is a tendency to separate the ownership and management of firms, so that these are increasingly controlled by executives rather than by shareholders.[8] At the same time, the tendency of pension funds to collect ever-increasing amounts of the workers' savings seems to be at work to achieve the so-called 'pension funds revolution'. A consistent and perhaps mounting share of the stocks of large firms is controlled by finance coming from the workers' savings, so that the latter could eventually become the owners of companies or at least control decisive stakes in them. This process – some students argue – could sooner or later lead to a situation in which companies are actually controlled by the workers.

The two hypotheses are not contrasting. In fact they portray a transformation process that should invade capitalism with co-operatives and no-profit organizations in the small firms sector and with pension funds in the big firms sector. True, history shows no signs of this revolution having taken place so far. But this is scarcely a convincing objection. After all, an appeal to history must be forward as well as backward looking. At any rate, there are some more cogent objections, which are based on the observation that the strength of capitalism lies not so much in single firms as in the system to which they give rise – a system that transcends the economic field.

The first objection refers to the workers' risk aversion. Why should a worker invest all his savings in a single firm when capitalists tend to diversify risk by investing in several firms? And why should a worker risk his wealth too in the same firm in which as a co-operator he risks his income and job? Does the success of a co-operative sector call for the workers to have less risk aversion than the capitalists? Some scholars argue that something like this does in fact occur. For example it has been observed that the members of a co-operative, especially if heavily financed by credit and public capital, tend to make investments that are too risky. The phenomenon however seems to occur because co-operators appropriate the residual income of an investment without bearing the full risk, part of which falls on the external lenders; after all, in the event of a strong risk of bankruptcy, a worker could always abandon the firm and hand over the risk to the lenders.

Thus it seems that co-operative firms have great difficulties in developing because, if they are widely self-financed, the co-operators tend to risk and invest too little; whilst, if they are externally financed, they tend to invest too much, with the consequence that there will be few lenders. Anyway, the prevailing opinion nowadays is that the members of self-managed firms have a strong aversion to capital risk, for one reason in particular: they are much more concerned with the stability of their job than with profit maximization. To deal with this problem institutional changes are required involving the entire system of firms rather than the single ones alone – changes aimed at providing some form of collective insurance for co-operative investments. I will return to this problem later.

A second objection is based on the observation that workers do not normally have the culture, knowledge and information required to take on an entrepreneurial function, not only because they have not received the right education, but also and especially because they spend most of their life working and therefore cannot dedicate enough time to developing their own 'human capital'. Moreover, there are various information asymmetries in managerial activities, so that effective worker control of a firm may be less efficient than managerial control. Finally the so-called costs of industrial democracy have to be taken into account: the decision process may be more complex and even more conflicting in a democratic firm than in a firm controlled by a few managers. All this makes co-operative firms riskier than capitalist ones from the lenders' point of view. On this problem too I will return later.

A third objection brings to light the fact that workers are scarcely endowed with capital, certainly less so than capitalists. As a consequence the financial structure of a co-operative firm tends to be riskier than that

of a capitalist firm.[9] External investors know that co-operative equity is scarce and therefore that, *coeteris paribus*, its risk of bankruptcy is high.

A fourth objection is based on the plausible conviction that a co-operative's goals differ at least in part from those of a capitalist firm. For instance, co-operators are interested in improving the quality of work activity rather than in maximizing the value of capital. And they may even pay themselves fixed monthly incomes that are higher than wages. This effect may be stronger than the efficiency-enhancing effect in managing information asymmetries, in which case co-operative firms are less profitable than capitalist ones for external investors.

These four objections justify a fifth which is perhaps the most important. If co-operative firms are riskier and less profitable than capitalist ones, financial markets will tend to select credit, i.e. to ration that directed to co-operatives and make it more expensive. This is the well-known dilemma of collateral (Vanek, 1970, 318). Co-operative firms obtain less credit and pay higher interest rates than capitalist firms. So how can the former expel the latter from the market?

As to pension funds, the workers' savings are administered as financial capital. And there is no reason why these savings should obtain a lower yield than the capitalists' savings. Pension funds tend to maximize profits and minimize risk and therefore prefer to invest in capitalist firms rather than in self-managed ones. For the same reason they will probably have greater faith in independent and greedy managers than in those who work for the workers. Thus, for both these reasons and because their investments are diversified, pension funds have no incentive to use their shareholding to entrust the control of firms to the workers. True, by investing savings in several firms, pension funds may perform a risk pooling function so as to offer workers a form of insurance. But precisely for this reason they contribute to deter the workers' control on firms. The workers of a firm, instead of investing their savings in that firm, put them into a pension fund, but in this way they deprive themselves of the faculty to use their own capital to control the firm in which they work. Thus pension funds end up by being a mechanism for collecting the workers' savings and putting them at the disposal of the capitalists.

Most of these problems are not insurmountable, and it is possible to envisage institutional reforms aimed at favouring the development of co-operation. One such reform might consist in the participation of public capital in self-managed firms. A relevant portion, not necessarily very high, of public participation in a self-managed firm might help to abate the workers' risk and, at the same time, that of external investors, thus facilitating further capital influx. A more courageous reform would be

one aimed at the constitution of self-managed firms which are entirely State owned.[10] Public participation in co-operative capital, even if partial, performs different functions. As already observed, it helps to abate the workers' risks and, at the same time, by reducing the bankruptcy risk, it facilitates further influx of credit capital. Moreover it may serve to guarantee a wider community from the externalities generated by production. Just consider a co-operative with a minority, albeit relevant, shareholding owned by public authorities. A public official might then influence the co-operators' decisions and, on some issues of collective utility, he might even exert a veto right. This can be done in self-managed firms that tend to under-invest in long term projects, for instance in scientific and technological research. The tendency to under-invest in research might be motivated both by the fact that the time horizon of most co-operators is shorter than that of the investment profitability, and by the fact that part of the research outcome is a public good which the co-operators are unable to appropriate. In such cases a golden share might be used to guarantee the community some benefits which the co-operators alone would be unable to provide.

As to negative externalities, private firms tend to neglect most investments aimed at safeguarding the environment, which in fact is a public good. In cases like this a public partner will intervene to induce co-operators to make socially beneficial investments, and perhaps even contribute to finance them.

There is often a danger when the capital of a self-managed firm is publicly owned: workers may be tempted to practise a sort of mass opportunism, for instance by squandering part of the capital. That is why it is preferable for public participation to be only partial. Vis-à-vis the risk insurance offered by the State, the equity belonging to the workers performs the function of a franchise: the co-operators who squander capital know they are devaluating their own wealth too.

Another possible reform might consist in inducing the bank sector to favour co-operative firms, so as to reduce credit rationing and the cost of finance. This of course implies a publicly controlled banking sector. It was not by chance that Marx and Engels proposed that one of the first provisions of a communist government should be the nationalization of banks: perhaps they thought that credit control could be used to finance the 'national workshops' (Ollman, 1977, 9).

Yet another kind of reform might consist in compelling pension funds to assign the proxies of each firm's shares to the workers of that firm. This mild provision might turn out to be very effective in transferring control of big concerns from the capitalists to the workers. Ownership is often so

dispersed in these firms that small stakes of shares are sufficient to gain control. However the value of the capital is so great that the employees would be unable to acquire controlling stakes of the companies in which they work. But the workers of a big firm might obtain the required majority at its shareholders' meeting by using, through pension funds, the savings of the entire working class. Thus three birds could be killed with one stone: the individual workers could diversify their financial risks; the working class could play the role of a collective risk insurer; the pension funds could use the financial strength of working class' savings to seize control of big firms.

So far I have dwelt mainly on the financial aspects of the self-managed firms' competitive disadvantages in a capitalist economy. But there are other no less important aspects that also deserve mention. One concerns the 'second objection' recalled above. The workers' scarce endowment of entrepreneurial ability, besides discouraging financial flows toward co-operative firms, is a major weakness in that it hinders their foundation. The distribution of entrepreneurial abilities is biased in a capitalist economy for two reasons. First of all, capitalist firms have no interest in investing in their workers' entrepreneurial ability, if for no other reason because they would lose the investment value in the event of the employees abandoning them. Secondly, the workers themselves have difficulty in autonomously investing in the development of those abilities both because it is a costly investment and because they are compelled to spend most of their life doing subordinate work, so that they do not have enough time to dedicate to study. To overcome this kind of difficulty massive interventions of a legislative kind would be necessary, for example, on the right to receive an education, on the length of work time, on income distribution, which a capitalist market does not do spontaneously.

A biased distribution of entrepreneurial abilities may cause another, even more serious, problem. Let's assume the first kind of problem has been solved and some co-operative firms have been set up. After all there are many of them – which makes us believe that setting-up difficulties are not insurmountable. But if there are no effective norms of industrial democracy and the workers lack control abilities, many co-operatives will tend to transform themselves into capitalist firms controlled by the managers. This is because a hierarchical structure with technical functions of co-ordination and organization must exist anyway. A hierarchy in a self-managed firm, however, cannot have any power function, i.e. it must not serve to dominate the workers. Yet cadres, functionaries and managers, who perform co-ordination and organization functions and who take on technical roles, will tend to develop the abilities inherent in the hierarchical positions

of those roles. Now, if climbing a hierarchical ladder depends on the individuals' ability to win the organizational competition, not only may the managers be selected through the organizational competition itself, but also the result of this selection may depend on talents that have nothing to do with technical abilities. Managers might thus run the firms not as agents of the workers, but because of their 'political' talents. This naturally prompts them to legitimize their position in terms of meritocracy rather than democracy. And since 'merit' may depend on the competitive struggle in the organization, managers will tend to accumulate power – a control instrument that serves to defend and improve their position, in other words, to come out winners in the organizational competition. This problem will be all the more serious the bigger are the firms and the higher the hierarchical ladders. Marx identifies the true capitalists, the 'functioning', the 'active', the 'industrial' capitalists, with managers rather than capital owners; he knows that the managers actually run and control the labour process and investment activity, and consequently the process of surplus value extraction (Screpanti, 1998). Now, if a joint stock company is considered a capitalist firm even when control is not exerted by the owners, but precisely because it is exerted by a 'functioning capitalist', the same will hold true with a co-operative firm in which the workers are 'their own capitalists'. They may be the formal owners, but if the firm is controlled by managers who are *de facto* independent, then it has been transformed into a capitalist company. This type of firm will tend not to distribute profits among the workers, but to reinvest them in order to feed its own growth, i.e. capital accumulation. The managers tend to work for the firm's expansion because in this way they increase their power. Thus a typical one-to-one relationship between power and accumulation is established which justifies the capitalist objective-function postulated by Marx: 'accumulate accumulate!'[11]

Another problem encountered with self-managed firms operating in a capitalist context is their tendency to transform themselves into capitalist firms controlled by private owners. The members of a profitable and growing co-operative might not wish to replace a retiring member with a new one, or employing a new worker by accepting him as a member. They would rather prefer to engage a wage worker. In this way the income of the extant co-operators would rise. If the process has time to produce all its effects, within a generation the co-operative may become a capitalist firm in which a few partners exploit a mass of wage workers. Whilst the case considered in the previous paragraph concerns the possibility of a co-operative being transformed into a capitalist firm *against* the co-operators' will, the one dealt with here, on the contrary, regards the possibility of it

being transformed *by* will of the co-operators. To avoid this effect, the use of wage labour should be forbidden in co-operative firms.

Another problem may arise from the fact that many co-operatives adopt the rule that retiring members are not entitled to receive a share of the firm's capital. The norm seems to be justified by the idea that capital accumulated through self-financing belongs to the co-operative as a collective concern and not to the individual co-operators. Yet the justification is specious and only serves to hide the co-operators' opportunism. In fact their income and their wealth increase every time a member retires. Still, this artifice is a cause of self-destruction, for it is more advantageous for the extant members not to enrol a new partner when an old one retires. If it is forbidden to employ wage workers, the number of co-operators and the level of production tend to shrink as time passes. But then capital is increasingly underutilized; and it becomes ever more profitable to sell it, thus further reducing the size of the firm. In the end this process leads to self-destruction of the co-operative. In such a case too it is easy to correct the defect with normative intervention. It would be sufficient to establish that retiring members are entitled to a share of capital.[12] Norms of this kind exist in many co-operatives. A legislative provision would strengthen this means of survival.

Now it is evident that all the reforms I have suggested and others that might be envisaged do not emerge spontaneously from the market. And this is the crucial problem. Theoreticians of the evolutionary road to communism tend to reason as if the market were a world of perfection, freedom and equality, and as if the State were a socially neutral institution. In reality a capitalist market is a world of abuse of power regulated by the monopolistic and oligopolistic control of big capitalist firms, by the speculators' control of financial flows, by the continual creation and reproduction of economic, social and cultural inequalities. Moreover the State, in a capitalist mode of production, tends to use its powers to reinforce capitalist rule; and it is probable that the policy of a capitalist Sate aims at regulating the growth of capitalist firms rather than favouring the co-operatives.

The crucial issue then is not so much that of establishing whether a change in production relations should occur gradually or suddenly. The point is that there can be no revolutionizing of production relations without *control of political power*:

> The experience of the period from 1848 to 1864 has proved beyond doubt that, however excellent in principle, and however useful in practice, co-operative labour, if kept within the narrow circle of the casual efforts of private workmen, will never be able to arrest the growth

> in geometrical progression of monopoly, to free the masses, nor even to perceptibly lighten the burden of their miseries . . . To save the industrious masses, co-operative labour ought to be developed to national dimensions, and, consequently, to be fostered by national means . . . To conquer political power has therefore become the great duty of the working classes.
>
> (Marx, 1864, 20, 11–12)

Only through State control is it possible to ensure adequate financial support to the workers' firms, as well as to remove economic privileges and any biased distribution of power, wealth, culture which systematically favour capitalist firms and hinder the development of self-management. And if the change is to be the kind that achieves emancipation of the oppressed, the only admissible type of political power is that in which the will and action of the masses is expressed.

The dissolution of the State

Thus political action is necessary to cope with the economic difficulties of self-management. On the other hand I have already argued that freedom expansion in the consumption sphere presupposes the intervention of public authorities, since it requires an increasing production of social goods. I have also argued that only democratic control of the State can bring out that popular self-government which Marx considers to be a necessary condition for a communist revolution. The question to be raised now is perhaps a little embarrassing but crucial: is it possible to obtain political self-government of people by using the tools of democracy available in modern capitalist systems?

Much of contemporary democratic thought tends to make a distinction between formal and real democracy. On the basis of this distinction, and by virtue of a certain principle of 'irrelevance of political forms as forms' (Canfora, 2004, 363), many old communists accepted the idea that formal democracy is opposed to real democracy, so that the former may be sacrificed in order to develop the latter. To avoid slips into such an ideology of 'popular democracies' it is necessary to clarify the meaning of these terms.

I define *real* or *substantial democracy* as the process of effective participation of citizens in public choices. *Formal democracy*, instead, I define as the set of normative institutions (type of voting system, political franchise, representation system, etc.) through which the citizens' participation in public choices is regulated. This basically depends on the Constitution of a country and its implementation through ordinary laws and government actions. Formal democracy establishes the *institutional conditions* of

substantial democracy. Since these conditions may be more or less restrictive, formal democracy may be more or less extensive. For instance it is well known that a majority electoral system is less democratic than a proportional one. Just think of the paradox of a situation in which, in a majority system, the government may be elected by a minority of citizens. Now, if formal democracy can be more or less extensive, real democracy as a consequence can be more or less real.

Besides the institutional conditions, there are others that I will define as *material conditions* of substantial democracy. These are the economic, social and cultural circumstances that make the effective exercise of democracy by all citizens possible. The most important of them include the cultural level of people, the distribution of wealth, the control of mass media, the hegemony on ideology formation processes.

A political system may be formally democratic while the material conditions are so badly distributed that substantial democracy is poor. The fact is that, precisely because normative institutions only define a formal democracy, they are *not a sufficient condition* for real democracy. A patent example is represented by the American political system – a system that drives about half the population (and especially the poor) to abstentionism, enables a president to be elected with a minority of popular votes (Canfora, 2002, 22–3) and assigns to the president himself crucial decisional powers over which the citizens do not even have right of information.

However one cannot deduce from all this that substantial democracy can work without formal democracy. The latter in fact has to be intended as a *necessary condition* for the exercise of true democracy. It seems evident that, in a process of freedom expansion as political self-government, an extension of real democracy cannot be obtained without extending formal democracy, i.e. its institutional conditions.

It is well known that power in a capitalist country is not distributed just as a function of the number of heads. Rather it is distributed as an increasing function of the quantity of dollars. The privileged classes are in a position to use strong extra-constitutional weapons of political action, besides their votes, so as to convince the median voter, the man-in-the-street, to come over to their side: wealth, lobbies, parties, mass media and the apparatuses of ideological production. This means that even universal suffrage, which aroused so much hope in Marx and Engels, must be considered a necessary but not sufficient condition for true democracy.

If the privileged classes resort to extra-institutional weapons of political struggle, the popular masses are compelled to do the same. However the biased distribution of power and wealth produces a qualitative difference in the forms of political action. Since they do not have the political power

and financial means, the popular masses have to use extra-constitutional weapons that differ from those used by capitalists and professional politicians, for instance, movements and organizations of protest, mobilization, struggle. These are alternative forms of democratic action which aim to contrast that use of the State and capital power which constantly tends to hold back substantial democracy. This is the properly political aspect of 'the real movement which abolishes the present state of things'.

The use of economic power to twist the democratic rules and make them serve the capitalists' interests has been observed by many, even non-Marxist, scholars. Lenin utilized this observation to devalue formal democracy and outline a model of dictatorship capable of going beyond 'parliamentary cretinism'.[13] But the celebrated 'professional revolutionary' failed to realize something that Marx and Engels have understood very well, namely that the political hierarchy itself is 'the *chief abuse*' (Marx, 1842–43, 3, 52), and that the ' "politicians" form a more separate and powerful section of the nation' that the nation itself becomes 'powerless against these . . . cartels of politicians, who are ostensibly its servants, but in reality dominate and plunder it' (Engels, 1971, 27, 189). It seems that the two German revolutionaries have discovered the 'political class' before Gaetano Mosca. In reality they have discovered much more, as they have realized that 'professional politicians' in a capitalist system do not work for themselves alone, but operate to stabilize the power of capital while trying to consolidate their own.[14]

They have also understood that a communist revolution does not take place once and for all, nor does it reduce to the seizure of power by a revolutionary party. If it has to be a self-government process, it must consist in a *permanent revolution*, one in which the popular masses constantly fight on two fronts: that of the transformation of production relations and that of State dissolution, i.e. the subtraction of power from the 'professional politicians' who control the State. On the former front the masses use formal democracy and extra-constitutional weapons to build up the material conditions for substantial democracy; on the latter they use substantial democracy to extend formal democracy.

Thus true democracy is not a conquest that can be guaranteed once and for all by seizure of the Winter Palace, because then the problem arises of what the new professional politicians who enter the Palace will do. This is why Marx sees it as a process of permanent revolution. True democracy can function as a form of self-government only if it consists in the citizens' continual participation in the process of abatement of the State and capital power. Only in this way can proletarian emancipation be an action of the proletariat itself.

Notes

1 Communitarian Communism

1 Good surveys can be found in Geras (1985), Lukes (1985, chap. 4), Buchanan (1987), Nielsen (1988). Among the interpreters who privilege the amoralist Marx see Tucker (1969), Wood (1972; 1979; 1984), McBride (1983) and Miller (1984). Among the supporters of the moralist Marx see Holmstrom (1977), Gould (1978), Reiman (1981; 1983), Husami (1978), Elster (1985) and Cohen (1995). More elaborate interpretations which endeavour to account for the two aspects have been put forward by Buchanan (1981; 1982), Lukes (1985), Petrucciani (1992) and Castellana (1993).

2 VanDeVeer (1972–73, 373) argues that Marx criticizes the Gotha Programme from the point of view of a principle of justice which is superior to that implied by the programme itself.

3 According to Meldolesi (1982, 35, 51, 52), Leroux is appreciated by Marx more than any other Saint-Simonian.

4 Geras (1980, 7; 1985, 79–81).

5 For an interpretation of Marx and Engels as followers of a utilitarian ethic see Allen (1973).

6 For examples, see Nozick (1974) and Dworkin (1981). As Preve (2005, 10) observed, the first philosopher to put forward this criticism was Aristotle.

7 This is a canon law compilation going back to the twelfth century. Here, as in much of Christian social thought, the idea prevails that an innocent communism is the original condition of humankind and the optimal state to aspire to (Kelly, 1992, chap. 5). Also, late medieval Christian thought nurtured the view that, in the world of sin, a rich man obtains his wealth only in two ways: 'either he receives it as a bequest from his father, or he steals it from others' (Giordano, 1974, 6), in other words: ownership is theft.

8 Buchanan (1982, 27) reconstructs the Marxian concept of human nature by using the expression 'protean'. Human nature is protean because it changes in history in relation to the economic and social formations in which man is embedded and as a function of the social action which determines the evolution of the formations themselves.

9 See e.g. Buchanan (1982, 60–9, 164–9; 1992), Lukes (1985), Petrucciani (1995, chap. 2), Finelli, (2004, 289–306).

10 Engels, who was readier than Marx to convert to communism, was however slower than him in abandoning the young-Hegelian humanist approach.

11 Buchanan (1982, 78) also argues that the theory of communism as a good society is developed by Marx on the ground of an assumption of human respect originating from Kant. He privileges the theses put forward in the *Jewish Question* and endeavours to prove that they will never be abandoned by Marx. Kain (1992), instead, appropriately confines Marx's moral philosophy to his early period. He too, anyway, argues that it was influenced more by Kant (and Aristotle) than by Hegel. It goes without saying that not all Marxists

would agree on this Kantian curvature of Marx. Certainly there would be strong disagreement by the latter Lukàcs (1980), who tries to reconstruct the ontological foundations of a Marxist ethic by rejecting the categorical imperative, and rather retracing its immanent genesis to a social-historical process. In his reconstruction Lukàcs investigates the teleological tension of the *homo humanus*, showing to be more Hegelian than Hegel himself. In fact, according to him, this tension, by motivating the alienated worker to realize himself by building up his personality, would push the human species *in itself* to bring to fruition its potential condition of human species *for itself*.

12 The Hegelian origins of all such deductions of communism are mercilessly brought to light by Guastini (1974, 168–74), who however also makes it clear that the structure of Marx's discourse here presupposes that Hegel has in some way been overcome. Marx in fact, following Feuerbach, has already turned the Hegelian hypostasis of predicate into subject upside down. The analysis of the labour–property–communism dialectic is the study of a real historical process, because labour alienation is a real fact. Thus Marx's discourse has a sense at least as a critique of ideology, a critique that accounts for the Hegelian hypostasis as an ideal expression of a real process. The latter consists in the transformation of the object-predicate of human activity (the produce of labour) into an extraneous entity that dominates man.

13 The cliché of the 'negation of negation' is rarely resumed by the mature Marx. In the chapter on *Primitive accumulation*, for instance, there is a phrase (Marx, 1867–94, I, 35, 751) in which the historical overcoming of private property is described as a process of negation in terms which are similar to the typically Hegelian ones appearing in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*. But it is only a linguistic similarity, so much so that Rubel (1874, chap 1) has talked of a 'parody' of Hegel.

14 Finelli (2004, chap. 5) has proved that Marx's 'metaphysics of the universal subject' derives from a failed parricide in respect of Hegel, responsibility for which must be traced back to Marx's dependence on Feuerbach. On the Marx–Feuerbach relationship see also Mugnai (1984).

2 The Communism of Abundance

1 For instance, in a letter to Engels of 4 November 1864, Marx justifies himself for having been 'obliged to insert two sentences about "DUTY" and "RIGHT", and ditto about "TRUTH, MORALITY AND JUSTICE" in the preamble to the rules' of the International Working-Men's Association, saying, however, that he did it only because he was asked to by some members of the International and, at any rate, that 'these are so placed that they can do no harm' (Marx, 1864b, 42, 18). Successively, in editing the *General Rules* of 1871, Marx deletes the phrase: 'They hold it the duty of a man to claim the rights of a man and a citizen, not only for himself, but for every man, who does his duty.'

2 See also Marx (1857–58, 28, 175–7; 1858, 29, 471–2). In the latter work, as can be seen from the words I have italicized below here, it is more than evident that, when he talks of 'exchange of equivalents', Marx is referring precisely to a situation of equal exchange, that is, the exchange between commodities having the same production cost, or embodying the same quantity of labour. The

exchangers 'confront each other only as possessors of exchange values and as those in need of exchange, as *agents of the same general indifferent social labour*. Moreover, they exchange *exchange values of equal magnitude*, for it is presupposed that there is an exchange of equivalents . . . The physical difference in the use value of their commodities is extinguished in the ideal being of commodity as price, and to the extent that this physical difference is the motivation for exchange, they are a reciprocal want for each other (each representing the want of the other), a want that can be satisfied only by *the same quantum of labour time*' (ib.).

3 Engels continues proclaiming his predilection for the proletarian moral, yet not because he considers it 'truer' than the others, but rather because he believes it 'contains the maximum elements promising permanence' and because 'in the present, represents the overthrow of the present, represents the future' (ib., 87).

4 Hegel (1991, §§ 106, 142 *et passim*). The importance of this distinction in view of a better understanding of Marx's attitude to moral philosophy was brought to light by Buchanan (1982, 3–4, 12–13).

5 The opportunity is offered by the necessity to rebut Mülberger's criticism of him on the housing problem.

6 Here the term 'interpret' should not be intended in the reductive sense that Marx himself attributes to it in the 11th thesis on Feuerbach. Rather it should be intended in the sense that the action of interpreting the world is already a contribution to its change. And here I am thinking of a 'hermeneutic of praxis' approach. This implies not only recognizing that our words are actions, but also, and more importantly, that our actions can be read as a text to be decoded and interpreted (Jervolino, 1996, 57–8). In this approach Marxism is recognized as an interpreting knowledge capable of accounting for the multifarious experiences of praxis (ib., 48).

7 See, for example, Heller (1976, chap. 5).

8 By measuring exchange values with the numéraire that Marx calls 'the monetary value of labour'.

9 A refined reconstruction of this conception of history can be found in Cohen (1978).

10 On all this see Heller (1976, chap. 1).

11 I follow Ben Fowkes' translation here. See the Penguin edition: London, 1990.

12 O' Connor (1988), Burkett (1999; 2003), Foster (1995; 2000) have made significant contributions to the vast literature on this issue.

13 This condition is necessary in a utilitarian approach wherein, in compliance with the principle of equal consideration for everybody, the social welfare function is additively separable. It is not necessary if the function is of a multiplicative type, as is the case with that of Bernoulli-Nash. This kind of function incorporates an egalitarian principle of justice which is stronger than that of equal consideration for everybody: society treats disadvantaged people with greater care and shows less regard for the more fortunate.

14 Marx (1867–94, I, 35, 486.) greatly appreciates the role Owen assigns to education, but downgrades its formative function. According to him, 'the education of the future' will serve not to shape a moral man, but only to form 'fully developed human beings'.

15 M. Rostagno, quoted in Ricci (2001, 217).

3 Freedom and the Individual

1 According to Althusser the epistemological break is marked by the 6th thesis, where Marx criticizes Feuerbach's idea of the existence of a universal essence of man by observing that it is a naturalist abstraction from history and social relations. But other theses too celebrate the transition from humanist philosophy to science, for instance, the 2nd, the 3rd and the 11th, which establish the scientific character of the 'philosophy of praxis'. Still others, however, like the 10th, remain trapped in a humanist approach. Luporini (1971, lxxxiii) is right then when he defines the *Theses* as 'a two-faced text: the bridge, better still, the subtle footbridge over the epistemological break'.

2 According to Althusser (1969, 199–202), the formation of the young Marx passes through two stages, one of rationalist humanism with a liberalist inclination and one of Feuerbachian humanism of communitarian leaning, humanism being a constant throughout the whole of the young period. Guastini (1974, 6) developed Althusser's argument by focusing on the young Marx's philosophy of law, and proved that the rationalism of the liberalist Marx tries to combine a young-Hegelian idealism with an embryo of natural law philosophy. Finelli (2004, 151–4) argued that that embryo of natural law philosophy is grounded on a still young-Hegelian ontology of the species-being. Some students erroneously interpreted the thesis on the epistemological break, by intending it in the sense of an opposition between an idealist young Marx and a materialist and determinist mature Marx (Avineri, 1972, 56–58). Avineri himself however proved that Marx was already a materialist when he wrote the *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law*, where the influence of Feuerbach's humanism is strong. In reality the true difference passes between the critical scientist and the humanist philosopher. Luporini (1971, lxxxi) accepted the epistemological break thesis, but claimed that it must not be used to reject the young Marx completely. Rather he tried to retrace in the themes addressed by Marx the philosopher the premises for the successive scientific analysis of capitalism. The mature Engels too tries to overcome his young-Hegelian formation, but he does not do it in the same direction as Marx. The latter overcomes Hegel by building on the critique of the inversion of the relationship between subject and predicate; on the ground of this critique he then founds the materialist conception of history by placing concrete human subjects at the base of historical transformation processes and considering their ideas as products and instruments of praxis. Engels, on his part, tries to rip dialectics from the empyrean of the spirit to transform it into a sort of objective law of natural and human evolution. On the problem of the different philosophical approaches of Marx and Engels there is now a vast literature. A good survey can be found in Walicki (1995, 111–24).

3 The conversion to communism, before involving Marx, takes place in Engels, for whom it takes the form of a commitment to libertarian positions greatly influenced by Proudhon, Hess and Weitling (Mayer, 1936, chaps 4 and 5).

4 I borrow the expression from della Volpe (1946, 93, 100), although I do not share his humanist interpretation.

5 However it should not be forgotten that Marx criticizes Saint-Simon on two fundamental issues: his erroneous vision of the nature of class conflict, i.e. his tendency to see crucial opposition between 'idle' and 'industrial' classes, the latter including the entrepreneurs and the workers; his fancying an ideal society

imbued with hierarchical and technocratic principles of organization, in which the workers must obey the entrepreneurs anyway (Meldolesi, 1982, 54–62). It seems that Saint-Simon's thought was assimilated by Marx very early, i.e. in Berlin in 1843, under the influence of Edward Gans, a law professor who tried to combine Saint-Simon with Hegel. But various intellectual exchanges with his future father-in-law, Ludwig von Westphalen, had paved the way (Gurwitch, 1948; Cornu, 1955, 67).

6 On these aspects of Marx's and Engels' theory see Finelli (1987; 2000) and Preve (1996, 44–51).

7 Freeing Marx and Engels from any residue of Feuerbachian humanism and Saint-Simonian economism is an operation loaded with political implications. The humanism–economism pair was evoked by Althusser (1976b) to single out the ideological superstructures of the 'Stalinist deviation', that deviation which transformed Marxism into 'a sort of Saint-Simonian left' (Meldolesi, 1982, 45, 61). Now the relationship between humanism and economism is not casual and extrinsic, and nor does it reduce to a blending of two independent positions. As noted by Preve (1990, 81), Althusser proved that economism (i.e. the thesis of socially neutral technical progress as a basic determinant of history) is necessarily linked to humanism (i.e. the presupposition of a socially neutral human nature). An argument deserving some exploration is that the economicist historicism of the mature Marx and Engels represent not the dismantling of their early humanist historicism, but rather – if I may be forgiven the quip – its dialectical development. What the two approaches have in common is the idea of an immanent finality of history.

8 Luporini (1971, xxiii) and Avineri (1968, 124–8) have called attention to the possible influence of Cieszkowski (1838). Finelli (2004, 80–3) raised some doubts on the weight of this influence, and noted that it would have some sense only in the light of an idealist reading of the 'philosophy of praxis', certainly not if this is intended in Gramsci's sense. Among other things, an influence of Cieszkowski is denied by Marx himself.

9 On the relationship between Marx and Aristotle see McCarthy (1990), Meikle (1991), DeGolyer (1992), Kain (1992), Booth (1992), Miller (1993), Margolis (1992), Pascucci (2006), Engelskirchen (2007).

10 On the relationship between Marx and Spinoza see the fundamental essay by Matheron (1977). See also Rubel (1985), Bongiovanni (1987), Balibar (1993), Yovel (1993), Pascucci (2006). For an audacious Marxist reading of Spinoza, see Negri (1998).

11 In his mature works Marx elaborates the notions of 'fetishism' and 'reification' (*Versachlichung*), which do not precisely coincide with that of 'alienation'. Meszaros (1970, chap. 8) argues that there is continuity between the mature and the young Marx on the alienation theme and, on this ground, he rejects the epistemological break thesis. But Marx the scientist goes beyond 'Marxist humanism' on many other themes besides that of alienation. Moreover, the mature Marx's handling of alienation (and fetishism) is rather different than the young philosopher's treatment. See Fineschi (2006, 91–117).

12 Perhaps Gramsci, better than any other Marxist thinker, grasped the substance of this individualist foundation of Marx's philosophical ontology. According to him, men as a 'concrete will', 'create their own personality, 1. by giving

a specific and concrete ("rational") direction to their own vital impulse or will; 2. by identifying the means which will make this will concrete and specific and not arbitrary; 3. by contributing to modify the ensemble of the concrete conditions for realising this will to the extent of one's own limits and capacities and in the most fruitful form. Man is to be conceived as an historical bloc of purely individual and subjective elements and of mass and objective or material elements with which the individual is in an active relationship . . . The synthesis of the elements constituting individuality is "individual," but it cannot be realised and developed without an activity directed outward, modifying external relations both with nature and, in varying degrees, with other men' (Gramsci, 1971, 360).

13 Gould (1978, 1–2). See also Forbes (1990, 55–7). In chapter 1 of Gould's work and in chapters 4, 5 and 6 of Forbes' there are accurate reconstructions of Marx's theory of the social agent's individuation process.

14 This was a political group inspired by the theories of Auguste Comte, the collaborator of Saint-Simon who was also the founder of sociological positivism. These 'socialists' assumed capitalism as a positive datum and as a natural fact, and purported to change things just by performing marginal adjustments through 'moral restraint'. The *Société des proletaires positivists* applied to enter the International. The General Council decided that its members, as proletarians, could be accepted as members of a simple section but not of a 'positivist section'. The reason was that the principles of Comtism contrasted with those established by the International's Statute.

15 First and foremost, that attempted by Lukàcs (1967–81).

16 In fact she herself abandons it. See Gould (1988).

17 See especially Meikle (1991), Pascucci (2006) and Engelskirchen (2007).

18 See in particular Bunge (1973), Bhaskar (1975), Weissman (2000), Hodgson (2006).

19 In this sense see Archer (1995) and Hodgson (2004).

20 According to Agassi (1967), an approach of institutional individualism accepts both the proposition whereby the individuals are influenced by social conditions and that whereby they in turn determine social conditions. Likewise it accepts both the proposition that society affects the formation of consciousness, and the one that individual consciousness can be a source of critique and change of society. Agassi develops the institutional individualism approach starting from Popperian positions, but does not hesitate to criticize Popper by accusing him of psychological reductionism. Although I share this critique of Popper, I have some difficulty in fully accepting Agassi's theses. They do not seem to be sufficiently clear on the distinction between the ontological, the axiological and the methodological fields. Hodgson (2007), to avoid any risk of Popperian reductionism, proposes to reverse Agassi's expression to 'individualistic institutionalism'. Other scholars have insisted on the necessity of providing sociological explanations by reducing social phenomena not to abstract individuals, but to individuals in social relations. See Bunge (1974, 1977, 1979), Gould (1988), Kontopoulos (1993), Weissman (2000). See also Hodgson (2004, 2006).

21 The mature Marx conceives history as an open process (Gandy, 1979, 42). History, in his view, has no meaning which cannot be derived from the concrete individuals' intentions and purposes. And since people can fail in pursuing

their goals, Marx recognizes that historical processes often occur as unintentional results of the social agents' actions (Tucker, 1980, 30). Carol Gould (1978, 27–8) observed that the open character Marx attributes to historical processes derives from a refusal of the logicism of Hegelian dialectics. History might even evolve in a dialectical way, but it is a 'real movement', not the logic of a Spirit who realizes himself as Universal Subject. Historical events are determined not by the acts of an abstract Subject, but by the actions of particular and finite individuals, agents who are endowed with a limited rationality, a reified consciousness and heterogeneous motivations. For these reasons the anatomy of the monkey is explained by that of man, rather than the reverse. In other words, historical science can only account for the past, whilst the future always remains undetermined. On the scientific character of Marx's approach to history see Burgio (2000, 151 *et passim*), who also stresses its originality, for instance the weight attributed to the knowledge of empirical data together with a recognition of the constructive role of theory. This approach rejects the deterministic conceptions of the historical process, while acknowledging the indefinite character of the future, that is, the possibility that any development stage is open to a variety of evolutional potentialities.

22 Three scholars seem to have gone more deeply into this problem, Louis Dumont (1977), Carol Gould (1978) and D. F. B. Tucker (1980). The principal merits of the former is to retrace the philosophical origins of Marx's individualism in the materialist critique of Hegel's holism and to note the fact that, although with some uncertainty, the foundations of Marx's individualist ontology already emerge in the *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law*. The most innovative contribution of Gould, on the other hand, is to be found precisely in the clarification of the philosophical bases of Marx's social ontology. Also some of her suggestions on the theories of alienation and freedom are illuminating. Gould though could not distinguish the mature from the young Marx for the simple reason that her interpretation is based on a single book, the *Grundrisse*. Finally Tucker (1980, 14–34) has persuasively argued in favour of an individualist Marx, and shown that his materialism induces him to account for social behaviour on the ground of the material circumstances in which the individuals act. He also showed that this approach emerges in Marx from his critique of Hegel's idealism, as well as from the scientific formation he assimilated from the English classical economists.

23 Gerratana (1983, 130) observes that, after some initial uncertainties on the use of the terms 'socialism' and 'communism', Marx and Engels tend to use them as synonyms.

24 I will limit myself to recall a few interesting contributions: Plamenatz (1975), Gould (1978), Selucky (1979), Brenkert (1983), Lukes (1984), Petrucciani (1992; 1995), Preve (1996), Maler (2003).

25 Marx often uses the term 'self-government' to define what nowadays is called 'self-management', for instance when he speaks of the *self-government of the producers*. But he also uses it in the sense of 'political self-government', *Selbstregierung der Gemeinde* (the self-government of the Commune). Since I think it necessary to clearly distinguish the notion of 'self-government' referring to the productive process from that referring to the political process, I will tend to use the term 'self-management' to denote the former.

26 For a wider analysis of the employment contract as a fundamental institution of capitalism see Screpanti (2001; 2006a).

27 Perhaps this is the right place to address a crucial problem of some liberalist notions of freedom, those in which individual freedom is founded on the self-ownership axiom, that is, on the idea that a person is free because he is the owner of himself. This notion was already present in 17th and 18th century Enlightenment thought and was recently rediscovered by Nozick (1974, 172). Now, the axiom of self-ownership as the foundation of freedom contradicts a basic principle of human rights, namely the norm on the inalienability of the person and his liberties: if I am free because I am the owner of myself, then I must be free to alienate my person, since the ownership of a good implies the right to sell it; however, if my liberties are inalienable, I cannot sell myself as a slave, and this means that I do not have the effective ownership of myself. This contradiction is clearly present in Hegel who, on the one hand, seems to accept the self-ownership axiom: 'the circumstance that I, as free will, am an object [*gegenständlich*] to myself in what I possess and only become an actual will by this means constitutes the genuine and rightful element in possession, the determination of *property*' (1991, § 45). On the other hand, though, he states that 'those goods, or rather substantial determinations, which constitute my own distinct personality and the universal essence of my self-consciousness are therefore *inalienable*, and my right on them is *imprescriptible*' (ib., §66). According to Cohen (1995) the self-ownership axiom is present even in Marx, for instance, when he studies capitalist exploitation as a case of injustice caused by the fact that the worker, by selling a good he owns, labour power, is expropriated of part of the produce of his own labour. However Marx, as shown in Chapter 2, does not account for exploitation on the ground of a theory of justice. And, although he sometimes slips into expressions ostensibly revealing the conviction that workers are the owners of themselves, he never says they are free because they have this property or not free because they are expropriated of the fruits of this property. The self-ownership axiom is typical of a certain liberalist conception of freedom, and is quite extraneous to the communist conception – a conception which rather sees in private property (even that of 'human capital', a theory Marx harshly criticizes) a condition for the non-freedom of wage workers.

28 On the economic and political implications of the workers' preferences in the labour process see Pagano (1985).

29 As to Engels, there is no room in his thought for the notion of freedom as decision-making autonomy in the productive process; instead he seems convinced that, for efficiency reasons, it is impossible to avoid rigorous discipline of labour based on a principle of authority which is made necessary by the complexity of machinery. See especially Engels (1874). On this issue there is a strong divergence with Marx, who believes that 'discipline will become superfluous under a social system in which the labourers work for their own account' (1867–94, III, 37, 87).

30 The thesis is also present in *Grundrisse*, where Marx (1857–58, 28, 213) says: 'As in the case of every individual standing in circulation as subject, the worker is the owner of a use value; he disposes of it for money, the general form of wealth, but only in order to dispose of this money in turn for commodities as objects of his immediate consumption, as the means for the satisfaction of his

needs . . . He shares in the enjoyment of general wealth up to the limit of his equivalent . . . He is not restricted to particular objects, nor to a particular kind of satisfaction. The range of his enjoyments is not limited qualitatively, but only quantitatively. This distinguishes him from the slave, serf, etc.'

31 The conception of freedom as self-government could be intended as a democratic version of the 'republican freedom' doctrine. In Marx and Engels it appears as a generalization of a theory of Rousseau, who in *The Social Contract* defines freedom in terms of political autonomy, i.e. as the citizens' attitude to obey willingly a law they democratically laid down for themselves. The theory passed to Germany through Kant and Hegel, but perhaps Marx and Engels got it directly from the Swiss philosopher. In *The German Ideology*, for instance, they observe that 'the Assembly proclaimed its independence . . . and seized the power it required, which in the political sphere could, of course, only be done within the framework of political form and by making use of the existing theories of Rousseau . . . The National Assembly had to take this step because it was being urged forward by the immense mass of the people that stood behind it. By so doing, therefore, . . . it actually transformed itself thereby into the true organ of the vast majority of Frenchmen' (Marx and Engels, 1845–46, 5, 199). With this act the French people conquered its political freedom. Probably, anyway, Marx gets this theory also from Spinoza. See Matheron (1978).

32 This passage of Engels seems to be exposed to a distorting interpretation. Walicki (1995) used it to prove the totalitarian implications of Marx's and Engels' theory of freedom. The demonstration consists of a translation of their conception into a poor copy of Hegel's. The latter is reduced to the proposition that a free man is one who understands that what happens must happen and quietly accepts its necessity. Now, it is true that Engels (1876–78, 25, 105) quotes precisely Hegel on the idea that 'freedom is the insight into necessity'. But this does not mean he accepts it in Walicki's sense. In reality, as Kolakowski (1981, I, 386–7) observed, in the controversial passage from *Antidühring* Engels puts forward a theory which is very different from that of Walicki's Hegel. He is saying not that freedom is the passive acceptance of necessity, but that men are all the more free the more they are able to modify natural constraints, also by means of scientific knowledge, so as to make them serve the goals they themselves have decided. He argues, for instance, that 'Man's own social organisation, hitherto confronting him as a necessity imposed by nature and history, now becomes the result of his own free action. The extraneous objective forces that have hitherto governed history pass under the control of man himself . . . It is the humanity's leap from the kingdom of necessity to the kingdom of freedom' (Engels, 1876–78, 25, 270). In this approach, will is not limited to passively accepting a univocal reality, but opens up to the many possibilities inherent in it and tries to make it develop in the desired directions (Prestipino, 2002, 175).

33 Some eminent examples are offered by della Volpe (1946), Bloch (1995; 2000), Maneli (1978) and Gerratana (1983). Prestipino (2002) tried to retrace in Kant, besides Hegel, the original source of ethical libertarianism. Preve (1996) also proposed an ennobling interpretation of Marx as a Hegelian philosopher of freedom, but he tried to bend his Marx–Hegel toward Spinoza rather than Kant, and this enabled him to highlight the individualist foundations of Marx's

libertarian conception. The most heroic and noble of these Hegelian–Marxist conceptions of freedom is certainly that of Dunayevskaya (1958), who even endeavoured in discovering the theoretical bases for a criticism of Stalinist totalitarianism in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*.

34 The most important essay among those published in the book of 1969 had came out in 1958 with the title 'Two Concepts of Freedom'. Some interesting contributions to the debate have been collected in Carter and Ricciardi (1996).

35 So it became clear that so-called 'negative freedom' is a confused idea resulting from the incapacity of its supporters to define the subject and the field of choice and their tendency to focus on only a few constraints, those of personal domination. Equally confused is the notion of 'positive freedom', which pays attention only to some aspects of the field of choice, those attaining to the achievement of human goals, and neglecting the objective impediments and the nature of the subject. Even Benjamin Constant's distinction between the 'freedom of the ancients' and the 'freedom of the moderns' shows all its shortcomings in the light of MacCallum's approach. The freedom of the ancients refers to the citizens' faculty *of* political participation (in the ancient *agora* and medieval 'parliaments'); the freedom of the moderns refers to the freedom *from* public intrusion in individual choices. Now, both notions are partial in that they consider only a few particular cases of constraints and hence arbitrarily restrict the kinds of opportunity sets taken into account. At any rate, a firm foothold achieved by the notion of freedom of the moderns is that the subject of choices can only be individual. I have already shown that this foothold is present in the mature Marx too. And this must be stressed with some force if only to clear the ground of certain notions of 'communist freedom' which were still fashionable in the 1960s among various supporters of popular 'democracies'.

4 The Emancipation of Labour

1 See also what Marx says in *Capital*: 'The cooperative factories of the labourers themselves represent within the old form the first sprouts of the new, although they naturally reproduce, and must reproduce, everywhere in their actual organisation all the shortcomings of the prevailing system. But the antithesis between capital and labour is overcome within them, if at first only by way of making the associated labourers into their own capitalist, i.e., by enabling them to use the means of production for the employment of their own labour . . . The credit system is not only the principal basis for the gradual transformation of capitalist private enterprises into capitalist stock companies, but equally offers the means for the gradual extension of cooperative enterprises on a more or less national scale. The capitalist stock companies, as much as the cooperative factories, should be considered as transitional forms from the capitalist mode of production to the associated one, with the only distinction that the antagonism is resolved negatively in the one and positively in the other' (Marx, 1867–94, III, 37, 438).

2 On all this see Reibel (1975), Moore (1980; 1993), Hodgson (1999). Marx's and Engels' hostility towards the market is common to much of nineteenth-century socialist thought (Thompson, 1988).

3 Here are some essential references: Damjanovic (1962), Lowit (1962), Bourdet (1974), Brachet (1975), Schweickart (1992), Selucky (1994), Adaman and Devine (1997), Lawler (1998). Jossa (2005) meticulously reconstructed Marx's and Engels' position on self-management and also highlighted the reasons why 'orthodox' Marxism tended to overlook it. As to Lenin, it is worthwhile observing that in one of his last writings, *On Cooperation*, he openly declared he was in favour of cooperatives. Lenin's view on cooperation recalls the one that modern research characterizes as self-managed firms with public ownership. Marx, on the contrary, having investigated the experiments backed by the Owenist movement, refers to cooperative firms owned by the workers. To understand the differences between the two kinds of self-managed firm the modern economic theory of market socialism should be studied, for which the reader is referred to Jossa and Cuomo (1997). Lenin criticized the old English cooperative movement in that it postulated the possibility of a socialist transformation without conquering political power. Cooperation, for Lenin, can develop as a socialist mode of production only if it is supported by public institutions and the credit system, which presupposes control of the State by the workers. This argument is anticipated by Marx who, in the above-quoted passage from the *Inaugural Address*, continues: 'At the same time, the experience of the period from 1848 to 1864 has proved beyond doubt that, however excellent in principle, and however useful in practice, co-operative labour, if kept within the narrow circle of the casual efforts of private workmen, will never be able to arrest the growth in geometrical progression of monopoly, to free the masses, nor even to perceptibly lighten the burden of their miseries . . . To save the industrious masses, co-operative labour ought to be developed to national dimensions, and, consequently, to be fostered by national means . . . To conquer political power has therefore become the great duty of the working classes' (Marx, 1864, 20, 11–2). This passage seems to suggest a transformation of the cooperatives into self-managed firms with public ownership and finance, and do not necessarily contrast with what Marx says in his *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, namely that cooperatives have value in that they are not protected by governments. In fact it is not a matter of protection. The problem is to create public institutions which, on the one hand, abolish State 'protection' of capitalist monopolies, and, on the other, provide the cooperative movement with the financial means and the legal conditions required to develop on a national scale. According to Marx, the creation of such institutions presupposes proletarian control of the State. In reality what Marx opposes, when he rejects State 'protection' of cooperatives, is the Lassallian political programme, which intends to promote State support for cooperation without revolution. It is the support of capitalist States that Marx argues cannot work (Cole, 1954, chap. 5).

4 Selucky's (1979) observations on the subject are perspicacious.

5 Hayek believed that general information is provided by the price system emerging from the competitive process. But prices tend to embody distorted information if markets are incomplete, unstable, non-competitive and if there are externalities, public goods and other forms of market failure.

6 I think Zolo (1974, 148n) is right when he observes the centralist motive is emphasized more by Engels than by Marx. Actually Engels appears to have developed the idea that central planning presupposes all-embracing public

ownership of the means of production. In the *Manifesto* it is said that 'the proletariat will use its political supremacy to wrest, by degrees, all capital from the bourgeoisie, to centralise all instruments of production in the hands of the State' (Marx and Engels, 1847–48, 6, 504). This passage presents a watered-down version of what Engels says in *Principles of Communism*, a text used by Marx to write the final version of the *Manifesto*: 'the proletariat will see itself compelled to go always further, to concentrate all capital, all agriculture, all industry, all transport, and all exchange more and more in the hands of the State' (Engels, 1847b, 6, 351).

7 For a detailed survey see Jossa and Cuomo (1997).

8 See Screpanti (1984). It is interesting to note that this view has been rediscovered by contemporary institutional research, especially within the 'complexity' and the 'information' paradigms (see Stiglitz, 1994).

9 Exemplary is the attitude of Amariglio and Ruccio (1998).

10 On the value and meaning of this objective I have only to refer to Lafargue (1979).

11 I call 'spurious' social goods those offered at a positive price.

12 Progressive taxation had already been introduced in England before the publication of the *Manifesto*, and was considered an attack on private property by a large stratum of public opinion.

13 For instance because of the well-known free rider problem. Many people try to evade taxes, many others try to obtain more medicines than they really need, still others dispose of private refuse in the public environment.

14 I use this term to exclude those forms of false consciousness which induce people to perceive some norms as self-determined when in fact they are not, as for example when a dictatorship or a religion obtain the consensus of individuals through manipulation of opinions and convictions. A woman who complies with the moral norm that obliges her to wear a chador might be convinced that the norm is right, but for the woman to believe that she has contributed to its determination would be irrational. When talking of freedom in this fourth sense, Marx sometimes uses the expression 'rational control'. Undoubtedly there are traces of Hegel's notion of freedom here. But one does not have to interpret this expression in a Hegelian sense. It seems more sensible to suppose that the critic of bourgeois ideologies uses the term 'rational' to characterize a consciousness that is free from ideological deformations.

15 The German deputies' chambers Marx refers to when criticizing Hegel were not properly liberal and democratic, since they were based on the *Stände*. However, as proved by Avineri (1968, 18), Marx's critiques of this kind of 'parliament' are no different from those he later raises against modern parliamentary democracies.

16 Engels, in an article published in *The New Moral World* on 18 November 1843, already defines 'dr Marx' as a communist.

17 On the importance of this work see also Cerroni (1972, 117 *et passim*), Guastini (1974, 145–66), Hunt (1975, 75) and Femia (1993, 70). I only recall these few scholars because they are representative of two different evaluations of the importance of the *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law*. Cerroni and Guastini study the work from the point of view of law theory and emphasize its methodological importance. The work is inspired by Feuerbach's *critique* of Hegel. Its basic notions (State, civil society, *stände*, bureaucracy, etc.)

are all rigorously Hegelian, but a drastic break is made with Hegel in political theory. Avineri, Hunt and Femia argue that the work is important because of its *positive* contents, its formulation of a 'true democracy' doctrine which anticipates some basic elements of the future theory of communism. A scholar who brings to light the importance of the *Critique* from both points of view is Rossi (1974, 300–407), who observes that the methodology adopted in this work prepares the foundations for the materialist conception of history and argues that the theses on true democracy open the road to a socialist perspective. In point of fact, the two interpretations are not contrasting. If I limit myself to considering only the second in this section, it is because I am mainly interested in highlighting the first decisive step Marx takes towards the construction of a materialist theory of communism.

18 'The state can and must go as far as the abolition of religion, the destruction of religion. But it can do so only in the same way that it proceeds to the abolition of private property, to the maximum, to confiscation, to progressive taxation' (Marx, 1843b, 3, 156).

19 Prestipino (2002, 179–80) recalls della Volpe's (1974) notions of *libertas minor* and *libertas major*, to argue that the former, as guaranteed by the rights of men and citizens, must be subsumed in the latter in order to ensure real freedom that is equal for everyone.

20 For instance Rjazanov (1928, 140–9), Zolo (1974, 153–70), Guastini (1974, 357–8).

21 According to Buber (1950) the thesis on the dissolution or abolition of the State *in general* as an inevitable consequence of the communist revolution was developed by Engels on the ground of some reticent indications from Marx. Successively it was attributed to Marx, but not all scholars agree on this posthumous attribution. Della Volpe (1963, 119) is one who does not agree. The Althusserian school is also rather sceptical on this thesis, perhaps because of its early Marxian justification (Zolo, 1974, 15n). At any rate it must be observed that Engels (1891a, 27, 190) himself, when theorizing State dissolution by referring to the Paris Commune, talks of a 'shattering [*Sprengung*] of the former state power and its replacement by a new and truly democratic one'. As to the early Marxian origin of the dissolution thesis, it should be noted that in the *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law* Marx writes of the State dissolution (*Auflösung*) as a process aimed at the completion (*Aufhebung*) of its abstraction from civil society by means of a 'true democracy' in which the people's self-determination is expressed in the act of revolutionizing both the State and the economy. In the *Aufhebung* process the existing State is suppressed and overcome, but its functions of expression of collective will are developed at a higher level. On all this see Avineri (1968, 202–20). It is worth noticing that in the *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law* Marx (1842–43, 3, 30) says that 'the French have recently interpreted this as meaning that in true democracy the political state is annihilated'. And this makes us suppose that the thesis on State dissolution is derived from Saint-Simon, in which it goes hand in hand with that on the reduction of politics to 'the administration of things' (Geoghegan, 1987, 25).

22 The category of 'professional politicians' is used by both Marx and Engels, but especially Engels (1886, 26, 393) develops it as a scientific notion. He does it in analysing the political systems in modern representative democracies, where

'the State has become an independent power vis-á-vis society'. This kind of State 'produces a further ideology [according to which] economic facts must assume the form of juristic motives in order to receive legal sanction'. Thus 'among professional politicians . . . the connection with economic facts gets well and truly lost'. The interesting thing is that in this way the States 'makes itself independent vis-á-vis society; and, indeed, the more so, the more it becomes the organ of a particular class', which however is the capitalist class rather than the political class.

23 Marx strongly favours the supremacy of legislative power, if for no other reason because it makes the general revolutions. At the time of the ascent to power of Louis Bonaparte he deeply reflects on the risk of executive power becoming so independent from the legislative power as to overthrow and drain it.

24 In *The Civil War in France* Marx uses the expression 'self-government of the producers' also to express the notion of 'political self-government'. As I have already observed, it is important to distinguish between the two notions.

25 According to Ollman (1977, 10) Marx adopts the expression 'dictatorship of the proletariat' in opposition to the elitist views of Blanqui. Draper (1962) observed that the term 'dictatorship' in Marx's times was not intended in the totalitarian sense we attribute it to day, but in the sense it had in ancient Rome, i.e. as the institution of a temporary office appointed to the settling of some exceptional political or military goals. An interesting curiosity: on 11 May 1860 Garibaldi landed in Sicily to lead a people's liberation war against the Bourbon monarchy of Naples; on the 14th he proclaimed himself 'dictator'; on 8 August Marx published an article in the *New York Daily Tribune* on the liberation war in Southern Italy and defined Garibaldi 'the popular dictator'.

26 On the democratic implications of the notion of 'proletarian dictatorship' see Draper (1962), Hunt (1975, chap. 9), Elster (1985, §7.3.1).

27 The issue of revolutionary methods is outside the scope of this essay, therefore I will not dwell on the problem of violence. I will just refer to Texier (1998), who has demonstrated that resorting to Jacobin-type insurrectional tactics is theorized by Marx and Engels for continental countries where the conditions for a democratic seizure of power do not exist. He also has demonstrated that these methods are considered unnecessary in countries like the United Kingdom and the United States, where relatively democratic systems exist and where a proletarian conquest of power can take the form of an extension of civil and political rights.

28 On the mechanisms through which the political class is induced to serve the interests of capital by pursuing its own, Marxist research has taken many a step ahead since Marx's times. I shall not dwell on this issue here but will just refer to Screpanti (2001, chap 3), where the reader can also find the basic bibliography.

29 The new hypothesis is developed by Engels in *The origin of Family, Private Property and the State*, where this, far from being conceived as a simple business committee of the bourgeoisie, is thought of as 'a product of society at a certain stage of development [when] it becomes necessary to have a power seemingly standing above society which would alleviate the conflict and keep it within the bounds of "order"; and this power, having arisen out of society but placing itself above it, and alienating itself more and more from it, is the state' (Engels, 1884, 26, 269). Then in *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy* the General singles out ideological production as one of the main functions of a modern capitalist State: 'The state presents itself to

us as the first ideological power over man. Society creates for itself an organ for the safeguarding of its common interests against internal and external attacks. This organ is the state power . . . But once the state has become an independent power *vis-á-vis* society, it immediately produces a further ideology' (Engels, 1886a, 26, 392–3).

30 It is interesting to note that some ironic passages on the 'universal suffrage', which were initially present in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, were skipped in the second edition of the essay. Canfora (2004, 111) noted that the core of communist tactic, as expressed in *The Manifesto*, is to win elections through universal suffrage. In point of fact, the demand for universal suffrage is a constant in Marx's political proposals, starting already with the *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law*. In the 1850s this position is revealed in Marx's admiration for the English Chartist movement – a movement which had as its first objective the achievement of male universal suffrage. And in an article in support of this movement Marx (1852b, 11, 336) argues that an unavoidable consequence of universal suffrage would be 'the political supremacy of the working class'. I have already shown the importance attributed to universal suffrage in the essay on the Commune of 1871. Later Engels (1895, 27, 515) explains that 'the Communist Manifesto had already proclaimed the winning of universal suffrage, of democracy, as one of the first and most important tasks of the militant proletariat'. The mature Engels, like Marx, recognizes that in the highest form of the modern capitalist State, i.e. the democratic republic, 'the possessing class rules directly through the medium of universal suffrage' (Engels, 1884, 26, 272), besides with economic power. Nonetheless he himself continues to believe in the revolutionary opportunities offered by this right. In fact the democratic republic 'is the only form of state in which the last decisive struggle between proletariat and bourgeoisie can be fought out' (ib., 271). And to the extent that the oppressed class 'matures for its self-emancipation, it constitutes itself as a party of its own and elects its own representatives, not those of the capitalists. Thus, universal suffrage is the gauge of the maturity of the working class. It cannot and never will be anything more in the present-day state; but that is sufficient. On the day the thermometer of universal suffrage registers boiling point among the workers, both they and the capitalists will know where they stand' (ib., 272). The General does not hesitate in acknowledging that 'with this successful utilisation of universal suffrage, however, an entirely new method of proletarian struggle came into operation, and this method quickly took on a more tangible form' (Engels, 1895, 27, 516). He is convinced that 'if one thing is certain it is that our party and the working class can only come to power under the form of a democratic republic' (Engels, 1886a, 27, 227).

31 He says so in the *Preamble to the Programme of the French Workers' Party* (Marx, 1880b, 24, 340), a 'minimal' electoral programme which he contributes to draw up together with Guesde and which he approves with enthusiasm, except for 'some foolishnesses such as minimum wages fixed by law, etc'. (Marx, 1880c, 46, 44). Among the programme demands are the extension of democratic liberties, the eight-hour working day, progressive taxation, equality of male and female wages.

32 Gerratana (1983) enucleates the essence of communist doctrine as being a theory of a movement instead of an ideal state, and correctly identifies its sources in *The German Ideology*.

5 Foundations of the Liberation Theory

1 I will use material already published in Screpanti (2004a; 2004b; 2006b; 2006c).
2 Some essential references are: Suppes (1987), Pattanaik and Xu (1990), Klemisch-Ahlert (1993), Bossert, Pattanaik and Xu (1994), Gravel (1994), Gravel, Laslier and Trannoy (1998), Puppe (1998), Peragine (1999), Van Hees and Wissemburg (1999).
3 See, for instance, Pateman (1970), Macpherson (1973; 1977), Tucker (1980), Nielsen (1984), Gould (1988), Van Parijs (1995).
4 Here by 'capitalist' I refer to the figure Marx calls the 'functioning capitalist' or 'active capitalist', i.e. the subject who makes production decisions. This might be an entrepreneur or a manager, but not necessarily the owner of capital. See Screpanti (1998; 2001, 2006a).
5 I assume all prices, including the wage rate, are given for the firm, an assumption justified by the hypothesis that all markets are oligopolistic and the firm is not a price leader in any of them. If the firm were able to influence prices in some markets, then the choice of prices too would enter the opportunity set. In this case it would be necessary to introduce as further constraints the structure of oligopolistic power in those markets. But there is no need to complicate matters in this way.
6 This hypothesis is highly unrealistic. In fact it is unlikely that a self-managed firm will use the same techniques and the same machines as a capitalist firm. First of all, when the workers are the owners of the capital, they will tend to use it more parsimoniously and carefully, thus reducing wear and tear of the machines and their depreciation rate. Secondly capitalist firms tend to invest in technological equipment that reduces the effects of the workers' hidden information and action and facilitates control. Presumably this will cause a tendency to invest in machinery and control apparatuses that are more costly than those used by self-managed firms. Thirdly, since labour is more costly in capitalist firms than in those that are self-managed, the former will tend to use more capital intensive techniques and therefore to over-invest. Finally, since the workers' turnover is higher in capitalist firms than in self-managed ones, the cost of training too will be higher. Thus it is highly probable that, for all these reasons, the cost curve will be lower in co-operative firms than in capitalist ones. On the other hand, it should also be considered that self-employed workers may choose techniques with an eye to the possibilities of self-realization offered by work activity, or at least with the aim of reducing frustration and fatigue. For the time being I am ignoring all these reasons, but I will return to some of them later, when I will deal with information asymmetries.
7 *Public goods* are those which, for technical reasons, *cannot* be profitably offered by private firms. They are characterized by non-excludability (nobody can be excluded from use) and non-rivalry (the use by an individual does not reduce the quantity available to others). A typical example is a lighthouse: no seafarer can be excluded from using it, and its use by a seafarer does not reduce the quantity available. Private firms cannot make profits by producing this kind of goods, which therefore have to be provided by a public authority. *Merit goods* are those which a community considers should be used by all citizens even if, due to lack of information or rationality, they do not want to. A typical example is compulsory vaccination. *Common goods* are those which are common

property, like a river, a mountain, a forest. *Publicly-provided private goods* are those which can be profitably offered by private firms but not in the quantity desired by society, as for instance medicines and medical care. The community may decide to offer them at political prices for reasons of social interest.

8 If tax rates are progressive, a redistribution effect is obtained which can be justified by the fact that not all factors generating taxable ability (rent positions, monopoly privileges, aptitude to exploit others etc.) are of a labour ability kind. The redistribution effects of progressive taxation may also be justified by the aim to maximize freedom. It could be demonstrated that, under certain plausible conditions, a government aiming to maximize the citizens' freedom should redistribute it an egalitarian way. I cannot furnish this demonstration here. See Screpanti (2004b; 2006b).

9 In the *Manifesto* Marx and Engels (1847–48, 6, 516) explain the establishment of a state of 'social harmony' as a consequence of 'the disappearance of class antagonisms'. In the *Critique of the Gotha Programme,* Marx (1875, 24, 87) accounts for the implementation of the communist allocation criterion as a consequence of the disappearance of 'the enslaving subordination of the individual', beside the ensuing development of productive forces.

10 For an attempt to outline a theory of alienation purged of all traces of Feuerbachian essentialism see Screpanti (2001, 18–21), where wage work is considered alienated because the worker, with an employment contract, undertakes an obligation to obedience, i.e. he 'alienates' part of his freedom. The mature Marx sometimes uses the expression 'labour alienation' in this sense.

11 In reality, in a growth process with systematic productivity increases it is possible to obtain work time reductions with unreduced monthly wages without a profit squeeze.

12 Class public goods are those that are enjoyed predominantly by a social class. For example, the police force, which defends the existing distribution of wealth and power, is a public good enjoyed mainly by the rich and powerful. Class public goods are a special case of those which Foley (1998) defines as local public goods: they are *socially* local.

6 The Politics of Communism

1 I use the term 'liberty' to mark the difference with respect both to real freedom and to a right. A formal liberty, or simply a *liberty*, is recognition of the prerogative of a subject to obtain a thing, that recognition not being accompanied by the identification of a corresponding obligation of another subject to provide the thing. Real freedom, or simply *freedom*, is the capacity of a subject effectively to obtain that thing. A *right* is the faculty of a subject to claim that somebody, a person or an institution, should do something to make the enjoyment of a liberty possible. Old liberal constitutions only define liberties. Modern ones tend to define rights, which they do by establishing the State's obligation to provide the conditions for making liberties real. Then policies and ordinary laws ensure enjoyment of the rights laid down in the constitution. Note that I define a constitution on the ground of its content rather than its approval procedures. Thus a law might well have a 'constitutional' value even if it is not part of constitution. This happens usually in common law systems.

2 On the State's role in supplying and financing the goods required to make freedoms real, see Holmes and Sunstein (1999).
3 If the supply of a social good widens the rich man's freedom more than the tax increase narrows it, his overall freedom rises (Screpanti, 2006b).
4 This possibility is acknowledged by many Marxist scholars, for instance, Mandel (1968, II, 657), Wright (1997, 463), DiQuattro 1998, 83), Cavallaro (1998).
5 The literature on this issue has brought to light four effects: the *direct residual claimant*, *peer pressure*, *participation* and the *loyalty* effect (Mirrlees, 1976; Oakeshott, 1978; Horvat, 1982; Kandel and Lazear, 1992; Miller, 1993; Bowles and Gintis, 1993; 1994; Screpanti, 2001, chap. 5). To these I add a fifth effect which I call *contrast of unloaded fatigue*: inseparability of the co-operators' activities in team production implies that if one of them shirks the others may have to overwork, giving them good reason to discourage shirking.
6 This is the effect Marx and Engels seem to privilege. Here is Engels' (1876–78, 25, 186) opinion: 'production is most encouraged by a mode of distribution which allows all members of society to develop, maintain and exercise their capacities with maximum universality'.
7 These two effects deserve some reflection. Research on the free rider problem has brought to light a solid argument as evidence of their inefficacy. The direct residual claimant effect would be ineffective because a self-interested worker would find shirking profitable regardless of what the others do. In fact the advantage of reducing his own toil accrues to him alone, whilst the economic advantage resulting from not shirking is shared among all the workers (the problem does not arise if the individual advantage from effort is over and above the individual cost). Similar reasoning could be used to demonstrate that no worker has an incentive to control the other workers if the individual cost of control is higher than the individual advantage it produces. These arguments may be rebutted by assuming that workers are endowed with a special kind of 'class consciousness', i.e. one implying that each individual knows that: (1) the collective good is maximized through co-operative behaviour, (2) all the others know; (3) his own advantage grows with the collective one. The former two conditions are not difficult to justify. In a game-theoretic approach it is usual to assume that each player knows the game structure and knows that all the others know. The third is not so obvious, however, because it implies that each individual identifies his own interest with collective interest. Yet I do not see why it should be so problematic, if it corresponds to objective reality. And it would indeed correspond to reality if everyone (or even a large number of people) behaved co-operatively because they are endowed with this kind of consciousness. If it is licit to assume that workers who work for themselves rather than for an exploiter capitalist tend to endow themselves with such consciousness, the problem is solved. Note that the worker who behaves co-operatively by virtue of such consciousness is not necessarily moved by altruistic sentiments; in fact he knows that by pursuing the collective interests he contributes to maximize his personal interest. Non co-operative behaviour, which gives the *impression* of maximizing personal welfare to the detriment of that of others', is self-defeating; at any rate it is contrasted by the *conviction* that personal interest depends (i.e. is an increasing function of) collective interest. The impression does not correspond to reality *if it is shared by all the workers*. The conviction, on the other hand, does correspond to reality

if it is shared by all the workers. The existence of this kind of consciousness might be more understandable if the process of its formation were known. Suppose people have enough time to learn from experience. If the game is repeated and its end is uncertain (i.e. if each worker lives long enough and no one knows with certainty the date of his death), condition (3) may be substituted with the following: (3b) each individual tends to react by imitating the behaviour of others: he co-operates if the others co-operate, he shirks if the others shirk. In this way co-operative behaviour would be immediately rewarded whilst shirking would be punished. Then a general propensity to co-operate might gradually materialize (Radner, 1986). This kind of 'class consciousness' could emerge spontaneously from social interaction. As time passes each individual would realize that the others co-operate only if he himself co-operates, and would therefore also realize that his own personal advantage can grow as a function of the collective advantage, not to the detriment of it. Thus condition (3b) could be replaced back by (3) for the workers who have learned a lesson from experience.

8 Marx (1867–94, III, chaps 23, 27) investigates this process with some accuracy. See Screpanti (1998; 2006a, ch. 4).

9 A self-managed firm which is largely financed by credit has to devote a significant share of value added to the payment of fixed incomes to lenders and this raises the variability of the residual earned by workers, all the more so the higher the capital-labour and leverage ratios.

10 Other less radical reforms might be conceived. Here are two examples. All the shares of a capitalist firm might be transformed into securities or quasi-shares with no voting rights. The workers would become debtors of their capitalists. After that, self-financed growth would gradually contribute to build up an equity belonging to the co-operative. This would not be a proletarian expropriation, for the capitalists would preserve the ownership of their wealth, but would however be a rather subversive reform. A less brutal provision might be one that assigns to the workers a pre-emption right in the event of sale or bankruptcy of their firm, besides the credit (and possibly public participation) required to get the company on its feet again. Part of the equity could be provided by the pension funds of the workers of that firm. Other finance might come from pension funds in the form of credit.

11 On this see Screpanti (2001, chaps. 4, 6).

12 Then new members should make their investment; this could be done through a personal investment scheme based on non-payment of profits and on the payment of a monthly income lower than the old members' income for a certain number of years. Alternatively, new members could make no investment, but then retiring workers would only receive a share of the capital accumulated from the time of their engagement (Jossa, 2006, chap. 3).

13 An expression he borrowed from Marx and Engels, who however had used it, not to devalue representative democracy, but to stigmatize those members of Parliament who are unaffected by the political, social and economic events occurring in the real world, who believe themselves to be above any criticism and who therefore contribute to undermine parliamentary authority.

14 Oddly enough, only a few Marxists were able to capitalize on this important scientific innovation of Marx and Engels – an oddity that can perhaps be explained by the sociology of revolutionary political groups. An enlightening

exception is represented by Gramsci who, in the note entitled *'Number and Quality in Representative Systems of Government'*, developed a strong democratic criticism of modern parliamentary democracies, which he analysed as political forms in which popular consensus is built up by the dominating elites. He argued, for instance, that in an electoral process 'it is untrue that all individual opinions have "exactly" equal weight. Ideas and opinions are not spontaneously "born" in each individual brain: they have had a centre of formation, of irradiation, of dissemination, of persuasion – a group of men, or a single individual even, which has developed them and presented them in the political form of current reality. The counting of "votes" is the final ceremony of a long process, in which it is precisely those who devote their best energies to the State and the nation (when such they are) who carry the greatest weight' (Gramsci 1971, 193). Not improperly Canfora (2002, 61), by referring to the sociology of the elites, defined Gramsci as an 'integral elitist'. Gramsci was well acquainted with Mosca's and Pareto's sociology of elites, but it is possible that, on this issue, he drew a greater inspiration from Michels (1911), a sociologist of political parties who was able to put to good use his experience in the German Social Democracy and his knowledge of Marx's thought.

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