

## F I V E

## MARXISM AND MORAL HISTORICISM

Even though it is apparent that Marx's thought contains moral judgments and—at least implicitly—moral principles, there are yet those who claim that all of this is irrelevant because his most basic moral (or metaethical) view is that whatever social structures have evolved or whatever social structures will evolve are, ipso facto, morally justified. This is the doctrine of moral historicism. It seems clear, however, that if Marxism is committed to moral historicism, this commitment is paradoxical since, as shown previously, Marxism is also committed to moral criteria for judging social institutions, namely, the values of freedom, community, and self-realization, and an egalitarian distribution of these goods. These moral values and principles are logically independent of the actual course of history and could, under some conceivable circumstances, be at odds with it. But let us examine this supposed difficulty in more detail.

Karl Popper explicates moral historicism as follows:

I have mentioned *moral positivism* (especially that of Hegel), the theory that there is no moral standard but the one which exists; that what is, is reasonable and good; and therefore, that *might makes right*. The practical aspect of this theory is this. A moral criticism of the existing state of affairs is impossible, since this state itself determines the moral standard of things. Now the historicist moral theory we are considering is nothing but another form of moral positivism. For it holds that *coming might is right*. The future is here substituted for the present—that is all. And the practical aspect of this theory is this. A moral criticism for the coming state of affairs is impossible, since this state determines the moral standard of things.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, vol. 2, p. 206.

In the following paragraph, Easton and Guddat amplify the consequences of Marx's (supposed) acceptance of this position:

Marx identified what "ought to be" with the dialectical movement of history. With this identification he not only deprived himself of the moral leverage for criticizing history which was implicit in his humanism, but also provided a justification for anything and everything that happens, no matter how cruel or inhuman.<sup>2</sup>

We should take the phrase "dialectical movement in history" with a grain of salt, since in his later works Marx meant to indicate by the term "dialectical" not the deterministic, philosophical Hegelian view of the development of things (i.e., the development of the *Weltgeist*) but, rather, the need for a *diachronic*—as opposed to a *synchronic*—analysis of the development of societies. Nevertheless, if Easton and Guddat are right about Marx being a moral historicist, some dire consequences are in the offing.

Since, as Popper points out, "it is clear enough that the theory depends largely on the possibility of correct historical prophecy,"<sup>3</sup> let us first examine the claim that Marx (and Marxists) are committed to a rigid sociological determinism (i.e., to the so-called "inevitability thesis" concerning the coming of socialism or communism) and then take up the claim that Marx (and Marxists) are and must be committed to the claim that whatever social structures

<sup>2</sup> Easton and Guddat, "Introduction," in *Writings of the Young Marx*, pp. 29–30. We might note here that some writers see this doctrine as characteristic not of Marx himself but only of a particular school or set of schools within the Marxist tradition. As a characterization of the Stalinist tradition, this is quite plausible and I am not arguing that no group of Marxists held these views, only that Marx and the Classical Marxists did not. As Alasdair MacIntyre writes: "The Stalinist identifies what is morally right with what is actually going to be the outcome of historical development. History is for him a sphere in which objective laws operate, laws of such a kind that the role of the individual human being is predetermined for him by his historical situation. The individual can accept his part and play it out more or less willingly; but he cannot rewrite the play. One is nothing in history but an actor and even one's moral judgments on historical events are only part of the action. The 'ought' of principle is swallowed up in the 'is' of history. By contrast the moral critic puts himself outside of history as a spectator. He invokes his principles as valid independently of the course of historical events. Every issue is to be judged on its moral merits. The 'ought' of principle is completely external to the 'is' of history. For the Stalinist the actual course of history is the horizon of morality; that what belongs to the future is progressive is made into a necessary truth. For the moral critic the question of the course of history, of what is actually happening and the question of what ought to happen are totally independent questions" ("Notes from the Moral Wilderness I," p. 91).

<sup>3</sup> Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, vol. 2, p. 205.

evolve are, ipso facto, morally justified. It is my contention that neither of these theses is, without qualification, correct.

*The Inevitability Thesis*

Support for Marx's prediction that capitalism will give way to communism (or let us say, for our purposes, socialism) can be found at each of several levels of his complex, multi-layered social-scientific theory. These levels are: (1) the theory of historical materialism proper (built around the concepts of the forces of production, relations of production, and the political and ideological superstructure and propounding the laws of technological and economic determinism); (2) the theory of classes and class struggle (i.e., the struggle of classes over the social surplus product and social powers, benefits, and opportunities generally); and (3) Marx's more specific theories concerning the economic and social dysfunctions of capitalism and his projections concerning post-capitalist societies.

On the standard (or technological determinist) interpretation of historical materialism, Marx posits two important causal (or nomological) relations holding between the categories listed above. The first is that the forces of production (machines, land, human labor power, etc.) in some sense determine the relations of production (whose legal analogue is property relations). In particular, whenever the production relations begin to inhibit or "fetter" the forces of production, they are "burst asunder," and new production relations—ones that do not fetter the productive forces—are established. The second nomological regularity asserted by Marx is that the forces of production and the relations of production (which together constitute the mode of production) determine, in some sense, the vast political, legal, and cultural (or ideological) superstructure. As Marx puts it in his famous "Preface," "with the change of the economic foundations the entire immense superstructure is more or less rapidly transformed."<sup>4</sup> This is known as the thesis of economic determinism.

At this level, the advent of communism is predicted once one assumes (as does Marx) both that communism is more productively efficient than capitalism and that it is the only historically possible alternative to capitalism that is more efficient. Since Marx's theory predicts that—at least in the long run—a less pro-

<sup>4</sup> Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, p. 5.

ductively efficient social system must give way to a more productively efficient social system, capitalism will eventually give way to communism or, as we are supposing, at least to its first stage, socialism. (Again, for this claim in Marx's writings, we should note the problem of the lack of social-psychological microfoundations in terms of people's beliefs and intentions.)

As noted in the introduction, however, there is an alternative interpretation of historical materialism, according to which property relations are determined by their tendency to promote or hinder surplus maximization as opposed to their tendency to optimize productive forces. On this interpretation, capitalism is likely to give way to socialism because people in general, and the working class in particular, will come to realize that the economic dysfunctions of capitalism prohibit it from maximizing the goods and services that can be produced, given the current productive forces. This view dovetails more readily with Marx's theory of classes and class struggle and his more specific analysis and critique of capitalism.

At the level of Marx's theory of classes and class struggle, it is nomologically necessary (or at least extremely probable) that capitalism will give way to socialism, given the following assumptions. First, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat are the two remaining major classes in capitalist society, i.e., the only two classes capable of setting up a state that conforms to their historical interests. Second, the proletariat has the power, once it becomes organized and motivated, to alter society to conform more to its own interests, i.e., to affect the transformation to socialism. Third, classes that are historically aligned with progressive economic forces generally achieve—at least in the long run—the organization and motivation necessary to promote their interests (i.e., the common interests of their members) in the struggle over the surplus social product, available leisure time, etc. Thus, just as the insurgent bourgeoisie was eventually able to usurp the landed aristocracy as the ruling class in the transformation from feudalism to the more productive economic system of capitalism, the proletariat is bound (or at least likely) to replace the bourgeoisie as the "ruling" class in the transformation from capitalism to the more productive economic system of socialism or communism.

Note, however, that a crucial difference between these two historical transformations is that the capitalist economic system developed on a large scale within feudal society, whereas it is impossible for the socialist economic system to develop on a large scale

within capitalist society. The greater efficiency and productivity of socialism (according to Marx and Marxists) comes into being only at the level of an entire society since an essential part of its efficiency depends on national or society-wide economic planning. In addition, the ruling capitalist class—being cognizant of its own historical interests—will try to derail the development of successful worker-owned and controlled enterprises that could serve as showcases for socialism. It will generally be able to do so since such an enterprise will still be tied to the capitalist economic system as a whole and will thus be dependent upon the advancement of capital and other financial dealings that are likely to be made difficult by the capitalist class (and the power elite serving its interests). Whereas all previous transformations from one sociohistorical epoch to another were basically invisible-hand processes, “the proletarian movement [must be] the *self-conscious*, independent movement of the immense majority, in the interest of the immense majority”<sup>5</sup> (emphasis added).

At the level of Marx’s economic theories we find the negative effects of capitalism which give content to both the above theories: capitalism is inherently unstable and dysfunctional because it must suffer the cyclical crises of overproduction. Since a socialist economy need not be unstable and dysfunctional in this respect and—Marx implicitly assumes—has no other overwhelming dysfunction that would make it even less productively efficient than capitalism, socialism is more productively efficient than capitalism and will thus succeed it. Furthermore, since socialism will benefit the proletariat and all other subservient classes because of its greater productive efficiency and—Marx, again, implicitly assumes—its propensity toward a more egalitarian distribution of social benefits and decision-making power, the proletariat and its allies will come to strive for the abolition of capitalism and the creation of socialism and, in all probability, will be successful.

Marx actually went beyond these claims, however, with his view that the capitalist economy will eventually suffer a complete collapse due to the increasing severity of the crises of overproduction or—if it happens to survive these crises for a sufficient amount of time—will collapse due to the falling rate of profit (which is due to the increasing proportion of constant to variable capital). The question I now wish to take up is this: is Marx really committed at any of these levels of his theory to the *inevitability*—

<sup>5</sup> Marx and Engels, “Manifesto of the Communist Party,” p. 344.

as opposed to the mere *probability*—of the abolition of capitalism and its replacement by socialism and, if so, is his position tenable?

At the level of his theory of historical materialism proper, what we want to know is whether we can deduce the inevitability of socialism from Marx’s thesis of technical or economic determinism taken in conjunction with correct empirical descriptions of social and economic conditions. The first thing to notice, perhaps, is that in the famous Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1858–1859), Marx describes this theory as only “a guiding thread for my studies” and does not claim that it is a wholly adequate or complete theory. Secondly, the deterministic base-superstructure model emphasized there is only one—albeit the dominant one—of several heuristic models at work in his writings. As Melvin Rader emphasizes, two other models can be detected in his works.<sup>6</sup> One is a modified, “dialectical” base-superstructure model in which there is considerable interaction between base and superstructure, although, as Engels puts it, the economic or material base is “the ultimately determining element in history.” Another is an organic model that asserts only that “the economic movement” is “by far the strongest, most primeval, most decisive” among the various interacting economic, political, and ideological factors involved in historical explanation. This is not to say that the strict base-superstructure theory of the Preface is a priori untenable, only that Marx’s overall approach to accounting for sociohistorical phenomena is much more complex and sophisticated than it is sometimes given credit for being.

Nevertheless, there are those who claim that Marx is committed to absolute laws of historical development and thus that his theory is not merely false but unscientific. It is on this basis, in fact, that Popper labels Marxism “the purest, the most developed and the most dangerous form of historicism.”<sup>7</sup>

By “historicism” in this context, Popper means “an approach to the social sciences which assumes that *historical prediction* is their principle aim, and which assumes that this aim is attainable by discovering the ‘rhythms’ or ‘patterns’, the ‘laws’ or ‘trends’ that underlie the evolution of history.”<sup>8</sup> Marx’s theory of historical materialism is unscientific, according to Popper, because—like all historicist theories—it confuses *trends in history* with *laws of history*. “The central mistake of historicism,” according to Popper, is that

<sup>6</sup> Rader, *Marx’s Interpretation of History*, pp. 3–85, 184–186.

<sup>7</sup> Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, vol. 2, p. 87.

<sup>8</sup> Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism*, p. 3.

its "laws of development" turn out to be absolute trends; trends which like laws, do not depend on initial conditions, and which carry us irresistibly in a certain direction into the future. They are the basis of unconditional prophecies, as opposed to conditional scientific predictions.<sup>9</sup>

. . . historicists overlook the dependence of trends on initial conditions. They operate with trends as if they were unconditional, like laws. Their confusion of laws with trends makes them believe in trends which are unconditional (and therefore general); or, as we may say, in "absolute trends"; for example, in a general historical tendency towards progress—"a tendency towards a better and happier state."<sup>10</sup>

While it is true that Marx was most definitively a child of the Enlightenment and, as such, had a predilection to believe in the inevitable progress of humanity, it is not clear that he thought this progress was guaranteed by "absolute historical laws" as opposed to discernible trends dependent for their continuation on the continuing existence of certain initial conditions. Furthermore, even if Marx did make the mistake Popper suggests, it is even less clear that contemporary Marxists must continue to make it.

The passage in Marx's works that Popper seems to see as the key to proving Marx's historicism (since he quotes it as evidence to this effect in both *The Poverty of Historicism* and the second volume of *The Open Society and Its Enemies*) is: "When a society has discovered the natural law that determines its movement, even then it can neither overleap the natural phases of its evolution, nor shuffle them out of the world by a stroke of the pen. But this much it can do: it can shorten and lessen the birthpangs."<sup>11</sup>

Even though Marx often spoke of "inexorable laws" of social development and of the inevitability of certain historical transformations (e.g., the transition from capitalism to communism), it seems dubious that he thought these "laws" were absolute in the

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 128.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Cited by Popper in *The Poverty of Historicism*, p. 51, and in *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, vol. 2, p. 86.

Interestingly enough, the Moore and Aveling translation of the same passage does not have nearly so deterministic a ring. Their translation is: "And even when society has got upon the right track for the discovery of the natural laws of its movement . . . it can neither clear by bold leaps, nor remove by legal enactments, the obstacles offered by the successive phases of its normal development. But it can shorten and lessen the birth-pangs" (*Capital*, vol. 1, p. 10).

sense of not depending on initial conditions. In the same breath that he affirms the "inevitability," for example, of "capitalist laws of production," he identifies these laws with tendencies or trends: "It is a question of these laws themselves, of these tendencies, working with iron necessity toward inevitable results"<sup>12</sup> (emphasis added). (Even though the phrase "iron necessity" seems to support Popper's absolutist interpretation, it is important to see that Marx may have been amenable to identifying these laws with tendencies or trends.) It seems wildly implausible that he thought these "laws" or tendencies or trends would continue no matter how initial conditions changed. Even his most abstract and general "laws" (namely, technical and economic determinism) are so obviously dependent upon such initial conditions as the continued existence of the human species, the continued existence of biological and psychological human needs that are fulfilled through human productive activity, and the continued invention of new technology that a person of Marx's intellectual stature could hardly have supposed that the postulated "laws" would continue to operate in their absence.

The fact of the matter is that Marx's theory of historical materialism can (and must) be thought of in terms of both the trends or tendencies he called "laws" and certain sorts of initial conditions. Therefore, they are not causal or nomological laws in the absolute sense. But this seems irrelevant to their scientific status. If Marx claims that the "law" of economic determinism is always applicable or that the transition from capitalism to socialism is "inevitable," he obviously ought to be understood as asserting that not only his posited "laws" but the initial conditions they depend upon are going to remain operational. The degree of probability that one invests in the continuation of these initial conditions is, of course, as important for purposes of prediction as the degree of probability one invests in the "laws" or trends themselves. For example, whereas for Marx—being happily ignorant of the possibility of the nuclear annihilation of humanity—the initial condition of the continued existence of the human species seemed assured, we unfortunately have reason not to assign the maintenance of this condition as great a probability. Even if Marx's theory is correct, his prediction of the "inevitable" advent of socialism will obviously not be borne out if humanity destroys itself.

Even Popper recognizes the legitimacy of explanations and pre-

<sup>12</sup> Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, p. 8.

dictions based on historical trends and initial conditions. He states, for example:

But what about those who see that trends depend on conditions, and who try to find these conditions and to formulate them explicitly? My answer is that I have no quarrel with them. On the contrary: that trends occur cannot be doubted.<sup>13</sup>

... if we have reason to assume the persistence of the relevant initial conditions then, clearly, we can assume that these trends or "dynamic quasi-laws" will persist, so that they may be used, like laws, as a basis for prediction.<sup>14</sup>

But even if Marx thought the laws of historical materialism "absolute" in Popper's sense instead of being dependent on the continued existence of initial conditions (which can include other trends, of course), there is absolutely no reason that the contemporary Marxist cannot render the theory in terms of trends and initial conditions as Popper demands. There is no reason, therefore—at least at this level of Marx's theory—to accept the claim that the advent of communism (or socialism) is inevitable rather than merely possible, probable, or extremely probable. But how does the inevitability thesis fare at the other levels of Marx's theory?

At the level of Marx's class analysis of society, the inevitability thesis, as stated by Kautsky, is that though the advent of socialism is "certainly not necessary in the fatalistic sense, that a higher power will present [it] to us of itself," it is nevertheless "necessary [and] unavoidable" in the sense that it is inevitable that

inventors improve technic and the capitalists in their desire for profit revolutionize the whole economic life, as it is also inevitable that the workers aim for shorter hours of labour and higher wages, that they organize themselves, that they fight the capitalist class and its state, as it is inevitable that they aim for the conquest of political power and the overthrow of capitalist rule. Socialism is inevitable because the class struggle and the victory of the proletariat is inevitable.<sup>15</sup>

This victory of the proletariat and advent of socialism, as stated previously, are predicted by Marx and Marxists on the basis that:

<sup>13</sup> Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism*, p. 128.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 126.

<sup>15</sup> Kautsky, *Ethics and the Materialist Conception of History*, p. 206.

(1) over the long run classes achieve motivation and organization necessary to promote their own interests in terms of promoting social arrangements that best answer their needs, and (2) once the working class—and other exploited classes in capitalist society—achieve the motivation and organization necessary to promote their own interests, they will affect the transformation to the proper social arrangements (in this case socialism). Now each of these premises and even Marx's theory of classes—which structurally defines classes in terms of their relation to production and, on this basis, assigns them certain "objective" interests—are challengeable. It seems, however, that a very strong case can be made for the prediction of the transition to socialism if these premises are true and if certain initial conditions (or trends)—like the continued existence of the human species—continue to be met.

While the series of successful anti-capitalist revolutions in this century would seem to indicate that—at least under some circumstances—the working class has the power to change society (in conjunction with the middle-class intellectuals who usually stock the leadership positions of revolutionary parties and, in some cases, with the peasantry), is it reasonable to claim that such anti-capitalist revolutions are *inevitable* and, thus, that the advent of socialism is *necessary* rather than merely *possible*, *probable*, or *extremely probable*? To claim justifiably that this is inevitable would mean that we can (justifiably) assign a 100 percent probability to the claim that the working class will come to perceive and pursue its own true or objective *class* interests as well as to the claim that it—together with other exploited classes—will achieve the organization necessary to affect the transition in question.

But is one justified in assigning a 100 percent probability to these claims? Consider the first claim: can we be 100 percent certain that the majority of members of the working class in, for example, advanced capitalist societies will come to perceive their objective interests and be motivated to pursue them? Furthermore, can we be 100 percent sure that they will come to accept the empirical belief that socialism is more stable, democratic, and egalitarian and less exploitative than the best capitalist societies and that this sort of socialism is historically possible? Can we be 100 percent sure that the working class by and large will develop what Marx calls "communist consciousness" or, in other words, develop from what Georg Lukács calls a *class-in-itself* into a *class-for-itself*? The answer to this, it seems to me, is no: even if one feels confident in making these predictions, it would be foolish to claim for them a 100 per-

cent probability, i.e., to claim that it is impossible for these predictions not to come true.

For one thing, though capitalism does tend to radicalize the less well-off segments of a population as well as some more well-off sympathizers, and though revolutionary movements are periodically generated in most capitalist societies, Marx seems to have greatly underestimated the power and tenacity of such ideological rivals of communist consciousness as nationalism and religion. In *The German Ideology*, for example, we find Marx claiming that

if this mass of men, [the proletariat] ever had any theoretical notions, e.g., religion, etc., those have now long been dissolved by circumstance.<sup>16</sup>

. . . universal competition . . . forced all individuals to strain their energy to the utmost. It destroyed as far as possible ideology, religion, morality, etc., and where it could not do this, made them into a palpable lie.<sup>17</sup>

In the "Communist Manifesto" Marx claims of the proletariat that

modern industrial labor, modern subjection to capital, the same in England as in France, in America as in Germany, has stripped him of every trace of national character. Law, morality, religion, are to him so many bourgeois prejudices, behind which lurk in ambush just as many bourgeois interests.<sup>18</sup>

The cruelest irony in these statements is that the age of nationalism—with all its horrors—was just beginning when they were written. Even today anyone who wants to approach an adequate understanding of the failure of socialist revolutions in the West must take into consideration the continuing strength of nationalism and other nonclass group identities, as well as the so-called "bourgeoisification" of the workers in advanced industrialized countries in the West. In addition, the psychological and ideological effects on working classes resulting from the identification of existing state-socialist societies with genuine socialism (by both sides in the East-West conflict) and the interest that the state-socialist bureaucracies and their associated parties around the world

<sup>16</sup> Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, p. 130.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 136.

<sup>18</sup> Marx and Engels, "Manifesto of the Communist Party," p. 344.

have often had in preserving the local status quo rather than altering it must also be considered.

Even the so-called bourgeoisification of the working class in the West (made possible by the super-exploitation of the Third World) and Marx's theory of the fetishism of capital, money, and commodities—which asserts that the true exploitative nature of capitalist society is hidden by the appearance of these surface phenomena—cannot account for the degree to which the proletariat around the world has failed to be transformed from a class-in-itself to a class-for-itself. But Marx's theories simply did not anticipate the degree to which proletarians and others are influenced by such ideological factors as nationalism, religion, and morality. The truth is that even the continuing economic and political crises of capitalism do not guarantee the development of communist consciousness among the proletariat and the oppressed to the degree Marx projected. (It is perhaps Antonio Gramsci's attempts to come to terms with this theoretical difficulty that have made his works so attractive to contemporary Marxists.)

One of the major modifications of Marxist empirical theory made by Lenin, in fact, is his claim that the working class will, in the normal course of events, develop only trade-union consciousness. Communist consciousness—since it includes the acceptance of some quite sophisticated theories—must be brought into the proletariat from the outside by intellectuals and professional organizers, who come largely from the middle classes. But for Lenin, Luxemburg, Trotsky, and other early twentieth-century revolutionary Marxists, even the fulfillment of the conditions of the continuing social, economic, and political crises of capitalism and the evolution of communist consciousness among large sections of the working class and other exploited classes are not sufficient for successful socialist revolutions. Another necessary condition on their view is the existence of a revolutionary socialist party with a correct political program, a correct strategy, and an astute sense of timing. Successful socialist revolutions occur, according to this view, only if both the "objective" condition of capitalist crisis and the "subjective" conditions of the evolution of communist consciousness among large numbers of the oppressed and the existence of the right sort of revolutionary movement are fulfilled at the same time—and even then it may take a not inconsiderable amount of luck.

But the thesis that socialism is inevitable even under all of these conditions is questionable on another ground. Even if a transfor-

mation from capitalist to post-capitalist society is inevitable under these conditions, this does not mean that the advent of *socialism* is inevitable. That is to say, not all possible societies that would be classified as post-capitalist (on the basis of having socialized productive property and introduced economic planning) will be classified as socialist societies if we take socialism (i.e., the "first stage of communism") to have the democratic characteristics attributed to it by Marx and the Classical Marxists. It may be the case that—for reasons Marxists have not explained—only bureaucratic state-socialist societies rather than genuinely socialist societies will come into being and persist even after the worldwide abolition of capitalism. Although Trotsky, for example, never gave up his belief that a worldwide, genuinely socialist society would eventually be brought about, he was not dogmatic enough simply to deny the possibility that all future post-capitalist societies would be bureaucratically deformed. He faced up to this disheartening possibility when, toward the end of his life, he stated:

The historic alternative, carried to the end, is as follows: either the Stalin regime is an abhorrent relapse in the process of transforming bourgeois society into a socialist society, or the Stalin regime is the first stage of a new exploiting society. If the second prognosis proves to be correct, then, of course, the bureaucracy will become a new exploiting class. However onerous the second perspective may be, if the world proletariat should actually prove incapable of fulfilling the mission placed upon it by the course of development, nothing else would remain except only to recognize that the socialist program, based on the internal contradictions of capitalist society, ended as a Utopia. It is self-evident that a new "minimum" program would be required for the defense of the interests of the slaves of the totalitarian bureaucratic society.<sup>19</sup>

Finally, we must keep in mind another possibility Trotsky constantly stressed, namely, the possibility that the struggle between the two major contending classes in capitalist society (the bourgeoisie and the proletariat) may end in their mutual destruction and a return to barbarism rather than the advent of socialism. For these reasons we can conclude that though Marx's theory of class struggle may prove revolutionary upsurges under capitalism to be

<sup>19</sup> Trotsky, *In Defense of Marxism*, p. 9.

inevitable (assuming the continuation of certain initial conditions), it by no means proves that the advent of socialism is inevitable.

*The Collapse Theory of Capitalism*

Are there any better arguments for the "inevitability thesis" at the level of Marx's more specific analysis of the dysfunctions of capitalism as a socioeconomic system? Is the advent of socialism or (at least) the fall of capitalism inevitable due either to a complete and sudden collapse of the economic system because of increasingly severe crises of overproduction (i.e., depressions) or to a grinding halt in production due to lack of capital investment resulting from the tendency toward a falling rate of profit? Marx, Engels, and other early Marxists seem to have assumed that such an economic collapse or a complete economic stagnation is inevitable. This contention, however, began to be challenged by Marxists around the turn of the century as it became increasingly apparent that Marx had underestimated the overall resiliency of the capitalist system in terms of its ability to purge itself of excess goods as well as inefficient enterprises through recessions and depressions without suffering a complete collapse—though not, of course, without causing a great deal of suffering. As Rosa Luxemburg points out in "Reform or Revolution," though capitalist societies have undergone one economic crisis after another, they have also exhibited an amazing ability to rebound—an ability Marx did not foresee, and which monopolization, Keynesian economic theory, and government regulation of the economy have further reinforced. The reason usually given by contemporary Marxists for rejecting the collapse theory of capitalism is that Marx did not foresee or take sufficiently into account certain counteractive tendencies. As the contemporary Marxist (or "Neo-Marxist") economist Paul Sweezy puts it,

Capitalist production normally harbors a tendency to underconsumption (or overproduction). . . . In principle this tendency may manifest itself in a crisis or in stagnation of production. Both are methods, the one sudden and perhaps temporary, the other steady and continuous, whereby accumulation is prevented from outrunning the requirements of the market for consumption goods.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Sweezy, *The Theory of Capitalist Development*, p. 216.

Up to this point we have neglected those forces which have the effect of counteracting the tendency to under-consumption, forces which evidently have been powerful enough to dominate the actual historical course of capitalist development. In order to reach an answer to the question which at present concerns us—is capitalism in fact headed for a state of chronic depression?—we must alter this procedure and focus our attention on the counteracting forces.<sup>21</sup>

Generally speaking, the counteracting forces may be grouped together into two main categories: those which have the effect of raising the rate of growth of means of production, and those which deprive a disproportionate growth in means of production of its economically disruptive consequences. In the latter category fall (1) new industries, and (2) faulty investment; in the former, (3) population growth, (4) unproductive consumption, and (5) state expenditures.<sup>22</sup>

On Sweezy's analysis, the last factor, state expenditures—especially the pump-priming of the economy with money that is not taken from anyone's income but is created either directly or by borrowing from banks—and altering the pattern of volume of taxation and expenditure can go a long way toward influencing total consumption and total accumulation and thus significantly help to counteract the tendency to underconsumption. "The tendency to underconsumption," according to Sweezy, "instead of translating itself into chronic depression at a certain stage of development, becomes merely a *tendency* to chronic depression which may be counteracted by a new force, the deliberate action of the state."<sup>23</sup> (Sweezy does not here go into the consequences of this sort of state intervention—namely, permanent structural inflation—but, so far as ameliorating the evil effects of capitalism goes, this may be a classic example of robbing Peter to pay Paul. The bourgeois economist's answer to this dilemma appears to be that of Keynes, who noted that we are all dead in the long run.)

Sweezy also challenges Marx's analysis, which leads him to the law of the falling rate of profit, which

to [Marx] possessed great significance. It demonstrated that capitalist production had certain internal barriers to its own

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 217.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., pp. 217-218.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 235.

indefinite expansion. On the one hand, a rising organic composition of capital is the expression of growing labor productivity; on the other hand, the falling rate of profit which accompanies it must ultimately choke up the channels of capitalist initiative.<sup>24</sup>

While not denying the existence of a trend for the rate of profits to fall under capitalism, Sweezy argues that Marx's deduction of the law is not sound. "The tendency of the rate of profit to fall," according to Sweezy, "is deduced by Marx on the assumption that the organic composition of capital rises while the rate of surplus value remains constant."<sup>25</sup> To this Sweezy responds: "There seems to be no doubt about the propriety of assuming a rising organic composition of capital. Is it justifiable, however to assume *at the same time* a constant rate of surplus value?"<sup>26</sup> And to this he answers:

Marx was hardly justified even in terms of his own theoretical system, in assuming a constant rate of surplus value simultaneously with a rising organic composition of capital. A rise in the organic composition of capital must mean an increase in labor productivity, and we have Marx's word for it that higher productivity is invariably accompanied by a higher rate of surplus value. In the general case, therefore, we ought to assume that the increasing organic composition of capital proceeds *pari passu* with a rising rate of surplus value.

If both the organic composition of capital and the rate of surplus value are assumed variable, as we think they should be, then the direction in which the rate of profit will change becomes indeterminate. All we can say is that the rate of profit will fall if the percentage increase in the rate of surplus value is less than the percentage decrease in the proportion of variable to total capital.<sup>27</sup>

. . . there is no general presumption that changes in the organic composition of capital will be relatively so much greater than changes in the rate of surplus value that the former will dominate movements in the rate of profit. On the contrary, it would seem that we must regard the two variables as of roughly co-ordinate importance. For this reason Marx's for-

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., pp. 96-97.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 100.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 102.



mulation of the law of the falling tendency of the rate of profit is not very convincing.<sup>28</sup>

This does not mean that there is no tendency for the rate of profit to fall. Not only Marx but classical theorists and modern theorists as well have all regarded a falling tendency of the rate of profit as a basic feature of capitalism. All I have tried to show is that it is not possible to demonstrate a falling tendency of the rate of profit by beginning the analysis with the rising organic composition of capital.<sup>29</sup>

Sweezy then goes on to argue that the causal mechanism behind this tendency toward a falling rate of profit is to be found in the process of capital accumulation. In addition, however, there are other social and economic forces that enter into the determination of the rate of profit which Marx did not adequately take into account.

These forces may be classified as those tending to depress the rate of profit, and those tending to elevate the rate of profit. Among the forces tending to depress the rate of profit we may mention (1) trade unions and (2) state action designed to benefit labor; among the forces tending to elevate the rate of profit we may mention (3) employers' organizations, (4) export of capital, (5) formation of monopolies, and (6) state action designed to benefit capital.<sup>30</sup>

Thus Marx's thesis that capitalist systems must either collapse or grind to an economic halt is not tenable.<sup>31</sup> His major complaint about capitalism as an economic system is not, of course, that it is bound to collapse but, in part, that it is dysfunctional in certain important respects (particularly in allowing productive forces to lie fallow during downturns in the business cycle) and that it generally functions to promote the interests of capital over those of labor (particularly in its constant propensity to increase the degree of exploitation of the laboring classes and, in general, to deprive them of any social benefit beyond those necessary to maintain an

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 104.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 105.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 107.

<sup>31</sup> See, also, Elster, *Making Sense of Marx*, pp. 155-161; Roemer, "Technical Change and the 'Tendency of the Rate of Profit to Fall'"; van Parijs, "The Falling Rate of Profit Theory of Crisis"; and Weisskopf, "Marxian Crisis Theory and the Rate of Profit in the Postwar U.S. Economy," and "Sources of Cyclical Downturn and Inflation."

acquiescent and functioning labor force). For purposes of the present work, however, the important point is that even if Marx is wrong in asserting that the continuing crises of overproduction or the tendency of the rate of profit to fall must result, at some point, in the collapse or complete stagnation of the capitalist economic system, he may well have been correct in enough of his empirical theory and his analysis of capitalism to provide a reasonable ground for both the empirical belief that the transformation from capitalism to socialism is a genuine historical possibility (or even probability), as well as the evaluative contention that such a transformation is—on the assumption of any humanitarian moral theory—to be endorsed.

### *Morality and History*

Having argued that no unquestionable arguments exist for the "inevitability thesis" at any of the levels of Marx's empirical theory, let us now turn our attention back to his supposed moral historicism and ask: even if the inevitability thesis were correct, would Marx (and Marxists) be committed to the thesis that whatever social formations evolve (or are destined to evolve) are, ipso facto, morally justified? The answer to this, again, seems to be no. As John Somerville points out:

If the concept of inevitability can exist side by side with "ethical considerations" in Spinoza, the Stoics, and other philosophers, why not Marx?

Are there not at least three possibilities involved? A thinker who believes that a further stage of society will inevitably develop might believe,

- 1) that this further stage will be ethically worse than the present;
- 2) that it will be neither better nor worse;
- 3) that it will be better.

Marx clearly is in the third category.<sup>32</sup>

What Somerville is getting at here is that Marx and Marxists hold (or at least should hold) that socialism and communism are the best of all historically possible societies *not* because they are *destined to evolve* but because they *best meet certain criteria of goodness*

<sup>32</sup> Somerville, "An Open Letter to Bertrand Russell," p. 70.

or rightness (for example, they better achieve human liberation or are more just than any other historically possible society).

Furthermore, it is immediately obvious that if "destined to historically evolve" is to be taken as a *definition* of "morally good," it is—like any other naturalistic definition of this term—vulnerable to the open-question argument. If "morally good" means "that which evolves," then whether or not something that has evolved is morally good should not be an open question. It would be the same as asking whether what is morally good is morally good. But, since asking whether or not a social formation destined to evolve is morally good is a meaningful and disputable question, the proposed definition of "morally good" cannot be correct.

However, very few contemporary thinkers familiar with these difficulties would want to claim they are *defining* "morally good" here. Instead they will claim to be offering a *theory of moral goodness*: the theory that whatever social formations evolve are—as a matter of fact though *not* as a matter of logical truth—morally good. But as a theory of moral goodness this is obviously wrong. In order for a principle of moral goodness (or theory of the good) to hold up, it must be in agreement with our considered moral judgments concerning any case we can think of—both actual and possible. This being the case, it is easy to see that "whatever kind of social formation evolves is good" is not going to serve as an adequate criterion. It is logically possible that a world fascist society must inevitably evolve, but—obviously—very few people would claim that such a society is morally justified or morally good even if it should happen to be inevitable. Under these circumstances it may be incoherent to claim that such a society "ought not to evolve" (since, as Hume puts it, "ought implies can"), but this does not mean that one has to endorse it as morally justified or good.

The point is that even though Marx certainly thought that the evolution of a "truly human" (i.e., morally good) society is *nomologically* necessary (at least given the perpetuation of certain initial conditions such as the continued existence of the human species and continuing technological development), there is no evidence at all that he is committed to the thesis that this is *logically* necessary. Given his values, Marx naturally views socialism and communism (as he conceives them) as morally superior to capitalism or any other form of society he thought historically possible. Nevertheless, since it is at least logically possible for a world fascist society to evolve, it would be absurd for Marx or any Marxist to commit him-

self or herself to the doctrine of moral historicism. If the question were put to Marx in this way and after making these distinctions, it is inconceivable—assuming he understood what we were saying—that he would have accepted the doctrine of moral historicism.

Although Marx may be committed to the thesis that a particular society cannot be judged *just* or *unjust* by any but its own (internal) standards, as, for example, Robert Tucker and Allen Wood suggest, it is nevertheless clear that Marx can and did make moral assessments of both actual and possible sets of social arrangements and that these assessments are both transhistorical and logically independent of considerations as to which social arrangements have evolved or are bound to evolve.

Perhaps what has bothered Marx and Marxists is that if a certain state of affairs or set of social institutions is inevitable or, at any rate, unalterable, then it serves little purpose to condemn them as immoral. As George Panichas writes:

It serves little purpose, on Marx's view, to refer to a state of affairs (or set of relationships) as morally condemnable if that state of affairs is unalterable or unavoidable. While Marx's views on this matter are complicated and cryptic (especially his view on whether something is immoral even if it serves no purpose to describe it as such), it appears that Marx maintained the position (a Marxist variant of the Kantian "ought not" implies "might not") that it serves little if any purpose to morally criticize some state of affairs if, at the time when such a criticism is to be offered, that state of affairs cannot be reasonably expected to be alterable or avoidable (where avoidable does not preclude terminable).<sup>33</sup>

There is a problem, however, in deciding what is and what is not to count as "unalterable." While there are paradigmatic cases of alterable and unalterable states of affairs, there are many cases that are not so clear. If someone (for some bizarre reason) offers the moral judgment that "pigs ought to be able to fly" or that "human beings should not ever be required to suffer pain of any sort" or that "human beings ought to live in complete harmony and never come into conflict with one another," we would say that he or she is violating the "ought"-implies-"can" criterion because it is not possible to fulfill these prescriptions. On the other hand, such judgments as "abortions ought not to be allowed" or "infanticide

<sup>33</sup> Panichas, "Vampires, Werewolves, and Economic Exploitation," p. 238.

ought not to be allowed" or "slavery ought not to be allowed" clearly do not violate this criterion because they are concerned with states of affairs that are clearly alterable. (This does not mean, of course, that all cases of abortion, infanticide, or slavery can be prevented because there are social sanctions against them, but it certainly seems possible, by means of social sanctions, either to allow or not allow them to become general practices.)

But consider now the case of the claim "slavery ought not to be allowed" made, let's say, in Rome in 70 B.C. around the time of the Servile Wars. Does this moral judgment violate the condition that "ought" implies "can"? The answer to this question is far from clear since it is far from clear whether slavery at that time was alterable or unalterable as a social institution. It was not, of course, impossible for individuals to escape the social position of slavery. Many escaped and were able to live as nonslaves elsewhere, and some (such as the Stoic philosopher Epictetus) were legally elevated from this position. So if one interprets the claim "slavery ought not to be allowed" as entailing the claims that "slavery as a social institution ought to be abolished" and "individual slaves, wherever possible, ought to be freed," then whether or not slavery as a social institution was alterable one would still have an obligation to free slaves if and whenever one was in a position to do so.

But the primary question is whether or not slavery as a social institution was at that time alterable. Presumably most Marxists would hold that it was not alterable (i.e., not capable of being eliminated) at that time because the forces of production were not yet ripe enough to force or allow a change in the relations of production, which, of course, the elimination of slavery would be. But even if this were true at an international level, it does not seem impossible that if the slave rebellions had succeeded, a slavery-free enclave could have been carved out of part of the Roman Empire.<sup>34</sup> This is not, of course, to say that all relations of exploitation

<sup>34</sup> In reality, however, the slave revolts in the Ancient World were aimed at freeing the individuals involved but not at abolishing slavery as a social institution. As Elster notes, "One can imagine three forms of struggle among the slaves: struggle to improve the slave condition, struggle to escape the slave condition, struggle to abolish the slave condition. The only organized collective action by slaves in Classical Antiquity—the slave revolts—took the second form. Slaves, when they revolted, fought for a freedom that included the right to possess other individuals as slaves," ("Three Challenges to Class," p. 152). For a discussion of the Marxist analysis of classes in Classical Antiquity, see M. I. Finley, *The Ancient Economy*, Chatto and Windus, London, 1973, and *Economy and Society in Ancient Greece*, Chatto and Windus, London, 1981; G.E.M. de Ste. Croix, *The Class Struggle in the Ancient World*, Duckworth, London, 1981; and Elster, *Making Sense of Marx*, pp. 318–342.

could have been abolished in such a society. No one perhaps would disagree with the Marxist's claim that a complex society under conditions of relative scarcity and a relatively low level of development of productive forces—such as that existing on the Italian peninsula around 70 B.C.—could not have become a classless society, i.e., a society without a ruling class which in some way extracted surplus value from a ruled (or exploited) class or group of classes. But whether or not one of the primary class relations had to be that of slavery seems at least debatable, perhaps indeterminate.

But even if slavery as a social institution was unalterable in Rome in 70 B.C. or for the next several hundred years thereafter, does this mean that the moral judgment made at that time that "slavery ought not to be allowed" violates the "ought"-implies-"can" maxim? After all, slavery was not an unalterable state of affairs under any and all historical conditions, as its elimination in later historical epochs has proven. What we need, it seems, is a number of distinctions concerning the ways in which states of affairs are unalterable. This would include states of affairs that are *logically impossible* to alter ("squares ought to be round"), those that are *physically impossible* to alter ("pigs ought to be able to fly"), those that are—for social-scientific reasons—impossible to alter in any historical epoch ("people ought to live in complete harmony and never come into conflict with one another"), and those that are—for socioeconomic reasons—impossible to alter only within a particular historical epoch or a particular existing set of social arrangements ("slavery ought not to be allowed," as said in Rome in 70 B.C. or earlier).

Although I do not pretend to have a completely worked out theory concerning this issue, it seems that given these distinctions the moral judgment "slavery ought not to be allowed," when made during an historical epoch in which it is not possible to abolish slavery as a social institution, would be a violation of Hume's "ought"-implies-"can" maxim if it were meant to apply to the immediate present or within the historical epoch generally. But such an utterance would not count as a violation if it were meant to apply to the indefinite future, i.e., not only to the current historical epoch but to future ones as well.

Be this as it may, even if "ought" implies "can" (as Hume puts it) or "ought not" implies "might not" (as Kant puts it), what follows is *not* that one cannot morally criticize or condemn an unalterable state of affairs but only that in so doing one is making an

*aretaic* judgment (i.e., a judgment of moral worth) as opposed to a *deontic* judgment (i.e., a judgment of moral obligation). We obviously cannot be obligated to change what cannot be changed, but we can judge a situation as morally good or bad, better or worse—at least in comparison to other *logically possible* worlds.

These distinctions seem to lead to the conclusion that the Marxist (or anyone else, for that matter) need not morally approve or disapprove of a society just because it is historically inevitable (which perhaps none are); but if he or she makes a deontic judgment that some society or other ought to exist (a judgment that presumably entails certain obligations), then in order not to violate the "ought"-implies-"can" maxim, the society in question must be historically possible. Conversely, to make the judgment that a particular society ought not exist, it must be possible for that society not to exist. Thus, if a right-libertarian like Robert Nozick were secretly convinced that some sort of post-capitalist society (state-socialist, socialist, or communist) is inevitable, then even though he can make the *aretaic* judgment that the coming of such a society would not be good, he cannot—on pain of violating the negative version of the "ought"-implies-"can" maxim—make the *deontic* judgment that it ought not come into being or that we ought to prevent it from coming into being.

Furthermore, to know whether or not one is violating this maxim, it must be made clear whether one is claiming that a particular society is possible in the present historical epoch or only in some future historical epoch. Thus if Spartacus had conceived of Marx's vision of communism in 70 B.C. and proclaimed that it ought to exist, he would be violating the maxim in the first case but not in the second. Naturally, some of the most important political disagreements we can have will be disagreements over precisely this issue, i.e., whether or not a particular sort of society is possible and, if so, whether it is possible in this historical epoch or only in some future historical epoch. Given the Marxist's perspective, the claim that we ought to have a worldwide federation of democratic, self-managing socialist societies in this historical epoch does not constitute a violation of Hume's maxim since, in the Marxist's view, it is possible to have such a society in this historical epoch. On the other hand, given the anti-Marxist perspective that it is impossible to have such a society in this or any other historical epoch, this moral judgment does constitute such a violation. That Hume's maxim is violated is, of course, not the important issue here. The important issue is the empirical, theoretical disagree-

ment over whether or not such a society is historically possible. The answer to this question determines radically different sets of social and political obligations.

Before taking up Marx's critique of justice, however, we must first resolve two more issues having to do with the relation between Marxism and morality: (1) the claim that morality is ideology and, therefore, must be repudiated; and (2) the claim that Marx's social theory commits those accepting it to one form or another of moral relativism and that, therefore, Marxists cannot claim any sort of objectivity for their moral views or normative political positions.