
Review

Constructing Marxist Ethics: Critique, Normativity, Praxis

Michael J. Thompson (ed)
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Michael J. Thompson's collection is a considerable addition to the already extensive literature on the often-contested relationship between Marxism and ethics. While there are some notable tensions between the essays, as a whole *Constructing Marxist Ethics* establishes and defends the thesis that within Marx there is a powerful account of human subjectivity and the potential for 'sociability and creativity' (p. 14) that stems from his notion of labour and his totalising method of critique. Thompson revives a humanist reading of Marx buried by the dominant Analytic Marxist orthodoxy.

Analytic Marxists have long argued that, although Marx critiques capitalism's inability to fulfil human needs, he does not provide an adequate moral or ethical theory in normative terms (p. 201). This argument is given short shrift in the collection. The case is made for a distinctively Marxian reasoning that has the objective capacity to 'articulate an ethics that is critical in nature, one that takes the concrete life processes of human beings as its ends its substance' (p. 235). The broader project of the collection is to reveal the depth of Marx's philosophical thought. Thompson resurrects an authentic and humanist Marxist philosophy that allows 'for an ethical Marxism to again be cultivated and developed' (p. 4). 'The essays that follow are united in the basic conviction that the humanistic and ethical foundations of Marxism are not only worth retrieving, but in some sense also constitute the central structure of Marxism and its contemporary salience' (p. 6). It is worth noting at the outset that I share Thompson's enthusiasm for this project.

The essays are organised into three parts: (1) 'Marxists Humanism and Ethical Models', (2) 'Critical Perspectives on Rights and Justice', and (3) 'Towards a Theory of Marxists Ethics'. Wilde's opening essay defends a Marxist humanism and reconstructs a Marxist ethics found in his reading of Aristotle and in the realisation of human potential in flourishing unalienated labour. This chapter sets up subsequent key themes. Burns discusses alienation in the *Economic and*



Philosophical Manuscripts in terms of how the sociological, aesthetic, psychic and ethical implications relate to the notion of recognition. Burns grounds these theorisations in Hegel's discussion of the 'master/slave' relation in the *Phenomenology* (p. 35). This idea is controversial in Marx scholarship (Arthur, 1983) and Burns poses a provocative challenge to Chris Arthur's reading. In chapter 3, Langman and Albanese contend that Marx's understanding of human nature is driven by a conceptualisation of dignity. The essay contends that desire and self-hood are vital components in Marx's sense of 'freedom' (p. 81). While I would agree that dignity is one (but not *the*) aspect of the fight against alienated labour, the lack of focus and adequate argumentation makes unpersuasive reading. Fraser's essay looks at 'Art as Ethics' and features a discussion of Marx's aesthetic theory in relation to Michel Houellebecq's 2011 novel *The Map and the Territory*. The juncture of the aesthetic and ethical in Marx offers for promising insights: 'Marx sees human beings as artists when they engage in an affirmation of their creative and productive powers' (p. 87) and '[t]he aesthetic moment of art as ethics is in resisting this imposition [alienation] and affirming our species-being' (p. 92). Unfortunately the two sections are not well integrated, and the brief discussion of aesthetics feels tokenistic.

Part 2 has less general consensus. Hamad defines Marx as a 'radical historicist', whose 'principles of justice' lie in the *historical* nature of his concepts (p. 113). Hamad's discussion presents a few clear problems, first his claim that 'Marx's celebrated rejection of the doctrine of essentialism' in the *Theses on Feuerbach* simply lumps Marx's notion of essentialism with Feuerbach's (p. 118). This misunderstanding leads into a contradiction. Hamad is at pains to condemn Althusser (pp. 113, 121, 126), but leaves himself open to the Althusserian argument that the sixth and seventh theses represent a departure from Marx's earlier concerns with a concept of human nature and humanism. His argument mirrors Althusser regarding a qualitative shift from Marx's philosophical aims to his 'theoretical ones' (p. 120). Interestingly, the influence of G.A Cohen towards the end of the chapter provides a context for Blackledge's critique in chapter 11.

Sayers' chapter provides a useful discussion of Marx as a critic of liberalism. He situates his argument in the context of a critique of Norman Geras' claims about a transhistorical standard of justice (which Hamad defends) (p. 147). Sayers rejects the notion that Marx offers 'a version of enlightenment liberal moral thought' and instead draws more deeply on Hegel's influence. For Hegel, 'Ethical life' is understood as freedom, which is realised in the historical development of right. Marx then 'criticises and rejects the Hegelian notion of abstract right and with it the remaining vestiges of the enlightenment idea of nature rights' (p. 149). Sayers argues that Marx must be understood as critic of liberalism and modernity. This gives some thrust to the contemporary relevance of Marx's critique of capitalism.



Sayers' chapter provides a direct theoretical counterpoint to 'Marx, Modernity and Human Rights'. Here Cannon aims to 'retrieve modern normative resources' including human rights. Why this is so, beyond the fact that human rights are positioned in opposition to some of the symptoms of capitalism is never very clear. Cannon at one point argues that social rights *and* economic rights are contained in the EU and UN charters and are of some use to the resistance to capitalism. This formal constitutional fact cannot be squared with recent EU policies concerning austerity. Overall, Cannon's contribution exposes the futility of painting Marx as a liberal and lacks a robust construction or portrayal of the key issues at stake. McCarthy's contribution looks at Marx's relation to natural law theory and Richard Tawney's claim that Marx is 'the last of the Schoolmen' (p. 192). He contends that Marx's intellectual inheritance is Aristotelian, a claim bolstered by a careful intellectual history centred on the contradictions of John Locke. Marx acts to 'disconnect and reveal the relationship between rights and laws, in effect, to reveal the reality hidden by Locke' (p. 208).

Part 3 discusses how a Marxian ethics *is to be constructed*, making explicit recurring themes of earlier chapters. Here Marx's Aristotelian features are central, validating his ontological characterisation of labour as intimately tied to human flourishing. This view of human subjectivity and potential necessitates a conceptual link to Marx's critique of political economy. Thompson's exemplary chapter does this most convincingly. He writes, 'Marx's ideas possess an *ethical structure* by which I mean he was working within an intellectual frame whereby claims about empirical facts or *cognitive claims* are dialectically related to claims about value, ethics and normative ideas, or *evaluative claims*' (p. 237). Thompson courts controversy with the contention that 'Marxian ethical theory is distinctly objective in character' (p. 237). This is a robust basis for an ethical reading of Marx; holding in a conceptual unity, fact and value, 'is' and 'ought'. Thompson retains the method of totality and demonstrates the wide implications this reading has on contemporary social theory and practice.

Henning's chapter is most at odds with the collection's dominant consensus. He contends that Marx's theories are 'value-free' and that Marx only had something to say about morality when 'practice-related' (p. 266). Such an analysis separates theory and practice (p. 271). Henning might believe this is the best way to construct 'scientific social theory', but his distance from both understanding Marx on his own terms or the dialectical nature of his thought, makes the chapter's case thin. Henning is incapable of differentiating, for instance, between the 'science' of Political Economy and Marx's project of the *critique* of political economy (p. 271). This chapter suffers by making the typical Analytic Marxist error of separating ethics from an understanding of the totality of Marx's thought.

The next essay fittingly takes up this theme. Blackledge critiques Cohen's version of Analytical Marxism, starting from his hugely influential *Karl Marx's*



Theory of History: A Defence (1978) which promoted an ‘old-fashioned’ type of economic determinism to his later embrace of Rawlsian liberalism. Blackledge argues that the logic of this theoretical move has its base in a faulty understanding of Marx’s method and a dislocation of theory from the historical reality of class struggle. Blackledge concludes with an argument for the way forward for revolutionary ethics. Here he validates the serious scholarship that he has done in reclaiming Alasdair MacIntyre for the Marxist tradition (pp. 306–312). Interestingly, MacIntyre features prominently throughout the collection, both showing the affinity between the Marxist and the ‘revolutionary Aristotelian’ critique of capitalism. Groff’s essay is a model of clarity. She examines the relationship between the Marxist and Aristotelian ethical models by evaluating the connection between *phronesis* and Marx’s ‘ethical infrastructure’ in *Capital*. She demonstrates the utility of the labour theory of value (pp. 315–319) while maintaining that Marxist ethics should be seen as a ‘species of Aristotelianism’ (p. 313). However, one might choose to respond to her conclusion, the groundwork provides considerable insights into the intimacy between Marx and Aristotle.

Appropriately, Hudis’ final essay takes up the ethical implications of a post-capitalist society. His essay grounds a need to conceptualise an overcoming of capitalism in political terms. Hudis points to the recent economic crisis and social movements such as the Arab Spring and Occupy which have given urgency to the need, in philosophical terms, to discuss an *alternative* (pp. 336–337). Hudis’ sophisticated Hegelianism understands this overcoming as essentially dialectical. This must be put ethically: ‘Marx’s entire critique of value production and his insistence that a socialist or communist society will not be governed by it, flows from the ethical principle that he had enunciated from his earliest writings’ (p. 350). One clear issue with this chapter is that Marx’s response to the Paris Commune is absent. *The Civil War in France* includes his discussion of workers power and the state, still key issues in the transition to a post-capitalist society.

However varied the specific modes of presentation, the importance of a clear identification of the ethical features of Marx’s thought is the recurring concern of *Constructing Marxist Ethics*. Given the re-emergence of Marx as a relevant figure for contemporary political theory, this collection proves highly useful for two obvious reasons. First, the essays deal with the textures and contours of recent debates, which allows for a reorientation to the humanist *ethical* Marx. Second, the collection reaches beyond issues of scholarship and presents Marx as a thinker that has pertinence to both contemporary political thinking *and* contemporary political practice.



References

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