

SEVEN TYPES OF OBLOQUY: TRAVESTIES OF MARXISM

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One comes across the strangest arguments these days. If you happen to be interested in Marxist thought, whether as history of ideas or as ideas of history, you find yourself quite regularly surprised. You may find yourself startled even, at the character of some of what you encounter. I offer here a modest compilation of examples, with accompanying critical commentary.

The principles governing the compilation are few. Examples are all from writers of the **Left** and from writings of the 1980s. Seven broad types of argument are reviewed; each type prominent within contemporary socialist discussion – though I make no claim to their being exhaustive of the genre of criticism they represent. Together, the assembled examples provide a kind of snapshot of something, that is all. The sequence of them is interrupted here and there by a digression.

I. Smiling Marxists

'Obloquy', as generally understood, means something very pronounced: speaking ill of a person or – as it may also be and is here – tradition of thought. I use the word in that sense. Instances of the first type of obloquy, which I shall be considering in this section, are unified by (loosely speaking) their style rather than their substance. They differ in that from the six types to follow, whose unity is thematic. The style defining the first type of obloquy is that of the quick, casual disparagement, untroubled by effort of serious proof or even advocacy: the small, avoidable falsehood or lightminded absurdity; the rendering of an opposing viewpoint in transparently prejudicial terms; the passing caricature or easy oversimplification; each of these generally in cahoots with others like it in the same text – for authors permitting themselves one usually permit themselves many – and cumulatively producing a not very good impression of their object. Here are some examples of such a 'style' of recent critical discussion.

Jon Elster gives his readers to understand that **Marx** may have thought 'each individual. . . has all **the** capacities that any other has', a view he finds 'extremely' utopian, by its denial of any genetically determined differences in

ability.' Curious here is that in support of the suggestion he adduces but one line from the *Grundrisse* which speaks, in a general way, about the artistic and scientific 'development' of individuals in a prospective – better – future. This seems different from saying that everyone has identical inherent abilities. It is all Elster offers. Except, that is, for a broad gesture towards 'the corpus as a whole, which never to my knowledge refers to differences in natural talents.' Also curious is that there is a famous passage in the Critique of the *Gotha* Programme, concerning the distributive principle suitable to a post-capitalist order, and in which Marx says things like: 'But one man is superior to another physically or mentally. . .'; and 'it [a particular distributive principle] tacitly recognizes unequal individual endowment and thus productive capacity as natural privileges'; and individuals 'would not be different individuals if they were not unequal'; and 'From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs!' Elster discusses the passage at some length elsewhere in his own text. Oversights are perfectly possible. How odd, though, unless on the basis of the clearest statement or entailment to this effect, to credit someone with the belief that we all have the same natural aptitude to be sprinters, or **weightlifters**, or mathematicians.'

There is a certain kind of socialist, according to John Keane, by whom it is supposed that 'under conditions of genuine socialism. . . all decisions in public affairs, no matter how small or insignificant, will be taken directly by the community as a whole'. Whoever else he may be thinking of here, he is anyway thinking of the Marxist kind of socialist, for this is what Marx supposed, **so** we are told, in 'a species of the collective harmony myth': 'All communist beings would make decisions on all public matters, no matter how insignificant, and without resorting to separate political institutions for securing agreements or reconciling conflicts.' Amongst the many and difficult problems **Marx** bequeathed to the Marxist tradition through what he did and did not say about the regulative institutions of a future communist society, this one had, I confess, hitherto escaped my notice: that everybody would have to be directly involved in the siting of each road sign. I had come across **Marx's** references to the continued existence of a 'public power' and the mechanism of elections; Engels's scepticism towards the notion of being able to dispense with the 'authority of the majority over the minority'; some reflections, even, of August Bebel, concerning 'democratic' elections to 'positions of trust' in a central administration, with the possibility of recall and re-election 'if this is demanded by circumstances or the electors deem it desirable' – and had come across a bit more yet (some of it to be detailed later) pointing to a picture of communist public affairs slightly more mediated and less harmonious than Keane suggests. Keane is perhaps exaggerating. But how odd to exaggerate **so**.²

How very odd, really, when you reflect upon it, a society of people endowed with exactly the same natural talents; or of people all directly deciding about everything, 'no matter how small'. It would be itself, doubtless, excessive were

we to say of this form of discourse about Marxism that it turns your average Marxist into someone who thinks all **humankind** will be permanently smiling 'after the revolution'; or into someone whose beliefs are consonant only with the wearing of an inane grin.

Stuart Hall commends Antonio Gramsci: 'Where Gramsci departs from classical versions of Marxism is that he does not think that politics is an arena which simply reflects already unified collective political identities, already constituted forms of struggle.' This is good for Gramsci but bad for classical Marxism. To that category we may take it **Marx** belongs, and Luxemburg and **Lenin** also. Now, it seems hard to give a clear meaning to **Lenin's thinking** on the revolutionary party, or on the strategy of proletarian-peasantalliance in **pre-1917** Russia, if it was a matter for him of already unified collective political identities. Equally, it is hard on such a basis to understand the mass strike's significance for Luxemburg: as formative, educative, **unifying** indeed; as constitutive of a new and active, self-governing political identity for the **working** class. These two were familiar with the distinction Marx made between a class-in-itself and a class-for-itself, and with what it implied about long, difficult struggles, about learning from the experience of them, about **interruptions** and defeats. Stuart Hall is familiar with the same distinction. He calls it '**Marx's** formidable distinction between a class "**in** itself" and one which has developed sufficient political, cultural and strategic unity to become an active force in history—"for itself". . . This seems rather better for classical Marxism. It could be the difference between Gramsci and less saintly figures in the tradition is poorly formulated.³

'Marxism's more scientific adherents. . . implicitly assumed the God's eye view of a transcendental, monological meta-subject able to grasp the whole from a presumed point exterior to it.' So says Martin Jay. That is some subject, all right: with a God's eye, and transcendental, and monological, and meta – and when Marxism's more scientific adherents have not been **so** sympathetic to notions of deity or transcendental subjecthood. It is perhaps merely an emphatic expression of the well-known and properly lamented tendency towards **dogmatism** in certain Marxist circles. No, it is not that. The target is other; contained in the words 'to grasp the whole'. Jay's target is 'totalistic knowledge'. What exact pejorative weight falls, for him, respectively on 'totalistic' and on 'knowledge' (as in 'more **scientific** adherents') is hard to say. But such, in any case, are the features of the historical-materialist enterprise – its aspiration to understand different **forms** of society, to explain their general character – which convict Marxism of the arrogant God's eye view.⁴

Another who is **worried** about totality is Jean Cohen. The problem which troubles her is **Marx's** 'one single totalizing logic, the logic of a "mode of production". . . [S]uch a totalistic theory dangerously excludes the possibility (which we of the twentieth century ought to know well) that there might be other modes of domination than **socioeconomic** class relations, other

principles of stratification in addition to class (nationality, race, status, sex, etc.). . . Note that the said totalistic theory, according to Cohen, does not merely give primary emphasis to class, nor even just understate, perhaps, the importance of other modes of domination. It 'excludes the possibility' of them. **Cohen** excludes the possibility of things I definitely remember reading: **Marx** saying that 'the general position of women in modern society is inhuman', and that 'Labour cannot emancipate itself in the white skin where in the black it is branded'; **Engels** saying of Germany that a nation which has allowed itself to be used as 'a tool of oppression against. . . other nations' must entirely renounce that past; Lenin following the two of them in declaring 'no nation can be free if it oppresses other nations'; Luxemburg **remarking** on the special sorrows of children; **Trotsky**, likewise, writing of the 'darkness' and 'dependence' of so many childhoods, and that a 'revolution does not deserve its name if it does not take the greatest care possible of the children'; and writing of 'Woman. . . at last **free[ing]** herself from her semi-servile condition'; Adorno **speaking** of 'the husband's barbarous power over the property and work of his wife' and of 'the lying ideology which sets up the man as superior'; Deutscher (yes, even in an essay with the title 'On Socialist Man') looking forward to the end of 'the present family, with. . . its dependence of woman and child on father' - and so, if need be, **on**.⁵

Stuart **Hill** also has something to say about all this singularity: 'We cannot imagine socialism coming about any longer through the image of that single, singular subject we used to call Socialist Man. Socialist Man, with one mind, one set of interests, one project, is dead. And good riddance. Who needs 'him' now. . . with 'his' particular sense of masculinity, shoring 'his' identity up in a particular set of familial relations, a particular kind of sexual identity? Who needs 'him' as the singular identity through which the great diversity of human beings and ethnic cultures in our world must enter the twenty-first century?'⁶ These writers, it may be observed in passing, are ever so contemporary. They invoke the twentieth, or the prospect of the twenty-first, century; say 'we ought to know' and 'we cannot any longer imagine'. And they draw all the while a picture of these grinning - and shrunken - predecessors. Beware when the writer writes, 'We know, today. . . Does she know, or is that currently the thing to say? And what he knows, was it perhaps also known yesterday? Was it known by someone, known at least in part?

Gösta Esping Anderson interprets Lenin: 'if socialists take parliamentary democracy seriously, they will betray the proletarian cause by helping obscure the nature of class struggle. Even worse, their participation will serve only to perpetuate and strengthen class exploitation, thus delaying the inevitable revolutionary moment.' By contrast with Kautsky, for whom 'parliamentary participation can develop the proletariat's capacity for socialist politics,' Lenin is said to have held that 'participation in bourgeois institutions. . . would corrupt working class politics.' This is the same Lenin as he whose strategic perspective for the Russian workers' movement over more than a decade was

summed up thus: 'there is not, nor can there be, any other path to real freedom for the proletariat and the peasantry, than the path of bourgeois freedom and bourgeois progress'; who railed against 'the hoary Narodnik theory that. . .we do not need bourgeois political liberty', and against 'anarchism which denies any participation of the proletariat in bourgeois politics. . .in bourgeois parliamentarism'; who, in *State and Revolution* (Esping Anderson's alleged source), spoke of the benefits to the proletariat of the 'wider, freer and more open *form* of the class struggle' vouchsafed by the democratic-republican type of bourgeois state; who upheld in fact 'the viewpoint that it was. . .*obligatory* to participate even in a most reactionary parliament'; that 'participation in parliamentary elections and in the struggle on the parliamentary rostrum is *obligatory* on the party of the revolutionary proletariat.' Esping Anderson feels 'It is impossible to cling to Leninism when one engages in empirical analysis.' You can see what he means.⁷

The list of such examples could be extended at will. But this first type of obloquy is now sufficiently exemplified. The above instances of it are all representative of the style: off-the-cuff, belittling – and, upon examination, feeble. They are not chosen, however, only for the style. They also signal, loosely, the substantive themes of the other six types of obloquy, to be pursued after the following short digression.

D1. Snapshot

There is any number of reasons, cogent, intellectually arguable, morally understandable or otherwise worthy of respect, why a person might not be, not want to be or not choose to call herself or himself a Marxist; and there is any number of reasons therefore – again, cogent, intellectually arguable, morally understandable or otherwise worthy of respect – why, Marxist or not, someone might be critical of this intellectual tradition, whether individual aspects or whole areas of it.

They might feel that Marxism to date has had too little to offer towards a theory of the political institutions necessary for any genuinely democratic community, deficiency enough when problems of political mediation will be with us for good. Or might think that, in historical and social explanation, although Marxism explains something or even quite a lot, there is too much which it cannot explain. Or might hold, on the basis of their judgement of whatever evidence they take to be relevant, that its central theoretical claims are wrong or at least not proven. They might not wish to appear to identify themselves with a primary emphasis on the effort to end economic exploitation and class division, in a world with more inequities than these. Even recognizing the desirability of socialism, they might doubt its probability, whether because of the discredit brought upon it by the regimes that have claimed its name, or for older and deeper reasons. Or they might wonder from where, or from what, credible agencies or strategies of socialism will emerge. They might feel, from within the 'inwardness' of their own personal

sphere and their sense of its importance to them, that Marxism will not help them much towards understanding or fulfilment here. Or feel that its major thinkers have had too little time for problems of moral philosophy, germane though these are to any project of human emancipation. Or feel, in the light of a religious or other metaphysical belief, that Marxism has had nothing or not the right sort of thing to say to them about the most profound meanings of life and death. They might just think that contributions to our knowledge of the social world have been too many and varied for it to be sensible to identify oneself with a label deriving from the name of one **man**.⁸

There is, to put it otherwise, plenty of room for difference with, and for difference within, this tradition of thought; for serious substantive criticism of it; for argument over its shortcomings that is precise and worthwhile. Why, then, with no lack of matter for sober critical discussion, is there on the Left today such a volume of caricature, ill-informed oversimplification and generally facile disputation in the treatment of Marxist thought? Note the specifications of time and milieu in the question. For Marxism has always been subject to this sort of thing. The sources of it, moreover, were generally not hard to see: overt political hostility, prejudice and the like. But the same easy critical themes, the same kinds of misrepresentation and distortion as were fed by such sources, now come from writers of the Left overtly open to what is positive in Marxist thought, and sometimes professing, indeed, a form of Marxism themselves. And they come from them after ~~two~~ decades in which a flourishing of debate and scholarship in this area has nuanced and enriched Marxism itself, as well as confounding the more vulgar representations of it which prevailed at the beginning of the period, during the Cold War. The point can be accentuated still further. It is possible to identify the themes and inflections of this new obloquy even confining oneself, as I mostly do here, to work of some quality: to the writings of serious scholars, some of them of considerable intellectual standing.

Whatever the explanation for it, the phenomenon itself is unmistakable. Amongst writers and academics across a significant sector of the Left, an impulse has lately grown towards the taking of some 'extra' distance, so to say, from Marxism. That is the subject of this snapshot: for the record, a moment of intellectual history when good reasons did not suffice; the actual standard of some of the reasons put forth.

II. Amazing Reductions

There are three common variants of the discursive form to be treated next. Its theme was foreshadowed more than once in Section I. It is that Marxism is – inescapably – reductionist.

An example of this second type of obloquy, in the first of the three variants I distinguish, is provided by Jean Cohen. She writes: 'The **base/superstructure** model, according to which the state, law, and ideology are conceived as determined ("in the last instance") by the mode of production. . . implies that

political power and domination represent something else: the social relations of domination of the only sphere with real weight in the historical materialist framework, the economy.' It obviously follows, if the economy is the only sphere with real weight in the model, that no other sphere has real weight in it; and it must seem reasonable, if that is so, to say that the 'reduction' thereby perpetrated 'precludes the investigation of the internal dynamics of the political sphere and the nature of the power of those who occupy its ranks.' Cohen says it. She is very quick on the subject of what Marxism precludes. Before, remember, it was other modes of domination than class; now, it is merely investigation of the dynamics of the political sphere.⁹

This first variant is the simple one. It simplifies. Marxism has here been rather pared down; reduced, in fact. For Cohen's is not the only version of the **base/superstructure** model. What student of Marxism can really be unaware of that today? She herself allows to peep out at us from between scarequotes the phrase, 'in the last instance'. It has two immediate associations: a letter from **Engels** to **Bloch**, and the writings of Louis Althusser. Expressly argued in both is that the **economy** is not the only sphere with real weight; that it would be 'senseless' indeed (**Engels**) so to construe it.¹⁰ On a conservative estimate, this must now have been argued by several dozen Marxist writers. Cohen just discounts the fact. And, with respect to 'the internal dynamics of the political sphere and the nature of the power of those who occupy its ranks', she discounts a few other things as well. **Marx's** analysis of Bonapartism, for example, is mentioned by her in this connection, but as exceptional only, 'an extraordinary deviation from the paradigm of class rule'. Also exceptional, one must suppose, would be Thalheimer or **Trotsky** on fascism, and **Gramsci** on hegemony, and Althusser on repressive and ideological state apparatuses, **Miliband** or Poulantzas on the capitalist state, virtually the whole classical Marxist tradition on the difference between parliamentary-democratic and autocratic forms of rule, and a certain amount of recent discussion of the notion of relative autonomy – to some of which material Cohen even refers.

It seems not to be enough to say that reductionist forms of explanation have been a problem within Marxist thought, a recurring tendency or temptation there; and one to which some Marxists may have succumbed more than others. This sort of critical observation, the import of which is undeniable, would obviously allow, for the problem, the possibility of solutions; for the tendency, the existence of other tendencies; for the temptation, a resistance to it also. It would allow that there might be Marxisms which were not reductionist. It is a criticism too weak for the tastes of some. There is more to the matter, however, than taste; arguments would also be to the point. An argument, in particular, as to why the **base/superstructure** model might not be rendered with a base which has real weight but is not the only sphere which has, would be most pertinent.

Moving on to a less blinkered variant of this theme, I benefit from the momentary support of **Barry** Hindess. Hindess rejects such simplification:

No serious exponent of class analysis maintains that class analysis tells us all we need to know about the political forces at work in the modern world. The assertion that we must avoid reductionism is commonplace in the literature and everyone now presents some version of **Marx** and Engels' insistence that other elements must be given their due.' Further: 'Marxists have always insisted that economism is something to **be** avoided.' And: 'Much of post-war **marxist** theory. . . has been devoted to developing **non-reductionist** interpretations of that [**base/superstructure**] **model**.'¹¹ Marxism then, for Hindess, is more complex than for Cohen. It is not irredeemably reductionist. If we look again, though, we will find that he thinks, after all, it is irredeemably reductionist. He offers two criticisms. One, that Marxist theory has yet to specify clearly 'the precise mechanisms' of the relationship between base and superstructure, provides a perfectly good issue for critical **discussion**.¹² But it amounts to the claim that Marxist types of explanation of political structures and events in terms of class or economic causes have generally not been good enough; and this is a matter of judgement, in which Hindess's view will not necessarily prevail with everyone. Talk of 'precise mechanisms' in the domain of social and historical analysis does nothing to strengthen the claim. It looks like an attempt, rather, to impose on Marxist theory standards which no other social theory has yet been able to attain, to the best of my knowledge. Still, this at least is criticism of a kind that can be seriously debated.

Hindess's other criticism is of another kind. It gives us the second standard variant of the second type of obloquy. It comes down to this, that by their refusal of reductionism Marxists fall into inconsistency – because they remain committed to what they refuse. Marxism, Hindess says, 'has insisted on maintaining two incompatible accounts of the connections between economic relations and other elements of social life.' Its **problem** 'arises not so much from reductionism as from the attempt to combine apparently opposed positions: the economy is the ultimately determining element, but other elements must also be given their due; politics and the state are autonomous, but only relatively so.' Again: '[Marxism] is openly committed to reductionist principles of explanation (the primacy of class struggle and determination by the economy in the last instance) – and it insists that other elements must be given their due.' As he also puts this: 'Class analysis. . . promises to combine an insistence on the irreducibility of political life with the promise of reductionism. But how the trick is done remains **obscure**.'¹³ Indeed. It would have to; until someone comes up with a way of fulfilling mutually incompatible promises.

It escapes Hindess's reckoning, evidently, that a Marxist for whom political life, the state, or whatever, is not reducible to a mere expression of economic structures or of class interests, is then not committed rather than still committed to reductionist principles of explanation. One who believes that 'other elements must be given their due' will not generally believe

this together with the view that economic structures explain everything, but will believe it together with the view that they do not. The conviction of a relative autonomy, a specific effectivity, of **superstructures** – as in, say, the work of Althusser – is not simply added **on** to a notion of the base as sole effective historical determinant. It undoes it. 'Primacy' of class and 'last instance' determination in such a context no longer **signify**, therefore, the same (reductive) promise of an 'only sphere with real weight'. They signify something less weighty than that. The logical point here is elementary and its neglect a little puzzling. To use again an analogy I have drawn elsewhere, it is as though someone, thinking a certain family was **composed** entirely of vegetarians, were then to find that several members of it regularly ate beef, and say: 'These are not so much vegetarians as inconsistent eaters. Their meat-eating is incompatible with their open commitment to... well, vegetarianism; as manifested in their continuing to eat a lot of Brussels sprouts and spinach.' At the risk of labouring a **point**: vegetarianism is not the eating of many vegetables. And reductionism is not the hypothesis of an **explanans** thought to be weighty, even very weighty. And if one simply lays it down that 'primacy' of class or 'last instance' determination must stand for something all-explanatory, and hence incompatible with relative autonomy and the like, the question is: why must it?¹⁴

We have **come** back to the place we were before. We **could** still do with an argument, some reasons, why the **base/superstructure** model might not be rendered with a base which has real, even preponderant, but not total determining and explanatory weight.

The third variant of this disparaging theme consists precisely of the denial of such a 'middle' way. There can be no third way, it is claimed, between a reductionist conception giving total explanatory weight to class, the economy, etc., on the one **hand**, and a simple pluralism of factors or elements, on the other. The contention, thus nakedly exposed, **is inane**. It forbids the possibility that one thing might just be more important than others. Unpresentable in this form, it is nevertheless a contention that is remarkably common with contemporary critics of Marxism. It sidles unobtrusively out of their prose. Here it is, for instance, from Christopher **Pierson**:

[T]he point is not to deny the interdependence of state and economy or, more broadly conceived, of state and society but rather to challenge the claim that the nature of this state can be derived from, for example, the 'irreconcilability of class contradictions' or 'the capital form'. For such a claim necessarily entails the subordination of political (and ideological) struggle to economic forms and a sublimation of struggles around differing political axes to struggles based upon class. The consequence of this Marxist position seems to be that (all) politics is, in some sense, class politics.¹⁵

The movement of thought here is: interdependence is fine; but to assign a Marxist-type priority within the interdependence 'necessarily entails' that class is all. Primacy then – as a matter not of what has sometimes been done, but of logic – is wholesale reductionism. As to why a Marxist might

not think class generally more important than other 'axes' without going quite this far, no reason is offered. None could be. It is what plenty of Marxists have actually thought.

Now, here is the same sort of thing from Martin Jay:

To avoid the reduction of the whole to a mere aggregate of disparate and autonomous elements, Marxist holism necessarily sought to locate an essential level of **determination** within the whole. . . Even when Louis Althusser attacked Hegelian Marxism for its expressivist notion of the totality, he held on doggedly to the belief in a dominant structure, an economic mode of production that was determinant in a last instance that paradoxically never came. With the **collapse** of the Althusserian project. . . the search for a privileged key to unlock the structural mechanism determining the whole has been all but **abandoned**.¹⁶

'Essential level' in the first sentence has to be taken in the sense of an original essence, to which all other levels are related as its epiphenomena – an inference, this, from the next proposition, about Althusser having attacked 'expressivist' notions of totality. It may be asked, therefore, why the quest for such an absolutist centre is said here to be a 'necessary' one for avoiding the 'mere aggregate of disparate and autonomous elements'. How about a less simplified social whole, constituted by levels, or sites, or structures, of differential causal weight, and in which one of them is by and large preponderant? Not possible, apparently. A vigorous and sustained argument for just this **kind** of conception is so characterized ('*Even. . . Althusser. . . held on doggedly* etc.') *as* to suggest that it is not a genuine option logically: eschewing the 'mere aggregate', did Althusser not fall back, with that 'dominant structure', on an expressivist essence? We learn at the finish that the search for what Jay calls, neutrally, 'a privileged key' to the social whole is now all but abandoned. He names a few people who have abandoned it. Once more, however, there is not the hint of a reasoned argument. Names alone cannot show why there is no logical space for **thinking**, for example, both that a fundamental feature of certain societies is that they are capitalist societies and that this is not the only significant feature of them.

As for a last instance, here is one. It comes in the shape of a question from Les Johnston. The question is formulated not *as* expecting an answer, but rhetorically, to **encapsulate** a problem which Marxism supposedly cannot resolve. '[I]f class struggle is given primacy over state institutions, how does one recognize the effects of **those** institutions?' That is the question. Amazing but **true**. If *p* is primary, how can *e* be recognized as having effects? Johnston is not brought up short by it. To him it makes the best possible sense. He is, you see, like Barry Hindess, a partisan of the radical contradiction in Marxist thought, the 'classical dilemma': of the state as reductionist 'expression' or the state as effective 'means of **power**'.¹⁷ Well, if primacy just *is* economic reductionism, then Johnston's is a hard question, indeed. And if primacy is less? This is a hard question for several people today.

The issue, the danger, of reductionism has been a serious and a necessary

theme in the history of Marxist thought. But it is now a very tired theme, wheeled out over and over again, without deliberation or discrimination as to when or where it might be apt. There is scarcely ever pause to reflect on what is the difference between explanation that is reductionist and explanation, period. It is not a sufficient basis for the complaint of reductionism that a given thinker explains certain features of one phenomenon by reference to certain features of another. He or she does not have to suppose that there are no other contributing or conditioning factors at work, or that there are no other dimensions of the phenomenon to be understood. It is actually banal, but necessary in this context to observe, that it is integral to the very act of explanation that some things are picked out, given prominence. A 'mere aggregate of disparate elements' will not take one very far.

Marxists pick out class and economic structures because they consider them to have powerful effects, both shaping and constraining, on institutions like the state, on political and other social practices. One aspect of this **particular** hypothesis, however, deserves to be emphasized. If the state matters, in Marxist theory, for the dominant economic class, this is by virtue of helping to stabilize or reinforce that class's economic wealth and power. The state matters, that is to say, because it is itself *not* nothing. It is not an empty space; not a mere appearance; not a facade; not just the same thing as the dominant class; and not a mere reflection of it. It is – and it matters because it is (but must I now say 'not only?') – the site of something different, separate, substantial: namely, concentrated authoritative and coercive power. The nature of such power, various modalities of organizing and dividing it, different ways of wielding or limiting it, exactly whose hands it is in: these are then, obviously, critical issues. One can grasp this, and also believe that politics is not quite autonomous, since it is affected, massively, by the distribution of economic resources.

Some of these contemporary critics of Marxism could do worse than to ponder the words of Stuart Hall; not in that same mode we have seen him up to now, which could only be agreeable to their own inclinations; but speaking, rather, so: 'It is well-nigh impossible on the left to affirm the importance and specificity of a particular level of analysis or arena of struggle without immediately being misunderstood as saying that, because it is important, it is the **only one**.' The level Hall here refers to is, as it happens, another level, but no matter. The point is good.

III. A Socialist Heaven

Obloquy of the third kind, encountered once already in a preliminary way, occurs when it is suggested that **Marx** and the tradition coming down from him look forward to an altogether harmonious and untroubled – sometimes also, uniform – future condition. In the **Marxist** vision of it, we are told, a society without classes will be not merely a radically better society, it will be out of this world.

The equality of talents imputed by Elster to **Marx** is criticism of this type. So is the same author's contention that Marx 'ignores the conflict between the self-actualization of man and of men that could arise because the frustration of unsuccessful individuals is an inevitable by-product of a system that allows a full development of human talents.' What Elster has in mind by this is given in an example: of the 'artist or scientist who throughout his life is desperately unhappy', unable to attain the standards he aspires to. '[P]recisely because of his great power and insight', he can see how far his work falls short. According to Elster, 'It is implicit in **Marx's** psychology that he did not believe such cases would arise in communism.' Then there is the 'mythology of abundance in an Eden of harmony', as formulated by Jean **Cohen**; 'the myth of collective harmony', where 'no serious conflicts of interest will arise among individuals or groups', as formulated by John Keane; and the notion, from Christopher **Pierson**, that 'all disputes over which it makes sense to appeal to democratic forms of conflict resolution would be eliminated with the transcendence of class society.'¹⁹

Taking stock provisionally: everyone with identical talents, no one **miserable** through failure to achieve their self-actualizing goals, abundance construed as Eden, no conflicts of either individual or group interest, the advent of universal agreement – it begins to look like a pretty tall order. Actually, no. The genuine goals of socialism, including of **Marxian** socialism, have always been a tall order. The picture here, I think one **can** reasonably say, is more hopeless than that. It is hopeless intellectually and hopeless practically. Such accents are, in any case, pervasive. They are found in writers much friendlier to Marxism, and more fair-minded, than are (now) those whose work I have drawn on heretofore. David Held, for example, in *Models of Democracy*, itself generally a model of balanced scholarship, propagates, when it comes to Marx, another of these standard depreciatory themes (to be taken up in due course as the sixth category in the present typology). Excerpted from it, we have this: that 'in communism all remnants of classes will have disappeared and with them the basis of all conflicts'; and that it will then be the case that 'everyone agrees on basic matters of public policy'. Kate **Soper**, too, **referring** to 'certain sources of tension in human relations. . . not traceable to economic causes. . . [and which] would persist even in societies that had corrected major iniquities and forms of exploitation', throws doubt on whether Marx was aware of such other sources of tension. It '**might** be mistaken', she says, to suppose he thought them eradicable; 'whether he did so or not', the expectation is '**problematic**'.²⁰

Others agree with this. Martin Jay looks favourably on the more moderate, less 'totalistic' sensibility he now detects in socialist thought **vis-à-vis** what came before. He speaks of the 'many. . . socialist theoreticians who have been disabused of the goal of complete normative **totalization** in the Hegelian Marxist mold'; of 'the yearning for totality. . . [now] all but abandoned'; of 'a corresponding acceptance of the inevitable imperfections

of whatever social order humans might create'; of 'the utopian hope of perfect reconciliation. . . quietly laid to rest'; of 'the nostalgic cum utopian hope for total dedifferentiation expressed in the socialism of redemption'; and of 'the daunting model of a normatively totalized, fully redeemed social **order**.'²¹ Daunting it certainly is; all '**complete**' and 'perfect' and 'total' and 'fully redeemed'. For, by a twist, the vision is not really that perfect, after all. This is supposed to be for human beings: embodied, emotional, **thinking**, heterogeneous sort of folk. Stuart Hall: 'Who needs a socialist heaven where everybody agrees with everybody else, where everybody's exactly the same? God forbid.* Quite. Who needs it?'

Finally, for good measure, here is Jon Elster once more:

Marx never to my knowledge **discussed** these [retardation, mental illness, senility] or other fatalities that **may** befall men, such as disease or accident, nor does he refer to the **implications** of man's **mortality**. Yet the **limited** and unknown **span** of human life has **profound** consequences for human nature, as has **also** the constant possibility of debilitations of various kinds.'²²

The judgement is offered in connection, not with **Marx's thinking** about a classless society, but with his view of human nature. It has a bearing, nevertheless, on our present preoccupations by the suggestion of a certain inattention on **Marx's** part to permanently troublesome features of the human predicament aside from class. One who would pass over the consequences for human nature of such matters as senility, disease, accident and the implications of human mortality, might very well have set in train a fully redeeming, rather smiling sort of tradition.

There are grounds, all the same, for thinking that these various claims and characterizations do not give an altogether rounded or **accurate picture** of the tradition in question. In his 'Preface' to the Critique of Political Economy, Marx talks of the 'bourgeois mode of production' as 'the last antagonistic form of the social process of production'. It is a well-known **Marxian** thesis. But he also, and immediately, specifies: 'antagonistic not in the sense of individual antagonism but of an antagonism that emanates from the individuals' social conditions of existence'. He is plainly alluding to class antagonism. Do not say now: but for Marx all antagonism is, at bottom, class antagonism. That is in question. One would need to explain why, if it were so, he should feel it appropriate to enter the qualification he does: antagonistic not in this sense but in that. The 'Preface' could scarcely be described as one of **Marx's** more obscure texts. It would seem to leave space (pace Keane) for serious conflicts of interest among individuals, unsettling the myth of **harmony**.²⁴

In The Holy Family, Marx discusses punishment. He speaks, in a way unlikely to surprise anyone, of the need to destroy '**the** anti-social sources of crime'. But he says also, with reference to **Hegel's** theory of punishment, that 'under human conditions punishment will really be nothing but the sentence passed by the culprit on himself. No one will want to convince him that violence from without. . . is violence which he had done to **himself**.'²⁵ This will doubtless strike many readers as a quite utopian idea of punishment

and, for all I know, it is. Notice, however, that even a utopian idea of punishment entails the thought that under what Marx here calls human conditions there might still be something to 'punish': wrong-doing, hurt or harm by some to others, that sort of thing. **Marx's** earlier writings, it is generally acknowledged, tend rather more to utopianism than does his mature work. This one of them, at any event, is not so utopian as to envisage a world in which people never trespass against one another. With the 'Preface' passage aforementioned, it leaves space for doubting (pace Held) that Marx thought the basis of all conflicts would disappear with classes.

In the Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts, reflecting on the power of money, Marx invokes, once again, the prospect of more human conditions.

Assume *man* to be *man* and his relationship to the world to be a human one: **then you can exchange love only for love, trust for trust, etc. . . . if you want to exercise influence over other people, you must be a person with a stimulating and encouraging effect on other people. . . . If you love without evoking love in return - that is, if your loving as loving does not produce reciprocal love; if through a living expression of yourself as a loving person you do not make yourself a beloved one, then your love is impotent - a misfortune. . . .**

Marx shows himself aware of a source of personal unhappiness not (generally) attributable to class. That is not so remarkable. It is a widely experienced form of adversity, misfortune in love. Equally **unremarkable**, in **virtually** any other context than this, would be the implication in the above lines that, even in the 'good society', there might be occasions of mistrust; more and less trustworthy people; failures to influence others; even persons dissatisfied, perhaps, through not being possessed of 'a stimulating and **encouraging** effect' on those around them. Here, it is all relevant. With the '**Preface**' and Holy Family passages aforementioned, it shows an awareness on **Marx's** part (Kate **Soper's** doubts on this score notwithstanding) of sources of tension in human relations not traceable to economic causes.

Turning now from the matter of interpersonal disharmony to other issues, I contest Jon Elster's suggestion that Marx did not believe there would be cases of frustration in communist society due to failed or incompletely realized creative projects; cases of people unhappy through having fallen short of their own ideal aims-and-standards. **Marx's vision**, to be sure, was **one of all-round self-development or self-realization**. But the evidence that this **was not understood** by him in any simple-minded spirit is right there in Elster's hands, in a familiar passage from the *Grundrisse* which informs his own discussion of the point. Marx argues 'that the individual, "in his normal state of health, strength, activity, skill, facility", also needs a normal portion of work, and of the suspension of tranquillity'; that the 'overcoming of obstacles is itself a liberating activity', a medium of 'self-realization'; and that to comprehend work **thus** 'in no way means that it becomes mere fun, mere amusement, as Fourier, with **grisette-like** naivete, conceives it. Really free working, **e.g. composing**, is at the same time precisely the most damned seriousness, the most intense **exertion**.'²⁷

It is not consistent with the sensibility here displayed that Marx could have overlooked the possibility – in any kind of society – of people sometimes failing or falling short in such enterprises, and of the potential meaning to them, emotional or psychological, of doing so. He knew something of what he spoke in this regard. In the nature of an obstacle, especially such as must call forth intense exertion to **overcome** it, is that it will not always be overcome; and in the nature of intense exertion is that, failing in its purpose, it often brings serious disappointment. It may well be that, in context of his overall expectations about communism, Marx would have thought disappointment so generated or, worse, unhappiness, to be of another and more bearable order, or just more acceptable morally, than the miseries and injustices he wrote of at length and lamented. But that is something different from what Elster so freely imputes to him.

I challenge, equally, the facile mockery by which Jean Cohen suggests (in plenty of company, it should be said) that the type of communist 'abundance' Marx must have had in mind is obviously ridiculous. I have argued elsewhere, in a way I merely summarize here, that where in *Critique of the Gotha Programme* he anticipates a time when 'the springs of co-operative wealth flow *more* abundantly' (my emphasis), Marx does not say enough to indicate precisely what sort or level of abundance he envisages. We know from other evidence that he does not mean only a sufficiency relative to some minimal standard of subsistence. But there is no textual basis for supposing, either, that he entertained the fantastic notion of a plenty without limits. We have a text that suggests otherwise: that, 'in all social formations and under all possible modes of production', there must be a 'realm of necessity'; a sphere, in other words, of labour that is 'determined by necessity and mundane considerations', by the imperative of maintaining and reproducing life. Given the high value Marx placed on *free time* – time beyond this sphere of necessity, time for autonomous individual development – any society, even a communist one, which must limit this kind of good in order to provide others, still lies within recognizable boundaries of a form of economic scarcity. The conclusion is unavoidable that what Marx looked forward to was a satisfaction of human needs, material and other, which, as ample or generous as it might be, would have to meet some standard of what was economically possible and socially '**reasonable**'.²⁸

One cannot help being struck by a certain lightmindedness in the dismissive, parodying way so many have with this **Marxian** theme, when large numbers of human beings still fall some way short of being able to enjoy any such standard; and a rather large number of these some way short even of a minimal sufficiency. Was *that* not the principal point of the man's life's work? Was it to entice an already flourishing humanity with dreams of boundless riches?

I beg, further, to differ with the opinion that Marx never discussed such features of the human condition as senility, disease, accident, or the

implications of human **mortality**. Naturally, since these implications are many and varied and the said features, taken all in all, make up a large subject, one will be able to think of a lot which he did not say about it. Should he have said everything? There seems on **occasion** to be an unspoken, unconscious assumption, shared by some critics of Marx with the most dogmatic Marxist fundamentalism, that his ideas ought to have been completely comprehensive. Short of so extravagant an assumption, the only worthwhile question raised by Elster's opinion is whether Marx displayed a sensitivity to the permanent problems of human frailty and finitude. Well, he knew – this has actually to be written – that death is harsh, 'a harsh victory of the species over the *pa* *cular* individual'; and that as a living, material being the human being is a limited, sentient being: 'Man as an objective, sensuous being is therefore a *suffering* being – and because he feels that he suffers, a *passionate* being.'²⁹ And Marx not only knew but discoursed lengthily on at least some significant implications of this mortality and propensity for suffering. He observed, for example, that the duration of people's lives is of consequence to them and that it matters if their lives are shorter than necessary; or are afflicted by avoidable accident, injury and disease; or are so toilsome and oppressive that they become, these people, 'prematurely' old. I offer a handful of references to Chapter 10 of the first volume of *Capital*.³⁰ Marx knew also that in communist society the labour of those who could, must **make** provision for those who could not (any longer) **work**.³¹ Did he have to spell out the various 'debilitations' in the human predicament in letters of fire?

So much for Marx himself. As to the tradition he began, I shall do no more, in concluding this section, than to sample some of the kinds of reflection to be found in its later thinkers. Isaac Deutscher wrote of death as a tragedy besetting humankind, and of aggressive drives still needing to find outlets for sublimation under socialism. 'We do not maintain,' he wrote, 'that socialism is going to solve all predicaments of the human race.' Herbert **Marcuse**, likewise, wrote of the 'ultimate necessity' of death; but of the exigency also of fighting for the difference between 'death after a fulfilled life' and dying before one must. Leon **Trotsky** reflected on the 'inexorable arch between birth and the grave', on the beauty of youth in the light of old age and death: on the 'pang of pity' experienced for the vanished youth of a loved one. Rosa Luxemburg spoke of the anguish and the conflicts born out of physical disability 'beyond all human interference'. And August Bebel (with how many others?) wrote of socialist society taking care of 'its aged, sick and **incapacitated**'.³²

Theodor Adorno impugned the notion of some endless 'dynamism'; he could imagine a future 'tired of development' and willing to 'leave possibilities unused, instead of storming under a confused compulsion to the conquest of strange stars'. And he commented on the problem of exclusive personal relationship, 'erotic conflict' arising out of 'prior engagement': 'Even, and

precisely, in a society cured of the anarchy of commodity production, there could scarcely be rules governing the order in which one met people.' And he thought, **Adorno**, that we should 'conceive the better state as one in **which** people could be different without **fear**.'³³ And then **Trotsky**, again, did indeed conceive the better state as a condition marked by certain differences. He saw it as one in which the planning of towns, and of the environment more generally, would be of interest not only to technical specialists. Around such questions would 'be formed true peoples' parties, the parties of the future for special technology and construction, which will agitate passionately, hold meetings and vote.' Further:

The *care* for food and education, which lies like a millstone on the present-day family, will be removed, and **will** become the subject of social initiative and of an endless collective creativeness. Woman **will** at **last** free herself from her semi-servile condition. Side **by** side with technique, education, . . . **will** take its place as the crown of social thinking. Powerful 'parties' will **form** themselves around pedagogic systems. Experiments in social education and an emulation of different methods **will** take place to a degree which has not been dreamed of **before**.³⁴

There may be more 'dynamism' to this than **Adorno**, for his part, would have liked. There seems to have been space within the Marxist tradition, in any case, for thinking – and thinking differently – about some enduring human problems, about a degree of mundane complexity, imperfection and friction, beyond the end of class division. There was space for something else (*pace* Jay) than full redemption, total dedifferentiation, perfect reconciliation; something else (despite Held or **Pierson**) than agreement on all significant matters of public policy. One could perhaps say, borrowing from a remark of Terry Eagleton's on William Empson, that this intellectual tradition understood something – not everything or enough – of the 'complexity and ambiguity any programme of social transformation must encompass, without regarding that transformative end as in any sense **unworthy**.'³⁵

D2. Edgar

Karl Marx knew a thing or two – and I do not mean about history or political economy. In 1855, he lost a beloved son, Edgar, who died at the age of eight. Marx was inconsolable, his family distraught with grief. He wrote, three months later, to Lassalle:

Bacon says that really important people have so many relations to nature **and** the world, so many objects of interest, that they easily get over any loss. I **am** not one of those important people. The death of my child has shattered me to the very core and I feel the loss as keenly as on the **first** day. My poor wife is also completely broken **down**.³⁶

Marx never to my knowledge discusses the experience of grief in his theoretical writings. He never discusses grief as a feature of a future communist society.

In 1972, Barrington Moore published a book called *Reflections on the Causes of Human Misery*, in the preface to which he observed:

I **am** somewhat struck by how little I have had to say about what we loosely call personal

unhappiness and misery. . .while on the other hand I have always regarded [the various causes of it] as a major source of misery for the mass of humanity. There is nevertheless a reason for this apparent gap. Though some portion of personal unhappiness is probably an inevitable part of human fate, a very large portion is due to institutional causes.³⁷

I am puzzled by the 'probably' here, in view of what precedes it, but that is a quibble.

A large, creative body of ideas, a tradition of thought, is a complex thing indeed. It will contain central theses and peripheral themes, original insights and unresolved problems, exaggerations and other insufficiencies, intellectual weaknesses as well as **strengths**. Amongst the weaknesses there will be false or one-sided hypotheses, actual obstacles to clear or fresh **thinking** about a given range of theoretical difficulties. And there will be also, always, unavoidably – within any such large body or tradition of ideas – gaps. The gaps may be partial or total. They may be too, in their way, a **kind** of obstacle to further thought. But a gap is also a space in which to think, in which someone *else* can think. She can think, so to put it, inside the tradition in which it is a gap; or outside it. Or he can think inside it but drawing from the outside; or outside it and drawing from the inside; or think just somewhere astride a line between these different intellectual regions. There will still be other gaps. It is a difficult business. It is made no easier by a style of intellectual exegesis which rushes to fill any gap, even a partial one, with **costless** frivolities.

One must, to a degree, separate the text from the thinker. All the same, there is the death of the child, Edgar.

IV. Absolute Knowledge

Obloquy of the fourth type occurs when Marxism is said to be a form of epistemological absolutism. The point of the charge is not that there have been Marxists given to absolutist certainty, uncritical, dogmatic modes of thought. It goes deeper: to the very heart of the Marxist (as well as many another) intellectual project. Since the fundamental reason for the charge – though not, be it noted, the content of it – is a commitment that Marxism genuinely owns to, it is not appropriate here, as in earlier sections it was, to assess this type of obloquy against sundry features of the tradition it purports to, but does not fairly, characterize. We may gauge it differently: by inspecting the quality of assertion and argument to be found in one altogether representative example of the genre. The word now, therefore, is to John Keane.

Marx, according to this writer, embraced the 'positivist assumption that absolute knowledge of modern civil society and the state' was attainable, an assumption Keane also describes as involving 'absolute truth claims' and – understandably in the circumstances – as '**arrogant**'.³⁸ This 'traditional claim to absolute knowledge', this continuation of 'the intellectualist bid for power', this pretence of a 'totalizing meta-discourse', this 'search for foundations and totalizing truth' – that is the sorry picture that is **Marxism**.³⁹ The contrast

is most stark between it and what Keane himself commends, namely, a theory offering 'accounts of social and political life. . .[which] understand themselves as *interpretations*. . .subject to self-contradiction, unforeseen social and political developments, drastic revision.' His is a commitment to 'cognitive relativism': a 'self-consistent relativism', and which he qualifies, for its part, as '**humble**'.⁴⁰ It 'is opposed to the arrogant search for ultimate truth'; to 'the futile search. . .for definite truths of human existence'; devotes itself to 'disarticulating all essentialist or absolutist truth **claims**'.⁴¹ The indictment is a very strong one; just so long as the reader asks no questions.

First question. What, theoretically, underlies this critique? What is the ground for ascribing to **Marx** and to Marxism an ambition to *absolute* knowledge? It is nothing but this: that Marxists have dared to entertain a concept of truth. **Marx's** theory, Keane informs us, 'falls victim to the assumption, common to **all scientism**, that it is true knowledge.' Or, as he also says, it presents 'its own language game as empirically true. . .hence **unassailable**'.⁴² There you see it: the assumption of '**true** knowledge'; and - 'empirically true. . .*hence* unassailable'. It is all the basis to the critique there is. In a couple of phrases, the equation is made: between knowledge and absolute knowledge. This, of course, squeezes out any idea **intermediate** between cognitive absolutism and cognitive relativism, such as the idea of a conditional, probabilistic kind of knowledge. It excludes a knowledge which, while indeed subject to critical questioning and the need for revision in the light of new theory or evidence, **can** be provisionally categorized nevertheless (when it **can** be) as knowledge. It can be so in virtue of the test of something outside itself, certain 'foundations' precisely, empirical, objective, realist, or what have you. These can also, and do all too frequently - as, in Keane's own words, through 'unforeseen social and political developments' - disabuse people of what they have wrongly taken for knowledge.

Scorning as hubris the very assumption of grounded knowledge, Keane's critique claims not to make any claims to a '**privileged**' truth itself, enjoying its modest place within the discursive plurality it celebrates. We shall see about that in a moment. His theme, it may be noted first, is much current, part of a wider philosophical contestation, in which Marxism finds itself in some good company. A special object, perhaps, of this kind of 'absolutist' disparagement, still it does not stand alone. It stands, as the basis of Keane's critique reveals, alongside rather a lot of **non-Marxist** thinkers, past and present, also **arrogant** enough to believe it necessary, and who tried so far as they were able, to distinguish truth from falsehood.

Second (age-old) question. Are we to take it, then, that as Keane will not avail himself of the assumption that these, his own views are empirically true or knowledge, he will be willing to forego any claims for them to (let us just say) intellectual cogency? The answer to this, entirely predictably, is unclear. **For** the procedure he favours escapes, he says, the classical contradiction of relativism: the contradiction that, falling under its own generalization,

it undermines its own truth; or not falling under it, it falsifies itself, by being itself a truth. It escapes this contradiction, according to Keane, by presenting itself as only a 'logic of particularity'; 'as neither a more universal logic nor a "truer truth".' And the kind of critical theory Keane aims at does not 'presume itself to be a privileged language game'.⁴³ May we indeed infer, then, rephrasing our second question, that between Keane's views, whether about knowledge and interpretation or about politics and society, and other contrary views, there is nothing to choose in the way of intellectual cogency? Must we choose in the way that we choose, say, between flavours of ice cream? Apparently not. '[R]elativism,' Keane says, 'certainly cannot cling naively to the complacent view (with which it is often stereotyped by its critics) that "every belief about every matter is as good as every other".' Some beliefs – possibly his – *can* be better than other beliefs.⁴⁴

Third question, therefore. What are the criteria for assessing this sort of thing? We are surely, now, owed some. And they will need to be free of the taint of absolutist or 'essentialist' foundations, or else the entire **relativizing** construction would seem to be (in the theoretical, not the psychological sense) fraudulent. So, what are the criteria? None are offered, none whatsoever. Instead, there is a linguistic sideways hop. The direct sequel to Keane's statement that relativism does not entail every belief being as good as every other is this: 'Relativism *rather* [my emphasis] implies the need for democracy, for institutional arrangements and procedures which guarantee that protagonists of similar or different forms of language games can openly and continuously articulate their respective forms of life.' Well, democracy is excellent: for relativists, and for empiricists and realists also, to speak only of these. It is a superior way of negotiating matters of political and ethical disagreement. But, here, it is an evasion of the issue confronting this *cognitive* relativism: the issue as to how one belief might be adjudged better than, or not as good as, another. I cannot imagine Keane could mean that questions of knowledge or, as he would prefer, interpretation, should be settled by voting; or what he would say, if he does mean that, as to how one should make up one's mind which way to vote (unless it be by trying to anticipate the outcome of the procedure itself). If he does mean that and knows some non-arbitrary criteria for making up one's mind which way to vote; or if he does not mean it and this is, as it appears, only a sideways hop; one awaits, as one will endlessly from this kind of intellectual outlook, some foundation-free means for distinguishing cognitively better from cognitively worse.

Meanwhile, one can only observe what the relativist (always) does, as opposed to says. Here, for instance, is some criticism – you will see how humble – directed by Keane at Lucio Colletti. He refers to Colletti's distinction 'between parliament (which could be eliminated by a future socialist state) and political and civil liberties, which are inviolable, and

thus a necessary feature of socialism'; to his claim that 'public liberties – the suffrage, freedom of expression, the right to strike – are not identical with parliament.' And Keane then continues:

This is undoubtedly true [sic]. The liberties of a democratic civil society encompass activities deeper and wider than parliament and its **associated** political freedoms. And yet **Colletti's** hint that civil and political liberties could be **preserved** and strengthened without parliament forgets their inner connection: the liberties of an active, self-organizing civil society cannot be defended without a central parliamentary assembly, which enables the particular interests of civil society to argue their **case** and to resolve their differences, openly, non-violently and without state repression. There has never been a political regime which simultaneously nurtured democratic civil liberties and abolished parliament. Nor has there ever existed a political regime which simultaneously maintained a democratic parliament and abolished civil liberties.⁴⁵

There are reasons for **thinking** that Keane is substantially right here against **Colletti**, with one or two qualifications (concerning, for example, the absence of state repression; or whether the last proposition is defensible without tautology). But neither the main **substance** nor the qualifications are the point. Look at how Keane talks: 'undoubtedly true'; and 'forgets'; and 'the liberties. . . **cannot** be defended', with not so much as a whiff of a qualification, whether 'as a rule' or 'generally' or 'probably'. And then, finally: this simply is how it is and always has been, this is the **reality** of the thing. If it be said that, oh, it is only a way of talking, I think one can legitimately ask what entitles someone so to talk, **invoking truth** and what gives every appearance of being foundations, empirical or realist, when it is that sort of appeal precisely that motivates the charge against others of **seeking** an absolute God. This is the (nearly?) universal **practice** of relativism, a practice at odds with its own theory, because the theory is itself rather unpersuasive. In itself, that is not such a temble thing, after **all**. Who has not fallen down, one way and another, trying to **explore** the treacherous landscape of knowledge or interpretation? But a genuine intellectual humility would be more hesitant before condemning as arrogant what it practises itself, however it may preach.

Quite how unself-aware this sort of outlook **can** be, walking quietly away from every difficulty, may be observed, to conclude here, from the following. Reflecting on the mutual relation between democracy, on the one hand, and 'indeterminacy', 'the destruction of the old reference points of ultimate certainty', the refusal of any 'universal metalanguage', on the other, Keane contends that to defend democracy is to 'reject every ideology which seeks to stifle this indeterminacy by demanding the general adoption of particular forms of life that are clothed in a broad repertoire of old and new metaphors'. He gives some examples of such ideologies, going on to describe them as **inimical** to **democracy** and containing 'a fanatical core'. 'Fortified by **their** Truth', they seek to 'crash into the world, throttling everything which crosses their path.' Here are the examples:

[E]very woman needs a man, as the herd needs the shepherd, the ship's **crew** a captain, the proletariat the party, and the nation a Moral Majority or Saviour; **mankind** is the master and

possessor of nature; scientific evidence is the **most** rational criterion of knowledge; capitalism is the chief guarantor of liberty; the end justifies the means; doctors know best; whites are superior to blacks; and so on.

You see how easy a language game can be. Keane manifestly wants to assemble some (we must not say untruths, so let us call them) poor generalizations: discredited, questionable or odious. But the point cannot be made in that way. For it purports to be about rejecting all 'ideologies', such as 'contradict the particularity of their own language games' by calling for 'general adoption'. He needs consequently to write, if he would put the argument to a genuine test, something like this:

Every person needs food and shelter, as the flower needs the sun, the ship's crew periodically sleep, citizens **civil** liberties, and the country a democratic parliament or free **press**; people do not like to be cruelly **tortured** or slaughtered; critical **scepticism** is a **useful** precaution **against** the claims of intellectual arrogance; capitalist exploitation or other grave social injustices tend to vitiate individual liberties; people have rights against personal violation for the ends of others; doctors know something; a society free of racism is superior to one not free of it; and **so on**.

One does not have to believe any or all of these to be absolute truths to see that they are somewhat different from Keane's innocent assembly. It would be interesting to know how many, and which, of them he would find fanatical or unworthy of general **adoption**.⁴⁶

V. **One** Class of Actor

Obloquy of the fifth type occurs when an author discovers that a basic form of **Marxian** explanation, namely, of political events by reference to class, is no good at all, not really explanation. Just as in the last section there was no question of needing to deny that Marxism has been committed to the quest for knowledge, here too it **will** not be a matter, obviously, of seeking to show **from** the texts that Marxists do not proffer explanations of this form. They do – sometimes more and sometimes less successfully. It is a matter again of sampling, in one representative case, the character of argument by which such explanations are urged to be inherently invalid. Since the case I take is that of Barry Hindess, it may be recalled that he it was who proposed the thesis that Marxism is, even when it is not, reductionist. He might have saved himself the trouble of that. If you cannot explain anything in terms of class, it seems uneconomical to contort oneself over whether Marxists explain everything in terms of it, since they undoubtedly do so explain quite a lot.

Hindess challenges the assumption that 'classes [are] themselves collectivities engaged in struggle', that classes are 'collective actors'. According to him, 'classes are not social forces at all. Discussion of politics in terms of class struggle is at best a rather complex allegory and at worst thoroughly **misleading**.'⁴⁷ Here is the argument for this:

An actor is a locus of decision and action, where the action is in some sense a consequence of the actor's decisions. Actors' decisions play a part in the explanation of their actions. . . Reference to an actor, then, always presupposes some definite **means** of reaching and formulating

decisions, definite means of *acting on them*, and some connections between the two. Human individuals are certainly actors in this sense, but they are dearly not the only things that reach decisions and act accordingly. Capitalist enterprises, state agencies, political parties and trade unions are all examples of actors other than human individuals.

Such collectivities *as* classes, on the other hand, 'have no identifiable means of formulating decisions, let alone of acting on them.' To treat as actors 'collectivities that have no means of formulating decisions' is to provide, says Hindess, 'a spurious **explanation**'.⁴⁸ The whole critical job has been done with a definition.

We might, of course, question the definition, but let us not. Let us accept it. Classes are not, then, actors. But why may they not be 'social forces' still, and there be social forces other than actors, of some explanatory importance? Or if 'forces' are definitionally equivalent with 'actors', why may classes not be social aggregates of another kind than actors and forces, and of explanatory importance? Consider, to come to the substance of the thing, this Collectivity. Large or very large numbers of its members become aware that some other collectivity or some institution is acting or about to act in a way **prejudicial** to what they cherish *as* their aims. There is within the Collectivity talk about it, this way and that: informal, spontaneous, in some places more organized. Sub-groups within the Collectivity, whether pre-existing or newly formed, structured or **loose**, confer. Some learn what others think directly by hearing from them; and some learn what others think indirectly through what they are told. Inferences are drawn from the known views of yet others. Partly because of this process, partly because even without it there is a widely-shared reaction amongst members of the Collectivity to the threat they perceive, actions now take place of a more or less consistent or even concerted kind. People take to the streets, say; or use money or positions of influence towards exerting other sorts of pressure upon a government.

Hindess leaves something unclear. Would the kind of process just described be a 'definite' or 'identifiable' means of formulating and acting upon decisions? His definition alone, perhaps, does not exclude that it would. In that case wider and looser types of collectivity than those he cites as examples could be actors after all and classes be amongst them. But if we interpret the definition in the light of his examples, he would appear to require, before we can talk of actors, that there be rule-governed, formally-constituted decision procedures. For, without exception, all of his examples are of formal organizations (capitalist enterprises, state agencies, political parties and trade unions).

Interpreting him in this light, our Collectivity is no social actor. But **so** what? On what basis will it now be said not to be a social force (or aggregate), and which can be used legitimately in explanation? It is not relevant, although it is true, that not all members of the Collectivity participate in deciding upon action and in acting. This is generally the case also with formal organizations. Nor is it relevant, although it is again true, that such concerted or convergent

actions as are decided on and taken are the product of a series of individual and sub-group activities. Not only is that, too, the case with the formal decisions and actions of the organizations Hindess allows to be genuine social forces. Further, it does not follow from it that the concerted or convergent actions from within the Collectivity are reducible without residue, are fully explicable in terms of, these constituent activities. They will not be so if – as I suppose here, because the supposition is often enough realistic – these **constituent** activities are themselves motivated by objectives (material interests or ideal values) which members of the Collectivity have formed in virtue of being members of it.

It is worth **noting** that the conception of 'social forces' implicit in Hindess's examples would render formal organizations the rock bottom of valid explanation in terms of such forces. One could not explain the character or conduct of these organizations themselves by reference to any wider or looser social aggregates. If, for example, a particular organization is not merely random in its social composition, must we then say that more members of one social group than another just happen, by coincidence, to have joined it? Or if we say, so as to avoid this conclusion, that more members of one social group are attracted by the organization's policies and principles, is that differential attraction itself not explicable to some significant extent in terms of differential dispositions people acquire by being differently located within social aggregates of the wider sort?

The question takes us into a companion argument from Hindess; one impugning the notion of class interests, interests based upon social location within the structure of capitalist society. Interests, he says, 'should not be regarded as structurally determined'. With this second argument I shall be brief, since its **logical** deficiency is manifest (and extraordinary). The shape of it is as follows: **people's reasons** for-action are not dependent on structurally defined class interests, because they are also dependent on other things. Hindess asserts that 'insofar as interests have an explanatory role, they are always dependent on definite discursive and other kinds of conditions, and their identification is always open to dispute.' This is so because interests are effective 'insofar as they provide reasons for actors' decisions'; hence only as 'conceptions', which are the 'products of assessment'. What reasons for action are recognized in a given situation will therefore depend on 'the forms of assessment' available to social actors. They can depend also on 'the work of individuals, political parties, unions and other agencies.' The point seems quite reasonable. But Hindess then concludes from it: 'the forms of assessment available to actors are not uniquely determined by their social location. It follows that the interests actors recognize and act upon cannot be uniquely determined by social location either.'⁴⁹

If the burden of the argument is – as it is – to disqualify explanation in terms of social location and its effects through interests, Hindess needs to tell us and to have established that the forms of assessment available to actors and the

reasons actors have for acting are not at **all** – or not **significantly, at least** – **governed** by social location. That **would** be a more exacting argument to make. It is also where his dissertation on this matter began. **'Not uniquely determined'** backs away from it, allowing that actors' reasons for action are determined by social **location to some extent**; in which case Hindess's effort to **disqualify class analysis** and explanation as at best merely allegorical fails.

VI. *The End of Politics*

Obloquy of the sixth type occurs when a statement is made to the effect that Marxists foresee a society without politics. The thesis was lately ventured by Michael **Walzer** in *New Statesman and Society*, the **Marxian** view of politics as 'nothing more than the superstructural enactment of class conflict' being said by him to entail that with the end of social classes 'there will be no politics'. It is a popular thesis, found in a goodly proportion of the critics referred to in this essay. **Pierson**: 'under communism there would be no specifically political institutions over which it would be appropriate to seek to exercise constraint or control' but, rather, an 'end of politics'. Jay: 'socialist traditions, like Leninism, that promised the end of politics'. Cohen: a 'communist society without the aid of political institutions', 'the dissolution. . . of politics itself, and **[t]he Communist Manifesto**. . . singing the praise of the destruction of politics'. **Keane**: everyone deciding about everything, no matter how small, without the need of 'separate political **institutions**'.⁵⁰

There is a certain conceptual elision here, most visible, as it happens, in the writer from amongst all these whose treatment of Marxism is the most sympathetic one. I mean David Held. In introducing for his part the end-of-politics theme, Held writes – as is accurate – that the end of the state for **Marx** involved 'the dismantling of politics as an institutionally distinct sphere in society used in the perpetuation of class **rule**.' Citing, like Cohen, a well-known passage from the *Manifesto* in support of this contention, as well as another from *The Poverty of Philosophy*, Held then goes on to offer, however, the following gloss upon them: that 'since class relations determine the key dimensions of power and axes of conflict in state and in society. . . when classes are finally transcended, all political power will be deprived of its footing and the state – and politics as a distinct activity – will no longer have a **role**.'⁵¹ Note the extension of meaning that has occurred: from politics in a determinate, particular sense, to 'all' politics. Note, equally, a debit in the reasoning for this extension: since 'key' aspects of the stuff of politics disappear, therefore politics *tout court* disappears. We shall need to ask if the passages Held cites do, in fact, license such an extension of meaning.

Let it be emphasized, first, that it is no part of the argument I shall make, to suggest that Marx or the tradition after him did offer an adequate theory or sketch of the political institutions of a classless society. They did not, not even remotely, and it has been a grievous lack. My point is a more limited one:

that the Marxist canon in this matter contains a space and some resources for making the deficiency good, and is not just the obstacle, which these critics one-sidedly depict, to the presently urgent task of elaborating models of a socialist polity. As the defence to be mounted is thus limited, it may be said that nothing much turns on it; the more especially since, in trying to make its deficiency good here, Marxist thought undoubtedly has a lot to learn from other intellectual traditions, in particular that of liberalism. What difference, then, whether Marxism is merely an obstacle or whether it leaves room and a few resources for thinking about the question, when there are in any case alternative points of departure? This difference. It matters whether Marxism is just disabled, by erroneous theses integral to it, from engaging seriously with the crucial issue of a feasible socialist polity; or whether there is space, *within* the framework of Marxism, a gap in the sense of our earlier digression (D2), large but not total, and in which Marxists, as well as anybody else who wants to, can today work to contribute to the discussion of that issue. The sixth type of obloquy would abolish such space. What follows displays it.

Let us consider what it is, precisely, that is invoked to support the projection of an end of politics, following upon the end of classes. Beyond the notion of communist uniformity – that everyone in a classless society will be the same **and/or** agree about everything including matters of public policy – it is the classical formula of the withering away or abolition of the state. I simply set aside the former notion, of uniformity, as not founded on anything substantial, and incapable consequently of furnishing a defensible basis for the theme. It is contradicted not only by texts cited in Section III above, but also by two central and perfectly familiar **Marxian** theses, when taken in conjunction. The first is that communism will achieve a conscious, collective control over social and economic processes which have hitherto escaped such control and indeed understanding, having taken place 'behind the backs' of individuals. The second – another side, this, of **Marx's** expectations concerning communist disalienation – is the thesis of an unprecedented flourishing of human individuality. Giving the lie as it does (just like that) to the talk about universal 'sameness', this second thesis also prompts one to ask how likely it is that Marx might have thought people, all of them, under such conditions of a flourishing individuality, would agree about all matters; and all matters to do with the public life of a large, modern society. It is unlikely. This is, to be sure, merely an inference. But it is an inference from something real and substantial in his work. One wants the material that will weigh against it, on the other side of the scale. **Marx** perhaps did speak also in a contrary sense. Did he?

I **turn** to the formula of the end of the state. Now, it falls out that Marx had a way of expressing this, over and again – in the passages Held and Cohen give and elsewhere – which seems **positively** to thrust upon the reader a point these two, and the other critics, nevertheless overlook. Here is the Manifesto passage:

When, in the course of development, class distinctions have disappeared . . . the public power will lose its political character. Political power, properly so called, is merely the organized power of one class for oppressing another.

And, here, the passage from *The Poverty of Philosophy*:

The working class, in the course of its development, will substitute for the old civil society an association which will exclude classes and their antagonism, and there will be no more political power properly so-called, since political power is precisely the official expression of antagonism in civil society.

Here, again, is a passage from a less familiar text, the review of a book by **Emile de Girardin**:

The abolition of the state has only one meaning to the Communists, as the necessary result of the abolition of classes, whereupon of itself the need for the organized power of one class for the suppression of another ceases to exist.⁵²

These formulations reveal the nature of the conceptual elision I have spoken of. The end-of-politics construal of Marx begins from an independently given meaning of politics (roughly, interpersonal deliberation, negotiation and authoritative decision-making in matters of public scope or concern), and then reads him as saying in such passages as these that all politics, in that sense, is the product of classes and class antagonism, and so must disappear with them. But the passages, I submit, are of another import, and virtually cry out that they are so. Marx offers a different, rather narrow meaning of politics – 'properly so-called', by definition, it is class power and class antagonism – and says that politics, in *this* sense, will disappear 'of itself' with classes. The abolition of the state, he writes, 'has only one meaning to the Communists', and this is it. But beyond the state so defined, *i.e.* as an oppressive class institution, a 'public power' will continue to exist. **Marx's** repeated, forcible expression of the point renders the deduction compelling that 'politics' and a 'state', on meanings of these terms broader than the one he here stipulates, would be part of a classless society.

If, as I propose, the texts cited are so clear on this point, how is it that so many commentators do not see it, even if only as a sort of shadow falling upon their chosen theme and which they must try to remove? It is not easy to say. The point is not an eccentric insight of the present writer. It is well-covered within modern Marx scholarship.⁵³ It is confirmed, moreover, by other material in **Marx's** writings. In *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, for example, he writes that 'Freedom consists in converting the state from an organ superimposed upon society into one completely subordinate to it'; a formula suggesting not only the continued existence of a kind of (converted) 'state', but also its democratic foundation.⁵⁴ This democratic theme, again perfectly familiar, recalls and **reaffirms** the substance of some of **Marx's** earliest theoretical reflections: on **Hegel**, and on the Jewish question.

Then, too, in his marginal notes on **Bakunin's Statism** and *Anarchy* – which yet once more says of the end of the state: 'This merely means: when class

rule has disappeared, there will no longer be any state in the present political sense of the word' - **Marx** makes it plain that the 'state' or 'public power' he envisages will have an elective basis. It is true that he also speaks of the subject of elections, in this context, as having become a 'business matter'. This is read by some as betokening an antithesis with politics. But the antithesis is with politics in **Marx's** restricted sense; for what he actually says is 'a business matter which does not afford any room for **domination**'.⁵⁵ The notion is of a democratic process which, freed from the contestation of classes, is no longer coercive in character, because Marx allowed himself to foresee a kind of community that would be willing to respect the outcomes of democratic deliberation. If even this is, as many will **think**, a highly utopian expectation, it is nonetheless a different expectation from that of an end of politics, in the broad sense. A non-coercive 'state', in which elections are democratically contested is one, we must presume, open to disputes over issues of public policy. Whether such a non-coercive 'state' is possible or not, it is anyway a terrain of politics, in the meaning that sundry commentators deny that it is.

A similar observation must be made concerning the notorious formula that, as **Engels** put it, 'public functions will lose their political character and be transformed into. . . simple administrative functions'. This was not, it has to be said, a happy usage, and it is not worth defending, much less perpetuating. Apart from its unlikely suggestion of a prospective simplicity of functions in a future society, the connotations of 'administration', as a (purely) technical sphere, are hard to put aside. Still, here again, it is not legitimate to abstract from the specifically Marxist - class-coercive - meaning of 'political', in interpreting the distinction between politics and administration. Engels, as was registered earlier, commented witheringly on the anarchist idea of getting rid of 'the authority of the majority over the minority'; dismissing the possibility of 'a society of even only two people' in which each does not 'give up some of his autonomy'. A society in which there is still the necessity of majorities and minorities, as there are still (and is implied by) contested elections, would seem to be a space of public dispute, a space for **politics**.⁵⁶

Lenin, finally, to spare a word for him, believed not only in the end of the state but also - as we are told by **Pierson** - that democracy itself, being 'simply one form of the state', is '**destined** to "wither away"' with the disappearance of **classes**.⁵⁷ This sounds bad. Is it true? Yes, it is; but only in a sense. In addition to the circumstance that Lenin, too, made clear his particular, Marxist understanding of the meaning of the 'state' ('The state withers away insofar as there are no longer any capitalists, any classes, and, consequently, no class can be suppressed'), there is also this: he went to some trouble to explain that he construed the withering away of democracy just qua state-form on this meaning. 'We do not,' he wrote, 'expect the advent of a system of society in which the principle of subordination of the minority to the majority will not be **observed**.'⁵⁸ Around what would minorities and

majorities have been expected by him to form? And should it not be said, particularly by someone not attached to the narrow Marxist meaning of the 'state', that **Lenin** did not, then, actually anticipate the disappearance (without qualification) of democracy?

Looking out menacingly, you see, from behind this figure of the end-of-politics rendition of Marxism, is a close and a not very pretty friend. Its presence should not go unremarked. I mean a disposition to give out that Marxist ideas in this area were (not to put too fine a point on it) **proto-Stalinist**. Held puts the thing gently: that **Marx's** conception, by delegitimizing disagreement and dispute, implied 'a propensity to an authoritarian form of politics'. Keane thinks that Marx showed 'a lack of respect or enthusiasm' for, among other things, the right to vote. Cohen would have it that, in the communist society Marx envisioned, the 'private' or the 'particular' was to be abolished, 'would no longer exist'. And Jay is pleased to note in this fin-de-siecle a 'widespread reassessment of the value of bourgeois democracy as more than a mere ideological smokescreen' (my **emphasis**).⁵⁹ What is one to say? Such opinions are in themselves unastonishing, for having been so widely canvassed by now. But one has also come to expect, by now, with the quantity and quality of available scholarship on Marxism, rather better than this. You can still be surprised by it in some of the places it is found.

VZ. Privilege

An example of the seventh type of obloquy, the last type of this series, will not be given. Readers are invited to find specific examples where they will, for there is today no shortage of them. They occur in discussion of the interrelationships between socialism, the **working** class, other types of social agent or political subject, and the various forms of exploitation and oppression: economic, gender, national, ethnic, and so on. It is, clearly, neither a small nor a simple set of issues, and I have no intention of trying to offer here anything like a thorough or sufficient treatment of them. I focus merely on one current anti-Marxist trope: that, in postulating a special connection between the prospect of achieving socialism and the movement and struggles of the **working** class, Marxism was and is guilty of a kind of arbitrary favouritism, privileging this particular agent at the expense of others, in a would-be universalizing discourse that is actually undemocratic.

A preliminary question about this is whether proponents of the criticism themselves regard socialism as a solution to all these aforesaid different oppressions. Typically they do not. It is, in fact, usually a companion argument to the one I focus upon that Marxism was wrong to conceive socialism in such an all-encompassing way, as the precondition for ending every human oppression; or – in extreme variants of this companion argument – as automatically bringing with it complete and universal liberation. The contention, in this extreme variant, is one more caricature, which I do not bother to contest at length, proffering merely two or three quite 'orthodox'

Marxist reference points to the **contrary**.⁶⁰ That Marxists have generally overstated, however, the interdependence between achieving-socialism and the **overcoming of** the other-social oppressions is fair criticism, Beyond continuing to register how different forms of domination can often feed off and mutually reinforce one another, socialists have to recognize that socialism, ambitious and difficult of attainment as it has proved to be, is one goal, relatively distinct from other emancipatory goals; which are of their own pressing urgency, the obstacles and resistances to them being the source of plenty human misery and stifled potentialities. There is **still** good enough reason for movements or agencies in support of these several goals to accept and to press the validity of each other's specific claims. Any battle against one grave systemic injustice diminishes itself by ignoring other such equally grave injustices, or by making light of them.

A contemporary universalism, therefore, may find its basis in the reciprocal recognition amongst different emancipatory struggles of what they share, as struggles against injustice or arbitrary power. **It** should not be founded on a claim that one such struggle is master or mistress of them all. If a feminist socialism and a socialist feminism, a socialist anti-racism or anti-racist socialism, are possible and necessary, **still** socialism, feminism and the struggle against racism train their sights on different objectives, none of which simply subsumes the others.

In this light, now, what is to be made of the argument that to see the **working** class as central, crucial, to any possible socialist future is arbitrarily to privilege it; that every **kind** of oppressed subject or social identity is a potential agency of socialism quite equally with this one? If the argument exploits a **notion of socialism as, definitionally, only that kind** of society from which all forms of social oppression have been **removed, then** socialism has been redefined again as universal, **all-encompassing goal**, and the whole point of insisting on its specificity and its distinction from other **goals is lost**. One might just as well say that the working class, or ethnic minorities, are equal potential agencies with women for overcoming gender oppression – understood, **this, as the end of all oppressions**. To establish, in other words, an equality amongst various putative agencies of socialism, the current critiques of Marxism on this point have quietly to take back what they forthrightly – and justly – put forward concerning the non-comprehensive, the particular, nature of the aim of a classless society.

If, on the other hand, this is not taken back, then the argument against 'privileging? **the working class-as-agency of socialism**, or that to do so is undemocratic, is unconvincing. Across the variety of conceptions of what is socialism, a **core idea has always** been the removal of **that form of (economic)** exploitation **which** is associated with class division. Cutting through the thorny issue of the boundaries of **the working class**, if we say it is composed roughly of all the victims – organized and not, male and female, black or white, ethnically diverse, and of whatever sexual orientation – of economic

exploitation, then there are at least two good reasons to suppose that it is this constituency that is the primary constituency of socialism.

First, it has an interest (**Hindess** notwithstanding) in opposing capitalist exploitation, in a way that alternative constituencies, alternatively defined, do not. Women, just as women, for example, do not; unless it **can** be shown persuasively that the significantly wealthy among them, by birth, or by marriage, or by professional or commercial success, are in their generality just as likely to come to a consciousness of the injustices of capitalism as are women workers; or unless it can be shown persuasively why the struggle against gender inequality is, just as such, intrinsically anti-capitalist, and consequently socialist. Apart from restoring, once again, the sort of spurious universalism that is criticized in traditionally inflated socialist claims, this amounts to saying – as has been said rather too often, wrongly – that capitalism by its very nature–could not–accommodate or adapt to this or that **particular democratic goal**. Who will confidently **say** it about **either** gender–or ethnic **equality**? What in the nature of capitalism definitively forbids the one or the other? Capitalism, as Marxists are all too frequently lectured, is not the cause of all ills. And it is not at all clear **that** to fight to remove these of them from existing capitalist societies must be to fight in vain.

Second, the idea – considered normatively now rather than predictively – that exactly those on the receiving end of a given form of oppression or injustice might be the primary agents of its liquidation is the opposite of undemocratic. It is a rather old idea and scarcely exclusive to Marxism: that **genuine social liberations are not (as a rule at any rate) delivered to people, by someone else**. Within Marxism this theme has had the name of proletarian **self-emancipation**, and the problem with it has often been seen to be, not the theme itself, but that no Marxists have **really** taken it seriously (as, unhappily, many Marxists have not), going in for various, elitist substitutionisms. Of a sudden, it turns out that it is the sentiment itself that is at fault, underwriting a kind of privilege. Quite how far things have gone today in the development of facile criticisms of Marxism across a sector of the **Left** may be gauged by imagining what the reaction would be, were a parallel of this 'privileging' argument to be tried out in relation to some other **type** of oppression. If someone were to suggest, for instance, that one should not specially focus on women as the primary constituency of the battle against women's oppression; or that black people in South Africa had no privileged (!) place in the current **struggle** against apartheid – it is a safe bet there would be many who would **not** even cross the road to respond to the suggestion.

Conclusion

This critical commentary was composed, though all the material engaged and criticized by it predates the period, in the months spanning the turn into the **1990s**, when momentous events, far from played out, were unfolding in Eastern Europe. Whatever other consequences may follow upon these

events, it seems not improbable that one consequence will be a **further** impetus to the propagation of material of a similar kind. Already it is possible to detect, within the spectrum of early reactions, one that might be called retrospective Stalinism or at least **Brezhnevism**: by which I mean a tendency, amongst people who have thought, insisted, for years that the Soviet and Eastern European regimes were not a genuine embodiment or product of Marxist belief, to wonder if the entire tradition is not now bankrupted by their wreckage – as though the ideas and values of Marxism were then, after all, wrapped up in these regimes, as before they were said not to be.

The sense in which it is likely to be true that a tradition is ended, is that the time of mass-based socialist movements which conceived themselves as specifically Marxist may well be up. There are good reasons, as well as bad ones, for drawing a line under it. Any socialist movement that seeks now to define itself by reference to one label or doctrine, that does not contain at its heart a vigorous, committed pluralism, intellectual and political, is doomed to be, not a movement, but a sect. At the same time, if socialism has any future, the movement for it needs to know where it has come from, not only the resources it lacks, but also the ones it has. It needs a proper form of self-accounting. Making a mess of its own past, of the different strands or currents within it, will not be a rewarding procedure. And this is to say nothing, all politics of the thing set aside, of the elementary care and sense of proportion which each generation of thinkers owes to the efforts of generations of thinkers before it.

NOTES

1. References for this paragraph: Jon Elster, *Making Sense of Marx*, Cambridge 1985, pp. 522, 88 – and cf. pp. 2–22, 526; Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, Harmondsworth 1973, p. 706; and 'Critique of the Gotha Programme', in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Selected Works*, Moscow 1970, Vol. 3, pp. 18–19. The starting point for Elster's discussion of this issue is actually a passage from *The German Ideology* in which it is said, 'it was not their [the utopian socialists'] view, as Sancho [Max Stirner] imagines, that each should do the work of Raphael, but that anyone in whom there is a potential Raphael should be able to develop without hindrance.' See Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works* (hereafter CW), London 1975 ff., Vol. 5, p. 393.
2. See John Keane, *Democracy and Civil Society*, London 1988, pp. 54, 63; for the Marx references; notes 52–55 below; Engels to Theodor Cuno 24/1/1872, in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Selected Correspondence* (hereafter MESC), Moscow n. d., p. 336; and August Bebel, *Society of the Future*, Moscow 1971, p. 23.
3. Stuart Hall, *The Hard Road to Renewal*, London 1988, pp. 169, 242.
4. Martin Jay, *Fin-de-Siècle Socialism, and other essays*, London 1988, p. 5 – which has also 'those who arrogate to themselves knowledge of the whole'.
5. References for this paragraph: Jean L. Cohen, *Class and Civil Society*, Oxford 1983, p. 193; Marx, CW, Vol. 4, p. 195, and *Capital*, Vol. I, Moscow 1961, p. 301; Engels, CW, Vol. 7, p. 92; V. I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, Moscow

- 1960–1970, Vol. 22, p. 149; Rosa Luxemburg, *The Spirit of Russian Literature: Life of Korolenko*, in Mary-Alice Waters, *Rosa Luxemburg Speaks*, New York 1970, p. 349; Leon Trotsky, *My Life*, New York 1960, p. 1, and *Problems of Everyday Life*, New York 1973, p. 53, and *Literature and Revolution*, Ann Arbor 1960, p. 253; Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, London 1974, pp. 32, 173; and Isaac Deutscher, *Marxism in our Time*, London 1972, p. 236.
6. *The Hard Road to Renewal*, pp. 169–70.
 7. See Gösta Esping Anderson, *Politics Against Markets*, Princeton 1985, pp. 12, 18, 24 – and xiii; and Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 9, pp. 112, 49 (and cf. pp. 23, 29, 52, 56, 83, 98), Vol. 25, p. 454, and Vol. 31, pp. 36, 59 (and pp. 56–65 passim).
 8. On the last point here, see Raymond Williams, *Resources of Hope*, London 1989, p. 66.
 9. For this and the next paragraph, see *Class and Civil Society*, pp. 103–4 – and p. 244 notes 60 and 64.
 10. Engels to Joseph Bloch 21–22/9/1890, in MESC, pp. 498–500 (and cf. Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. III, Moscow 1962, p. 772).
 11. Barry Hindess, *Politics and Class Analysis*, Oxford 1987, pp. 8, 88 – and cf. pp. 94, 101.
 12. *Ibid.*, pp. 89, 102, 103–4.
 13. *Ibid.*, pp. 89–90, 94–5, 102.
 14. See my *Discourses of Extremity*, London 1990, p. 145; and more generally, on this issue of reductionism, pp. 73–5, 84, 86–7, 93–4, 130–36, 166 n. 13.
 15. Christopher Pierson, *Marxist Theory and Democratic Politics*, Cambridge 1986, p. 173.
 16. *Fin-de-Siècle Socialism*, p. 4.
 17. Les Johnston, *Marxism, Class Analysis and Socialist Pluralism*, London 1986, p. 78 – and pp. 50, 62, 67–8.
 18. *The Hard Road to Renewal*, p. 156.
 19. Elster, *Making Sense of Marx*, pp. 86, 91; Cohen, *Class and Civil Society*, p. 188; Keane, *Democracy and Civil Society*, pp. 54, 63–4; Pierson, *Marxist Theory and Democratic Politics*, p. 28.
 20. David Held, *Models of Democracy*, Cambridge 1987, p. 131; and Kate Soper, 'Marxism and Morality', *New Left Review* 163, May/June 1987, pp. 105–6 (my emphasis).
 21. *Fin-de-Siècle Socialism*, pp. 10, 12, 13.
 22. *The Hard Road to Renewal*, p. 173.
 23. *Making Sense of Marx*, p. 61 n. 3.
 24. Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, London 1971, p. 21.
 25. CW, Vol. 4, pp. 131, 179.
 26. CW, Vol. 3, p. 326.
 27. *Grundrisse*, p. 611.
 28. See 'Critique of the Gotha Programme', *Selected Works*, Vol. 3, p. 19; *Capital*, Vol. III, p. 799; and 'The Controversy About Marx and Justice', in my *Literature of Revolution*, London 1986, pp. 51–4 (or *New Left Review* 150, March/April 1985, pp. 81–4).
 29. 'Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts', CW, Vol. 3, pp. 299, 336–7.
 30. *Capital*, Vol. I, pp. 245, 246, 251, 252, 254–5, 263–4 n., 266, 269, 270.
 31. *Capital*, Vol. III, p. 826, 854.
 32. Respectively: Deutscher, *Marxism in our Time*, pp. 237–8; Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, New York 1961, p. 215; Leon Trotsky, *Trotsky's Diary in Exile*, London 1958, pp. 56–7; Rosa Luxemburg Speaks, p. 354; Bebel, *Society of the Future*, p. 107.

33. *Minima Moralia*, pp. 155–7, 78–80, 103.
34. *Literature and Revolution*, pp. 249, 253–4.
35. Terry Eagleton, *Against the Grain*, London 1986, p. 165.
36. Marx to Ferdinand Lassalle 28/7/1855, CW, Vol. 39, p. 544; and see David McLellan, *Karl Marx: His Life and Thought*, London 1973, pp. 274–5.
37. Barrington Moore Jr., *Reflections on the Causes of Human Misery*, London 1972, p. xvi.
38. *Democracy and Civil Society*, pp. 219, 228.
39. *Ibid.*, pp. 229, 220, 232, 234.
40. *Ibid.*, pp. 228, 229 (and pp. 230, 235), 236, 234–5.
41. *Ibid.*, pp. x, 238, 236–7.
42. *Ibid.*, pp. 220, 235.
43. *Ibid.*, pp. 233, 235.
44. *Ibid.*, p. 237.
45. *Ibid.*, p. 182.
46. See *Ibid.*, pp. 238–41. Those interested in the debate on 'essential contestability' may consult here also a small new contribution to it. The view of democracy which Keane defends 'acknowledges its essentially contested quality'. But then that view – 'a pluralist civil society guarded by an open and accountable state' – is at once said to comprehend that what is seen as democratic 'at any given time and place can be maintained. . . only through *these* democratic procedures' (Keane's emphasis). This means. . . that democracy cannot be interpreted as merely one language game among others'. So it goes.
47. *Politics and Class Analysis*, pp. 108–9.
48. *Ibid.*, pp. 110–11.
49. *Ibid.*, pp. 112–19 – emphases added.
50. See Michael Walzer, 'The Good Life', *New Statesman and Society*, 6 October 1989, pp. 28–9; Pierson, *Marxist Theory and Democratic Politics*, pp. 28, 30; Jay, *Fin-de-Siècle Socialism*, p. 9; Cohen, *Class and Civil Society*, p. 107 (and cf. pp. 108–9, 187, 190); Keane, *Democracy and Civil Society*, pp. 62–3 (and 54).
51. *Models of Democracy*, pp. 123–4 (and 131).
52. CW, Vol. 6, pp. 505, 212; and Vol. 10, p. 333 (translation modified).
53. See especially, for their care and clarity, Hal Draper, 'The Death of the State in Marx and Engels', in Ralph Miliband and John Saville (eds.), *The Socialist Register 1970*, London 1970, pp. 201–307; and Michael Evans, 'Karl Marx and the Concept of Political Participation', in Geraint Parry (ed.), *Participation in Politics*, Manchester 1972, pp. 127–50.
54. *Selected Works*, Vol. 3, p. 25.
55. See David McLellan, *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, Oxford 1977, p. 563 (and cf. Held, *Models of Democracy*, p. 131).
56. *Selected Works*, Vol. 2, p. 378; and MESC, p. 336.
57. Pierson, *Marxist Theory and Democratic Politics*, p. 79.
58. *Collected Works*, Vol. 25, pp. 455–6, 467.
59. Held, *Models of Democracy*, pp. 137–8; Keane, *Democracy and Civil Society*, p. 59; Cohen, *Class and Civil Society*, p. 184; Jay, *Fin-de-Siècle Socialism*, p. 8.
60. Lenin: 'By transforming capitalism into socialism the proletariat creates the possibility of abolishing national oppression; the possibility becomes reality "only" – "only"! – with the establishment of full democracy in all spheres, including the delineation of state frontiers in accordance with the sympathies of the population.' *Collected Works*, Vol. 22, p. 325. Trotsky: the text to note 34 above; or this (reductionist?) observation, that 'culture was the main instrument of class oppression. But it also, and only it, can become the instrument of socialist emancipation.' *Problems of Everyday Life*, p. 236.