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Marx, Justice, and The Dialectic Method

PHILIP J. KAIN

AN INTERESTING CONTROVERSY has recently been provoked by Allen Wood. He argues that capitalism, for Marx, "cannot be faulted as far as justice is concerned." For Marx, the concept of justice belonging to any society is rooted in, grows out of, and expresses that particular society's mode of production. Justice is not a standard by which human reason in the abstract measures actions or institutions—there is no eternal, unchanging norm of justice. Each social epoch gives rise to its own standard; each generally lives up to it; and each must be measured by this standard alone. Thus, in Wood's view, capitalism is perfectly just for Marx.¹

Nor does Wood think that the capitalist's appropriation of surplus value is taken to be unjust by Marx. In capitalist society, the worker is generally paid the full value of his or her labor power. The value of labor power is determined, like the value of any other commodity, by the amount of labor time required for its production, here, what it takes to keep the laborer alive and working. The exchange between capitalist and worker is assumed to be an exchange of equivalents and, as Wood says, is, in Marx's opinion, "no injustice at all" to the worker. It is true that the laborer is not paid the value of the product which is produced—a value which would be higher than the value of the worker's labor power. The difference between these two sums is appropriated by the capitalist and is the source of surplus value. But in capitalist society, according to Wood, the worker is not due this extra sum. The capitalist purchases labor power from the worker, not finished products. The exchange between worker and capitalist is thus an exchange of

¹ A. W. Wood, "The Marxian Critique of Justice" (hereafter "Critique") in *Marx, Justice, and History: A "Philosophy and Public Affairs" Reader* (hereafter *MJH*), ed. M. Cohen, T. Nagel, and T. Scanlon (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 3, 13, 15–16. A. W. Wood, "Marx on Right and Justice: A Reply to Husami" (hereafter "Reply") in *MJH*, 107–109.

equivalents, and according to Wood it is a just transaction, both for capitalism and for Marx.²

It follows from all of this, for Wood, that one cannot condemn a society as unjust by using the standards of a later or different society. Thus, in Wood's opinion, slavery, for Marx, must be accepted as perfectly just in the context of ancient society despite the fact that it would be unjust in a capitalist or socialist society. So also, capitalism must be accepted as just despite the fact that socialist society would have a very different standard of justice. Socialist society would not be able to condemn capitalism as unjust because its standards would not be rationally applicable to capitalism.³ There are no transcultural or transhistorical norms of justice.

Wood's views have been rejected by other writers, among them, Husami. The latter cites many passages where Marx, if he does not actually say that capitalism is unjust, certainly employs the sort of language typically used in moral condemnation. Husami also claims that Wood overlooks a crucial matter. Husami agrees that the moral standards of any epoch are, as Wood holds, determined by the given mode of production, but they are also, and Wood does not see this, determined by class structure, i.e., by the conditions, consciousness, and interests of particular classes. Thus, while capitalism will be just for the capitalist class by capitalist standards, it will be unjust for the proletariat by proletarian standards.⁴

It is also the case, for Husami, that from the proletarian perspective the capitalist's appropriation of surplus value is unjust. Moreover, Husami finds no evidence to suggest that it is illegitimate, in Marx's view, to judge an earlier or different society by an independent moral standard. In fact, he thinks that we can find Marx doing so.⁵

The disagreement between Wood and Husami, on the surface at least, appears direct, straightforward, and clear cut. It seems that we must simply decide which view is correct. In reality, however, the matter is not so simple. In some respects both writers are correct; in other respects both are wrong. But more importantly, neither sees the full picture. Each is attacking the issue one-sidedly and peripherally.

2 "Critique," 19–22. Also see *Capital* (hereafter *C*), ed. F. Engels (New York: International, 1967), I: 193–94 and for the German see *Marx Engels Werke* (hereafter *MEW*) (Berlin: Dietz, 1971ff.), 23: 208.

3 "Critique," 18–19. "Reply," 131–32. Brenkert also holds this view at least as far as justice is concerned; see G. G. Brenkert, "Freedom and Private Property in Marx," in *MJH*, 80–105.

4 Z. I. Husami, "Marx on Distributive Justice," in *MJH*, 43ff., 47–50. G. Young also opposes Wood's views. See "Doing Marx Justice," *Marx and Morality*, ed. K. Nielsen and S. C. Patten, *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, Supplementary Volume VII (1981), 251–68.

5 Husami, 49–51, 53–54, 59, 66ff.

In the "Notes on Adolph Wagner," Marx writes:

In fact, in my presentation, profit is not 'merely a deduction or "robbery" on the labourer.' On the contrary, I present the capitalist as the necessary functionary of capitalist production and show very extensively that he does not only 'deduct' or 'rob,' but forces the production of surplus value, therefore the deducting only helps to produce; furthermore, I show in detail that even if in the exchange of commodities only equivalents were exchanged, the capitalist—as soon as he pays the labourer the real value of his labour-power—would secure with full rights, i.e. the rights corresponding to that mode of production, surplus value. But all of this does not make 'profit' into a 'constitutive' element of value, but only proves that in the value not 'constituted' by the labour of the capitalist, there is a portion which he can appropriate 'legally,' i.e. without infringing the rights corresponding to commodity exchange.

When Wood comments on this passage, he makes a great deal out of Marx's claim that the capitalist appropriates surplus value with full rights, and he tries to argue away the parts of the passage in which Marx also claims that it is a robbery. On the other hand, when Husami discusses this passage he focuses on the claim that this appropriation is robbery, but discounts the claim that it is also fully in accord with right.⁶ I can see no way around it. In this passage Marx says *both* that the capitalist robs and that he acts in accordance with right. The capitalist is acting both justly and unjustly in the same act. It is not legitimate to dismiss one or the other side of this apparent contradiction. Our task will be much more difficult than that. To understand and explain this contradiction and to unravel the dispute between Wood and Husami, we must begin to understand the method which Marx employs in his later writings for the study of political economy, something which Wood and Husami have not done. A correct understanding of this method, which is outlined for the first time in the Introduction to the *Grundrisse* and which in *Capital* Marx calls his "dialectic method,"⁷ will go a long way toward helping us to understand the ethical views to be found in Marx's later writings.

Marx's method in the *Grundrisse* does not begin, as it did in the *German Ideology*, by tracing the historical development of production through its different historical stages, nor does it even begin by selecting a specific

6 "Notes on Adolph Wagner," in *Texts on Method*, trans. T. Carver (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1975), 186 and *MEW*, 19: 359–60. "Reply," 115–18. Husami, 76–77.

7 *G*, I, 19 and *MEW*, 23: 27.

epoch which it then studies in a straightforward historical fashion. Instead, it begins by isolating—sifting out by comparison and analysis—certain abstract and general categories that are more or less common to all epochs of production. It does not begin historically; it begins conceptually. In each particular epoch, it is true, these general characteristics or categories, Marx says, “split into different determinations.” The task is certainly not to focus on the common characteristics as eternal laws independent of history, but rather to see how these general characteristics are determined differently in different periods. The point is to distinguish the general from the specific. For example, Marx says that “all production is appropriation of nature on the part of an individual within and through a specific form of society.” However, he then goes on to tell us that in one epoch this appropriation can take the form of communal property and in another the form of private property.⁸

Traditional political economy did not begin in this way. It began straightaway by studying the real and the concrete—the actual historical period. From there it had to move analytically to simple categories or abstract general relations. Only at that point could what Marx calls the scientifically correct method begin. The correct method starts with these simple concepts, works out the relationships that exist between them in modern society, and only then works back toward an understanding of the concrete. At this point it is able to grasp the concrete as a “rich totality of many determinations and relations.” At the start, all that was possible was a vague and chaotic conception of the whole. The concrete, for Marx, is the organized and articulated concentration of many determinations and relations—it is not given at the start *for thought*, but is the outcome of a process of comparison, analysis, and investigation. Marx admits that the actual concrete is the starting point for real historical development as well as for observation, but we can only grasp it at the start as a vague and chaotic conception. For science, the concrete is a *result*. The concrete-for-thought must be constructed or reproduced. Only then do we achieve through analysis a clear and scientific understanding of the concrete. Marx is very careful to point out, however, that the method of moving from abstract general categories to the concrete is merely the way in which our thought grasps the concrete. It is by no means the way in which the concrete is actually produced, as was the case for Hegel.⁹

As we have said these general categories common to more or less all epochs of production are determined differently in particular epochs. The categories are transformed historically. In each epoch, Marx says, a particu-

8 *Grundrisse* (hereafter G), trans. M. Nicolaus (London: Allen Lane, 1973), 85–88, 776; for the German see *Grundrisse der Kritik der politischen Ökonomie* (hereafter GKPO) (Frankfurt: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, n.d.), 7–10, 662.

9 G, 100–102 and GKPO, 21–22.

lar form of production predominates. It assigns rank and influence to the other elements. It is "a general illumination which bathes all the other colours and modifies their particularity." Each category is stamped and moulded by the particular structure of the period because the economic reality which the category expresses has been transformed in each period. The context of interconnected relations is changed by the development which the particular form of production undergoes.¹⁰ These categories develop historically in two important ways. They become more abstract or general and they become increasingly subordinate to a complex economic structure.

In earlier less developed economies, the main categories stand out in their simplicity and express dominant relations. In more highly developed societies, the category expresses subordinate relations of a more developed and complex whole. Compare, for example, money in the form of cattle or precious metals in early history to credit or interest in modern society. Again, in early history, an individual or clan can simply *possess* land or goods. Only in more developed societies do individuals hold *property*, and this involves complex juridical relations determined by and subordinate to a complex economic structure. Thus, a category can stand out, predominate, and express dominant relations of a less developed economy or it can express the subordinate relations of a more developed one.¹¹

Categories also become more abstract as history progresses. The best example of this is labor. The Physiocrats finally identified labor as the creator of all wealth. But only a particular form of labor, agricultural labor, was taken to be the creator of all wealth. Later, Adam Smith identified labor in general—not a particular form of labor, but all forms of labor—as the creator of wealth. It was only possible for Smith to make this advance, Marx thinks, in a society where no specific form of labor was any longer predominant—in a developed capitalist economy where individuals transfer easily from one form of labor to another and where the individual is relatively indifferent to the specific form of labor. The most general abstractions arise only in a complex society "where one thing appears common to many, to all. Then it ceases to be thinkable in a particular form alone." Abstract labor is not merely a product of abstract thought. Labor in reality has become abstract—labor in general creates wealth and labor is no longer linked to a specific form.¹²

Also, Marx holds that the development of exchange value to its abstract

¹⁰ G, 107 also 776 and GKPO, 27, 662.

¹¹ G, 102 and GKPO, 22-23.

¹² G, 104 and GKPO, 24-25.

purity and generality presupposes a mode of production in which the individual product is no longer produced directly to satisfy a particular need of the producer. Exchange value develops only in a complex market economy where products are produced for exchange, thus, where the producer becomes increasingly indifferent to what particular sort of thing is produced and is only concerned with the exchange value to be gotten through the sale of the product.¹³

We can thus see that abstract categories, with which the scientifically correct method must begin, can only achieve their higher development, reach higher abstraction, in highly developed and complex societies which arise relatively late in history.¹⁴ In some cases, it is not even possible to grasp a category earlier in history. For example, Marx points to Aristotle, who argued that exchange "cannot take place without equality and equality not without commensurability. . . . Here, however, he [Aristotle] comes to a stop, and gives up the analysis of the form of value." For Aristotle, it was impossible that "unlike things can be commensurable,—i.e., qualitatively equal. Such an equalisation can only be something foreign to their nature."¹⁵ Why was Aristotle unable to grasp the category of value? Why was he unable to see that different commodities can be equal to each other in value if they both required equal amounts of labor for their production? Marx says, there was "an important fact which prevented Aristotle from seeing that, to attribute value to commodities, is merely a mode of expressing all labour as equal human labour, and consequently as labour of equal quality. Greek society was founded on slavery. . . . The secret of the expression of value, namely, that all kinds of labour are equal and equivalent . . . cannot be deciphered until the notion of human equality has already acquired the fixity of a popular prejudice."¹⁶

Thus, the scientifically correct method must be able to start with highly developed abstract categories in order to work out the interconnections between them and thus to understand modern society, and also, as we see in Marx's discussion of Aristotle's attempt to understand the concept of value, so that the method can come to understand past societies in a way in which at times they could not understand themselves. For Marx,

Bourgeois society is the most developed and the most complex historic organization of production. The categories which express its relations, the comprehension of its structure, thereby, also allows insights into the structure and relations of production of all vanished social formations out of whose ruins and elements it built itself up,

¹³ G, 251–52 and GKPO, 163–64.

¹⁴ G, 103 and GKPO, 23–24.

¹⁵ C, 1: 59–60 and MEW, 23: 73–74. Also see Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1133b.

¹⁶ Ibid.

whose partly still unconquered remnants are carried along within it, whose mere nuances have developed explicit significance within it, etc. Human anatomy contains a key to the anatomy of the ape. The intimations of higher development among the subordinate animal species, however, can be understood only after the higher development is already known. The bourgeois economy thus supplies the key to the ancient, etc.

Just as Cuvier could reconstruct the entire anatomy of a particular animal from one of its bones, since he knew the higher fully developed structure of the species,¹⁷ or just as "relics of bygone instruments of labour possess the same importance for the investigation of extinct economic forms of society as do fossil bones for the determination of extinct species of animals,"¹⁸ so given an understanding of modern categories and their interconnections we can begin to understand past societies.

An understanding of categories and their interconnection in modern society is necessary in the way that for some contemporary philosophers of science a paradigm is necessary before it becomes possible to empirically study the phenomena under consideration. Moreover, this paradigm or articulated structure of categories makes it possible to understand and illuminate the specific determination of categories in earlier societies. One can see what is missing (as in the case of Aristotle or the Physiocrats discussed above), and one can identify elements which have been modified, transformed, or even inverted.

One must start with the highly developed categories of modern society. One cannot begin by studying the categories which express earlier forms of society and hope to trace their development to modern society. For example, if one begins by studying the feudal period, one will discover that landed property predominates over other forms of production and that they are dependent upon it. Moreover, it will appear that only agricultural labor creates wealth. In capitalism, landed property and agriculture become subordinate forms of production. The relationship becomes inverted. Landed property becomes a branch of capital and industry, and, of course, one finally sees that labor in general creates wealth. Marx also adds that ground rent, derived from landed property, "cannot be understood without capital. But capital can certainly be understood without ground rent." For the scientifically correct method, "it would therefore be unfeasible and wrong to let the economic categories follow one another in the same sequence as that in

¹⁷ *G*, 105, also 776 and *GKPO*, 25-26, 662. Also *C*, 1: 8-9 and *MEW*, 23: 12. For a discussion of Cuvier's method see G. W. F. Hegel, *Hegel's Philosophy of Nature*, trans. J. Petry (London: Allen & Unwin, 1970), 3: 178-84 and for the German see *Sämliche Werke*, ed. H. Glockner (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann, 1965ff.), 9: 674-84.

¹⁸ *C*, 1: 179-80 and *MEW*, 23: 194.

which they were historically decisive. Their sequence is determined rather by their relation to one another in modern bourgeois society, which is precisely the opposite of that which seems to be their natural order or which corresponds to their historical development."¹⁹ Again, Marx says that the historically earlier form of merchant's capital, "is incapable by itself of promoting and explaining the transition from one mode of production to another. Within capitalist production merchant's capital is reduced from its former independent existence to a special phase in the investment of capital. . . . The special social conditions that take shape within the development of

¹⁹ *G*, 107 and *GKPO*, 27–28. As we have seen, Marx's method requires that we begin with the highly developed categories which express our own epoch and that we work up the paradigm which allows us to understand this epoch as well as its past history. The question arises here as to why we should privilege our own epoch and its categories or, in general, why later epochs and their categories should be privileged over earlier ones. Even worse, it would seem to follow that if we accept Marx's method, future epochs and their categories would be privileged over our own. The point here, I think, is that any history must be written from a standpoint. Marx, who wants to understand his own epoch, quite reasonably takes that epoch as his standpoint. Part of explaining it requires that we understand its historical development. There is no teleology here. We are simply looking back in history to explain what made it possible for us to reach our present standpoint. However, it is clear that a good deal depends on what standpoint one adopts. Explaining the way in which different epochs arise will require us to draw and throw into relief different factors in the past to explain how these different epochs arose. Very clearly, if we began from the standpoint, say, of an earlier epoch, then, as Marx himself admits, in looking back to explain how this highpoint was produced, we would pick out and throw into relief very different elements in past history to explain it than we would if we were trying to explain our present standpoint. It would also follow, very clearly, that if at some point in the future we tried to explain our own epoch—our future epoch—we would again pick out and throw into relief very different elements in the past than we would in explaining our present epoch. This would be the case even for those parts of the past which overlapped for these different standpoints. However, I think that Marx would hold that at least this method would remain the same—it would be the correct method at all periods or from all standpoints—though what it would discover would be quite different and would differ relative to the standpoint adopted.

It seems legitimate to say that later epochs and their categories (with some possible exceptions, e.g., a dark age which fell below the level of earlier epochs) would generally be privileged over earlier ones. After all the later epoch would have available to it what earlier epochs had discovered and the later epoch could in explaining itself and indeed in order to explain itself go on to discover new things about the past which had never been seen before or could solve problems which past epochs could not solve (e.g., Aristotle's inability to understand the concept of value). Without a doubt there is a certain amount of relativism implied in this method. Any epoch will be blind to certain things that later epochs can perceive and different epochs will see the past differently, even the same past. Nevertheless, there is a sense in which we can speak plausibly of progress here. Later epochs not only can understand past epochs and the way these past epochs have interpreted both themselves and their past, but later epochs can also see the degree to which the outlooks of these past epochs help or hinder our understanding of our own present, and most importantly later epochs can build upon all of this. It seems to me that we can speak of a certain amount of progress here, I will not say in 'objectivity', but at least in reducing relativism.

merchant's capital are no longer paramount. On the contrary, whenever merchant's capital still predominates we find backward conditions."²⁰

We must also notice that in the *Grundrisse* and *Capital* Marx operates with a concept of essence. In *Capital*, Marx tells us that "all science would be superfluous if the outward appearance and the essence of things directly coincided."²¹ He tells us that surface phenomena are quite different from the concealed essence of things. He also says that it is a "paradox that the earth moves around the sun, and that water consists of two highly inflammable gases. Scientific truth is always paradox judged by everyday experience which catches only the delusive appearance of things."²²

One of the many reasons why this distinction between essence and appearance is necessary, is to enable us to understand the category of value. It is quite clear that value is to be considered an essence behind surface appearance. Marx tells us that "market-price of production . . . diverges considerably from . . . market-value. All these phenomena seem to contradict the determination of value by labour-time. . . . Thus everything appears reversed in competition. The final pattern of economic relations as seen on the surface . . . is very much different from, and indeed quite the reverse of, their inner but concealed essential pattern and the conception corresponding to it." And also, "Value . . . does not stalk about with a label describing what it is. It is value, rather, that converts every product into a social hieroglyphic. Later on, we try to decipher the hieroglyphic, to get behind the secret of our own social products. . . ."²³ As we have already seen, Aristotle was unable to discover this hidden essence. That could be accomplished only in a higher more complex society where categories had reached higher levels of development. We must also see that the scientifically correct method seeks this inner essence behind phenomenal appearance. The method does not begin with an empirical study of a historical period—the vague and chaotic surface appearance of the real and concrete. It begins with abstract categories gotten by analysis and it works these categories into an interconnected structure which grasps an essence. Only then does it return to the study of the actual empirical concrete. The first volume of *Capital* begins by studying such abstract categories (e.g., the commodity, value, labor), and, as Marx tells us in the third volume of *Capital*, slowly works back toward the phenomenal surface of society (e.g., to prices, profit, rate of profit).²⁴ Marx tells

²⁰ C, 3: 327 and MEW, 25: 339.

²¹ C, 3: 817, also 209 and MEW, 25: 825, 219.

²² *Value, Price, and Profit* (hereafter VPP), ed. E. M. Aveling (New York: International, 1935), 37 and MEW, 16: 129.

²³ C, 3: 209 and MEW, 25: 219. C, 1: 74 and MEW, 23: 88.

²⁴ C, 1: 8 and MEW, 23: 12. C, 3: 25 and MEW, 25: 33.

us, in *Capital*, that "a scientific analysis . . . is not possible, before we have a conception of the inner nature of capital, just as the apparent motions of the heavenly bodies are not intelligible to any but him, who is acquainted with their real motions, motions which are not directly perceptible by the senses."²⁵

To sum up our findings, we can say that Marx's method involves four principles: (1) One begins not with an empirical and historical study of society, but with abstract categories obtained by analysis. (2) As these categories are transformed through history, they become more abstract and general, and they become increasingly subordinate to a complex economic structure. (3) When one has discovered the interconnection of categories in modern society and worked them into a paradigm, only then does it become possible to gain a clear empirical understanding of modern society and also a clear understanding of past societies. (4) This categorial structure grasps the essence of things behind surface appearance.

2.

So far we have considered Marx's method solely as a method for the study of political economy. However, Marx either tells us or implies that it also applies to religion, mathematics, natural science, and astronomy.²⁶ If we look carefully we can also see that he applies it to ethics. In *Capital*, Marx writes:

But original sin is at work everywhere. As capitalist production, accumulation, and wealth become developed, the capitalist ceases to be the mere incarnation of capital. He has a fellow feeling for his own Adam, and his education gradually enables him to smile at the rage for asceticism, as a mere prejudice of the old-fashioned miser. While the capitalist of the classical type brands individual consumption as a sin

²⁵ C, 1: 316 and MEW, 23: 335. Also C, 3: 48 and MEW, 25: 57-58. Marx's concept of an essence in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* was quite different from what it is in the *Grundrisse* and *Capital*. In the earlier text Marx wanted to derive all appearance from a metaphysical essence and he took existence to be the realization of essence—the form of existence was even caused by the essence (see *Marx-Engels Collected Works* [New York: International, 1975 ff.], 3: 279-81, 284-86, 288-93 and MEW, Erg. I: 520-21, 524-26, 528-33). But in the *Grundrisse* Marx is perfectly clear that discovering the interconnection of categories—grasping the essence—is simply a method, the way our mind works; it has nothing to do with the actual generation of the actual concrete (G, 101 and GKPO, 22). Here essences are not metaphysical entities. They arise out of social processes and, as we shall see, disappear with the disappearance of those processes. Essences, strange as it may sound, are deeper forms of appearance. Categories and their interconnection are, on the one hand, the essence behind surface phenomena which turns a vague and chaotic conception into a clear and coherent scientific understanding, and, on the other hand, are appearances of the real social processes of the actual concrete which can change or disappear as these social processes are historically transformed. For a fuller discussion of this rather complex matter, see my "Marx's Dialectic Method," *History and Theory*, 19 (1980): 294-312.

²⁶ G, 106, 460-61 and GKPO, 26, 364-65. VPP, 37 and MEW, 16: 129. C, 3: 817 and MEW, 25: 825. C, 1: 316 and MEW, 23: 335.

against his function and as "abstinence" from accumulating, the modernized capitalist is capable of looking upon accumulation as "abstinence" from pleasure. . . . At the historical dawn of capitalist production—and every capitalist upstart has personally to go through this historical stage—avarice, and desire to get rich, are the ruling passions. But the progress of capitalist production not only creates a world of delights; it lays open, in speculation and the credit system, a thousand sources of sudden enrichment. When a certain stage of development has been reached, a conventional degree of prodigality, which is also an exhibition of wealth, and consequently a source of credit, becomes a business necessity to the "unfortunate" capitalist. Moreover the capitalist gets rich, not like the miser, in proportion to his personal labour and restricted consumption, but at the same rate as he squeezes out of the labour-power of others, and enforces on the labourer abstinence from all life's enjoyments.²⁷

If we look closely, we can see Marx employing his method here. To make this clearer, let us recall something from the "Comments on James Mill" of 1844. There, Marx claimed that the credit system perverted virtue. For example, trustworthiness, rather than standing out as a value in its own right and as an end-in-itself, became subordinate to the credit system. It became a means to get credit or a guarantee that loans would be repaid.²⁸ So also here in *Capital*, the original virtue of abstinence gives way to prodigality as capitalism develops. Moreover, this transformation is produced by the credit system. The display of wealth becomes a business necessity—it insures good credit. Behavior becomes increasingly subordinate to and is transformed by complex economic processes. Virtues no longer stand out as accomplishments of the individual. Rather, the individual's behavior is regulated in accordance with necessities imposed by a complex state of affairs. Furthermore, the capitalist's desire for wealth is no longer realized through his own particular and personal effort, but through a complex and abstract process of squeezing wealth out of the labor power of others.

If we look closely at certain categories connected with morality—the categories of equality and freedom—we can get an even better view of Marx's method at work. We can see that these categories are transformed in different periods of production. They become more abstract and increasingly subordinate to a complex social structure. Marx says: "Equality and freedom as developed to this extent are exactly the opposite of the freedom and equality in the world of antiquity, where developed exchange value was not their basis, but where, rather, the development of that basis destroyed them. Equality and freedom presuppose relations of production as yet unrealized in the ancient world and in the Middle Ages." Equality and freedom are produced as individuals become subordinate to and determined by the com-

²⁷ C, 1: 593–94 and MEW, 23: 619–20.

²⁸ "Comments on James Mill," in *Marx Engels Collected Works* (New York: International, 1975ff.), 3: 214–15 and MEW, Erg. I, 448–49.

plex economic structure of the market. With the development of capitalist exchange and exchange value, all buyers and sellers meet freely in the marketplace as equals.²⁹ This relationship is abstract in two different senses. It is abstract in the sense of being universal or general—all individuals meet as free equals in the marketplace. It is also abstract in the sense that capitalism abstracts from all characteristics of individuals except their equality and freedom in the marketplace. In other respects they may not at all be equal and free.

Capitalist equality is limited and imperfect. Moreover, it will not explain the higher development of equality to be found in socialist society. For Marx, as we recall, the categories of one stage will neither explain nor produce the development of a higher stage. Marx criticizes socialists like Proudhon who seek to realize the sort of equality and freedom which exist as ideals in capitalist society but which they think have merely been perverted in practice, "The proper reply to them is: that exchange value or, more precisely, the money system is in fact the system of equality and freedom, and that the disturbances which they encounter in the further development of the system are disturbances inherent in it, are merely the realization of equality and freedom which prove to be inequality and unfreedom."³⁰ For example, Marx rejects the view that it is possible to realize an equality of wages within capitalist society:

Upon the basis of the wages system the value of labouring power is settled like that of every other commodity; and as different kinds of labouring power have different values . . . they must fetch different prices in the labour market. To clamour for equal or even equitable retribution on the basis of the wages system is the same as to clamour for freedom on the basis of the slavery system.³¹

For Marx, we cannot use a capitalist notion of equality to explain or promote a higher form of equality. However, in the first stage of communist society, the principle of equal right is finally achieved without principle and practice being at loggerheads. An equality of wages is finally achieved at least in the sense that what individuals draw from the social stock of means of consumption is in equal proportion to the labor time which the individuals contribute.³²

However, this equal right will still be, Marx thinks, a right of inequality. Given individuals with unequal endowment and unequal productive capacity, inequality will result.

²⁹ *G*, 245–46 and *GKPO*, 156–57. *C*, 1: 168 and *MEW*, 23: 182.

³⁰ *G*, 248–49 and *GKPO*, 160.

³¹ *VPP*, 39 and *MEW*, 16: 131–32.

³² "Critique of the Gotha Program" (hereafter "Gotha"), in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2d edition, ed. R. C. Tucker (New York: Norton, 1972), 530 and *MEW*, 19: 20.

Right by its very nature can consist only in the application of an equal standard; but unequal individuals (and they would not be different individuals if they were not unequal) are measurable only by an equal standard in so far as they are brought under an equal point of view, are taken from one definite side only, for instance, in the present case are regarded only as workers and nothing more is seen in them, everything else being ignored. Further, one worker is married, another not; one has more children than another, and so on and so forth. . . . To avoid all these defects, right instead of being equal would have to be unequal.³³

Here, equality is still abstract—both in the sense that it is universal and in the sense that we abstract from all characteristics of the individual except the fact that the individual is a worker contributing a certain amount of labor time. This latter form of abstraction is finally overcome in the second stage of communist society where goods will be distributed in proportion to the concrete needs of the individual. There the individual will be treated as a concrete being, not an abstraction.

However, in the second stage of communist society, it might seem that equality is done away with. This society will operate on the principle, "From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs!" Brenkert argues that here Marx leaves behind the principle of equal right because, as Marx says, "Right by its very nature can consist only in the application of an equal standard." Since the principle of "to each according to his needs" is not a principle of equality, Marx abandons equal rights. Wood also makes a similar point.³⁴ I cannot agree with Brenkert and Wood here. It seems to me that the second stage of communism embodies a transformed concept of equality. Aristotle, for example, distinguished between arithmetic and geometric equality. Arithmetical equality requires that individuals receive strictly equal shares. The way A is treated is simply the same as the way B is treated. Geometrical equality only requires equal proportionality as when A is to B as X is to Y. Individuals of greater worth are due more, but equally in proportion to their worth. So the share of A is to the share of B as X is to Y, where X and Y are qualities of, respectively, A and B. This, it seems to me, is the principle Marx is adopting for the second stage of communism. However, for Marx, it is not a person's class, status, wealth, or even virtue which determines the amount due them, but simply their needs.

Thus, in the second stage of communist society, the bourgeois form of equal right will be transcended. Marx also speaks of this concept of equal right as being among "ideas which in a certain period had some meaning but

³³ "Gotha," 530–31 and *MEW*, 19: 21.

³⁴ *Ibid.* Brenkert, 91. "Reply," 131.

have now become obsolete verbal rubbish."³⁵ Thus, it is clear that this general concept is determined differently in different periods and that the concept becomes more abstract, in the sense of being applicable in a more universal way, as it approaches communist society. However, it finally ceases to be abstract in the sense that we consider only one aspect of the individual in abstraction from the others. Equality moves from being an abstract universal to being a concrete universal as it approaches communist society—just as the method moves from the consideration of abstract categories to a grasp of the concrete.

Marx also discusses justice. He writes:

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 willful 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.³⁶

It is also clear that as material conditions develop, conceptions of justice are transformed in the same way as with other categories. In modern society, for Marx, justice becomes increasingly determined by and subordinate to abstract social processes. Marx tells us that in feudal society the difference between necessary labor for which the worker was paid and surplus labor for which the worker was not paid stood out clearly and visibly, "the labour of

35 "Gotha," 531 and *MEW*, 19: 21–22. It may seem that when Marx rejects equal right he is rejecting all forms of equality, but I do not think this is the case. Consider the following passage: "Thus, what all this wisdom comes down to is the attempt to stick fast at the simplest economic relations, which conceived by themselves, are pure abstractions. . . . What this reveals . . . is the foolishness of those socialists (namely the French, who want to depict socialism as the realization of the ideals of bourgeois society articulated by the French Revolution) who demonstrate that exchange and exchange value etc. are originally (in time) or essentially (in their adequate form) a system of universal freedom and equality, but that they have been perverted by money, capital, etc." He goes on to say that, as capitalism develops, this equality and freedom turn into inequality and unfreedom (*G*, 248–49 and *GKPO*, 169). What Marx objects to here is that these socialists fasten upon general abstractions without paying attention to how they are historically transformed and determined in different periods. So also, I think, when Marx speaks of equal right as being among "ideas which in a certain period had some meaning but have now become obsolete verbal rubbish" his objection again is to fastening upon moral categories which in the past had some meaning but which have now been transformed and have lost that meaning. Marx objects to fixing upon such categories as general unchanging abstractions and taking them as ideals capable of being realized in (or of promoting) a higher form of society. To reject an outmoded concept of equal right on these grounds does not in any way suggest that he would reject a transformed concept of equality—geometrical equality.

36 *C*, 3: 339–40, also 385–86 and *MEW*, 25: 351–52, 398–99.

the worker for himself, and his compulsory labour for his lord, differ in space and time in the clearest possible way." The laborer may even perform the work on two distinct plots of ground, one his own and the other his lord's, or he may perform entirely different sorts of labor for himself and for his lord. Such a clear distinction is not visible in capitalist society. The worker simply labors for a certain number of hours and is paid for a day's work. The difference between necessary labor which is paid and surplus labor which is not is unclear. The worker appears to be paid simply for the whole day's labor. This appearance "forms the basis of all juridical notions of both labourer and capitalist. . . . The exchange between capital and labour at first presents itself to the mind in the same guise as the buying and selling of all other commodities. The buyer gives a certain sum of money, the seller an article of nature different from money. The jurist's consciousness recognizes this, at most, as a material difference. . . ." ³⁷ The juridical consciousness abstracts from all relations except those between buyer and seller, and this forms the basis for all juridical notions—which thus would include the notion of justice. Thus, under capitalism, the concept of justice as free exchange of equivalents comes to be determined by and subordinate to complex, obscure, and abstract social processes.

We have seen that Marx's treatment of these categories follows the method outlined in the *Grundrisse*, at least in the sense that these categories undergo development and transformation through history, and that, at least up to capitalist society, they become increasingly abstract and subordinate to complex social processes. Moreover, it is also clear that Marx has changed his mind on an important issue. In the *Communist Manifesto*, he registered the objection of a hypothetical bourgeois, " 'Undoubtedly,' it will be said, 'religious, moral, philosophical and juridical ideas have been modified in the course of historical development.' But religion, morality, philosophy, political science, and law constantly survived this change." Marx then went on to reject this claim and to hold that such religious, moral, and legal notions would disappear in communist society. ³⁸ It is now clear that Marx no longer completely rejects the claim made in this quotation. Certainly he still thinks that religion will disappear, but he does not think that moral and juridical ideas will. His method tries to understand the transformation of concepts such as freedom, equality, and justice; he works out a theory of their transformation; and he holds that these concepts will be fully realized in communist society.

It is also clear that Marx applies the methodological principle of distin-

³⁷ C, 1: 539–40 and MEW, 23: 562–63.

³⁸ *Communist Manifesto*, in MECW, 6: 504 and MEW, 4: 480.

guishing between surface phenomena and inner essence to his discussion of equality and freedom. In bourgeois society, these categories belong to the realm of surface phenomena, "This simple circulation, considered by itself—and it is the surface of bourgeois society, obliterating the deeper operations from which it arises—reveals no difference between objects of exchange, except formal and temporary ones. This is the realm of freedom, equality, and of property based on labour."³⁹ Moreover, this liberty and equality, which appear as surface phenomena, disappear at the level of essence. "In present bourgeois society as a whole, the positing of prices and their circulation etc. appears as a surface process, beneath which, however, in the depths, entirely different processes go on, in which this apparent individual equality and liberty disappear." This equality and freedom prove to be inequality and unfreedom.⁴⁰

We must also notice that the same distinction applies to the capitalist's appropriation of surplus value. Marx says: "The owner of the money has paid the value of a day's labour-power; his, therefore, is the use of it for a day; a day's labour belongs to him. The circumstance, that, on the one hand the daily sustenance of labour-power costs only half a day's labour, while on the other hand the very same labour-power can work during the whole day, that consequently the value which its use during the day creates, is double what he pays for that use is, without doubt, a piece of good luck for the buyer, but by no means an injury [*Unrecht*] to the seller."⁴¹ It is not an injury or an injustice to the seller because the seller has received the value of his or her labor power. The exchange was an exchange of equivalents. Generally speaking, for Marx, a transaction is just in capitalist society if it is an exchange of equivalents and if the transaction was entered into freely. Equality and freedom amount to justice.⁴²

But when Marx says that this exchange involves no injustice (*Unrecht*) to the seller, we must ask if, like equality and freedom, this is only so at the level of surface appearance. Marx tells us that "The wage-form . . . extinguishes every trace of the division of the working-day into necessary and surplus labour, into paid and unpaid labour. All labour *appears* as paid labour . . . the unrequited labour of the wage-labourer" is concealed.⁴³ Thus, the appearance is that the worker is simply paid the value of a day's labor

39 "Marx to Engels on 2 April 1858," in *Marx Engels Selected Correspondence*, ed. S. Ryazanskaya (Moscow: Progress, 1955), 107 and *MEW*, 29: 317. Also *C*, 1: 540 and *MEW*, 23: 562.

40 *G*, 247–49 and *GKPO*, 159–60.

41 *C*, 1: 193–94 and *MEW*, 23: 208.

42 This is implied at *G*, 241 and *GKPO*, 153. Also *VVP*, 39–40 and *MEW*, 16: 131–32. Also, compare *C*, 1: 84, 84n with 168–69; for the German, *MEW*, 23: 99, 99n, 182–83.

43 *C*, 1: 539–40 (my emphasis) and *MEW*, 23: 562.

and that the capitalist gains profit by selling the product of a day's labor on the market for more than it cost to produce it. The reality, however, is that surplus value is derived, not in circulation, not in the market, but in production. By distinguishing between labor (or a day's labor) and labor power, we see that the capitalist pays the value of labor power in the form of a wage, but pockets the difference between it and the value of the product produced by a day's labor and sold on the market. The worker is paid for one part of the labor and is not paid for the other part. It is true that the capitalist's profit is realized in circulation in the sense that the capitalist must successfully sell the product to realize a profit, but nevertheless, for Marx, this profit is dependent upon the surplus value produced by the unpaid surplus labor of the worker in production. Thus, Marx says, "Surplus-value and rate of surplus value, are, relatively, the invisible and unknown essence that wants investigating, while rate of profit and therefore the appearance of surplus-value in the form of profit are revealed on the surface of the phenomena. . . . Although the excess value of a commodity over its cost-price is shaped in the immediate process of production, it is realized only in the process of circulation, and appears all the more readily to have arisen from the process of circulation. . . ."44

When Marx argues that the contract between the capitalist and the worker was not an *Unrecht* to the latter, he can argue this because the contract was entered into 'freely' and it involved an exchange of equivalents. All other aspects of this relationship are ignored in capitalist society.⁴⁵ It is clear then that since capitalist equality and freedom are surface phenomena, and since equality and freedom in exchange amount to justice, that the right or justice on the side of the capitalist also belongs to the realm of surface phenomena. Marx himself says, "we may understand the decisive importance of the transformation of value and price of labour-power into the form of wages, or into the value and price of labour itself. This phenomenal form, which makes the actual relation invisible, and, indeed, shows the direct opposite of that relation, forms the basis of all juridical notions of both labourer and capitalist, of all the mystifications of the capitalist mode of production, of all its illusions as to liberty."⁴⁶ If all the juridical notions of capitalist society are phenomenal forms, so then is its conception of justice. And even more clearly, Marx says, "Living labour capacity belongs to itself, and has disposition over the expenditure of its forces, through exchange. Both sides confront each other as persons. Formally, their relation has the

44 C, 3: 43; also 209 and MEW, 25: 53, 219. Also G, 255 and GKPO, 166.

45 See G, 251 and GKPO, 163.

46 C, 1: 540 and MEW, 23: 562.

equality and freedom of exchange as such. As far as concerns the legal relation, the fact that this form is a mere semblance, and a deceptive semblance, appears as an external matter. What the free worker sells is always nothing more than a specific, particular measure of force-expenditure."⁴⁷ And in general, "In present bourgeois society as a whole, this positing of prices and their circulation etc. appears as the surface process, beneath which, however, in the depths, entirely different processes go on, in which this apparent individual equality and liberty disappear."⁴⁸

We can now see that the passage from the "Notes on Adolph Wagner," where Marx said that the exchange between capitalist and worker was both a robbery and also fully in accord with right, means that this exchange accords with right at the phenomenal level of surface appearance and that it is robbery in essence.⁴⁹

It should now be clear that when Wood argues that capitalism is not unjust, that the exchange between the worker and the capitalist, is not unjust, and when he goes on to marshal evidence to show that this in fact is Marx's view, Wood is perfectly correct, though he only sees the surface half of the issue. Wood does not at all recognize that capitalism is just for Marx only at the level of surface appearance. Since Wood does not see or cannot accept the difference between essence and appearance, he does not see that, for Marx, capitalism is also unjust, and is so in essence.

On the other hand, when Husami argues that, for Marx, capitalism is unjust,⁵⁰ Husami is also perfectly correct. There is, however, a certain ambiguity in Husami's article. At times he tries to discount Wood's claim that, for Marx, capitalism is just, and at certain points he even argues that in some of the passages where Marx actually claims that capitalism is just, Marx is speaking satirically or ironically. Husami's tendency here would seem to be that capitalism is *simply* unjust. Nevertheless, at other times, Husami is willing to admit that capitalism appears just to capitalists though it will not appear so to the proletariat. Here, Husami is closer to the truth than Wood is. However, Husami's view is that differences in class perspective are what allow capitalism to appear both just and unjust. Husami does not seem to grasp the significance of Marx's method, and especially the significance of Marx's distinction between essence and appearance, for the analysis of moral categories.⁵¹

47 G, 464, also 457-58 and GKPO, 368, 361-62.

48 G, 247 and GKPO, 159.

49 "Notes on Wagner," 186 and MEW, 19: 359-60.

50 Husami, 43, 45.

51 Husami, 44, 47, 63, 67, 77. In this respect, Buchanan comes closer to moving in the right direction; see A. E. Buchanan, *Marx and Justice* (Totowa, New Jersey: Rowman & Littlefield, 1982), 54.

Next, we must attend to Wood's claim that for Marx it would be impossible to condemn as unjust the institutions of an earlier society because the only standards by which a society can legitimately be judged are those which arise from its own mode of production. Thus, "the holding of slaves by the ancients would be a just practice; and the claim that ancient slavery was unjust, whether it is made by contemporaries of the institution or by modern men reading about it in history books, would simply be wrong." In the same way, it would be impossible to condemn capitalism on the basis of a socialist standard of justice, "any such standard would not be rationally applicable to capitalism at all, any such condemnations would be mistaken, confused, and without foundation."⁵² Wood is simply wrong here. He has not studied the method which Marx outlined in the *Grundrisse*.

For Marx, we have seen, there are categories which all stages of production have in common. These characteristics develop and are determined differently in different historical periods. If these categories, once they have become highly developed, are worked into a paradigm which grasps and expresses modern society, the same paradigm will also allow insight into earlier societies just as human anatomy contains a key to the anatomy of the ape. There will be a difference between earlier and later categories—partly unconquered remnants will have been carried along into the modern category and nuances in the earlier categories will have developed explicitly—but since the modern category will be a transformation of the old, it can give us insight into the older category.⁵³ It seems to me that this aspect of the method also applies to ethics. In fact, we can actually find passages where Marx does so apply it and where Marx does specifically what Wood prohibits. He judges capitalist society by socialist standards. In the following passage, we see a very good example of how Marx's method allows him both to explain the development of social institutions and to judge them morally:

It was not, however, the misuse of parental authority that created the capitalistic exploitation, whether direct or indirect, of children's labour; but, on the contrary, it was the capitalist mode of exploitation which, by sweeping away the economic basis of parental authority, made its exercise degenerate into a mischievous misuse of power. However terrible and disgusting the dissolution, under the capitalist system, of the old family ties may appear, nevertheless, modern industry, by assigning as it does an important part in the process of production, outside the domestic sphere, to women, to young persons, and to children of both sexes, creates a new economic foundation for a higher form of the family and of the relations between the sexes. It is, of course, just as absurd to hold the Teutonic-Christian form of the family to be abso-

⁵² "Critique," 18–19, 29. Also "Reply," 108–109, 130–31. Brenkert also holds this position; see Brenkert, 89–90.

⁵³ *G*, 105, 776 and *GKPO*, 25–26, 662.

lute and final as it would be to apply that character to the ancient Roman, the ancient Greek, or the Eastern forms, which, moreover, taken together form a series in historical development . . . the fact of the collective working group being composed of individuals of both sexes and all ages, must necessarily under suitable conditions, become a source of humane development; although in its spontaneously developed, brutal, capitalistic form, where the labourer exists for the process of production, and not the process of production for the labourer, that fact is a pestiferous source of corruption and slavery.

Here Marx is comparing the capitalist form of the family to other forms—both earlier forms and a later “higher form of the family.” Moreover, he is measuring, judging, the capitalist form by this higher form, which is certainly the socialist form of the family that capitalism is laying the foundation for. Marx also seems to be doing much the same thing when he says, “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.”⁵⁴

It is true that, though we find some, we do not find many passages in which, from the perspective of a higher socialist morality, Marx condemns as unjust the institutions of earlier societies. I suspect, however, that there are reasons for this that are quite different from the ones that Wood gives. Marx says that to oppose the welfare of the individual to the welfare of the species,

is to assert that the development of the species must be arrested in order to safeguard the welfare of the individual so that, for instance, no war may be waged in which at all events some individuals perish. . . . Apart from the barrenness of such edifying reflections, they reveal a failure to understand the fact that, although at first the development of the capacities of the human species takes place at the cost of the majority of human individuals, and even classes, in the end it breaks through this contradiction and coincides with the development of the individual; the higher development of individuality is thus only achieved by a historical process during which individuals are sacrificed for the interests of the species.⁵⁵

Marx, like Hegel and Kant, thinks that the development of humanity as a whole has proceeded at the expense of individuals.⁵⁶ If this is a true description of what has actually occurred in history, then despite the fact that past societies have been immoral and unjust, can be condemned as such, and have been condemned as such, this immorality and injustice cannot easily be

⁵⁴ C, 1, 489–90 and MEW, 23: 514. C, 3: 776 and MEW, 25: 784.

⁵⁵ *Theories of Surplus Value*, ed. S. Ryazanskaya (Moscow: Progress, 1969), 2: 118 and MEW, 26, pt. II: 111.

⁵⁶ G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (New York: Dover, 1956), 25–27 and *Sämtliche Werke*, 11: 54–57. I. Kant, “Idea for a Universal History,” in *On History*, ed. L. W. Beck (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1957), 13–16 and for the German see *Kant's gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Royal Prussian Academy of Science (Berlin: Reimer, 1910ff.), 8: 19–22.

avoided if the species is to develop. In Marx's view, historical development cannot be stopped, and furthermore, the only real hope for humanity is to reach the end of history where finally the contradiction between the individual and the species will come to an end. Even in the passage concerning the family quoted above, Marx both condemns the dissolution of the family caused by capitalism and at the same time argues that capitalism is laying the foundation for a higher form of the family. Look at the language employed by Marx in this passage, "However terrible and disgusting" the dissolution of the family under capitalism, "*nevertheless*," capitalism creates the "foundation for a higher form of the family."⁵⁷ The dissolution of the family under capitalism is immoral, but it creates the basis of a higher form of the family. Any condemnation of past society must also recognize that that society is laying the foundation of a higher society. If the condemnation of past society implies that it would be best if historical development were to stop, this would make impossible a final end to the conflict—the only way to finally reconcile the individual and the species. One refrains from a simple condemnation of past society not because there are no rational grounds for doing so, as Wood claims, but because doing so can show a lack of realism and a blindness to the moral end of history.

However, it does not follow from this, as Isaiah Berlin claims, that agreement or disagreement with the advance of history determines whether or not a thing is moral.⁵⁸ For Marx, things are moral or immoral independently of whether or not they will retard or hasten historical development. Marx does not argue that the dissolution of the family under capitalism should be considered moral because it is laying the foundation of a higher form of the family. It is laying this foundation; nevertheless, it is immoral. Agreement with history only determines whether or not something is hopeless, not whether or not it is moral.

Thus, when one claims that capitalism is unjust, one cannot mean that capitalism should or could have different standards than the ones which correspond to its mode of production. Nor does it imply that history should or could come to a standstill. Nevertheless, one does not want to be caught having to say that one thing is just for capitalism and another thing is just for socialism so that there is no way to judge the former by the latter's

⁵⁷ C, 1: 489–90 and MEW, 23: 514. It might seem that Marx is smuggling in a form of teleology here, that is, suggesting that history will work toward the goal of creating a higher form of the family. But I do not think this is the case. All Marx says is that the development of capitalism brings about the *economic foundation* for a higher form of the family. In other words, it creates the conditions which will allow, make it possible, for people themselves to change the form of the family in response to the problems they find in the existing form of the family.

⁵⁸ I. Berlin, *Karl Marx: His Life and Environment* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), 154–55.

standards. One wants to be able to say that socialism involves higher standards of justice, ones which capitalism cannot realize or fulfill, but which the historical development of capitalism prepares the ground for. Moreover, the development of this higher standard provides the key to understanding the earlier. It allows us to see the shortcomings of capitalism as well as the way in which it is preparing the ground for a higher form of society.

3.

It is also the case that Wood's views saddle him with peculiar difficulties. It would seem that a socialist party seeking a revolution, if it were to be said to act morally, would have to act in accordance with capitalist morality. On these grounds, it might well be argued that such a party would have no moral right to revolt at all. If, on the other hand, this party chooses not to act in accordance with capitalist standards of morality, then it would seem to be the case, on Wood's view of things, that the actions of this party would simply be immoral. One might then be led to argue that there are not and should not be any moral constraints on the party's actions at all, and Wood comes very close to holding this view himself.⁵⁹ It may be that such thinking goes a long way toward explaining the behavior of some leftist parties. At best, Marx would be put in the position of Kant, who argued that if a better constitution is realized through revolution, it would be wrong to try to overthrow the new constitution and return to the old, but, nevertheless, anyone caught in the act of revolt would justly deserve the punishment received,⁶⁰ a position which Marx clearly did not hold.

Many of those who write on Marx seem to assume, whether they are fully aware of it or not, that Marx is exclusively, or at least primarily, a theorist of revolution. From this assumption, it might seem to follow that everything that Marx says, all areas that he investigates, must in some fairly direct way be connected with the promotion of revolution or the realization of socialism. If not, then something is wrong: either Marx has been misinterpreted or Marx made an error and must be revised. This assumption is especially important with regard to consciousness and it has special significance for ethics. The assumption that everything must be connected with revolution can lead in radically different directions, depending upon whether or not one thinks that consciousness is *capable* of promoting revolution, but in any case it leads to a misreading of Marx. Some theorists, like Lukács and Marcuse, are led to argue that consciousness—including ethics and aesthetics—

59 A. W. Wood, *Karl Marx* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), 141–42.

60 I. Kant, *Perpetual Peace*, in *On History*, 120 and *Kant's gesammelte Schriften*, 8: 372–73.

does promote revolution even if not in a crude and immediate way.⁶¹ Others, like Stanley Moore, think that morality is incapable of promoting social transformation, and argue that when Marx does appeal to morality he violates his own principles of historical materialism.⁶² Wood, too, seems to operate with a similar set of assumptions:

To create a "proletarian morality" or "proletarian concept of justice" by disseminating a set of ideas which working-class agitators find politically advantageous would strike Marx as a shortsighted and self-defeating course for the movement to adopt. It is far safer and more efficacious in the long run to rely simply on the genuine (non-moral) reasons people have for wanting an obsolete and inhuman social system to be overthrown and replaced by a higher form of society; . . . changes in the prevailing standards of right and justice do not cause social revolutions but only accompany them. This, of course, is not to deny that bringing about changes in the moral, legal, and political superstructure of society is for Marx an important subordinate moment of revolutionary practice. But on Marx's theory new standards of right come to be valid because revolutionary changes occur in economic relations; it is not the case that revolutions do occur or should occur because post-revolutionary standards of right are already valid for pre-revolutionary society.⁶³

For Wood, the fact that a higher socialist morality cannot promote revolution is closely connected with the claim that there can be no valid socialist morality until socialism is established and that capitalism cannot be judged by socialist standards.

I cannot accept the widespread assumption that Marx is primarily or exclusively a theorist of revolution, nor can I accept the consequences which this assumption has for morality, namely, that if morality does not promote revolution it is illegitimate to appeal to it. Marx's thought is not limited to being a theory of revolution. It certainly is that, but it is also much more than that. His theory of historical materialism, which was first set out in the *German Ideology*, as well as the revised version of it first outlined in the Introduction to the *Grundrisse*, makes very general claims about the relationship of material conditions to all forms of consciousness—material conditions influence consciousness. This is a general theory which implicitly demands that Marx develop, or at least be able to develop, theories of art, religion, law, psychology, science, morality, and indeed all other forms of consciousness. He must show how these forms of consciousness are influ-

61 G. Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. R. Livingstone (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1971), 2, 19–21, 42, 52–53, 70. H. Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation* (Boston: Beacon, 1969), 37–38; *The Aesthetic Dimension* (Boston: Beacon, 1978), xi–xiii, 1.

62 S. Moore, "Marx and Lenin as Historical Materialists," in *MJH*, 212ff., 232–33. "Gotha," 531 (my emphasis) and *MEW*, 19: 21.

63 "Reply," 132–33. "Critique," 30. Also *Karl Marx*, 126ff.

enced by material conditions. If this cannot be shown, then Marx cannot maintain his doctrine of historical materialism. Moreover, Marx is obliged to develop these theories whether or not the forms of consciousness they describe will serve to promote revolution. If there is some connection between material conditions and consciousness, he must show that connection, and it is not in the least obvious that in all cases these forms of consciousness will promote revolution. Marx denies that religious consciousness will promote revolution. Must psychology? Must art? Must mathematics? I do not think that for Marx ethics is expected to promote revolution. Nevertheless Marx is obliged to have a theory of ethics. He says that the proletariat should "vindicate," not reject, "the simple laws of morals and justice which ought to govern the relations between individuals." In *Capital*, he also says that individuals "may subjectively raise themselves above" their social conditions. He is saying, I think, that they can morally raise themselves above their social conditions. Yet at the same time Marx goes on to say that he does not think the individual can be held "responsible for the relations whose creature he socially remains."⁶⁴ In other words, morality is quite possible and has an important place despite the fact that it alone cannot transform social conditions or promote revolution. There is simply nothing wrong with this unless you hold that historical materialism is only a theory of revolution and that everything must contribute to revolution or lose its legitimacy.

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⁶⁴ *Civil War in France*, in *Writings on the Paris Commune*, ed. H. Draper (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 35 and *MEW*, 17: 3; *C*, 1: 10 and *MEW*, 23: 16. It is even conceivable that a political party could find itself in a position where what is moral is at odds with what social conditions require for the defence or advancement of the class it represents. And it may be the case that this party does what social conditions require rather than what morality demands. But this is no reason to decide, as Berlin and others think Marx does, to call such action moral. Nor is it a reason to decide to call it non-moral, as Wood would have it. It is simply immoral. As we have seen, in his discussion of the family and of the development of the human species, Marx made it quite clear that acting morally, certainly acting in accordance with a higher morality, is not always possible at all stages of history. Yet at the very least such regrettable situations should serve to hasten our work for the development of social conditions that will be compatible with moral action.