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What's Wrong with Exploitation?

Richard J. Arneson

The aim of this paper is mainly expository. It attempts to elucidate Karl Marx's conception of exploitation and to state clearly what is morally objectionable about exploitation as Marx understands it. This task is not as straightforward as it sounds, for two connected reasons: (1) Marx's normative views on exploitation are densely intertwined with empirical economic hypotheses, particularly the labor theory of value; and (2) partly out of a misplaced confidence that his substantive ethical positions are noncontroversial except for those who have a distinct motive of self-interest for misperceiving plain truth, Marx for the most part eschews any attempt at justification or even clear description of those ethical positions. The posture he adopts is that of the disinterested scientific observer standing among apologists for capital.[1] Marx's ethics intrude on his analysis by implication and sometimes by innuendo. In order to exhibit the basic ethical premises that indicate what troubles Marx about the phenomenon he identifies as "exploitation," the commentator has to reconstruct the premises from Marx's suggestive hints, from his tone and style, from his side comments, parenthetical remarks, and wisecracks. Not surprisingly, there is wide disagreement as to what ethical view, if any, to ascribe to Marx.

Toward the end of this essay I try to defend the interpretation I develop against objections based on a very different general sense about what Marx is up to. One objection is that Marx thinks justice an ideologically suspect notion and so does not base his critique of capitalism on its lapses on the score of distributive justice; another is that Marx places little emphasis on the distributional side of the economy and is much more concerned for the quality of productive life. Finally, I try to state simply what are the main morally controversial aspects of Marx's ethical beliefs about exploitation.

1. For examples of Marx explicitly adopting the stance of lone scientist among a herd of biased observers, see Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling (New York: Random House, Modern Library ed., 1906), p. 241n.; also the "Author's Prefaces," pp. 15–20.

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I

It is sometimes said that, according to Marx, capitalism and other class societies are necessarily or by definition exploitative, and that socialism by contrast will be necessarily nonexploitative.[2] From a moral standpoint these statements are misleading. One can locate in Marx a technical sense of the term "exploitation," according to which exploitation is the appropriation by a class of nonworkers of the surplus product of a class of workers. For a given work force the surplus product is to be understood as the quantity of goods produced minus the quantity of goods necessary to sustain that work force, where this difference is positive. Quite obviously exploitation in the Marxian technical sense does not imply exploitation in the ordinary evaluatively charged sense of the term. (In this ordinary sense, exploitation involves mistreatment.)[3] To see this, consider feudal relations of production. Under feudalism one finds serfs bound by custom to the lord's estate, so that as a condition for working his own lands to his own advantage the serf is obliged to work the lord's lands and/or turn over part of his own harvest to the lord. By custom the lord is bound to supply military protection to his serfs. We may suppose that the lord coerces his serfs to fulfill their customary obligations. This thumbnail description implies exploitation in the technical sense, but that there is any mistreatment of the serfs by the lord is not yet plain. The description so far offered leaves it open that the protective services of the lord may be a fair equivalent—by whatever standards we choose to judge these matters—for the services the serf is obliged to render to the lord. These protective services are paradigms of public goods,[4] so the coercion employed by the lord may be simply a necessary part of a scheme that is beneficial and fair to all concerned. No doubt lords often, perhaps always, mistreated or oppressed their serfs, but that they did so does not follow by definition from the relations that, according to Marx, are constitutive of feudal society.

Another way to call attention to the gap between the technical Marxian sense of exploitation and the ordinary sense is to focus on the notion of surplus product which figures in the definition of the technical sense of the term. Without a surplus product there can technically be no exploitation. This implies there is no exploitation in a slave society in extremis in which conditions of production have declined so that slaves do not pro-

2. Nancy Holmstrom, "Exploitation," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 7 (1977): 353–69, quotation from p. 353.

3. G. A. Cohen distinguishes between the "technical Marxian sense" of exploitation and the sense of exploitation which entails oppression in "Karl Marx and the Withering Away of Social Science," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1 (1972): 182–203. In the definition of "exploitation" I offer in the text two sentences back, "appropriation" must be understood as involving coercion.

4. For a characterization of *public goods* and a suggestion of a moral argument justifying coercion that is needed to secure the provision of public goods (in some cases), see Mancur Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1965).

duce more than is needed for their subsistence but are continually starved so that their masters may live sumptuously. In the ordinary sense of the term there could hardly be exploitation more brutal than this.

The notion we aim to expound is a compound of the technical and ordinary senses of exploitation: where there is appropriation of a surplus product by nonproducers and mistreatment or (to employ another idiom) violations of the rights of the producers, we shall say there is wrongful exploitation. The normative side of Marx's economic doctrine is subtle and elusive. His discussions mix together historically contingent and analytically necessary features and so do not provide a neat list of necessary and sufficient conditions for the presence of wrongful exploitation.

II

According to Marx, a capitalist economy is fundamentally divided into two groups of persons, of which one is composed of those who own the tools and raw materials, while the members of the other own virtually no property and to make a living must hire themselves out as laborers for the tool owners. From a moral standpoint, the least controversial part of Marx's criticism of capitalism is his implicit invocation of the natural-rights tradition in querying the process that creates these two separate classes of tool owners and tool users.[5] Marx claims simply that the concentrations of ownership of the means of production that were a historical precondition of capitalist enterprise were largely accomplished by plainly immoral acts. "In actual history," writes Marx, "it is notorious that conquest, enslavement, robbery, murder, briefly force, play the great part."[6] In its context this statement rebukes writers who defend capitalist wealth and poverty by asserting that originally it is the superior virtue of the productive few that is responsible for accumulations of private wealth. Some might challenge the factual accuracy of Marx's claim, but few would dispute that economic advantages gained in the manner Marx describes should be forfeited. However, this objection by Marx is not at the core of his moral criticism of capitalist enterprise. For we can transcend the situation that gives rise to this objection, at least in thought, while still imagining a form of economy that is recognizably capitalist. If we imagine a reformed capitalist economy that takes its start from a fair initial distribution of wealth, we can expect that, through the repercussions on the market of people's differential endowments of intelligence, diligence, ruthlessness, "good luck," etc., in time some persons will come to control vastly more resources than others. The wealthy now can earn their living through the profitable purchase of the labor of those who eventually have virtually no economic resources besides their labor.

5. The use to which Marx puts his invocation of the natural-rights tradition is not altogether uncontroversial. For example, it conflicts with J. S. Mill's notion of title by prescription. See Mill, *Principles of Political Economy*, in *Collected Works* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965), 2:217.

6. Marx, 1:785.

Marx's moral qualms about the violent character of precapitalist accumulations of wealth would have no application to this reformed capitalism, yet presumably he would castigate some of its exchange relations as wrongfully exploitive, and we need to know what morally suspect features are picked out by this description.

By way of anticipation, and to orient the reader through what follows, I will state bluntly that there seem to me to be basically two moral concerns fused together in Marx's idea of wrongful exploitation. One is the idea that people should get what they deserve; the other is that people should not force others to do their bidding. So stated, these ideas are scarcely controversial, though Marx's elaboration and application of them may be. Marx adheres to an austere notion of deservingness according to which people are responsible (at most) for their intentions and not for the actual results of acting on their intentions, for these results are causally influenced by a wide variety of morally arbitrary contingencies. One is responsible only for what lies within one's control, but if Kant is right the actual consequences of one's acts often do not lie within one's control and so can never by themselves dictate a judgment of deservingness. Marx further insists that there are empirical prerequisites even for good intentions and that lacking these prerequisites may mitigate even individual responsibility for one's own intentions.[7] Only in a fairly arranged social environment has each person a fair opportunity to develop the willingness to try to make economic contributions. In the absence of such an environment, dispensing blame to economic malingerers is questionable and, more crucially, so is dispensing superior reward to the more successful. A capitalist economy remunerates competitors in response to market signals, which vary because of the influence of morally arbitrary factors, of which the most obvious is ownership of wealth. This would be so even under the envisaged fair initial distribution of resources under the imagined reformed capitalism. The rough idea that one comes to deserve economic remuneration only for trying, only for effort or sacrifice expended, underlies Marx's qualms about exploitation.

For reasons that will emerge as we proceed, ascribing a notion of deservingness to Marx is contestable and so in need of defense. What I take to be the other element that figures in Marx's notion of what is wrong with exploitation is plainly visible in his post-1843 writings and duly noted by every commentator. This is the idea that exploitation involves an exercise of power by some over others, to the disadvantage of the less powerful. Marx never tires of emphasizing that ownership of capital confers power to command the labor of others. In the *Communist Manifesto*, he states, "Communism deprives no man of the power to appropri-

7. Marx makes this point in "Capital Punishment," *New York Daily Tribune*, February 18, 1853, quoted by Jeffrie Murphy in "Marxism and Retribution," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 2 (1973): 217–43. A cruder statement occurs in *The German Ideology*. See Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works* (New York: International Publishers, 1976), 5:193–95.

ate the products of society; all that it does is to deprive him of the power to subjugate the labour of others by means of such appropriation."[8] Within any class society wrongful exploitation will involve interactions between persons of markedly unequal social power, and the inequality will determine the distribution of benefits from the interaction. In market economies these inequalities of power assume the form of great disparities in bargaining strength between capitalists and workers.

III

This attempt to describe the two underlying moral elements in Marx's idea of exploitation (let's call them the "deservingness" objection and the "power-inequality" objection) is so far quite vague and in need of clarification.

Toward this end, it will be useful to criticize an account of Marx's concept of exploitation developed by Nancy Holmstrom. Drawing on Marx's analysis of "The Rate of Surplus Value" in chapter 9 of volume 1 of *Capital*, Holmstrom arrives at the following formulation, which I take to be a listing of a set of necessary and sufficient conditions for the presence of exploitation: "The profits of capitalists, then, according to Marx's theory, are generated by surplus, unpaid and forced labor, the product of which the producers do not control. This is exploitation as Marx uses the term."[9] Holmstrom correctly holds that Marx has a concept of exploitation that is applicable not just to capitalist but to all class societies, and she intends the passage just quoted to serve as analysis of this general concept. The problem here is that one can describe situations in which all the four features she takes to be common to exploitation are present but in which the deservingness and power-inequality objections do not apply, and in these situations there is no wrongful exploitation. (So far as my argument goes, Holmstrom might be correctly explicating the technical sense of exploitation, but my discussion above shows that the technical sense fails adequately to capture Marx's moral concerns, and it is these moral concerns which Holmstrom claims above all to have exhibited.)

Consider the following imaginary society. (If one insists upon realism, imagine this society to be the aftermath of nuclear holocaust.) The society is divided into two classes of people, the Robust and the Disabled. The Disabled are incapable of sustained productive work, mental or physical. They can reproduce and take care of their domestic arrangements. Disabled parents uniformly produce children similarly afflicted. By contrast, the Robust are healthy and reasonably strong, like us. The rules organizing economic production in this society are as follows. By law, all tools are the property of the Disabled. The Robust own no tools. Otherwise all citizens, Robust and Disabled, are guaranteed the rights character-

8. Marx and Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (hereafter cited as *Communist Manifesto*), *Collected Works*, 6:500.

9. Holmstrom, p. 358. For evidence that this is intended to be a set of necessary and sufficient conditions, see p. 363.

istic of market societies, and in fact market relations determine the organization of production. The Disabled hire the Robust to work their tools. The work abilities of the Robust roughly balance the tool ownership of the Disabled, so their bargaining strengths are roughly equal, and approximately equal incomes accrue to each member of society, Robust and Disabled alike. To avert the distracting objection that in this society, insofar as they refrain from forcible expropriation of the tools of the helpless Disabled, the Robust are merely being continuously charitable, I should specify that before becoming permanently crippled, the ancestors of the Disabled took care to wire themselves to their tools in such a way that each generation of Disabled can detonate society's tools in face of any threat of expropriation.

Reviewing the alleged four features of exploitation, we note that each obtains in our imaginary society. The Robust produce a surplus above their subsistence needs. Some large fraction of this surplus is appropriated by the Disabled, hence not under the control of the producers. As to whether the labor of the Robust is forced, it is pertinent to cite Holmstrom's characterization of the forcing that occurs under capitalism: "Persons who have no access to the means of production other than their own capacity to labor do not need to be forced to work by chains or by laws. The 'freedom' they have compels them to sell their labor power to those who own the means of production and to put themselves under their dominion."[10] This characterization holds true of the relation between the Robust and the tool-owning Disabled. Finally, "unpaid labor" is defined as labor for which the laborer does not receive a full value equivalent. According to Marx and Holmstrom, the laborer under capitalism who contracts with the capitalist to work a full day for a subsistence wage is nonetheless paid only for part of his day's labor, the part in which he produces his subsistence and for which he receives a full value equivalent. On this definition of unpaid labor, some of the labor of the Robust is clearly unpaid.

Although the labor of the Robust displays the four alleged features of exploitation, two features of the situation militate against our speaking of wrongful exploitation in this context. First, the economic relations between Robust and Disabled are not marked by any overall inequality in bargaining strength.

Second, we take note that the objection to exploitation which we have labeled the deservingness objection also fails to apply to the society of the Robust and Disabled. In the economic domain a good will is a will to support oneself and to contribute one's fair share to the economic common life. Since the Disabled are completely incapable of economic production, we can say either that on account of this incapacity they are not to be faulted for failure to display the intention to make such a contribution, or that it is fair to presume they do have the requisite intention unless they give out behavioral cues to the contrary—for example, by

10. Ibid., p. 357.

gloating maliciously at their incapacity or by greedily deploying the tools they possess. Either way, it is plain the Disabled can be fully as deserving of economic remuneration as the Robust who do contribute to the economy. In the society of the Robust and Disabled, morally arbitrary factors do not bring about inequalities in the distribution of economic advantages.[11]

Here one might wonder why the target of my discussion is Holmstrom rather than Marx. Why not frankly say that Holmstrom has got Marx right and that my criticism of her explication is really a criticism of the views Marx actually held?

In numerous texts Marx employs rhetoric that strongly suggests he believes the exploitation of capitalist and other class societies to be morally wrong. In some of these passages Marx offers broad hints as to why he regards exploitation as wrong. But he neither develops these hints nor explains their basis. He drops these hints in the course of attempting to solve certain problems in Ricardian economic theory that are themselves independent of the question of whether exploitation is good or bad. Marx deploys the technical sense of exploitation to serve his purposes in this Ricardian enterprise. On these facts the reader is hardly entitled to assume that the economic concept Marx uses exactly corresponds to the moral concerns his hints vaguely associate with that concept. It would be quite extraordinary if the necessary and sufficient conditions for the one exactly coincided with the necessary and sufficient conditions for the other, and it would be even more remarkable that Marx nowhere remarks on this coincidence of scientific and moral concerns—as in fact he does not. Where Marx is reticent, the interpreter is not at liberty to saddle him with an implausible idea just because it is peculiarly neat and simple. My view is that Marx believed that, under empirical conditions that hold true for most instances of technical exploitation in any class society that has existed or is likely to exist, technical exploitation does coincide with wrongful exploitation. Stating the exact necessary and sufficient conditions for wrongful exploitation is a messy undertaking which Marx does not attempt. That Marx believes there is a rough empirical overlap between technical and wrongful exploitation helps explain why Marx neglects to account for their possible theoretical divergence. Where the alignment between a door and its jamb is not quite true, but one expects this slight misalignment will cause no practical difficulties in opening or shutting the door, calling attention to the lack of fit may seem pointless. But nowadays, with regard to Marx, we are in the position of having seen the door collapse and yet remaining interested in the doorjamb standing alone. That is, Marx's contributions to economic science do not form a

11. Similar objections apply to a definition of "Marxian exploitation" offered by Lawrence Crocker in "Marx's Concept of Exploitation," *Social Theory and Practise* 1 (1972): 201–15. "Accordingly I propose that the necessary and sufficient condition of exploitation is that there is a surplus product which is under the control of a group which does not include all the producers of that surplus" (p. 205).

position that is tenable in the current state of the discipline,[12] but his moral reasons for condemning capitalism are still as germane as ever and may be perfectly sound.

IV

Certain arguments known to Marx purport to show that capitalist profits are a fair return for the productive sacrifice of the capitalist. One argument has it that since capital is created or at least enhanced by past labor, the idea of expropriating capital threatens to deprive the capitalist laborer (or his heir) of the fruits of his past exertion. Another argument deems profit a wage equivalent for the labor of entrepreneurial management. A third argument considers profit a fair return for the risk of losing one's capital assumed when one invests it. Bracketing risky investment and employing the later terminology of Alfred Marshall, one can regard interest payments as "the reward of waiting."[13] If sound, these arguments would disprove the claim that capitalist exploitation is susceptible to the deservingness objection I have outlined. Consider Marx's response to the last-mentioned argument, which held that, in making an investment of his capital, the capitalist is deferring a gratification to which he is entitled, the gratification of consuming his capital, so he deserves remuneration for this abstinence. Against this moral argument in favor of interest, Marx is savagely satirical.[14] He does not, however, contest the view that, if a capitalist sacrifices through abstinence on behalf of a socially desirable aim, he then deserves a reward in the form of interest. Instead, Marx denies the antecedent of this conditional claim. If sacrifice is measured against the baseline of a comfortable standard of living previously enjoyed, in a variety of circumstances the capitalist can increase his level of consumption while simultaneously increasing his capital accumulation, so his abstaining from consuming his entire capital at once does not represent any sacrifice at all.[15] (Note that Marx's baseline for measuring sacrifice is controversial, in that one could hold that just deferring any consumption to which one is entitled counts as sacrifice.) Marx's ethical strategy here is to avoid contentious moral issues by asserting that the empirical conditions that would give rise to them do not in fact obtain. Marx's responses to the other standardly offered justifications of profit

12. Three commentators who arrive at this conclusion from very different theoretical viewpoints are Marc Blaug, chap. 7 of *Economic Theory in Retrospect*, rev. ed. (Homewood, Ill.: Richard D. Irwin, Inc., 1968), and M. C. Howard and J. E. King, *The Political Economy of Marx* (New York: Longman, Inc., 1975).

13. Alfred Marshall, *Principles of Economics* (1890; reprint ed., London and New York: Macmillan Co., 1961), p. 587.

14. Marx, *Capital*, 1:649–51, 654–56, 666–67, 784–85.

15. Ibid., pp. 651, 667, and 784–87. Note, however, that this argument by Marx must rely on measuring abstinence against a baseline defined independently of property ownership. This choice of a baseline will require defense. One might hold that no matter how affluent a standard of living a person enjoys, if it be granted that he has a right to a certain property, then his investing that property postpones a gratification to which he is currently entitled, hence is sacrifice.

follow this same strategy.[16] Notice that Marx's strategy of argument acknowledges that the deservingness objection does not necessarily hold against all technical exploitation per se but, rather, holds given empirical conditions that do in fact broadly obtain in capitalist society.

V

Marx maintains that under capitalism surplus value is "extorted"[17] from the workers when he is stressing the coercion in the wage-labor relation, but he also on occasion speaks of the same process in terms of capitalists' "embezzling"[18] workers when he wishes to emphasize that the wage-labor relation involves a kind of theft of which the workers remain ignorant. It is this embezzling aspect of exploitation that I now want to focus upon.

In Marx's economics, workers' wages are asserted to hover around a subsistence level. During the working day workers produce beyond what is required for their subsistence. This surplus is taken by the capitalist, and Marx accordingly calls the surplus-producing labor of the workers "unpaid labor,"[19] though he recognizes that in the commonsense view of the worker it appears that he is paid wages for the entire workday, not just the portion of it during which he produces goods whose money value is sufficient for his subsistence and equal to his wage. Why is it reasonable to see matters in Marx's way rather than that of the commonsense worker? The principle that generates Marx's characterization is that a worker's labor is unpaid to the extent that he does not receive a full market-value equivalent for the product he creates. However, Marx understands that the notion of the "product he creates" and the related notion of the "surplus produced by the worker" are unclear as so far explained. The unclarity has to do with the fact that what is produced by labor depends on the productivity of the tools and raw materials on which labor is operating as well as on the productivity of labor itself. The labor theory of value is intended to resolve this ambiguity, but the vicissitudes of Marx's empirical theory of value need not concern us here. From an ethical standpoint, what is pertinent is to be aware that, despite Marx's statement that all capitalist profit is an appropriation of worker's unpaid labor, the principle underlying this cannot be simply, "the worker is entitled to his full

16. On the idea that a Lockean labor theory of property justifies ownership of capital, see *Communist Manifesto*, p. 498, and *Capital*, 1:834–37, and 1:784–86. On the idea that profit is in effect a wage equivalent for entrepreneurial and managerial labor, see *Capital*, 1:215, and esp. 3:383–87. On the argument that profit is a fair return for risky investment, see *Grundrisse*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, and Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1973), pp. 889–92. On the argument from capitalist abstinence, see *Capital*, 1:667 and pp. 648–56.

17. *Capital*, 1:559.

18. Ibid., p. 670.

19. This phrase occurs, e.g., on pp. 585, 591, 597, 600, 602, 623, 624, 637, 638, 642, 643, 667, 678, and 680.

product," for this formula is ambiguous pending some specification of "his full product."

To see how this ambiguity affects the correct statement of the ethical premises that justify Marx's characterization of the wage-labor relation as involving embezzlement, consider a society divided into two castes, Lowlanders and Highlanders. By custom and tradition, the Lowlanders work relatively unproductive swampland at the bottom of a valley. Tradition and custom specify that the Highlanders work the fertile lands high above the valley. (Perhaps the custom originates in the need to effect a geographical separation of the two groups, divided by ethnic animosity.) The Lowlanders work hard but their yield is small. The Highlanders work equally hard, and from their rich land they derive a bountiful harvest. By custom and tradition, each year the Highlanders must turn over 20 percent of their harvest to the Lowlanders. Any Highlander who balks at this yearly obligation is summarily punished. Let us further postulate that as a consequence of these customary practices the income enjoyed by each member of the society—Highlander and Lowlander alike—is equal. Question: Are the Highlanders in this example exploited? Intuitively one wants to answer no, but it would appear that the four necessary and sufficient conditions of exploitation cited earlier are present in this example. Consider the 20 percent of the Highlander harvest which they are required to yield to the Lowlanders. The Highlander labor that creates this surplus is surplus, unpaid labor, the product of which is not under the control of the producers. Is this labor also forced in the relevant sense? To gain subsistence, the Highlanders must perform labor 20 percent of whose products are appropriated by the Lowlanders, much as under capitalism the workers must sell their laboring capacity in order to live. Beyond subsistence, the Highlanders are not required to work, but insofar as they do work they are forced to yield a portion of the harvest to others. I think in these circumstances Highlander labor is plausibly viewed as forced, and certainly the part of their labor they expend to meet their subsistence needs counts as forced.

Here again we have a scenario which exhibits technical but not wrongful exploitation. The deservingness objection fails to apply to this situation, and it is this fact which precludes wrongful exploitation.

The Highlander/Lowlander example brings out clearly the moral relevance of the simple fact that the amount of wealth a worker produces will vary depending on the quality of the tools and raw materials at his disposal. The slogan, "Those who produce the wealth are entitled to control its disposition," is sensible only if it is tacitly assumed that all would-be producers have access to a fair share of the instruments of labor. Similarly, in Locke's doctrine of property, a person acquires clear title to an unowned chunk of the earth by laboring upon it only if there remains "enough, and as good left in common for others." Locke's account of how private ownership may be justified allows that persons of markedly un-

equal laboring abilities might come to enjoy ownership of markedly unequal amounts of property.[20] In contrast, the ethic of good intentions more stringently deems variations in people's laboring abilities as contingencies that do not render persons more or less deserving. One can imagine a variant of the above example in which Highbrows and Lowbrows work equally diligently on equally productive land but with great differences in output reflecting disparities in their physical strength, intelligence, and so forth. For Marx, the appropriate principle for regulating situations like those depicted in the Highlander/Lowlander and Highbrow/Lowbrow examples is not so much "Those who produce the wealth are entitled to control its disposition" but, rather, "Those who make equal productive sacrifices are equally deserving of economic remuneration."

VI

In summary, I am claiming that according to the position that is implicit in the side comments Marx makes while presenting his economics and in the normative bent of the economics itself, wrongful exploitation exists wherever technical exploitation exists together with the following two conditions: (1) the nonproducers have vastly more social power[21] than the producers, and they employ this power to bring about technical exploitation; and (2) this technical exploitation establishes an extremely unequal distribution of economic advantages, and it is not the case that one can distinguish the gainers from the losers in terms of the greater deservingness of the former. Although Marx does not favor abolishing wrongful exploitation at all times and places, he does advocate its abolition wherever this is feasible, that is, wherever the moral cost of abolition is not inordinately high. Marx believes that technical exploitation is nearly always accompanied by the two conditions that render it wrongful. This is his moral objection to exploitation.

It may be helpful to restate this fundamental point in another idiom. As I see it, the normative idea in Marx's conception of exploitation has its origin in his vision of a cooperative economy which is organized with tolerable efficiency and which produces a given stock of goods for the satisfaction of people's desires at a cost of a given amount of human drudgery. Each person deserves a fair (equal) share of economic goods in exchange for the willingness to contribute a fair (equal) share of the

20. By "Locke's account" I intend to refer only to that portion of Locke's story told in secs. 24–35 of the "On Property" chapter of his *Second Treatise of Government*. I leave aside Locke's discussion of money and of the import of tacit consent to money.

21. In this context, a person's *social power* is his capacity to induce other persons to behave as he wants them to behave, other than by means of persuasion. The measure of your social power is the extent to which you can motivate other persons to abstain from actions they desire to perform and instead to perform actions that suit your desires. (This account requires tinkering if it is to avoid counterexamples in which one person is led to act as another desires out of sympathy for him.)

drudgery that is required to produce those goods.[22] Drudgery here is labor that is intrinsically disliked or dissatisfying. If for the sake of simplicity we restrict our attention to persons with equal wealth and similar desires, we can measure drudgery in this way: the more a person is willing to pay to be excused from labor services that he is called upon to perform, the more drudgery that labor contains. There are various ways by which an economy can deviate from this ideal standard in its treatment of people. Exploitation is one important form of mistreatment. To be exploited is roughly to be forced to perform drudgery to an unfairly great extent, and to receive in return an unfairly small share of goods, where this forcing is brought about via an inequality of power favoring some economic agents over others. To eliminate the roughness of this characterization, one should conjoin to it the constraints of the notion of technological exploitation: thus, for example, a severely handicapped person who means well but cannot acomplish much could be abused, forced to perform drudgery, etc., without being technically exploited.

VII

So far my argument has sailed along on the assumption that Marx believes that in the economic arena people ought to get what they deserve, and that what they deserve varies with their intentions and (under normal circumstances) with their efforts or sacrifices expended, rather than with the actual outcome of their intentions. Evidence is needed for this controversial assumption.

One bit of evidence is that Marx makes a point of emphasizing that, under capitalism, necessary work is not shared fairly among the able economic agents. Under capitalism, as in any class society, some of the able contrive to gain positions of advantage which permit them to shirk labor and impose on others the burden of doing their share. This point requires clarification. Consider this quotation:

> The intensity and productiveness of labour being given, the time which society is bound to devote to material production is shorter, and as a consequence, the time at its disposal for the free development, intellectual and social, of the individual is greater, in proportion as the work is more and more evenly divided among all the able-bodied members of society, and as a particular class is more and more deprived of the power to shift the natural burden of labour from its own shoulders to those of another layer of society. In this direction, the shortening of the working day finds at last a limit in the generalisation of labour. In capitalist society spare time is ac-

22. This sketch of fairness and drudgery ignores the complication that some people want more economic goods and less leisure than others. Also ignored are the refinements that are needed to take account of the fact that the amount of drudgery required to produce a given stock of goods is not fixed but varies with many factors, including the degree to which egalitarian distribution requirements permit the use of incentives to attract individuals to jobs which they perform most efficiently. Ignoring these complications faithfully explicates Marx, who also ignores them.

> quired for one class by converting the whole life-time of the masses into labour time.[23]

Marx is not asserting that the capitalist fails to contribute to the economy, if "contributing" connotes "causing production to increase." The capitalist rather fails to contribute to the needed economic drudgery. Marx elsewhere writes: "I present the capitalist as a necessary functionary of capitalist production, and show at length that he does not only 'deduct' or 'rob' but forces the production of surplus value, and thus helps create what is to be deducted."[24] The capitalist robs, but he also "helps create" or contributes, so according to Marx crediting someone with making an economic contribution is perfectly compatible with counting as robbery that person's extortion of remuneration for this service.

If Marx believes that what people deserve is a function of the efforts they expend, then we should expect to find him sometimes voicing this concern in contexts where technical exploitation is not at all in question. And, strikingly, this is exactly what we do find. In his notes published under the title *The Critique of the Gotha Program*, Marx contemplates two stages through which he predicts postcapitalist society will pass. The two stages are characterized in terms of the principle of economic distribution operative in each: "To each according to his labor contribution" in the first stage; and "From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs" in the second, higher stage. Marx evinces considerable anxiety about the principle that governs the first stage, which does succeed in guaranteeing to each individual the equal right to receive consumer goods in proportion to his labour contribution but which thereby sustains a right that is "stigmatized by a bourgeois limitation." This limitation Marx explains as follows: "But one man is superior to another physically or mentally and so supplies more labour in the same time, or can labour for a longer time; and labour, to serve as a measure, must be defined by its duration or intensity, otherwise it ceases to be a standard of measurement. This *equal* right is an unequal right for unequal labour. It recognizes no class differences, because everyone is only a worker like everyone else; but it tacitly recognizes unequal individual endowment and thus productive capacity as natural privileges."[25] Marx proceeds to voice the hope that postcapitalist society will eventually attain the conditions for passing to the second stage and thus for crossing beyond the "narrow horizon of bourgeois right" in its entirety. Sidestepping the question of

23. *Capital*, 1:581.

24. Marx, *Marginal Notes on Wagner's Textbook on Political Economy*, as cited in Ziyad Husami, "Marx on Distributive Justice," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 8 (1978): 27–64; Allen Wood, "Marx on Right and Justice: A Reply to Husami," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 8 (1979): 267–95.

25. Karl Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Program*, reprinted in the *Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert Tucker (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1978), p. 530. In "Justice and Capitalist Production: Marx and Bourgeois Ideology," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 8 (1978): 421–54, Gary Young comments on Marx's adherence to a "modified labor theory of property" in the *Gotha Program* notes but fails to note Marx's qualms about such a theory.

why Marx so characterizes this passage beyond the first stage of socialism, I want to call attention to the fact that Marx evidently takes it to be morally problematic that a society should permit individuals to gain a greater share of economic benefits by virtue of their superior "individual endowments" of economic abilities. Marx's worry bespeaks a concern for deservingness as I have sketched it.

Further confirmation of this interpretation is forthcoming from inspection of the formula that Marx anticipates will govern the distribution of labor and economic benefits under the second, higher stage of socialism: "From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs." This formula is intended to satisfy the deservingness proviso: that morally arbitrary factors should not be permitted to establish inequalities in the division of economic benefits. If all economic agents produce in proportion to their abilities, it is appropriate that all should be equally remunerated in the sense that each gains satisfaction of his needs to an equal degree. Presumably some sanction, at least community disapproval, is to be applied to persons who balk at contributing according to ability, but as Marx holds that a precondition for reaching this second stage is that labor should have lost its onerous quality and become "life's prime want," he evidently does not believe that in this advanced setting motivating citizens to contribute their labor will be much of a difficulty. Doubts can arise about the formula. A person's economic ability at a given time depends upon what he has done in the past to develop his economic talents, and we may wonder what requirements are to be placed on persons to develop specifically economic abilities, as opposed to allowing individuals to develop themselves as they freely choose, without regard to social need. Also a person's needs at a given time will depend to some extent on what he has done in the past to foster some needs rather than others. Persons may choose to develop in themselves needs that place greater or lesser strains on scarce social resources, and the nature of these choices may render them more or less economically deserving. Consider two persons, both with artistic need, one of whom is cost conscious and learns to satisfy this need through media that are cheap (watercolors, pen-and-ink drawings), while the other is not mindful of cost and develops talents that can be exercised only at extravagant cost (huge marble sculptures, deep-sea photography). It is not obvious that "to each according to his need" is the appropriate principle for distributing scarce social resources to these artists, or that following that principle here unproblematically satisfies the deservingness proviso. But I think these doubts pertain to the vagueness of Marx's slogan rather than call in question its basic moral thrust. It may or may not be true that running a socialist economy according to Marx's formula would satisfy the deservingness proviso, but Marx clearly intends his formula to satisfy a proviso along these lines and regards the second stage of socialism as "higher" than the first stage for just this reason. This is what "crossing the narrow horizon of bourgeois right" amounts to. Society severs all connections between the amount of benefits one receives from

the economy and the "morally arbitrary" genetic and social factors that determine one's ability to contribute to that economy. This hoped-for state of affairs will satisfy a prime aspiration of a socialist movement as it emerges from a marketplace economy.

I believe the passage quoted above from the *Critique of the Gotha Program*—a work usually cited by writers trying to prove that the language of justice and rights is wholly inadequate to express Marx's condemnation of capitalism—affords a good vantage point from which to see how irrelevant to the substance of Marx's thought are his suspicions of rights and rights talk.

In strong language Marx here avows his conviction that rights are cramped and hidebound conceptions forming a narrow horizon that had better be surpassed if socialist society is to flourish. Yet if Marx's words are taken literally, it is only the horizon of bourgeois right, not that of rights *überhaupt*, that is superseded in the transition to the higher stage of socialism. The slogan "From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs" quite as readily as the lesser slogan "To each according to his labor" admits of paraphrase in terms of rights: namely, each person has a right to social benefits that satisfy his needs to a degree that is equal to the level of needs satisfaction reached by every other person, and each person has the right that every other person should contribute in proportion to his ability to this stock of social benefits doled out to satisfy human needs. If we say with Mill that a person's right to something is his valid claim on society to protect him in its possession,[26] we misunderstand Marx if we imagine him to be a skeptic who denies there ever are any such valid claims. Marx's suspicions of rights must be tantamount to verbal quibble. Marx states, "right [*das Recht*] can never be higher than the economic structure of society and its cultural development conditioned thereby."[27] What this asserts is not any general skepticism regarding rights but an empirical claim about the prerequisites for securing them. I think one can also find in this statement a hint as to the source of Marx's distrust of the language of natural rights and natural justice. These ideas, especially as invoked by "vulgar" economists, often connote a conception of rights as timelessly valid claims which any society in any epoch is absolutely obligated to satisfy, and Marx, who like most of us is inclined to think that people's rights vary with their circumstances, is properly skeptical that in *that* exalted sense there are any rights at all (or alternatively, that if there are any timelessly valid rights they are so abstract and vague—e.g., each person is entitled to equal respect—as to have no determinate implications for conduct even when circumstances are specified).

26. John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, in *Collected Works*, ed. J. M. Robson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969), vol. 10, p. 250.

27. Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Program*, p. 531.

VIII

Let someone object: to look for the necessary and sufficient conditions for the presence of wrongful exploitation as Marx understands it is to search after a will-o'-the-wisp, because Marx's writings neither explicitly nor implicitly articulate any such idea. Marx did not envisage any task that the concept of wrongful exploitation can plausibly be taken to fulfill, the objection proceeds. Moreover, it is misguided to attempt to patch this gap which Marx himself failed to notice and so did not try to fill, for a reason that Allen Wood has recently pointed out: "We even find [in Marx], perhaps to our surprise, some fairly explicit statements to the effect that capitalism with all its manifold defects, cannot be faulted as far as justice is concerned."[28] And writing specifically of Marx's views on the exploitation of workers by capitalists, Wood summarizes his account in a sentence which may appear entirely to undercut the terms in which I have conducted the present discussion: "The appropriation of surplus value by capital, therefore, involves no unequal or unjust exchange."[29]

The main reason given to support this contention is that Marx thought that appeals to justice "presupposed a theory of society which he believed he had shown to be false."[30] The theory in question is really any theory that fails to acknowledge that all aspects of society, including the juridical, must be understood in their relation to the underlying mode of production. In Hegelian language, the state, together with all juridical principles emanating from it, is not an independent sphere but a dependent moment of civil society. The principles of justice are juridical forms whose content is fixed by the prevailing mode of production. According to this interpretation—call it the *amoral* interpretation—Marx holds that an economic institution or transaction is *just* whenever it "corresponds, is appropriate to, the mode of production." Measured by this test, the wage-labor relation between capitalists and workers is paradigmatically just, for it is absolutely necessary to the functioning of the capitalist mode of production and so presumably "corresponds" to it. On this model, Marx takes justice to be an apologetic notion that has little relevance for the appraisal of capitalism.

It is true that Marx occasionally seems to characterize as "just" aspects of capitalism that strike us and him as fairly horrible. But when Marx uses terms of moral evaluation he is often employing them in what has been called the inverted-comma use, and this is almost invariably so when characterizations of justice are being mooted: that is, Marx's "this is just" can almost always appropriately be rendered "this is what is called

28. Allen Wood, "The Marxian Critique of Justice," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1 (1972): 244–82. See also William McBride, "The Concept of Justice in Marx, Engels, and Others," *Ethics* 85 (1975): 204–18; George Brenkert, "Freedom and Private Property in Marx," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 8 (1979): 122–47; and the references cited in the latter.

29. Wood, "Marxian Critique," p. 263.

30. Ibid., p. 274.

'just.'"[31] With this hypothesis in mind, let us inspect the quotation from *Capital* which is definitely the best evidence for the amoral interpretation.

> To speak here of natural justice, as Gilbart does . . . , is nonsense. The justice of the transactions between agents of production rests on the fact that these arise as natural consequences out of the production relationships. The juristic forms in which these economic transactions appear as willful acts of the parties concerned, as expressions of their common will and as contracts that may be enforced by law against some individual party, cannot, being mere forms, determine this content. They merely express it. This content is just whenever it corresponds, is appropriate, to the mode of production.[32]

The target of this passage is one Gilbart, who asserted that it is a "self-evident principle of natural justice" that a loan that brings profit to the borrower should be repaid with interest. I think one can discern in this passage a concern on Marx's part to keep theoretical economics uncluttered by concepts of moral theory that, as Marx thinks, have no place in economic science.[33] Marx's aim here is not to adumbrate his pet version of a "theory of justice" but rather to banish talk of justice from the economic enterprise. Understanding the context of Marx's utterance makes it improbable to regard the passage as an expression of Marx's considered views as to the true nature of justice. Rather, the "principles of natural justice" in each era are those principles that are unreflectively read off from the surface appearance of economic life in that form of society. In these "juristic forms" the characteristic economic transactions of capitalism, for example, appear to be voluntarily undertaken by the contracting parties and "expressions of their common will," but in fact these appearances are false. What explains why a given principle appears naturally just to the unreflective—the vulgar economists like Gilbart or the unthinking man in the street—is the circumstance that the principle sanctions forms of behavior that are everyday occurrences in the society and

31. Occasionally Marx himself supplies the inverted commas, as in these sentences from the *Critique of the Gotha Program*: "Do not the bourgeois assert that the present-day distribution is 'fair'? And is it not, in fact, the only 'fair' distribution on the basis of the present-day mode of production?" (p. 528). In other places, context and sense make it plain that the inverted-comma sense of a moral term is intended. This quotation from *Capital* supplies an intermediate case: "Now the wage-labourer, like the slave, must have a master who puts him to work and rules over him. And assuming the existence of this relationship of lordship and servitude, it is quite proper to compel the wage-labourer to produce his own wages and also the wages of supervision, as compensation for the labor of ruling and supervising him, or 'just compensation for the labor and talent employed in governing him and rendering him useful to himself and to the society'" (3:386). The phrase that Marx encloses in quotes is taken from a speech of a "champion of slavery." Marx's point is that it is no more just for the capitalist to count himself as deserving the reward of profit for the labor of supervision than it is for the slave master to represent himself as similarly deserving.

32. *Capital*, 3:339–40. For an alternative account of this passage, see Young, pp. 433–38.

33. See also the second footnote to the first paragraph of *Capital*, 1:96–97, for a robust assertion of the autonomy of economic science in relation to morals.

indispensable to its functioning. Of course, from these sociological surmises (which are vague by Marx's standards—he gives little help toward deciphering what exactly it is for a transaction to "correspond to" a mode of production), nothing at all follows about what will seem just or unjust to reflective social critics capable of seeing beyond appearances.

The contrast between how matters appear and how they really are runs through all Marx's discussions of bourgeois attempts to portray the fundamental wage-labor relations of capitalism as just. In chapter 24 of *Capital,* Marx asserts, "The ever repeated purchase and sale of labour-power is now the mere form; what really takes place is this—the capitalist again and again appropriates, without equivalent, a portion of the previously materialised labour of others, and exchanges it for a greater quantity of living labour."[34] It appears that the worker exchanges a day's labor for a day's wage, but according to Marx it is really labor power that is exchanged for the subsistence cost of its reproduction; and furthermore, according to Marx this latter exchange is only apparently an exchange, whereas in reality the capitalist coerces the worker who has no genuine choice in the matter. The appearance of exchange conceals the worker's "economical bondage"; "In reality, the labourer belongs to capital before he has sold himself to capital."[35] Whether we judge the arguments by means of which Marx reaches this conclusion to be good or bad, there can be little question but that he intends to argue that capitalism appears to be just but actually is pervasively and subtly unjust.

Any interpretation of Marx which denies his polemical interest in the injustice of capitalism is embarrassed by the need to specify why Marx did after all condemn capitalism and to gauge the degree to which his condemnations are consistent with the rest of his social theory. Suppose one urged: "A socialist society will be higher, freer, more human than the capitalist society it replaces, but it would be highly misleading to characterize socialism as more just than capitalism. Each mode of production develops juridical forms appropriate to it, so each mode of production is just as judged by its own standards, which are the only appropriate standards for making juridical judgments."[36] The trouble with this response is that it takes Marx's theory of ideology to be singling out standards of justice as peculiarly unsuitable for radical social criticism, while allowing the possibility of effective social criticism founded on standards other than justice. But Marx's theory of ideology is global in scope. Commonsense, prevailing conceptions of nonjustice standards of evaluation are equally susceptible to tainting influence or determination by economic factors as are evaluations couched in terms of conceptions of justice. A threat of incoherence looms.

On my reading of Marx, we can eliminate this threatened incoherence by taking due note of the distinction between sociologically explain-

34. *Capital,* 1:639; see also pp. 591–92.
35. Ibid., p. 633; see also *Grundrisse,* p. 515.
36. The quoted words paraphrase Wood, "Marxian Critique," pp. 269–70.

ing how certain people have come to adopt a given view of some matter and asserting "in one's own voice" what one takes the correct view of this matter to be.[37] Armed with this distinction, we could consistently accept Marx's accounts of how ideological factors dispose a populace to accept systematically distorted principles of justice, freedom, or humanity, while also accepting Marx's implied assertions that socialist society will be more just, and perhaps also "higher, freer, more human," than its predecessor.

This simple solution is unavailable to the amoral interpretation of Marx. So far as I can see, the proponent of the amoral interpretation must resort to the tactic of driving a wedge somehow between Marx's treatment of justice and nonjustice norms. The claim has been made that implicitly, though admittedly not explicitly, Marx must have distinguished between juridical, moral values and nonjuridical, nonmoral values. The distinction is roughly between valuing something because it satisfies our desires or needs and valuing something because it satisfies the constraints of conscience or the moral law. On the amoral construal, Marx is in effect a skeptic about justice and morality. But Marx is not a skeptic about such nonmoral values as freedom, community, and self-actualization; in fact, he bases his critique of capitalism on such values. Morality is always mere ideology; nonmoral ideals need not be.[38]

However, one would ransack Marx's texts in vain for any reason to think that "this is unjust" is always ideological sham whereas "this is unfree" or "this is uncommunal" may be reasonable evaluations. No such reason exists, so it cannot be found. The most obvious difficulty with upholding this distinction emerges when we notice that, if the dichotomy between moral and nonmoral values is meant to be exhaustive, issues of fairness in distribution must fall on the side of the moral values. The value of a fair distribution is not contingent on any desires for fairness present in the persons involved in the distribution. (If each of two children wants all of a chocolate cake to which neither has any special claim, it is better to divide the cake evenly—despite the fact that neither child has any interest in fair division, and regardless of whether anybody else wants a fair division either.) But issues of fairness in distribution (whether or not we label them "justice" concerns) are at the center of all Marx's objections to capitalism. With regard to freedom, for example, what bothers Marx about capitalism is not simply that it supplies too little of this nice nonmoral value. Rather, the problem is the skewed distribution of freedom which a market economy enforces, and the superiority which Marx claims for socialism is supposed to lie in socialism's tendency to correct this maldistribution. To my knowledge Marx never even begins to argue for

37. The claim that Marx can distinguish and does distinguish between a sociological explanation of how a certain person comes to hold a given view and an argument regarding the truth or validity of that view is equivalent to the assertion that Marx does not commit the genetic fallacy. The assertion can be queried in its application to early bravado works like *The German Ideology* but seems correct for the mature Marx.

38. Wood, "Marx on Right and Justice: A Reply to Husmai," p. 283.

the dubious claim that under socialism the aggregate of freedom (measured how?) will be greater than the aggregate of freedom under capitalism. Marx's claim in this regard is plainer and more plausible: under socialism the distribution of freedom will be more equal, hence better and (one may as well say) more fair. (The next section of this paper argues that exploitation as Marx conceives it is above all a distributive notion.) The amoral interpretation of Marx thus fails to represent his critique of capitalism accurately.

There are gibes against the entire edifice of morality in the *Communist Manifesto*. These passages do not support the claim that Marx implicitly marks a distinction between moral and nonmoral values that is central to his critique of ideology. The *Manifesto* invents a bourgeois critic of communism who worries that cultural values that have lasted throughout history are threatened by communism. The critic says, "But religion, morality, philosophy, political science, and law, constantly survived this [historical] change. There are, besides, eternal truths, such as Freedom, Justice, etc., that are common to all states of society. But Communism abolishes eternal truths. . . ."[39] These supposed eternal truths encompass moral and nonmoral values. The communist voice of the *Manifesto*, answering the critic, makes no attempt to insist on the distinction the critic ignores, but indiscriminately classifies a motley of eternal truths as ideology: "But don't wrangle with us so long as you apply, to our intended abolition of bourgeois property, the standard of your bourgeois notions of freedom, culture, law, &c. Your very ideas are but the outgrowth of the conditions of your bourgeois production and bourgeois property. . . ."[40] The reason Marx here gives for discounting bourgeois conceptions of justice, to the extent it has plausibility at all, is equally a reason for discounting bourgeois conceptions of freedom and culture and law and much else, and Marx says as much. The influence of economic interests and economic structures over people's conceptions of value extends beyond morality and justice to the sphere of nonmoral goods. To recognize this is to recognize that the amoral interpretation of Marx cannot be sustained. There are just two possibilities: either Marx believes that the prevailing economic structure strictly determines that all evaluative standards fully endorse the prevailing structure, in which case all normative social criticism must come to a halt; or Marx believes that the economic structure influences but does not entirely determine the evaluative standards that arise within it, in which case criticism of a mode of production as unjust is in principle just as viable as criticism appealing to nonjustice standards.

McBride and others correctly call attention to the paucity of Marx's explicit discussions of the injustice of capitalism,[41] but this reticence on Marx's part is matched by the paucity of his discussions of the rationale of

39. Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, 6:504.
40. Ibid., p. 501.
41. McBride, pp. 204–5.

nonjustice standards for condemning capitalism. The situation is not that Marx talks a great deal about freedom and other nonmoral values and is strangely silent about justice in a way that demands some special explanation. Marx is generally taciturn about norms. Yet there is a distinction which helps explain, though it does not justify, the belief of many that Marx altogether eschews condemnations of capitalism on the ground of injustice. Marx is more suspicious of theoretical concepts of evaluation than he is of commonsense, everyday prescriptive notions. Insofar as Marx thinks justice talk and rights talk are theoretically tinged, he avoids them. If this is the source of Marx's intemperate sneering at talk of rights, then we should notice that a commentator who takes as his task the articulation of the normative theory that is implicit in Marx's tests, or that makes best sense of what Marx wrote, would go badly astray if he attempted to infer a theoretical position from Marx's reticence about justice. I think Brenkert goes astray in this way when he elaborates and ascribes to Marx a ramified theory of freedom—a theory of which Marx's texts are innocent—and then contrasts this theory with Marx's shy avoidance of justice talk, in order to argue that Marx measures capitalism against a standard of freedom, not justice.[42] Although I have some sympathy for Marx's reluctance to engage in evaluative theory, I think there are good reasons to override Marx's reluctance. But then we must understand that we have overridden the *only* reasons to be found in Marx for resisting the natural interpretation: that Marx hates capitalism in part because he believes it to be grossly unjust.[43]

IX

I now wish to take up an objection closely related to the one just canvassed. This objection begins with Marx's celebrated assertion that in general it is "a mistake to make a fuss about so-called *distribution* and put the principal stress on it,"[44] for distribution relations are a consequence of the production relations of a given society. Since the production relations are causally fundamental, placing a focus on distribution is akin to giving obsessive attention to blemishes while ignoring the structural faults of which the blemishes are a minor by-product. The objection I am imagining would then maintain that my account of wrongful exploitation vio-

42. Brenkert, sec. 2. To clarify: I do not deny a theory of freedom may be *implicit* in what Marx writes, but then a theory of justice is also implicit in Marx. Brenkert tries to argue that there is an asymmetry in Marx's treatment of justice and of freedom such that Marx has a notion of freedom that is "a valid basis for trans-cultural and trans-historical appraisal." But the only asymmetry I can see is that Marx regards justice talk as more theoretical, hence more tendentious.

43. Marx's suspicion of moral theory explains why he unhesitatingly describes the capitalist's appropriation of surplus value as "robbery" but not as "injustice." I think Marx's aim is to avoid giving the impression of making a contribution to evaluative theory, an enterprise of whose worth he is skeptical.

44. Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Program*, p. 531. See Robert Tucker, "Marx and Distributive Justice," *The Marxian Revolutionary Idea* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1969).

lates Marx's clearly expressed stricture against overemphasizing distribution and so must be a grievous misconstrual of Marx's thought.

Marx's assertions about the priority of production over distribution unfortunately run together distinct issues that should be kept separate for analysis. (Although Marx's slogans are misleading, I do not think his texts could mislead a careful reader.) First, take the simplified claim that production relations have priority over distribution relations in the sense that changes in production relations invariably cause changes in distribution relations, while changes in distribution relations invariably cause little or no change in production relations; and furthermore, the attempt to alter distribution relations while holding production relations intact will be ineffective over the long run because a given set of production relations produces one unique set of distribution relations and tends to restore any slight variations in distribution away from that set. (With other positions he held, Marx could not consistently have subscribed to so bald a position as this, but I here ignore the qualifications and hedges that need to be added to this position so that it reflects Marx's considered view.) Call this claim the *claim of causal priority*.

Accepting even this exceedingly strong claim of causal priority is perfectly compatible with the project of criticizing capitalism for the distribution relations it sustains, asserting a preferred set of distribution relations, and recommending an alteration in capitalist production relations precisely in order to reach the desired distribution relations. That is to say, the claim of causal priority could be embraced by a social critic who cares not a fig for the character of production relations except insofar as these have effects on the character of distribution relations. Assuming the correctness of the claim of causal priority, one could not convict such a social critic of mistakenly making a fuss about distribution.

However, the above way of disposing of the objection is not fully satisfactory, for Marx sometimes asserts what might be described as a claim of the moral priority of production over distribution. The clearest articulation of this viewpoint occurs in the *Critique of the Gotha Program*, where Marx compares the Lassallean socialists who would campaign for a "fair distribution of the proceeds of labour" with a misguided slave who would urge the rebellion against slavery to inscribe on its banner: "Slavery must be abolished because the feeding of slaves in the system of slavery cannot exceed a certain low maximum!"[45] A worker under capitalism "in thrall to obsolete notions" who would urge the abolition of wage slavery out of a dissatisfaction with the level of wages attainable in a capitalist economy is, according to Marx, similarly misguided.

Now it does not at all conflict with my project in this essay—getting clear about the nature of wrongful exploitation—to acknowledge that Marx's grounds for condemning capitalism encompass various concerns (such as his belief that the effects of coercive division of labor are inimical

45. Marx, *Critique*, p. 535.

to human flourishing) which do not find their way either into his technical notion of exploitation or the moral charges linked to that notion. Marx's doubts about capitalism are heterogeneous and are not easily gathered under a single rubric. Perhaps several of his doubts that do not fit under the category of exploitation concern the unfree, debasing quality of the worker's productive life under capitalism. So much we may readily grant to the thesis of the moral priority of production.

But this policy of generous concessions must confront the facts (*a*) that exploitation is basically a distributive notion, a matter of how the economic surplus is divided, and (*b*) that this exploitation according to Engels is "the basic evil which the social revolution wants to abolish by abolishing the capitalist mode of production."[46] On the plausible surmise that Marx would endorse this sentiment of his friend Engels, we must conclude that Marx seems to be divided in his own mind as to the significance of distribution vis-à-vis production. His polemics against the emphasis on fair distribution in Lassalle and Proudhoun and other non-Marxian socialists seem to be at odds with the pride of place given in his own writings against capital to a fundamentally distributional notion. Of course, to note this is just to restate the original objection: any interpretation such as mine which characterizes Marx as terribly muddleheaded about the most elementary implications of his own theory thereby undermines itself.

One may achieve some initial easing of the tension between the prodistribution and the antidistribution Marx by observing that both technical and wrongful exploitation concern not just the results of distribution, the profile of who gets what, but more crucially the process by which a distribution is brought about. The power-inequality aspect of wrongful distribution has to do with the lopsided power imbalances that are the continual precondition of capitalist enterprise. Exploitation is roughly a matter of being taken advantage of by someone who has power over you. If a concern with distribution is narrowly construed as a concern solely for relative shares, the percentage of wealth or income that accrues to each person under a given economic scheme, then exploitation is not simply a distributional concern. Recalling Marx's comparison of slavery and wage slavery introduced in the course of rebutting those who would advocate a fair remuneration for labor, we take note that part of the rhetorical force of this comparison hinges on our feeling that it is bizarre to worry excessively that the slave is made to subsist on few consumer goods because this overlooks the obviously more basic and pressing evil, the master's legal power over the life of the slave.

In fact, it is only given a tightly circumscribed definition of "distribution" as referring only to wages and other sources of personal income or, as Marx puts it, to "the various titles to that portion of the product which goes into individual consumption,"[47] that Marx even professes an indif-

46. Quoted in Crocker, p. 201.

47. Marx, *Capital*, 3:879.

ference to distribution. On this definition the concepts of production and distribution do not exhaustively classify economic transactions since, for instance, government spending "to satisfy the general social needs" will fit into neither category. (Marx's definition of "distribution" is narrower than standard mid-nineteenth-century economic usage, of which J. S. Mill's famous introduction to book 2 of *Principles of Political Economy* may be taken as a representative sample.) If one wished to render "distribution" equivalent to "relations of economic welfare" by adopting a broader definition according to which the sphere of distribution would include the division of all economic benefits and burdens, including job satisfactions and dissatisfactions, welfare payments, public parks and other amenities, the pleasures and displeasures of unemployment and its anticipation, and so on, then Marx is by his own account an intensely keen and partisan observer of the distributional sphere thus broadly understood. Once it is understood that Marx adopts a narrow view of distribution, it must also be discerned that it is no inconsistency on his part to criticize those who stress distribution while himself placing great stress on the broadly distributional notion of exploitation in his own treatment of capitalism. (Here I leave aside the question of whether Marx is being fair to the Lassalleans and others whom he accuses of fixing their attention obsessively on distribution in the narrow sense.)

X

In conclusion, I will indicate briefly some aspects of Marx's beliefs about wrongful exploitation that are morally controversial and so in need of further clarification and defense.

1. Marx owes us an elaboration of the role of coercion and forcing in his account of exploitation. The appropriation of an economic surplus by nonproducers must be a forcible taking if it is to count as technical exploitation. Without force or coercion there is no exploitation. For one can imagine establishing a Bureau of Labor Sacrifice in a just society. Anybody who chooses can contribute his labor to this bureau, under harrowing work conditions, on condition that the nonworking bureau chief will appropriate the worker's product and dispose of it as he chooses. If some volunteer their labor to this bureau, their labor is not exploited, even if all other conditions for the presence of exploitation are present. Nor is the nonvoluntariness of labor a sufficient condition for exploitation, as we saw in the example of the ideal feudal estate, or as we could see in contemplating an otherwise ideally just society that enforces the rule, "He who does not work, neither shall he eat."

We need to know what the criteria for forced labor are and how they guarantee the result that wage-labor contracts under capitalism are not voluntary on the part of the laborer. Some of Marx's more embattled slogans suggest a very stringent account of what makes labor nonvoluntary: lacking access to the means of production, workers lack access to the means of subsistence and virtually must make a deal with some capitalist

or starve. A characterization along these lines will yield the result that most wage labor in societies that make provision for governmental welfare relief is voluntary labor. Imagine a capitalist welfare society that affords a bare subsistence to each citizen in the form of a guaranteed annual income. Depending on further conditions, I would want to say that in such a society workers guaranteed a subsistence who proceed to work for capitalists to obtain a more commodious living might yet be exploited, that is, their labor might plausibly be viewed as forced. An analysis of 'voluntary labor' is needed that will permit approach to these and related questions.

2. One necessary condition for technical exploitation is that a product be produced whose disposition is not under the control of the producers. This condition seems clear enough in its application to cases in which a single laborer produces something unaided. What does it entail for joint production? Suppose a number of producers democratically decide what to do with the products they make, the composition of the majority shifts as coalitions form and re-form, but we can identify a minority of voters (the pariahs) who never are in the majority and who never have the privilege of deciding what is to be done with the products they help make. Does the labor of the pariah voters pass this necessary condition for technical exploitation? If our analysis of exploitation has it that wherever there is democratic control of production, it thereby follows that labor is not exploited, *this* will certainly be controversial. (I do not think Marx's view should be so characterized, but no interpretation is likely to be intuitively self-evident.)

3. The power-inequality objection raises questions. Are lopsided inequalities intrinsically or instrumentally bad, or both? If inequalities are deemed instrumentally bad, the question arises: why it is fair to forbid accumulations of wealth on the ground that these accumulations put persons in a position to take advantage of others if they so choose? It is not in general morally permitted to forbid someone from doing something morally acceptable because doing it puts him in a position where he might do something morally unacceptable. If power inequalities are deemed intrinsically bad, this needs defense. Marx and Engels occasionally explain that they are not superegalitarians who propose equal distribution in every respect, but then, with respect to those areas one believes to be appropriately regulated by egalitarian principle, we need to know why these areas are being singled out over others.

4. If we think of an economic order as necessarily stamping a moral judgment on each person's conduct in the form of the income and other benefits accruing to each person in virtue of his economic contribution, Marx's deservingness claim looks plausible. Persons are not strictly deserving of praise or blame for anything except (at most) the quality of their intentions, which in favorable circumstances may seem to lie within everybody's control. Capitalism may then seem unjustly to distribute praise and blame in the form of the economic rewards it bestows. But

there are other ways of viewing economies. It needs to be made clear whether Marx's doctrine of exploitation presupposes the moralistic picture of an economy sketched above, and, if so, whether this picture can be amplified and defended against other contenders, and, if not, what picture does underlie Marx's account and what features of it ought to draw our assent.