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JUSTICE AND CLASS INTERESTS

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1. Marx on Justice

Marx does not criticize capitalist exploitation on the grounds of rights or justice. He bitterly attacks those socialists who do criticize capitalism on such grounds. Marx even holds that the transactions through which capital exploits workers and the distribution relations resulting from this explitation are just.

To see these things is not to advance an *interpretation* of Marx; it is merely to state facts about what Marx's texts consistently say[1]. But the textual facts do *call for* an interpretation of the conception of justice which lies behind such counterintuitive assertions on Marx's part. In earlier writings of mine, I have tried to develop such an interpretation, based on texts such as the following one:

> "The justice of transactions which go on between agents of production rests on the fact that these transactions arise out of the production relations as their natural consequences. [The content of such transactions] is just whenever it corresponds to the mode of production, is adequate to it. It is unjust whenever it contradicts it" (MEW 25: 351—352).[2]

I interpret Marx as holding that the justice of an action, transaction or system of distribution consists in its bearing a certain relation of adequacy, correspondence or functionality to the social mode of production within which it takes place.[3] An action, transaction or system of distribution is just whenever it is functional in relation to that mode of production, unjust whenever it is dysfunctional. Given such a conception of justice, it is no longer surprising that capitalist distribution and the relation between capitalists and workers turn out to be just. For to say that the trans-

actions between capitalist and worker are just is to say no more than that these transactions harmonize with the capitalist mode of production. And this they may do even if (as Marx also asserts) they also involve coercion, oppression and explitation.

I interpret Marx's concept of justice as an attempt to account for the actual extension of the words "just" and "justice" in social life, through the use of his materialist conception of history. When the concept of justice has been historically important and potent, Marx thinks, it has been so on the basis of the prevailing economic relations. Standards of justice prevail because they serve an economic function within the prevailing mode of production. Hence whenever we are correct in calling an act or institution "just", what we are really saying about it is that it serves such a function. It follows that when we say that an act or institution is "just", we need not be giving it any commendation or positive evaluation. Marx seems in fact to have been averse to discussing the merits and defects of capitalism in terms of rights or justice, and his concept of justice coheres well with this attitude.

In earlier writings I have advanced speculations concerning Marx's reasons for treating justice in such a dismissive way.[4] I have noted that Marx shows a consistently hostile attitude toward moral values and conceptions generally, and I have suggested that Marx's treatment of justice might reflect a fundamentally Hegelian conception of moral norms as expressions of a given social order, and specifically as expressive the demands that order makes on individuals in order to insure its survival and smooth functioning. Morality on this view is an essentially conservative institution, and it should not be surprising that moral norms do not serve well as vehicles of revolutionary demands and aspirations. I have suggested that the values in terms of which Marx does criticize capitalism (values such as freedom, human development, community, and material prosperity and security) are basically nonmoral values.

It would be euphemistic to call these suggestions and speculations an "interpretation" of Marx. The most I would claim for them is that they are consistent with what Marx says, and that they extend his explicit views in a way which brings out an underlying coherence among them. I regard as important the threefold distinction between (1) textual facts, (2) interpretations which can be based on the texts and (3) speculative extensions which cohere with the texts. To be sure, it is a distinction which cannot always be drawn sharply. But it is only responsible exegetical practice to keep it in mind. In

relation to Marx especially, I wish interpreters would do this more often. When people argue that Marx "implicitly" condemned capitalism as "unjust", for example, I think the arguments they present, even if they were successful, can seldom be plausibly seen as justifying more than speculative extensions of Marx's views, because the Marxian texts which mention justice explicitly are too consistently against them.

2. Justice and Distributive Principles

One intelligent reaction to my account of Marx's views might be to acknowledge the textual facts, accept the interpretation and even to look favorably on the speculations as accounts of Marx's own ideas, but nevertheless to deny that there is much importance, either theoretically or practically, to Marx's immoralism and his critique of justice. This denial might be based simply on the fact that Marx's views about morality are sufficiently idiosyncratic and sufficiently far removed from the central insights of his social thought that they need not be taken seriously. Marx was, after all, operating with a deliberately reductive conception of justice and (if my speculations are credited) with a conception of morality which assigns to morality an exclusively conservative social function. Few thinkers who today apply the concept of justice to social arrangements are likely to be tempted by this side of Marx, however much they may be drawn to Marxian ideas in other respects. To most of us, Marx's treatment of the concept of justice must surely seem at best artificially narrow, at worst crudely erroneous. For social thinkers of whatever persuasion, the concept of justice is the most natural one to use whenever we are deliberating about how best to set up social arrangements, to distribute the burdens and benefits of social life. It is true that Marx often insisted that it was premature for socialists to develop detailed schemes about such arrangements at the then current stage of development of the proletarian movement. At the same time, however, he clearly believed that rational deliberation about social institutions would be an important part of any free or truly human society. In that sense, he clearly recognized the legitimacy of the questions which philosophers and social theorists raise under the heading of justice, whatever his own treatment of the concept of justice may have been.

I find this reaction, for instance, in some of the work of Robert J. Van der Veen.[5] Van der Veen admits that Marx did not himself

assert that capitalist exploitation is unjust or put forward any standard of justice by which social institutions are to be measured. But Marx's own definition of justice, says Van der Veen, is "a rather narrow one". In a broader sense of "justice", Van der Veen claims that Marx "certainly could be said to have an implicit substantive conception of justice" (Van der Veen, p. 434). He calls this broader conception of justice a "formal" and "technical" one, and ascribes to it three basic properties:

(1) It contains *principles* for the *evaluation* of laws and institutions which are independent of these laws and institutions.
(2) It gives *distributive evaluations*, comparing the outcomes with respect to some distributive variable of human interactions under a given set of laws and institutions to outcomes prescribed by the principles.
(3) The variables distributed may be of any kind, including rights, opportunities, material things, utility, or human capacities (Van der Veen, p. 452).

Van der Veen's purpose is to compare widely divergent views of the good life and the good society, such as those Rawls, Nozick and Marx. He is therefore trying to formulate a concept of justice which is abstract enough to be neutral between such competing visions. The most obvious difference between Van der Veen's concept of justice and Marx's, of course, is that to call something "just" is necessarily to evaluate it positively if we understand "just" in Van der Veen's sense, but not if we understand "just" in Marx's sense.

Marx certainly "evaluated" social institutions. Might it be possible to ascribe a conception of justice (in Van der Veen's sense) to him ? Of course this could not be what Marx himself meant by "justice"; and there is no other word in Marx's vocabulary for it either. Nevertheless, it is inherent in the idea that Marx might have had an "implicit" concept of justice that the concept in question is not one which found expression in Marx's explicit talk about justice.

One possible reason for doubting that Marx has even an "implicit" concept of justice in Van der Veen's sense is that Marx flatly repudiates the "distributive orientation" among his fellow socialists. When we look closer, however, this reason disappears. For (as Van der Veen points out) Marx's attack on the "distributive orientation" is in fact an attack on the orientation to the distribution only of certain specific sorts of entities, such as purchasing power over consumable goods. Though he never says so in these words. Marx does clearly object to the prevailing distribution of such

entities an effective control over the means of production, leisure time, and the opportunity to acquire education and skills. Of course one would look in vain in Marx's writings for anything which could be called a "principle" for distributing such entities. The whole point of looking for an "implicit" concept of justice in Marx, however, is to construct a conception which might have justified the evaluations of social institutions which Marx made. I think we ought to admit that there is nothing in Marx's views which would specifically exclude him from formulating principles of this kind, even though Marx does seem to think that in his own time it is premature for the worker's movement to do so.

3. Justice and Impartiality

Thus far, I have made several concessions to those who wish to ascribe an "implicit" concept of justice to Marx. If they are willing to admit that the status of this concept is that of a speculative extension rather than a textual fact or textually based interpretation, I am willing to concede to them that there is nothing in Marx's texts which explicitly excludes ascribing to him a concept of justice in Van der Veen's abstract and technical sense of the term. But now it is time to stop conceding and to begin raising difficulties for them. The rest of this paper will be devoted to the task of showing that the whole enterprise of reading Marx's critique of capitalism as based on some "implicit principle of justice" can only be carried out in defiance of other important parts of Marxian doctrine. More specifically, I will argue that one cannot consistently carry through such an enterprise unless one is willing to abandon both important parts of Marx's materialist conception of history and the Marxian conception of revolutionary practice based on them.

Van der Veen's conception of justice is deliberately abstract. But it is also "technical" in certain respects which are not obvious, and perhaps not even intended by Van der Veen. For one thing, the positive evaluation we give something when we call it just in Van der Veen's sense is not supposed to be specifically a moral evaluation, as it is when things are commended as just in the usual sense of the term. Closely connected with this is one other way in which Van der Veen's concept of justice is quite different from the ordinary concept of it. Owing to this difference, I think we will see that it is very misleading to say that Marx might have held "implicit" principles of justice on the ground that he might have held principles of

justice in Van der Veen's technical sense.

The reason for this is that more is required for some proposal to be put forward as a "principle of justice" in the usual sense than that it evaluate possible social distributions of some sort of entity. In addition, the principle must be advanced on a certain sort of basis, namely one which is disinterested or impartial as regards the interests of those to whom the principle is supposed to apply. This does not mean that every principle of justice must be egalitarian in content. In fact, it says nothing about the content of principles of justice. Rather, it means that any differential treatment of people's interests (whether equal or unequal) must be justified on the basis of some impartial standard, such as the special desert of individuals or the greatest common good of all concerned. If I put forth a distributive principle with the understanding that it is to be justified in this way, then I may be taken to be putting it forth as a principle of justice. But if I do not put it forth with this understanding, then I am not putting it forth as a principle of justice, whatever I may be doing.

Imagine, for instance, that I propose that all political decisions in the United States be made by an elite consisting of people who have written at least one book on Kant and one book on Marx. Now merely by proposing this, I have not claimed that it would be just. Perhaps I propose it simply because (since I happen to belong to the specified elite) that distribution of power would please me or serve my interests. If that is all I am prepared to say in favor of the proposal, then I may have made a wish or expressed a preference, but I have not proposed a principle of justice at all. Suppose, however, that I put forth this principle on the ground that only those who have written books on these two philosophers are qualified to govern, or that such people alone deserve to hold political power, or that it will be in the common interest if such an elite should govern. These claims may or may not be plausible, but they at once make it plausible to say *of me* that I am proposing my principle as a principle of justice. And the plausibility of the principle itself as a principle of justice would stand or fall with the plausibility of such claims.

Van der Veen seems to be thinking of this point himself when he says that "the formal device of independent principles of justice only makes sense given the wish to judge social issues independently of particular interests" (Van der Veen, p. 452). Taken literally, however, what he says is simply false. As we have just seen, the formal device of setting up principles to evaluate distributions of things is just as useful for expressing personal wishes as it is as for

proposing principles of justice. What Van der Veen *should* have said is rather that this formal device acquires a connection to the concept of *justice* (in the usual sense) only if the principles are advanced on the basis of considerations which are independent of particular interests. Perhaps Van der Veen intended his concept of justice to be understood in this way. That is, perhaps be intended the principles in question not only to be independent of the social institutions to be evaluated, but also to be advanced on grounds whch are independent of any particular interests.

For the remainder of this paper, I will use the words "just" and "justice" not in the Marxian sense of functionality for the prevailing mode of production, but in the sense of Van der Veen's distributive principles of evaluation, with the further proviso that principles of justice are principles which are to be justified on the basis of disinterested or impartial considerations. This usage will fit well with my intention in this paper not to be concerned with the exegesis of Marx on justice, but rather with the project of those who want to formulate "implicit" principles of justice for Marx which are admittedly in defiance of the Marxian texts which talk about justice. My point will be to emphasize that the defiance of these texts is not the only price which must be paid by those who want to interpret or extend Marx's views in such a way.

Earlier I conceded that there is nothing in Marx's texts which prohibits him from formulating his critique of capitalism in accordance with some principle of justice in Van der Veen's technical sense. But once we have added the proviso that a principle of justice must be advanced on impartial considerations, then it is no longer correct to concede this. For it is a fact that Marx refused to evaluate social institutions from an impartial or disinterested standpoint, and regarded the whole enterprise of doing so as ensnared in ideological illusions.

According to the *Communist Manifesto*, the communists "struggle for the achievement of the immediate goals and interests of the working class, but in the present movement they also represent the future of the movement" (MEW 4:492). Marx never proposes to justify the overthrow of capitalism from a disinterested standpoint. He consistently argues for communism solely from the standpoint of the proletariat, and from the standpoint of those classes whose interests in his view coincide with that of the proletariat in this respect (such as the peasantry), or else whose members are in his opinion destined to become proletarians (such as

the petty bourgeoisie) (MEW 4:471).

The interests Marx defends are, to be sure, regarded by him as the interests of the vast majority (MEW 4:472). But he never confuses this with the common interest of all society. Marx knows that there are large groups of people (the bourgeoisie and the landed aristocracy) whose interests are going to be simply ignored or sacrificed by the revolution. And he never attempts to disguise this fact, either from his fellow revolutionaries or from the enemies of the revolution (MEW 4:493–494). Of course someone might regard the sacrifice of some interests as justifiable from an impartial standpoint if the justification could be based on considerations of desert or the common good. But Marx never appeals to considerations of desert in behalf of proletarian interests, and he rejects the very conception of the common good or universal interest as ideological (MEW 3: 46–49, 63, 229). Marx's own concept of justice, which implies no positive evaluation of what is just, also thereby avoids any appeal to disinterestedness or impartiality. Thus Marx's concept of justice is another sign of his utter rejection of such appeals.

4. Historical Materialism and the Class Interests Thesis

This stance is not just a piece of eccentricity on Marx's part. It has its basis in his materialist theory of history. But to see this, we must take a little time to recall the main features of Marxian historical materialism.[6]

Marx views history as divided into epochs, each characterized by a distinct mode of production. The mode of production consists of a set of social relations or economic roles, whose most crucial feature is the fact that these relations assign effective control over the means, process and fruits of production to the occupants of certain roles, excluding the occupants of other roles. These differences between roles are the basis of *class* differences in society.

On the materialist theory, social change comes about because the social powers of production are not static, but change, and on the whole tend to grow. At any given stage of the development of such powers, the employment and further development of the powers of production is facilitated more by some social relations of production than by others. Eventually any given set of social relations will become obsolete in relation to the growth of the productive powers, they will become dysfunctional in relation to their employment or "fetter" their further development. A social

revolution, for Marx, consists in a transformation of the social relations of production which is required by the growth of the powers of production (MEW 13:9).

The mechanism by which the adjustment of social relations to productive powers is carried out on the materialist theory is the *class struggle.* According to the opening words of *The Communist Manifests,* "the history of all previous society is the history of class struggles" (MEW 4:462). We have seen that social relations for Marx divide society into groups distinguished by their degree of control over production. These groups are not directly "classes" in the Marxian sense, but they can become classes as soon as they are organized and represented by a political movement and an ideology which defines and promotes their class interests (MEW 4: 181, 8:198).

The class interests of a given class are based on the common situation of the class's members, and especially its hostile relation to other classes, which arises from the fact that the relations of production assign effective control over production and its fruits to some at the expense of others. The individuals who have this control have an interest in retaining it, and the individuals whe are excluded from it have an interest in wresting it away from those who have it. These individual interests, however, are not directly class interests. Since classes are not just categories of individuals but social and political organizations or movements, class interests are always something distinct from theinterests of the individual members of the class, which sometimes demand the sacrifice of individual interests. Class interests are "general interests" of the members of the class, though they are always particular interests in relation to society as a whole, because they arise only through the hostile opposition of classes to one another (MEW 3:53, 227). Because classes are social groups insofar as they are represented by a social movement, Marx identifies the interests of a class with the political interests of the movement which represents the class (MEW 8:185).

These political interests, however, relate to the economic structure of society, and the system of relations or roles through which effective control over production is determined. The basic goals of any class movement are not determined by the momentary consciousness of its members, but rather by the social changes which the movement can accomplish given its historical situation (MEW 2:38). These changes, as we saw above, consist in a transformation of the relations of production which brings them into harmony with the

powers of production. Whatever the conscious goals of the members, or even the leaders, of a class movement may be, what the movement can effect is determined by the state of social productive powers and its determination of the relations of production. Thus Marx identifies the long term goals of a class movement, and hence the interests of a class, with the establishment and defense of a certain set of production relations in society. The same factors which govern the content of these interests, however, also in the long run govern the outcome of the class struggle. At a given stage of history, that class is victorious whose interests consist in the establishment of the particular set of social relations which best suits the productive powers at that historical stage.

Human history is the result of the interaction of many human agents, each of whom is equipped with a set of goals and a set of means to achieve them. One way of making sense of history is to construct a theory enabling you to specify those results which will be the long term product of these interactions on the basis of identifiable factors. Such a theory can explain the results causally by reference to the factors which produce them, and explain the factors functionally or teleologically by reference to the way they contribute to the results. Engels views Marx's historical materialism in this light. "Men make their history, however it may turn out, in that each pursues his own consciously willed ends, and history is just the resultant of these many wills acting in various directions." But individuals often achieve results they did not intend, and individual motives are too multifarious to make historical events intelligible. Therefore, the task of the historical scientist is to identify the "driving forces" of history, which account for the results of the interaction. Here "it cannot be so much a question of the motives of individuals, however prominent, as of motives which set in motion great masses...; and this too not momentarily for the transient flaring up of the strawfire which quickly dies out, but for lasting action which flows into a great historical alteration" (MEW 21: 297–298).

According to Marx's theory, these "driving forces" of history are class interests and the results of their struggle: "The class struggle," Marx tells us, "is the proximate driving force of history" (MEW 34:407). The class struggle is only the "proximate" driving force of history, because it in turn is a function of the uneasy harmony between productive powers and production relations. But it is through the class struggle that we as historical agents relate to

history. Our historical role depends on the relation of our actions to class interests and the struggle between them. The objective historical meaning of our actions consists in their bearing on the class struggles taking place in the time and place where we live. To understand ourselves as historical agents is to understand these interests and the bearing of our actions on them. Whatever the aims or conscious intentions of our actions may be, Marx believes that our actions are historically effective only insofar as they involve the pursuit of class interests, and that the historical meaning of our actions consists in their functional role in the struggle between such interests. Let us call this Marxian belief the "class interests thesis".

5. The Class Interests Argument

Because it affects our self-understanding as historical agents, the class interests thesis has important consequences for the way we approach the criticism and alteration of social arrangements. I think, moreover, that Marx's perception of these consequences are in large part responsible for his attitude toward justice and other moral values. More specifically, what Marx saw is that practical recognition of the class interests thesis positively excludes a us from taking justice, in the sense of evaluative principles of distribution which are to be justified from disinterested or impartial considerations, as our fundamental object of concern.

If we approach social practice convinced of the class interests thesis, then we will recognize that whatever desires, values and goals we may have, our accomplishments as historical agents are basically going to consist in the way we further the interests of certain classes. If our primary concern in our actions is with their historical results, then this recognition will inevitably have an effect on our goals themselves. Since we will tend to choose projects that we regard as having some chance of success, we will tend to see our projects within the framework of the class interests which are prominent in our society and age. We will see our task as historical agents not as one of setting our goals according to abstract values or standards and then trying to find some means of achieving them, but rather of choosing between the goals of already existing historical movements, and pursuing the goals of the movement we choose by joining this movement and identifying ourselves with it.

According to the class interests thesis, however, these goals are in no case determined by disinterested or impartial considerations:

they are always the particular interests of one class struggling against other classes. To identify ourselves with a class movement is therefore to abandon the pretense to ourselves that our fundamental concern is with what is disinterestedly or impartially good. For according to the class interests thesis, no effective historical action ever takes the form of pursuing what is impartially or disinterestedly good.

In light of the class interests thesis, we might find it worthwhile to evaluate the existing social structure in terms of the distribution of some chosen variables. In fact, we might even be able to define the set of production relations a given class movement strives for in such terms. To this extent, we might very well concern ourselves with some specific version of justice in Van der Veen's formal and technical sense. But this would not be a concern with justice in anything like the ordinary sense, because there is no attempt to justify our evaluations from an impartial or disinterested standpoint. As yet, we are no more discussing justice in the ordinary sense than I am talking about justice when I express the purely self-interested wish that my country should be governed exclusively by people exactly like me.

From the standpoint of the class interests thesis, moreover, such a standpoint seems to be positively excluded from what is most fundamental to our social practice. For this practice is determined by our identification with a class movement, and that involves pursuing class interests as such, and not for the sake of some further end. A concern with justice as one's fundamental goal and an acceptance of the practical consequences of the class interests thesis are therefore incompatible.

I have just presented an argument for the claim that practical recognition of the class interests thesis ought rationally to have an effect on our values and priorities as historical agents. The argument says that practical recognition of the class interests thesis excludes rational historical agents from taking justice as their fundamental goal or concern. I will call this argument the "class interests argument".

Let us be cautious, however, about what the class interests argument claims and what it does not claim. It does not claim that in pursuing the interests of a class we are not also as a matter of fact pursuing what is in fact just or disinterestedly good. The argument claims only that if we accept the practical consequences of the class interests thesis, then we cannot be concerned about class interests

primarily for this reason. It is consistent with this argument to claim that what is in the class interests of the proletariat is in fact just (i.e. that the proletariat's goals deserve favorable evaluation on the basis of distributive principles which can be disinterestedly or impartially justified). What the argument claims is that recognition of the practical consequences of the class interests thesis involves valuing the particular class interests ahead of justice or what is disinterestedly good.

Sometimes Marx appears to think that the class interests thesis, perhaps together with the fact that society is torn by deep class conflict, entails that the very idea of a common interest, or of what is impartially and disinterestedly good, is a mere chimaera, that there is no such thing. If he did think this, then I believe he was wrong. The idea of what is impartially or disinterestedly good is not the idea of an empirical agreement or overlap between people's interests. Instead, it is the idea of something which is good from a standpoint independent of any particular interest, though perhaps not independent of all human interests whatever. Perhaps there is something incoherent about the notion of such a standpoint, but to show this it is not enough to point out that people's interests do in fact profoundly conflict. Hence the class interests argument, as I have formulated it, does not rest on Marx's belief that there is no such thing as a universal interest or a disinterested standpoint. The class interests argument requires only the weaker claim (which I think is entailed by Marx's belief), that practical recognition of the class interests thesis excludes self-conscious historical agents from taking justice (or what is impartially good) as their primary object of concern.

The class interests argument does, however, conspicuously capture one peculiar feature of Marx's attitude as a social critic. Marx often describes the results of the communist revolution in terms which suggest that if one accepts the description, then one has reasons for considering these results as impartially or disinterestedly good. For example, Marx claims that the revolution will put an end to alienation, that it will enable every member of society to develop his or her capacities, that it will promote community and solidarity between people, and that it will facilitate the expansion of human productive powers and the universal satisfaction of human needs.[7] The passages in which Marx makes such claims are well-known, since they constitute the liturgy which self-styled "Marxist humanism" never tires of chanting. What is striking, however, is that

Marx at the same time rejects the preoccupation with disinterested human good. He displays only contempt for the humanitarianism of the "true socialists" who, he says, "have lost all revolutionary passion and proclaim instead the universal love of humanity" (MEW 3:443). Rather than universal love of humanity, Marx represents the pursuit of proletarian class interests as the appropriate form of social practice. He does so, I think, because he draws the conclusions from the class interests thesis which I have indicated.

Another thing that the class interests argument does not say is that recognition of the practical consequences of the class interests thesis excludes all concern whatever for what is just or impartially good. The class interests thesis tells us that insofar as we are concerned with the historical results of our actions, the only course it makes sense to adopt is to affiliate ourselves with a class movement and to identify ourselves with its interests. But even if our primary concern is with the historical results of our actions, that does not prevent us from having other concerns as well. We might, for instance, devote ourselves to the pursuit of proletarian class interests, but also be concerned to reconcile the goals of the proletariat as far as possible with what is just or impartially good. Practical recognition of the class interests thesis begins to interfere with this course of action only when our concern for justice threatens to interfere with or predominate over our concern for the interests of the proletariat. In such cases, recognition of the class interests thesis dictates that we get our priorities straight and thus dampen our enthusiasm for justice, so that we may get on with what really matters.

The class interests argument therefore has nothing to say against a Marxist who professes to be concerned to some extent with justice, while frankly confessing that the pursuit of justice is of secondary importance to the particular interests of the proletariat. I submit, however, that once they have heard this frank confession, non-Marxists will naturally be very skeptical of the commitment of such a Marxist to the pursuit of justice. A commitment to justice is normally thought to require not merely that one look to some degree favorably on what is disinterestedly or impartially good, but also that one place what is disinterestedly or impartially good ahead of any particular interest. What the class interests argument says is that if I accept the class interests thesis and am primarily concerned about the historical significance of my actions, then I cannot rationally place justice on what is impartially good ahead of the

particular class with whose interests I choose to identify. In effect, then, what the argument says is that a historical agent who accepts the class interests thesis cannot rationally have the kind of commitment to justice which conscientious moral agents are normally supposed to have.

This point also brings out the fact that the class interests argument is in an important way conditional. It applies to us only insofar as our primary concern as agents is with the historical results of our actions. This is an important qualification, because not everyone has to have human history as a primary practical concern. Nothing in the class interests thesis prevents me from ignoring history altogether and considering my actions only in terms of their relation to my own private interests, or the interests of my family and friends, or only in relation to the will of God or to some a priori moral principle. If I take such a stance, there is nothing whatever in the class interests thesis which has to dempen my enthusiasm for justice.

Of course it might be difficult to sustain this unconcern consistently in the case of the moral or the religious person. If I cannot lead a pious life without caring about the way God's will works itself out in history, and if I cannot be a conscientious moral agent without having a genuine concern with the fate my pursuit of justice is likely to meet with in the long run, then I cannot afford to ignore what kinds of historical action turn out to produce results. Once I find myself concerned with what can be accomplished in history, even if my concern was originally motivated by religion or the moral law, my attitude will become vunlerable to modification by considering the implications of the class interests thesis. To preserve my attitude intact, I may be compelled to adopt an unattractively escapist posture toward the historical significance of what I am doing which I did not originally think was part of my piety or my moral righteousness. More specifically, the class interests argument says to those who profess to take justice or what is impartially good as their primary concern that they may rationally do this only as long as they are ready to remain indifferent to whether the cause of justice will ultimately be victorious in the historical struggles taking place around them. Such indifference, however, might leave them open to a charge of hypocrisy in their professed devotion to justice. But the class interests argument does not pretend to stand in the way of those champions of justice who are willing leave themselves open to this charge.

6. Class Affiliation and Historical Self-Understanding

Another thing that the class interests argument does not exclude is someone's choosing a class affiliation on the basis of what is just or impartially good. If we accept the class interests thesis, then insofar as we care about the historical results of our actions, we see that the basic choice open to us is that of which class interest to promote. If the interests of one class recommend themselves to us as overlapping more with what is just or impartially good, then we might choose to affiliate ourselves with that class for these reasons. The class interests argument has nothing to say against this.

The *Manifesto* speaks of "a section of bourgeois ideologues" who transfer their allegiance to the proletariat because they have "worked themselves up to a theoretical understanding of the historical movement" (MEW 4:472). This is presumably a self-description on the part of Marx and Engels, but the reasons for their transfer of class allegiance are not given. Those who wish to interpret Marx's critique of capitalism as based on justice may find it natural to conjecture that Marx and Engels may have affiliated themselves with the proletariat because they believed that the results of a proletarian revolution would mean a more just distribution (in the "implicit" or non-Marxian sense) of wealth, leisure and opportunities for personal development. Marx's consistently hostile attitude toward the pursuit of justice and his apparent belief that there is no such thing as the universal interest or common good both stand in the way of such a conjecture. The class interests argument, however, does not stand in the way of it.

The class interests argument does, however, claim that once we as self-conscious historical agents affiliate ourselves with a given class, it would be irrational for us to continue to maintain justice as our primary concern. The class interests argument is an argument about the way in which it is rational for self-conscious historical agents to *modify* their goals and concerns in the light of the class interests thesis. The argument does not deny that it may be rational to have a concern with justice before one self-consciously adopts a class affiliation. But it does assert that it is irrational as a historical agent to remain aloof from class affiliation, and it also esserts that it is irrational for a person who has assumed a class affiliation to accord justice (or anything else) a higher priority than the interests of the class with which one identifies.

Of course, the class interests thesis does not imply that a

rational historical agent must go through a process of choosing a class affiliation. This may happen in the case of bourgeois ideologues, but it probably will not happen in the case of proletarians whose class affiliation grows spontaneously out of their life circumstances and is not mediated by a process of deliberation based on justice or anything else. The class interests argument says nothing whatever against the rationality of a class affiliation arrived at in this more natural and spontaneous way. On the contrary, it suggests that rational historical agency for most people will consist in becoming aware of the historical meaning of their spontaneous class commitments.

There will undoubtedly be some who think of themselves as Marxists, who accept the class interests thesis and regard themselves as working in behalf of proletarian class interests, but who are inclined to question the class interests argument. If as I have already conceded above the class interests thesis does not prevent the interest of the proletariat from coinciding with what is in fact just or impartially good, and does not even prevent me from joining the proletarian movement out of a concern for justice, then, they may reason, nothing could possibly prevent me from continuing my affiliation with the proletariat precisely in order to advance the cause of justice. I might even resolve to remain in the proletarian movement as long, and only as long as the class interests of the proletariat seem to me to coincide with the ends of justice. In my work on behalf of the proletariat, I might even think of the proletarian movement as an instrument or vehicle of justice, and see myself and other lovers of justice as using this movement as a means to the end of achieving social justice. What would be irrational in this ?

The irrationality is one which Hegel explored very insightfully in Chapter 5 of the *Phenomenology of Spirit.* It would be the same irrationality as that of the tail flattering itself that it was wagging the dog. In effect, what the class interests thesis tells us is that those who strive for justice in human history are, objectively speaking, always striving in behalf of the interests of some class or other, and that their sriving must, from a historical point of view, be regarded in this light, whatever their private aims and intentions in the matter may be. We cannot accept this thesis and still pretend to view our own aims and intentions in the same light we did before. In the case of aims and intentions which are not directed specifically to class interests, it requires us to see them only as vehicles or masks of class

interests, which are impotent on their own to accomplish anything in history.

To see our commitment to justice in this way, however, is incompatible with regarding ourselves as using the proletarian movement as a means to justice. On the contrary, it compels us to regard the concern for justice on the part of those who commit themselves to the proeltarian movement out of such a concern as something which, objectively regarded, serves only as a means to furthering proletarian class interests. Under these circumstances, we can maintain our concern with justice only by severing the intention we ascribe to our actions from the historical meaning we ascribe to them. But to do this is, in effect, either to refuse to be a *self-conscious* historical agent at all, or else to deceive oneself about the historical significance of one's actions and intentions. These are not options we can embrace while at the same time thinking of ourselves as rational historical agents striving for justice in human history.

The point made by the class interests argument is a bit hard to grasp because it brings out one way in which our self-understanding in the light of a Marxian conception of history differs from the self-understanding many people have of their actions in ordinary life. We usually think of ourselves as determining the meaning of our actions by the intentions we form and the motives we adopt. The world, even the social world, stands over against us. It may influence us in the formation of intentions and the adoption of motives if we let it, but it cannot on its own pre-empt our agency in this matter.

The Marxian conception of historical agency, as I read it, does not deny that individuals are free to act on whatever motives and with whatever intentions they please.[8] As Engels says, history is just the result of many people acting on their own motives and pursuing their consciously willed ends (MEW 21:297). But the theory does deny that the historical meaning of our actions is something which depends on these conscious motives and intentions. Instead, the theory holds that our actions have an objective historical meaning in light of their relation to the "driving forces" of history, which are class interests. Thus we may say of a man whose conscious intention is the pursuit of justice that from the standpoint of history what he is doing, whether he knows it or not, is promoting the interest of this or that class. When we say this, we are not denying that his conscious intention is to pursue justice nor (as I interpret the theory) are we ascribing to him any unconscious intention

different from this. But we are saying that the historical meaning of his actions does not depend on his private intention, but derives from the functional relation in which his actions stand to class interests.

The Marxian theory therefore does not deny that our motives, aims and intentions are what we think they are. But when we accept this theory and begin to understand our own historical agency in terms of it, this cannot avoid having an effect on the way in which we view our motives, aims and intentions. Because we want (and rationally ought to want) a unified and harmonious conception of ourselves as historical agents, we will form (or at least revise) our aims and intentions in light of the historical meaning we understand them to have. We will adopt intentions which coincide with the historical meaning of what we do. Since we recognize that objectively speaking the pursuit of justice is only a vehicle or mask for the pursuit of class interest, we will no longer think of ourselves as pursuing justice, but will come to think of ourselves as pursuing the interests of a particular class. For only in this way can we harmonize our conscious intentions with our historical self-understanding and thus attain to self-conscious historical agency.

7. Why Do Marxists Care About Justice ?

The class interests thesis is a central claim of Marx's historical materialism. Via the considerations I have presented in the class interests argument, it provides us with good reasons to abandon justice as our chief aim insofar as we view our actions in their historical meaning. I think, moreover, that these considerations were something of which Marx himself was aware, and they help to account for his dismissive attitude toward justice and for his own reductive definition of justice in terms of what is functional for the prevailing mode of production.

Despite this, however, many who regard themselves as Marxists continue to be concerned with justice as a social goal. Why is this ? Is it that they simply have not considered the class interests argument ? Or do they have good replies to it ? Even if (as I believe) the class interests argument is a valid one given Marx's class interests thesis, I would be unwise to flatter myself that I have convinced all Marxists of that point in the last few pages. But I do not think that the continued enthusiasm for justice among Marxists is due either to ignorance of the class interests argument or to a considered rejection of it. Marxists nowadays seem not to give much weight to the

considerations involved in the class interests argument, but I think this is not to be explained merely by oversight or inattention on their part. What is the explanation, then ?

Most of us academic Marxists seldom get beyond the point of convincing ourselves that the goals of Marxism are worthy ones and trying to convince others of this. But as we have seen, there is nothing in the class interests argument which prevents us from using considerations of justice for this purpose. The class interests argument begins to make a difference only when we have actually begun to participate in a class movement and begin to examine our values, aims and priorities in terms of what this participation means. Since academic Marxists seldom get this far, the class interests argument is something most of them can safely ignore. In fact, the class interests argument even poses a certain danger to the project of converting people to Marxism by appealing to their antecedent passion for justice. For this argument threatens such people with the prospect of having to mortify this passion once they have adopted Marxist aims on the basis of it.

In my opinion, however, there is an even more basic explanation for people's indifference to the class interests argument. And that is that however important the class interests thesis may have been to Marx himself, we tend nowadays to be very skeptical of it. For this thesis belongs to a theory of history which insists on understanding history in terms of the functional or teleological relation of human actions and social institutions to basic historical tendencies. Still worse, it is a theory of history which is genuinely confident that history makes rational sense, that it exhibits a progressive movement which can be understood by those who act within it, and that this understanding can provide historical agents with rational confidence in their historical vocation. In the late twentieth century it seems to be hard for anyone really to hold such convictions and base a whole approach to social practice on them.

More specifically, Marx's whole conception of revolutionary practice involves affiliating oneself with a movement in behalf of the interests of the proletarian class. This is based on the belief that the truth of the class interests thesis is almost perceptible in the social questions and political struggles of the day. The international proletarian movement is something Marx regards as something whose existence is obvious, even if it may be a matter of debate which individuals, doctrines and parties best represent its interests.

It is difficult not to be skeptical about all this today. Of course

we like to talk about working in behalf of such a movement, but when we do so, what movement are we talking about? Thinking Marxists everywhere are increasingly reluctant to identify the proletarian movement with the Soviet bloc and those who support it. But it is also implausible to identify it with the organized labor movement in capitalist countries. There is virtually nothing international or revolutionary about this movement, and the percentage of the population it represents may even be decreasing.

What seems to be most convincing in the thought of Marx and the Marxist tradition is the late twentieth century is their critical analysis of capitalism, and their recognition that the capitalist mode of production is responsible for most forms of irrationality and inhumanity perpetrated by modern society against its members. It is not surprising, then, that social critics in the late twentieth century are interested in reformulating Marx's criticisms of capitalist society in terms of moral theories and distributive principles of justice. For this is the most natural way of clearly articulating these criticisms. The class interests argument is of comparatively little interest to them because they have already given up that part of Marx's theory of history on which it is based.

What I have tried to show, then, is that those who wish to re-interpret Marx's critique of capitalism as based on an implicit concept of justice must do so at a certain price: they must repudiate a significant part of Marx's theory of history. The fact that they must do this, it seems to me, constitutes a strong argument against their position regarded as an interpretation of Marx, or even as a speculative extension of Marx's views. It need not be any argument against their position simply as a piece of social philosophy, however, especially if, as I have just been suggesting, they may have good reasons for abandoning the parts of Marx's theory of history which are incompatible with it.

Social philosophers of this kind, however, are often proud of the fact that their theory owes much to Marx, and it is tempting for someone like me to criticize them by saying that their implicit or explicit rejection of the class interests thesis implies that they are no longer really 'Marxists'. This is especially tempting when they themselves try to characterize 'Marxism' as fundamentally a certain sort of moral or ethical position.[9] But it is a temptation I ought to resist. There is no non-arbitrary definition of what one must believe, either substantively or methodologically, to deserve to be called a 'Marxist'. Even if there were such a definition, it would ultimately make no

difference whether a given person deserves the label or not. The only consequence of believing that it does make a difference is to make debates between Marxists into affairs of authority rather than affairs of reason. And this is something which must be condemned both by reason and by whatever authority Marx's opinion may have.

The best way to make my point, therefore, is simply to say as precisely as I can what parts of Marx's theory of history I think must be repudiated by someone who wants to develop a critique of capitalism based on principles of justice. Such a person does not, I think, have to abandon any of the materialist conception of history as it is explicitly stated in the famous 1859 Preface to the *Critique of Political Economy*. For this Preface deals only with the relation between productive powers and the economic structure of society, and omits all reference to the class struggle through which the growth of productive powers effects revolutionary changes in the economic structure. The part of Marx's theory which must be repudiated has to do only with the class mechanism through which the productive powers effect such changes. The price which must be paid for a Marxist critique of capitalism based on justice is not the materialist conception of history as a whole, but only the class interests thesis.

This price is not insiginficant, however. In fact, to abandon the class interests thesis is in effect to abandon the Marxian concept of revolutionary practice altogether, since such practice consists for Marx essentially in the pursuit of class interests. It is, moreover, only the class interests thesis which provides any connection between historical materialism as expounded in the 1859 Preface and the practical concerns of those who want to transcend capitalism historically (whether on grounds of justice or on others). Only the class interests thesis gives us any reason to think that the war between new productive powers and old production relations has any bearing on our efforts in behalf of a class movement. And the class interests thesis is the only thing in Marx's own view which gives us any ground at all for thinking that the efforts we put forth in behalf of our principles of justice have any prospects of success in the real world.

Why do people interested in economic justice take such an interest in Marxian historical materialism ? My suspicion is that they do so because Marx's conception of revolutionary practice presents radical critics of capitalism with a view of history which gives practical direction to their hopes and a ground for confidence in

them. This view, however, is inextricably bound up with the class interests thesis, and the Marxian conception of revolutionary practice, which is based on the class interests thesis, involves the considered rejection of every approach to social criticism which takes justice or what is impartially good as its chief concern. I think, therefore, that those who are interested in reformulating Marx's critique of capitalism in terms of principles of justice must come up with a new conception of the way their principles are to be realized in human history. Marx's conception of revolutionary practice is no longer open to them.[10]

NOTES

[1]These facts are acknowledged even by those who interpret Marx's critique of capitalism as founded on justice, at least by those interpreters whose views are responsible and textually informed enough that they must be taken seriously. Such interpreters admit that to read Marx as condemning capitalism on grounds of justice is to interpret Marx "against his own self-understanding" (See Andreas Wildt, "Gerechtigkeit in Marx' Oekonomiekritik", in G. Lohmann and Emil Angehrn, eds., *Ethik und Marx* (Munich, 1985)). Or they say that "though Marx did think capitalism was unjust, he did not think he thought so" (See Norman Geras, "The Controversy About Marx and Justice," this volume.)

[2]In citing works of Marx and Engels I will refer to the *Marx Engels Werke* (Berlin, 1961—1966), abbreviated "MEW" and cited by volume and page number. All translations are my own.

[3]See "The Marxian Critique of Justice," in Cohen, Nagel and Scanlon, eds., *Marx, Justice and History* (Princeton, 1980), pp. 3—41 and *Karl Marx* (London, 1981), pp. 130—140.

[4]See "Marx on Right and Justice: A Reply to Husami," in *Marx, Justice and History*, pp. 106—134, *Karl Marx*, pp. 125—130, 131—156, "Marx and Morality," in A. Caplan, ed., *Darwin, Marx and Freud* (New York, 1984), "Marx' Immoralismus" in G. Lohmann and E. Angehrn, eds. *Ethik und Marx* (Munich, 1985), and "Marx's Immoralism", in B. Chavance, ed., *Actes du Colloque Marx* (Paris, 1985).

[5] Robert J. Van der Veen, "Property, Exploitation and Justice," *Acta Politica* (1978), Vol. 4, pp. 433—465. Cited below as "Van der Veen".

[6] Compare *Karl Marx*, pp. 61—110.

[7] Compare *Karl Marx*, pp. 1—60.

[8] Compare *Karl Marx*, pp. 111—117.

[9] See Jon Elster, "Further Thoughts on Functionalism and Game Theory," *Actes du Colloque Marx* (Paris, 1985).

[10] An earlier version of this paper was delivered at the Colloquium "The Problem of Justice: An Emancipatory Approach from a Marxian Perspective" at the Rijksuniversiteit Gent in March, 1984, organized by Koen Raes and moderated by Jaap Kruithof, to both of whom my thanks are due. I am also grateful for the comments I received on it at that time by a number of different people, among whom I want especially to mention Norman Geras, Philippe van Parijs and Robert Van der Veen.