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Part I

A Theory of Welfare?

1

Communitarian Communism

Marx and Engels as moralists

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Egalitarian justice

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The New Man

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

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

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

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

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

We also see that the people who are living communally live better with less work, have more leisure for the development of their minds, and that they are better, more moral people.

(Engels, 1845b, 4, 227)

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

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

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

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

The Hegelian origins of Marx's New Man

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

(Marx, 1844–45, 3, 216–17)

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

In the former article there is an abrasive critique of the rights of man and the citizen as formal guarantees of liberty and as consequences of the separation of the State from civil society. The rights of man attain to the individual as a member of civil society, whilst a citizen’s rights attain to him as a member of the State. In a later chapter I will show that Marx’s critique of these rights may be interpreted as an implication of a more extensive and advanced notion of freedom than the liberalist one. Here I must instead observe that, perhaps more legitimately, it may be interpreted as founded on a communitarian notion of communism. This notion has given rise to understandable critiques from some philosophers⁹ who observed the inconsistency of founding a more advanced doctrine of freedom and human emancipation on a model of ideal society placed beyond the rule of law: since rights are guarantees of freedom, one may conceive a revolutionary process that strengthens, extends and multiplies them, not one that nullifies them. On the contrary, Marx sometimes seems to think that a more human society needs no legal or political guarantee of freedom. What kind of emancipation would be ensured in this way? Here it is:

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

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

(Marx, 1843b, 3, 168)

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

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

(Marx, 1844a, 3, 204)

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

This relationship also reveals the extent to which man’s *need* has become a *human need*; the extent to which, therefore, the *other* person as a person has become for him a need – the extent to which he in his individual existence is at the same time a social being.

(Marx, 1844b, 3, 296)

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

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

manifested, reduced to an observable *fact*, the extent to which the human essence has become nature to man, or to which nature to him has become the human essence of man.

(Marx, 1844b, 3, 296–7)

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

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

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

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

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

(Engels, 1844, 3, 464)

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

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

(Engels, 1847a, 6, 96)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The dialectics of communism

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

Private property is thus the product, the result, the necessary consequence, of *alienated labour* . . . *Private property* thus results by analysis from the concept of *alienated labour*, i.e., of *alienated man*, of estranged labour, of estranged life, of *estranged man*.

(Marx, 1844b, 3, 279)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

(Marx, 1844b, 3, 296–7)

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

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

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

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

(Marx, 1843a, 3, 186)

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

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

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

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

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