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Introduction to Marx and Modern Political Theory: From Hobbes to Contemporary Feminism

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Introduction

I first began to study Marx some twenty-three years ago. In those days there were many things that made it easy to become interested in Marx: among them the political ferment of the late 1960s and the fact that at the University of California at San Diego, where I was a graduate student, there were several important and interesting Marxists—Fredric Jameson, Herbert Marcuse, and Stanley Moore. The latter two were my teachers in the Philosophy Department, and the latter, to whom this book is dedicated, became my dissertation director. Moreover, the spirit of Marx was in the air and it seemed necessary to read him to understand what was happening in the world.

Despite the political ferment of the late 1960s, there were things that made it difficult for me to accept Marx at first. As an undergraduate, I had studied in a great books program at St. Mary's College of California, and the Philosophy Department at UC San Diego, very much under the influence of Richard Popkin at that time, took a history of ideas approach to philosophy. There were things about Marx that seemed at odds with my whole educational background. Some of his texts, especially the *Communist Manifesto*, made him seem like a sort of communist Descartes, like someone who would sweep aside all past culture, tradition, and morality—as if there were nothing of value to be found there—and start over with a clean slate.¹

I have come to see that this was not an accurate picture of Marx, and indeed, a great deal of my work over the last twenty-three years has involved exploring the roots of Marx's thought in earlier tradition and rejecting anything like a Cartesian break. This is still a part of what motivates this present book. I would like to show that Marx grows out of and tries to go beyond, that he tries to solve the problems

2 *Introduction*

and realize the potential of, the tradition in political theory of Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Kant, and Hegel.

Since my years as a graduate student, however, a different perspective on Marx has increasingly developed. Indeed, in many ways, it is a product of the radicalism of the 1960s. I would not say that this new perspective has replaced other perspectives. It exists alongside and competes with them, but it is gaining in power. For this perspective, far from it being the case that Marx is a communist Descartes who sweeps aside all past tradition, Marx is the very opposite. He is all too deeply rooted in past tradition—in ethnocentrism, in sexism, and in a totalizing antipluralism. Far from it being the case that Marx rejects and thereby liberates himself from past tradition, he has not at all freed himself from many of the most oppressive and dominating aspects of our past. Thus, in Chapters 7 and 8, I want to respond to some of the objections that contemporary theorists have raised against Marx, and I want to argue that just as I once was mistaken in thinking that Marx had rejected too much of the past, so these contemporary theorists are mistaken in thinking that Marx has not rejected very much of it. Marx does begin to free himself from these past forms of domination, significantly so for a nineteenth-century theorist, and he does so more than is obvious on the surface of his writings, which, after all, were not aimed at a twentieth-century audience, or focused in twentieth-century terms and categories, or for twentieth-century sensitivities. When Marx is understood, I think he can contribute to contemporary theory that wants to free itself from traditional sexism and ethnocentrism and create a pluralist society.

This book makes no pretense of being a complete history of modern political philosophy. It deals with only a few figures: Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Kant, Hegel, and Marx. It leaves out many others. And it makes no attempt to say anywhere near everything that might be said about any of these figures. It is merely a series of limited studies that I hope will bring into focus an interesting and important set of issues and problems.

Given my concern in the later chapters with certain contemporary forms of oppression, domination, and power, one of the issues that I want to discuss in the early chapters is the traditional concept of sovereignty as it develops from Hobbes to Marx. For Hobbes, the government must be sovereign and sovereign power must be absolute. This was so because Hobbes, I will try to argue in Chapter 1, had no social theory, only a political theory. The only power capable of holding citizens together in a civil body, for Hobbes, was a political power—the

government or the sovereign. If the government lost its grip, individuals collapsed back into the state of nature.

Locke, by contrast, developed a social theory and thus was able to argue for limited government and the sovereignty of the people. The better your social theory—that is, the more cohesion you are able to find among the citizens apart from the political sphere—the less power the government need have to hold the citizens together. If you have a good enough social theory, then, with Marx, you might even begin to talk about the withering away of the state and, I will try to argue, the dissolution of sovereignty. For Hobbes, since he had no notion of social cohesion, the sovereign had to be absolute. For Locke, there is enough social cohesion to argue that government can be limited and that the people can be sovereign. This social cohesion, for Locke, arises out of property, property interest, commerce, and trade. Unfortunately, I will argue in Chapter 2, Locke does not succeed in making the people sovereign. His emphasis on unequal property shifts sovereignty to the propertied classes and in effect makes them sovereign over the propertyless.

For this reason, Rousseau rejects commerce, trade, and seriously unequal property as incompatible with the common good or the general will. Instead, he focuses on custom, tradition, and community as the forces capable of providing enough social cohesion so that the people can be sovereign and so that they can establish a general will and thus rational freedom. Rousseau is not a totalitarian as so many think. Rather, I argue in Chapter 3, he achieves an ideal but utopian synthesis of individual liberty and community. His views are utopian because healthy customs, traditions, and community simply have to be given in a premodern society, and they are incompatible with wealth, commerce, and trade. Such a society is impossible to realize in the real modern world.

Kant's philosophy of history, I argue in Chapter 4, is capable of explaining how particular, conflicting interests embedded in commerce and trade can lead toward the universal, the common good, or the categorical imperative rather than erode it as Rousseau thought they would. And thus Kant can go beyond Rousseau—he not only has a theory of the ideal society but a theory for how actually to realize it in the modern world. But, on the other hand, Kant has nothing to say about, and no way to realize, community.

Hegel attempts to synthesize much of this earlier tradition. He very clearly rejects a Hobbesian absolute sovereign that stands over society and holds the citizens together from outside. Hegel does have a social

4 *Introduction*

theory that explains the internal coherence of society apart from the governmental or political sphere. He sees that property, property interest, and trade in civil society provide this coherence much as for Locke, and he also sees that custom, tradition, and community provide this coherence much as for Rousseau. At the same time, he seems aware that unrestrained commerce and trade would shift power to the wealthy classes. On the other hand, Hegel does not want to eliminate wealth, commerce, and trade as for Rousseau and thus make the ideal state impossible to realize in the modern world. He sees, with Kant, that particular interests can lead to the universal.

Hegel's conception of the modern state is thus very similar to Rousseau's ideal community based upon rational freedom realized through a general will and reinforced by custom, tradition, and community. And Hegel develops a philosophy of history similar to Kant's that will allow him to explain the development of an ideal moral society in the modern world based upon a general will that at the same time is compatible with wealth, commerce, and trade. But, as we will see in Chapter 5, to achieve this synthesis among particular interests, the general will, and community, Hegel must abandon individual consciousness and move to spirit.

The laws and institutions of the state, for Hegel, arise through the historical development of the spirit of a people. Through alienation the citizens create the state as their own objectification and then are disciplined by their state. Through this process, both the state and individuals are molded so that individuals receive rational laws that accord with the universal and also with their own interests, but, for Hegel, the citizens do not democratically control their institutions or give themselves their own laws as for Rousseau. Their laws and institutions just arise through the historical development of spirit.

In order to explain how history can move toward the ideal society, Marx develops a theory of revolution. In many respects this theory is based upon Kant's philosophy of history. Conflicting interests, or in Marx's case, conflicting class interests, lead toward the common good. In fact, the class interest of the proletariat, we shall see, will lead it to act in accordance with the categorical imperative—it will drive the proletariat toward the development of an ideal moral society. Locke was the first to develop a theory of legitimate revolution; except, I will argue, revolution was legitimate for Locke only to defend property, not at all to allow the propertyless to transform things so as to achieve a more equitable society. Kant relies on conflict among nations to achieve the ideal society, and he is even willing to accept the gains in

this direction made by revolutions, but he is unwilling or unable to allow that any revolution can be legitimate.

At any rate, Marx develops a philosophy of history in many ways like that of Kant, which will allow him to realize an ideal society that, much like Rousseau's, is a radically democratic and egalitarian community. In these respects, Marx's project is very similar to the project of Hegel, but Marx wants to accomplish all of this while avoiding Hegel's rejection of concrete Rousseauian democracy. Moreover, Marx wants to avoid Hegel's abandonment of individual consciousness and his move to spirit. To accomplish this Marx tries to realize a communal individual and to dissolve sovereignty.

This very brief sketch, which touches upon only a few of the issues that we will take up, nevertheless, I hope, at least suggests how I think Marx's thought grows out of, synthesizes, and realizes the tradition that precedes him. Marx not only develops a theory capable of combining community with rational freedom and concrete democracy, he also moves beyond utopianism. He develops a theory of how actually to bring the ideal society about in the modern world. This is to say, certainly, that he brings to fruition the tradition of Rousseau, Kant, and Hegel. It might be thought that this leaves out, and perhaps is even incompatible with, the tradition that begins in Locke and develops in modern liberalism. In fact, Rousseau, Hegel, and Marx have all been accused of being totalitarians or at least of being on the road toward totalitarianism. I do not think this charge can be sustained. But even if I am right it would still seem clear to most people that a Marxian society would fall far short of what would be considered an ideally open, tolerant, and pluralistic society. Thus, in Chapter 7, I would like to argue something that should be a bit surprising, namely, that the society Marx envisions is very definitely a pluralist society and that pluralism is compatible with community. In Chapter 8, I will also try to argue that Marx envisions this ideal pluralistic community as one that will bring about the emancipation of women, and that Marx, if correctly understood, could contribute more to modern feminist theory than many modern feminists have thought he can.

I have claimed that Marx moves beyond utopianism. We must notice, however, that there are two ways in which one can use the term "utopian." In one of these senses Marx is not a utopian; in the other he very definitely is. In the first sense, political theorists are utopian if they simply describe an ideal society without having any theory of how actually to realize it in the real world. In other words, the theorist has no philosophy of history or theory of social transformation, or at

least not one that can explain how to bring the ideal society about. Plato, Thomas More, and, I will argue, Rousseau are good examples of such utopian theorists. Marx, on the other hand, has a very highly developed philosophy of history, an elaborate theory of social transformation, and a complex theory of revolution by which he tries to explain how to realize the ideal society. For Kant and for Marx it is not enough to merely describe the ideal society; a serious political theorist must explain how to realize it. In this sense Marx is definitely not utopian.

Nevertheless, there will always be some tension here. After all, in order to make it easier to develop a theory of how to realize the ideal society, a theorist can always make the ideal a bit easier to realize—the theorist can water down the ideal. The less ideal your ideal society, the less it goes beyond actually existing society, the easier it is likely to be to realize and the less utopian it will be—and, very likely, the less interesting it will be also. On the other hand, the more you emphasize the ideal character of the ideal society, the further it goes beyond actually existing society, the greater and more radical the social transformation it involves, all of this will make it increasingly difficult for the theory of how to realize the ideal to keep up with the ideal. Such a theorist is not utopian in the first sense. Such a theorist *has* a theory of how to realize the ideal. It is just that this theorist's conception of the ideal society is always running a bit ahead of the theory of how to realize the ideal society. Marx is such a theorist and he is utopian in this second sense.

In my opinion this second type of utopianism is acceptable—even desirable. We do not want to water down the ideal to make it easier to achieve. We always want to keep the ideal a bit ahead of what we are likely to be able to realize. If we stripped Marx of his idealism in this area, if we were to accept only what was practically realizable and soberly possible in Marx's thought, we would eliminate a great deal of his power, his brilliance, and his value—or at least I think so. As this book proceeds, the reader will notice that I tend to move through the sober, practical, realizable aspects of Marx's thought as quickly as is reasonably possible and that I tend to focus on his ideal side—on those aspects of Marx's thought that certainly have not been realized and that to some will appear impossible ever to realize. Perhaps this is a failure of mine. Perhaps this is a failure of Marx's. But then perhaps this is what will live when all else is dead in Marx's thought.

Even if Marxism as a political movement is already dead, even if Marx's theory of how to realize the ideal has totally failed, as our

liberal journalists now take such great joy in telling us over and over again at every opportunity, perhaps it is only this ideal element in Marx that can remain to inspire us. Marx's thought, as we shall see, always contains a hope—the glimmer, the lure, of a beautiful world, the highest good, the realization of the species' essence.

Despite the fact that most of our liberal journalists seem to believe that Marxism has collapsed in Eastern Europe, it must be said that few Western Marxists—and for a great many years before this collapse—would have accepted the notion that Eastern European societies were Marxist in the first place. This may sound like a cheap way to avoid the issue, but that is very largely due to the news media's ability to make us see reality as they see it. They have us convinced that Eastern European societies were Marxist and that Marxism has now collapsed. But if Western Marxists have been denying for many years that these societies were Marxist, I do not see why we should change our minds now. Moreover, even the most superficial reading of Marx should show that in very fundamental ways Eastern European societies were not Marxist. Marx rejected the existence of a state standing over and dominating society, whereas the Soviet Union had one of the most powerful, dominating, bureaucratic state apparatuses in the world. Marx rejected a standing army attached to the state and held that the only kind of army compatible with democracy was a citizen militia, an army controlled by the citizens that they could use to ensure that the state did not try to stand over and dominate society, whereas the Soviet Union had one of the most powerful standing armies in the world attached to and controlled by the state. And Marx was a radical democrat; he even rejected representatives, who go off and vote as they see fit, in favor of deputies, who are given very strict voting instructions and are immediately recallable by their constituents. The Soviet Union certainly did not have deputies—it did not even really have representatives.

So, whatever has collapsed in Eastern Europe, it was not Marxism—certainly not as Marx understood it, nor as Western Marxists have understood it for quite some time now. The Soviet Union and other Eastern European societies right now are in serious need of some very practical, concrete, technical assistance. They certainly will not get much help in this area from a writer who has been dead for over a century. What they might get from Marx is something different—a hope, a better vision, the lure of an ideal.

Despite our liberal journalists, the abandonment of communism and the embracing of markets in Eastern Europe is not going all that well.

A popular joke in Hungary had it that the Communist government needed forty years to lose the moral support of the people. For its successor, one year was enough.² However, I certainly do not wish to try to predict what will occur in Eastern Europe. But one thing—admittedly of a wildly speculative sort—that might be said about Russia is that while it has definitely made very healthy moves toward democracy that everyone hopes will be preserved, at the same time, there are many in Russian society that do not at all want to give up socialism. Is it too utopian to hope that Russia, which has had nothing to do with the collapse of Marxism, might eventually move closer to the realization of truer Marxian ideals? If there is any chance at all of this, perhaps it justifies continued work to uncover this ideal dimension in Marx's thought. At any rate, I in no way apologize for such utopianism.

The charge of utopianism can be very intimidating. One of the most powerful arguments that can be made against moral and political ideals is to call them unrealistic, impossible, utopian. This is usually thought to be a trump. Case closed. Nothing more to say. Moreover, political theorists worry about such charges and try to avoid them. It seems to me that there is a great deal of unthinking that goes on here.

If a theorist makes a sound argument that certain of our social or political institutions are oppressive, unjust, or immoral, what does it amount to to argue that it would be unrealistic and utopian to eliminate those institutions—that you cannot imagine being able to significantly change those institutions? This may merely indicate a failure of *your* imagination. Who could have imagined the collapse of old-style Soviet Marxism twenty years ago? Who could have imagined in 1950 the advances that blacks and women have made in the United States since then, inadequate as these advances have been? What does it mean to call a moral ideal utopian, impossible, unrealistic? Is this intended to eliminate all moral obligation on our part with respect to this ideal? That is often what is suggested by such accusations. But I do not think so. “Ought implies can” has been a truism since Kant enunciated the proposition. But it seems to me we cannot accept this proposition when it comes to political ideals. It may be that we cannot imagine how we can eliminate these immoral, unjust, and oppressive institutions. It may seem impossible to do so. Nevertheless, we still have a moral obligation to remove them. If we cannot imagine how, then we will just have to rely on the imagination of others until we can begin to imagine how ourselves. And we must always remember

that what it seems possible to accomplish will change with every step we take.

In three earlier books on Marx I have approached his thought historically in the sense that I have argued that there are different periods of his thought and that he fundamentally changes certain of his views in these different periods.³ I have not changed my mind about these matters and one will still find references of this sort in the present book, but the last three chapters, which deal with Marx, are not, as my earlier books were, structured to reflect the different periods of Marx's thought. That would simply make matters far more complicated than they already are and it is my purpose to focus on other sorts of historical connections in this book.

One of these, which will become quite central for us in Chapters 6 and 7, has already started to emerge here, namely the tension that exists in the modern world between freedom and community. The difficulty of conceiving, let alone realizing, a society that is both communal and that preserves individual freedom is, I think, one of the major problems, if not *the* major problem, of modern political theory.

As I will argue, especially in Chapter 6, human beings need community; they need it to have a sense of belonging and to be at home in their world. Moreover, community creates a sense of familiarity that makes it possible to work with others smoothly and comfortably, to be close enough to them so that individuals can learn from each other, so that they can develop their powers and capacities, indeed, so that they develop as human beings. Furthermore, community facilitates communication that is necessary for all of these things and that is also, most importantly, necessary to allow us to uncover and overcome any oppressions that hitherto have not been recognized in the community. Community can also combat anomie, aloneness, and alienation. It can give one a sense of place, a sense that what you are and are doing is proper, recognized, meaningful, and significant. It can give one a sense of reality and rightness among the other members of one's community and in one's world. In the past it has even given individuals a sense of being ontologically plugged into the cosmos, rooted in the real and the right. The absence of community in the modern world leaves a cold and lonely abyss.

The trouble, however, before we get carried away with community, is that traditional communities always involved serious oppression—the domination and oppression of women, of other races or religions, of the lower classes, of science by religion, and of progress by custom and tradition, to name only a few. The modern world, on the other

hand, has come almost to define itself, at least in very large part, by its concern with freedom, and freedom understood, in very large part, as freedom-*from*, certainly as freedom-from all these traditional oppressions but very possibly as freedom-from the premodern traditional community itself.

As this modern conception of freedom arose and established itself in Europe, it meant rejecting the authority of the Church—its authority over science, philosophy, politics, and morality. The rise of modern science, for example, meant that each discipline carved out its own autonomous area, subject to no authority but reason, and certainly not subject to religious authority.⁴ Protestantism even carried this principle into the realm of religion itself. Religious belief should be free from any external authority, certainly of the Roman church, and based solely on individual conscience. With the rise of capitalism, the modern world shed the authority of the community over the economic sphere in favor of individual liberty, competition, and particular interests.

One can almost say that what modernity means, or at least a significant part of what it means, is a continuous, ongoing process of liberation, of emancipating one group after another, of freeing them from one oppression after another. Abolitionists work to eliminate slavery. Socialists try to free the working class from capitalist oppression. Feminists work to free women from traditional male domination. The modern world, we can even say, is out to discover ever-new oppressions embedded in the traditional past and to free individuals from them.

Furthermore, what this ongoing process of liberation also seems to imply is that each attempt at emancipation from traditional authority is likely, sooner or later, to be attacked, in its turn, as an inadequate attempt at emancipation. It will be attacked for failing to get to the root of the oppression and it may even be attacked by more progressive emancipatory movements as itself a new form of oppression. Protestant fundamentalism comes to be seen, by modern liberalism, no longer as a radical form of emancipation but as a closed-minded form of intolerance. The role of capitalism in emancipating us from feudalism is far outweighed, for socialists, by its oppression of the proletariat. And then socialists in their turn come to be seen as totalitarian oppressors. Even modern science, which prides itself on being free of, and freeing us from, all ideology, is now being criticized by modern feminists for its ideological blindness with respect to women.

The real strength of modernity is that it digs deeper and deeper, that

it continuously uncovers new forms and layers of oppression, brings them to light, attacks them, and tries to overcome them. And then even this emancipatory process itself is seen as still containing some oppression and is attacked in its turn. This is a powerful dynamic of liberation. At the same time, though, it continuously makes it impossible to establish any tradition, any community, any place, any at-homeness. We never seem to be able to purge our traditions of all oppression so as to finally fit ourselves into them and be at home. We always find further oppressions dirtying our nest.

This drive for freedom, for freedom-from, liberates us from oppression. And without any doubt such liberation is an absolute necessity for achieving the good life. But this liberation does not itself give us the good life. It is a necessary means to the good life. The good life is not possible while any oppression remains. But liberation from oppression is not itself the good life. It is empty. It continuously negates, rejects, eliminates, eradicates, destroys. It not only negates and eliminates external authorities and institutions out in the social world, but it criticizes, attacks, negates, and eliminates within ourselves—attitudes, assumptions, values, feelings, and so forth. It empties us of undesirable qualities, but it does not fill us with anything.

Moreover, this modern form of emancipation, this freedom-from, must at least shy away from itself endorsing anything positive, any substantive form of the good life, any tradition, any form of community, because to do so can and, sooner or later, probably will become something for others to attack, to free themselves from, a new form of oppression. The modern tendency seems to be ever toward pluralism, diversity, difference. Endorsing a single conception of the good is seen as totalizing, as imposing one's views on others, even as totalitarianism. Or at least one more and more frequently hears such arguments these days.

At any rate, community has little chance of establishing itself in the face of this continued and ongoing liberation. And liberation cannot achieve community. The future of any liberation is to be perceived as an oppression that calls for further liberation. Or at least this has been true of liberations in the past. Everyone hopes that it will not be true of their own liberation movement.

I am not poking fun here. I am certainly not dismissing liberation. Liberation, the liberation of workers, of women, of racial and ethnic minorities, and of others, is absolutely essential. Community without such liberation is not acceptable and not possible. Yet continuous liberation that never achieves community, that never roots itself in tradi-

tion, that never achieves anything positive and substantive, is ultimately not acceptable either.

Marx, I think, was aware of this problem, at least at the level it had reached in his era, and he was trying to resolve it. He fully endorses, to the level he understands them, to the level that they had materially and ideologically emerged, the liberation movements of his time. He endorses the modern liberation from religious authority.⁵ He himself attacked the authority of science, at least the ideological authority of the science of political economy.⁶ He wrote many articles in support of the emancipation of slaves in the United States.⁷ He endorsed the emancipation of women, as I will argue in Chapter 8. And, of course, he spent his life working for the emancipation of the working class. At the same time, he wanted to regain community and, indeed, saw it as a necessary element of this liberation.

How then is it possible to reconcile, make compatible, community and liberation? It will take a good deal of space to explain this in Chapter 7. Here we can at least say that, in the first place, we must come to understand the ideal community and the good life, not as a static blueprint, a neat and final set of institutions, a finished utopia, but rather as a society that engages in a certain form of activity—free activity, activity that develops powers and capacities, that enriches the individual, activity that is an end in itself. Such activity would leave plenty of room for emancipation, even for ongoing emancipation, for resisting any authority that would try to dominate this activity, make it serve an end other than its own. At the same time this activity would involve interaction with others in a community, an interaction that would create bonds, meaning, connection, at-homeness. This community, then, cannot be static; it has no room for traditional authority, authority that stands over and dominates. Marx rejects a state standing over society, capitalists standing over workers, men over women, whites over blacks. Individuals must empower themselves by interacting with each other in an egalitarian and pluralist community. We will have a great deal more to say about this in Chapter 7.

Yet the Marxian attempt to synthesize liberation and community has not succeeded—it has certainly not been accepted. At least a part of the reason for this is that any liberation movement resents other movements that claim to go beyond it. Capitalism, which begins as a liberation movement and certainly still sees itself as a liberation movement—and Marx would at least agree that it once was⁸—resents the Marxist's claim that capitalism does not go far enough, that it oppresses workers. Either it doesn't like hearing this truth or is unable to

accept it as a truth. It feels threatened and counterattacks, at times violently and always ideologically. It accuses Marxism of being even more oppressive. Moreover, other newer liberation movements that have not yet succeeded in their liberation often tend to see Marxism as part of the establishment, as another form of oppression, as a hindrance to their program of liberation.

And without a doubt, a large part of the Marxist movement is guilty as charged. A very large part of the Marxist movement has failed to see the dialectic that Marx envisions between ongoing liberation and community. A large part of the Marxist movement is unable to move beyond its own original notions of liberation, let alone reconcile them with community.

Marxism has real weaknesses. It has weaknesses at the level of practice—the horrors we have seen in communist societies. It also has theoretical weaknesses. It does not have a complete theory for the emancipation of women, less even for races, and, given the development of modern capitalism since Marx, not even for workers. Yet, I want to argue that what we very importantly find in Marx is a recognition of the two sides of this most important and crucial modern tension. We find a recognition of the need for liberation, freedom from domination of all sorts, a continuous, ongoing, emancipation, and, at the same time, the recognition that this is not enough, the recognition that we need community. And Marx has a theory for how to connect these two.

It seems to me that the modern world, if it cannot accept Marxism as it was written by Marx, or certainly as it was played out by the Marxist tradition, which for the most part fell far below the level of Marx, this modern world then needs a new Marxism if it is to solve the problem of reconciling freedom and community. Any solution, I suspect, will have to pay careful attention to Marx and perhaps even launch itself from Marx. This book, it is hoped, will be a modest attempt to bring this problem into focus.

I am sure, though, that some will see the hope of finding anything in Marx that can be valuable for our world as a lost cause and as the greatest naivete. For them, Marx is an old dog that should finally be buried and forgotten. Others might admit that a standard historical treatment of Marx, the old dog, is an acceptable scholarly project, but that linking him with current, “stylish” matters like feminism, ethnocentrism, and pluralism is likely to weaken what might otherwise be a solid study. This problem, however, is not just a problem with the present book. It is a problem in our world. To take just one example,

we see the very same tension in the current debate over humanities core courses in the United States.

Many contemporary theorists want to dismiss traditional authors, the canon, great books—which after all were written by white, European, upper-class males. These books should be read critically—*very* critically. They should be called before the bar of modern antisexist, antiracist, antiethnocentric criticism and thoroughly denounced. This is all right. I have no objection to it. But there also are problems here.

Keeping in mind what has already been said about the modern drive toward liberation, one of the things that any decent education should do, it seems to me, is to call into question, force us to reflect upon, our own modern norms, values, outlooks, assumptions, and perspectives. In other words, one of the things that any decent education should do is what those old racist, sexist, and ethnocentric dogs back in the nineteenth century were so good at doing—using history to *undermine*. They used history to show us that our present views, assumptions, and values are not fixed, eternal, and natural, that they had not always been held, that they developed in a specific period under specific conditions, that they thus could very obviously change in the future, and thus that something *better* was possible. Darwin used history to undermine the fixity of species. Marx used it to undermine the fixity and naturalness of capitalism. Nietzsche used it to undermine the fixity and normativeness of Judeo-Christian morality. With a bit of work, one could even argue that Freud used the history of the individual to undermine consciousness.

To simply sift through the great books of the past, denouncing them for being racist, sexist, ethnocentric, and so forth, is all right. It will not sustain your interest for long. To see nothing else in them is a serious mistake. To try to see how a modern antiracist, antiethnocentric, and feminist consciousness arose out of them is more interesting. But to do any of this without calling our own norms, values, and assumptions—yes, even our own antiracist, feminist, antiethnocentric values, norms, and assumptions—into question is to perpetuate what we are trying to overcome.

We should, as Marx and other nineteenth-century thinkers did so well, use history to undermine the status quo. We must see that our values, the ones we accept, our own feminist, antiracist, antiethnocentric values, are not just *our* values, above and beyond all that has preceded us, neat and clean and isolated. Our values are the outcome of earlier history. They are certainly a reaction against, but they also grew out of, and thus in an important sense are dependent upon, our earlier

history, which we are so critically sorting through and denouncing. And this certainly would seem to suggest that having grown out of this dirty past there might well be some serious flaws in our own views, unless we think we have reached the Absolute.

We must come to see that our own values, even our best ones, are part of a process, a process that goes beyond but that also grows out of and deeply depends on what precedes us historically. If we fail to see this, the next liberation movement to come along will ruthlessly remind us of it. We must see not only what is no longer acceptable about the past, but how the past made us possible, how we depend upon it, how we are tied to it, how we are stuck with it. We *are* our past to a very great extent. We must see how the past leads to the best norms, values, and assumptions we have and at the same time how our best values, norms, and assumptions, the ones we believe in most deeply, are probably also polluted by our past and therefore need to be improved upon. The past that we continuously reject and undermine also continuously undermines us.

To simply reject the past, to lump it all together as sexist, racist, and ethnocentric, and put it behind us can cause us to forget to question the very values that allow us to dismiss the past in this way. It can cause us to fail to see our own process of development and to rest content with what we are, accept our own values as final: exactly what every liberation movement in the past has mistakenly done, namely, denounce everything but itself.

To bring alive the past, to see our dependence on it, our complicity with it, to see that we have not gotten completely above it or outside it, will cause us to question, reflect upon, our own values—not those of *others* of our contemporaries, but *our* very own values—and to push them further. And, of course, as soon as we develop new values and perspectives and use them to study the past, we will see a new and different past, out of which we now will see ourselves growing in a different way, understand ourselves differently, and so forth.

The past conditions our present norms at least in the sense that we position ourselves to reject precisely what has occurred in our past with the consciousness, perspectives, and tools that our past has made possible for us. We don't reject anything and everything, but our concrete past that conditions, positions, and limits us in a specific way. We do not have an absolute, abstract, disconnected perspective to criticize from. We are the outcome of our specific past. All we can do is to continue to criticize our best values. We can do that by using our past, our traditions, to undermine ourselves and to work toward the

sort of community that will facilitate and reinforce this process. I think that Marx can at least begin to help us think about such matters.

Notes

1. *Communist Manifesto*, in *Marx Engels Collected Works* (hereafter *MECW*) (New York: International, 1975 ff.), VI, 499–504 and, for the German, *Marx Engels Werke* (hereafter *MEW*) (Berlin: Dietz, 1972 ff.), IV, 476–81.

2. *The Guardian*, Vol. 43, No. 28 (May 22, 1991), 14.

3. P. J. Kain, *Schiller, Hegel, and Marx* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1982); *Marx' Method, Epistemology, and Humanism* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1986); *Marx and Ethics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988).

4. See also "Leading Article in No. 179 of the *Kölnische Zeitung*," *MECW*, I, 201 and *MEW*, I, 103.

5. *Ibid.*

6. *Capital*, ed. F. Engels (New York: International, 1967), I, 14–16 and *MEW*, XXIII, 19–22.

7. See the newspaper articles on this topic collected in Volume XIX of *MECW*.

8. *Manifesto*, *MECW*, VI, 486–90 and *MEW*, IV, 464–68.