

Anti-Moralism

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Marx, Tony Skillen correctly tells us, spoke with contempt of morality while at the same time condemning capitalism as an utterly evil system. 'Why is this attack on capitalism reconcilable with the rejection of "the moral point of view"?' Tony asks. His answer is: 'Because morality is one of the (real) evils of class society, and especially of capitalist society'. ('Marxism & Morality' RP8 pl1). Emphasising the point, he repeats:

Marx called the whole established notion and practice of 'morality' into question. He regarded it as he regarded religion, as inherently ideological, mystifying and repressive (RP8 pl2)

A similar point of view is presented by Andrew Collier ('On the Production of Moral Ideology' RP9). Morality, he tells us, represses libido. It exists to enforce the hegemony of the ruling classes. It is therefore in the interests of the exploited to thrust it aside. Our principles ought not to guide our desires but the other way about - we ought to change our principles to accord with our natural inclinations. Andrew Collier and Tony Skillen may differ in the relative importance that they each give to Freud, but they both agree that morality must give way to natural inclinations this side of the socialist revolution.

Revolutionary Socialism is Premoral

The bizarre thing about Andrew and Tony's 'anti-moralism' is how extraordinarily moralistic it is! Certainly if you are going to have moral principles what these two have to say *might* play a useful role, but this is beside the point. For the cogency of the revolutionary point of view does not at all depend upon adherence to moral naturalism or Freudianism, or any other substantive moral point of view. For instance look at the polemic which Marx launches against the moralistic cant of the bourgeoisie in the *Communist Manifesto*:

You are horrified at our intending to do away with private property. But in your existing society, private property is already done away with for nine-tenths of the population; its existence for the few is solely due to its non-existence in the hands of those nine-tenths. You reproach us, therefore, with intending to do away with a form of property, the necessary condition for whose existence is, the non-existence of any property for the immense majority of society.

In one word, you reproach us with intending to do away with your property. Precisely so; that is just what we intend...

Communism deprives no man of the power to appropriate 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. (Moscow edition pp74-5)

No question here of confronting one set of moral ends with another! Bourgeois moral principles are not set against some abstract and idealised standard and shown to be lacking in intrinsic merit. Of course this *could* be done, but if it constitutes the main thrust of one's argument, one never gets beyond a purely idealist critique of bourgeois morality. Instead Marx utilises the abstract and universal principles of bourgeois morality as a powerful means of condemning the reality

of capitalist society. Bourgeois society therefore stands condemned by its own moral principles - we don't have to invent or espouse new moral points of view to draw the conclusion that we must smash capitalism. Those workers who believe in a strict adherence to the 'fair' and 'universal' application of bourgeois moral principles certainly do not have to be disabused of these principles. On the contrary, the fact that they believe this may be one of their strongest reasons for wanting to disabuse themselves of the reality which is so palpably at variance with these principles.

The best and most effective way of confronting those who have illusions in bourgeois society is thus to show the contradiction between the idealised theory and the stark reality of capitalism. A good example of how to do this, is *Socialist Worker's* coverage of the Lambton affair:

Not a peep of protest can be heard from the anti-porn merchant, Lord Longford, one of whose closest friends is Lord Lambton. Not a splutter of indignation from Mary Whitehouse or Malcolm Muggeridge or the Festival of Light.

These people and organisations know perfectly well that prostitution - the subordination of human relationships to cash - is an indispensable part of the social system which they support.

People are bought and sold on the factory floor so that shareholders of the Lambton and Jellicoe breed can grow rich and indulge themselves, among other things, by buying and selling prostitutes.

Shares and whores, in short, are both essential to the lives of an entire class whose other main preoccupation is telling hospital workers, miners and engineers to restrain their wage demands in the national interest. (SW 325, 2/6/73)

Now of course all codes of moral belief derive their currency in a given society from its structure of social relations. Any more to change society will therefore inevitably undermine such a moral code in so far as it succeeds. What this shows is that when and if universal bourgeois moral principles can be successfully utilised to provide reasons for smashing the status quo, they are unlikely to survive but will instead wither away. Even so they may still be able to provide us with powerful weapons in the struggle and therefore cannot be ignored.

As Marx's thought matured, so too did his premoralism develop further, and by the time he was writing *Capital* it was complete. He had by then completely changed the emphasis from that of the outrage and horror at the barbarity of capitalism to be found in the *Paris Manuscripts*, to the fuller scientific understanding of how capitalism works as a system. This did not make him the slightest bit less outraged, but it did mean that outrage ceased to be the starting point for how capitalism was to be conceived of as a whole.

The key to understanding this change of emphasis is given by the form of the dynamic of the development of capitalism to be found in Marx's later writings. Therefore he specifically spells out the contradictory nature of capitalism. Capitalism is self-destructive - its own development progressively paralyses, subverts and tears apart its own structure. Thus it is completely incapable of fulfilling the aims of any of the universalised moral systems which have attempted to make capitalism acceptable to its victims. Conceived of as a whole, therefore, it is nonsensical to be in favour of it. To be in favour of capitalism is to be in favour of its dynamic, which is at the same time to be in favour of its destruction. That is why Marx does not share the moral naturalism and libertarianism of Skillen and Coll-

ier. He goes one stage further: seeing that capitalist reality cannot satisfy any universalised ends, the crucial division becomes that between those prepared to fight against capitalism and those who are not. To pretend otherwise, to imagine that we must all be cleansed of 'morality' first of all, can only encourage needness moral sectarianism. The revolutionary alternative to this is to seize upon people's moral sentiments whenever and wherever they can be used in the process of developing the will and the understanding to smash the system and create socialism. Hence the term 'pre-moralism', for it is a pre-condition for the fulfillment of any coherent and universal set of moral aims that capitalism be smashed first of all.

Against Utopianism

Marx distanced himself from moralism for another reason too. He was not just concerned with utilising moral feelings against the capitalist status quo, but in addition it was important to demonstrate the fruitlessness of the moral approach within capitalism. Utterly wrong conclusions about what to do will be drawn if we simply look at our aims and aspirations and try to solve them within the system. The reason for this is that capitalism is a system which proceeds according to its own laws - it is not subject to rational, conscious control. So there is no way we can take it as a whole and move it in the direction we choose. The formulae of capitalist Political Economy thus

... bear it stamped upon them in unmistakable letters that they belong to a state of society, in which the process of production has the mastery over man, instead of being controlled by him...

(Capital Moscow 1961 Vol 1 p81)

The only way society can be subjected to human rational control is by terminating its subjection to the laws of capitalism, and this remains true whatever direction one would like to choose for society as a whole, and not simply the direction of Freudian-naturalism which Collier and others have favoured.

What distinguishes scientific from utopian socialism, is that it refuses to have its strategy dictated by what appears as the most important thing, as seen from one or another moral point of view. As Engels put it in 'Socialism: Utopian and Scientific':

The growing perception that existing social institutions are unreasonable and unjust, that reason has become unreason and right wrong, is only proof that in the modes of production and exchange changes have silently taken place with which the social order, adapted to earlier economic conditions, is no longer in keeping. From this it also follows that the means of getting rid of the incongruities that have been brought to light must also be present, in a more or less developed condition, within the changed modes of production themselves. These means are not to be invented by deduction from fundamental principles, but are to be discovered in the stubborn facts of the existing system of production.

(Selected Works Moscow 1962 Vol2 pl36)

From a purely moral point of view few people of any political persuasion would rate the degradation and exploitation of the industrial working class as more important than say, the starvation of thousands of millions in the Third World. Undoubtedly, they would say, the latter is a worse evil of capitalism. Yet for all that revolutionary socialists are correct when their strategy

orients them to the former. It is overwhelmingly obvious that the form of labour which produces and reproduces capital is to be found in the productive activity of the industrial working class. So the only way of attacking capitalism's domination over the Third World is in the fight by industrial workers (who are predominantly situated in the developed world) against their own exploitation in the factory. Moreover, capitalism has created the working class not only as the unique agent for the abolition of capitalism, but also as the unique agent for the creation of socialism. That is why Marx characterises the working class as

... a class always increasing in numbers, and disciplined, united, organised by the very mechanism of the process of capitalist production itself. The monopoly of capital becomes a fetter upon the mode of production, which has sprung up and flourished along with, and under it. Centralisation of the means of production and socialisation of labour at last reach a point where they become incompatible with their capitalist integument. Thus integument is burst asunder.

(Capital Vol 1 p763)

So it is certainly not moral outrage which determines what one's political orientation ought to be, but one's knowledge of the unique role and potentiality of the proletariat as a revolutionary class. It is in this sense that Engels is absolutely right about the irrelevance of moral principles here - and this remains true whether the moral principles involved are those of the puritan-bourgeois whom Tony Skillen and Andrew Collier take as their stalking horse, or for that matter, the 'anti-moralism' and Freudian-naturalism in whose name they conduct their criticism.

The Collective Self

Tony Skillen, to his credit, certainly recognises the insufficiency of mere criticism of bourgeois morality. Without developing 'socialist forms of struggle', he argues, we shall be left with 'the mere erosion of bourgeois morality' which 'is compatible with lumpen cynicism - a passive pre-condition of fascism' (RP8 pl0). No such caution is to be found in Andrew Collier's paper - indeed he draws exactly the opposite conclusion (In his terminology bourgeois morality appears in the personified form as the superego): 'As long as the superego is strong, frustrations imposed by the present structure of social reality will reinforce moral ideology; weaken the superego and they will be seen as intolerable restraints, to be resisted and if possible abolished by the overthrow of that structure.' (RP9 pl2)

Such a conclusion is not at all borne out by history in the one-sided manner that Andrew suggests, and nor could it be unless the most mechanistic theories were correct. After all what constitutes 'the structure' which our newly liberated ego is going to 'overthrow'? Is it perhaps the World Zionist Conspiracy against which the Nazis launched their crusade? Or the blacks and debit/credit financing which the National Front see as the scourge of the Western world today? The problem is not what the structure really is, but what it appears to be to those who, as the crisis develops, perceive that whatever it is it fails to meet their own needs and aspirations. How it will appear does not at all in general depend upon individual psyches, but upon the episodes which bring about the perception that the system can't deliver the goods. Workers who have experienced years of collective and successful militant struggle, whose consciousness has in an important sense been formed in the struggle, act instinctively along class lines. Revolutionary socialism

can appear as natural to them precisely because it makes their own previous acts intelligible and significant. Equally they will only have been capable of class unity against the boss if they have succeeded in developing a certain immunity against the usual ruling-class ploys of dividing one section of workers against another. And this is the best vaccination against fascist ideas that there is.

This is hardly a novel conclusion in itself. After all we have merely reasserted that one's conception of social reality is a product of social conditions and the struggle against those conditions. But it is an important reminder because it enables us to put Andrew Collier's recommendations into a proper perspective, and to contrast them with some other (and in my view better) alternatives. To do so other than in the most schematic way would take us way beyond the bounds of *Radical Philosophy*, for it depends upon a highly concrete analysis (and therefore a relatively unphilosophical one) of the nature of contemporary capitalism. All the same some generalisations are to the point. Inevitably as capitalism's current crisis develops, more and more of its victims will find it incapable of delivering the goods, and will for this reason be inclined to question the moral ideology which supports and justifies it. In general, the deeper the crisis, the more rapidly will this process develop. Consequently the role of revolutionaries is to aid and participate in the development of this process. This process is predominantly an *objective* one, that is to say it proceeds so long as workers successfully fight off attacks on their standard of living, independently of what they, individually or collectively, believe themselves to be doing. Secondly, revolutionaries have to show that the answer lies in workers' power in the factory and above all in the state. This can only be done if something objective, namely a mass revolutionary party, is built within the working class. But even so this process is predominantly a *subjective* one, because it only succeeds if sufficient numbers of workers consciously strive to create revolutionary socialism.

These are linked processes, for in the long run the only way for workers to escape capitalist rationalisations is to smash capitalism and create socialism. But we can still look at them separately to assess the factors that influence them, and to see the relevance of Andrew Collier's remarks in this respect. First of all then, does his analysis point to ways of developing workers' real and effective resistance against the demands of capitalism? Of course not! For the urgent need of the British working class today is to build forms and organs of struggle capable of linking and generalising the spontaneous and isolated struggles of, for instance, the local government and health service workers. To do so the spontaneity of *individual* sections of workers has to be developed into the *collective* response of the whole working class. The *material conditions* for a class-wide disaffection from bourgeois ideas are thus advanced only by those measures which develop a collective class-wide response of the proletariat itself. It follows that such conditions can only suffer if marxists encourage a form of Freudian-ego-gratification in its place.

Precisely this renders such ideas incapable of helping at the subjective level either. For as individual egos, the workers will never conceive of themselves collectively - they will never achieve a *class consciousness*. To achieve this, we need forms of thought and action which stress

the 'we' in place of *and against* the 'I', exactly the opposite therefore of what Andrew Collier suggests. Of course the various repressive apparatuses of bourgeois society like the bourgeois family repress and stunt the development of the individual. All the same it is a mistake to concentrate attention on this point, and to do so can easily lead to reactionary politics. Firstly this is because it leaves out the most crucial point: man is a social being. We live in societies not merely - as Hobbes and Locke believed - to satisfy pre-existent individual needs and wants, but because our very needs themselves are overwhelmingly collective and social - they could neither be fulfilled *nor* created without society. One of the chief ideological functions of contemporary moral and political philosophy is to obscure this point, and by doing so it has covertly underwritten and endorsed *laissez-faire Liberalism*. Society, this theory informs us, exists solely to give the pre-existing 'individual' more elbow room. It therefore sees any attempt to use society to create *collective* satisfactions and freedoms as an unjustifiable encroachment on the 'rights' of the 'individuals'.

We reject this theory. It falsely identifies self-fulfillment with the satisfaction of the *non-social* self. It completely ignores, and therefore in practice it can only repress and stunt, the potentiality that mankind has for *collective* self-realisation. More concretely we need a theory in its place which not only expresses the collective as against the individual, but does so in ways which allow the working class to understand both the nature of their relationship to capital and also the means of changing it. At the moral level this means that the theory must legitimate the struggle of the workers against capital and also underwrite the moral urgency of their task. To do so there is no doubt that the theory will have to encourage some virtues and condemn some vices. Certainly this will not take the form of Categorical Imperatives, because these principles apply to proletarians only and not members of the bourgeoisie. But neither could they be the purely pragmatic rationalisations of self-interest that Andrew Collier suggests. He is certainly right to stress the importance of making society and its rules change so as to fit the people that it contains rather than vice-versa, but this does not mean that people in general, or the working class in particular, must not subordinate self-interest to socialist principles on some occasions too. It is not sufficient to rely upon a 'practical reason of a non-moral kind' which just 'involves understanding one's own needs, developing them in such a way that their most satisfying form of satisfaction is possible ... selecting the best means for the satisfaction of needs, etc.' If this were literally true there could be no working-class heroes and certainly no working-class martyrs, for within Collier's theory there is no room for acts of supererogation, and especially not when they lead to the agent's own death. If all acts are to be judged by the mechanical operations of Andrew's felicific calculus many of the courageous acts which have inspired millions of workers, from the Paris Commune to the 1905 St Petersburg Soviet would have been mistakes - pure and simple. Yet in spite of the fact that from the point of view of many individuals involved, 'self-interest' could never have justified their action, who could doubt the value and the correctness of what they did?

We value such actions because they bear witness to the ability to place the interests of the work-

ing-class above one's own as an individual. Not only is it a form of moral philistinism to construct a theory in which they must be excluded, but it can only devalue an important (though subsidiary) weapon in the working-class armoury for use in the class struggle.

The Value of Morality

Morals, or rather moral principles and actions, only become possible or intelligible under certain circumstances. In our present discussion for instance they arise in and through a conflict between the interests of the worker as an individual and as a member of the proletariat. We have characterised his action as 'moral' on occasions when he opts for the latter and against the former, and we have done so for the following reasons: (1) It is against his self-interest, (2) It is in the interests of his class, (3) The interests of his class are, ultimately, the interests of mankind. In situations where the proletariat has a very real chance of defeating capitalism, self-interest becomes (in general) the interest of the working class too. The arena of the specifically *moral* act diminishes accordingly on these occasions.

Working class moral activity is of course less important than the non-moral or self-interested actions of the class, but its significance is for all that a real one, and it certainly shows Andrew Collier to be wrong or confusing when he claims that 'There is no moral basis for socialism, no such thing as "living as a socialist" in capitalist society... How a socialist gets his money or his kicks is politically irrelevant'. For it is precisely proletarian moral considerations, embodied in the concepts of class solidarity, cooperation with one's work mates and struggle against the bosses, that makes the best militants reject the seductive offers of cushy managerial posts or other attempts to buy them off. 'How a socialist gets his money' can thus be of the utmost importance.

So it is a myth to believe that all correct actions can be validly derived from one's needs and interests, for sometimes these must be overridden by actions derived from considerations which concern one's very *authenticity* as a socialist. Interests don't always have to be confronted by other interests therefore. Correct actions follow from what one *is* as much as from what one *wants*.

So, in conclusion, we don't need morality to demonstrate the necessity for revolutionary socialism. To understand the real and contradictory nature of capitalism is to appreciate its incompatibility with both bourgeois and socialist moral theories. At this level it is therefore superfluous and idealistic to opt for Freudian naturalism. However the working class, as the only agents capable of smashing capitalism, will need moral principles to guide an individual's action when such action comes into conflict with his self interest. But in that case too, what is needed can hardly be summarised by Collier's programme of combatting the superego in the name of the ego. For in reality it is the ego itself which stands in need of suppression to the collective subject 'we', to solidarity, and to fighting against the capitalist class. In all these areas Andrew Collier is going in the wrong direction. ~

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Notes

Reductionism and the 'Uniqueness of man'

I want to examine here some of the arguments used by John Lewis in *The Uniqueness of Man* [Lawrence & Wishart, 1974], an eminently readable polemic against the crude reductionism employed by such notorious characters as Desmond Morris, Jacques Monod, H. J. Eysenck and B. F. Skinner. In Lewis's main thesis (that man is more than a collection of molecules, mechanical interactions, or a 'naked ape' that has acquired a few tricks) I find much to agree with. Moreover Lewis's exposition of the reactionary and anti-social nature of these views is beyond dispute. However, in putting forward arguments to demonstrate the 'uniqueness of man' Lewis commits himself to certain dubious assumptions concerning the relationship between a philosophical standpoint and a moral or political attitude. These invite the following questions: does a particular political attitude *inevitably* follow from a philosophical standpoint? What is the relationship between the metaphysical assumptions which underlie the theories of Morris, Eysenck et al, and the reactionary and manipulative political attitudes associated with them? Does a manipulative attitude *inevitably* follow from reductionism, as Lewis suggests?

According to Lewis reductionism, or to use his expression, 'the philosophy of nothing but', has expressed itself in three main forms: (i) in the modern materialism of Francis Crick and Jacques Monod, who reduce man to physical and chemical constituents; (ii) in the theories of scientists, such as Minsky and Turing, who regard the computer as a model of the human brain, and (iii) in the 'ethological and genetic' myths of Konrad Lorenz, Robert Ardrey, and Desmond Morris, who reduce man to the level of the predatory carnivore or the laboratory rat, 'ineradicably aggressive' and 'motivated by a territorial imperative'. [p15]

Though held by the BBC and the press as great works of science very few of these theories have any genuine scientific merit, and what is more, argues Lewis, they rest on very shaky metaphysical assumptions. By concentrating on their philosophical weaknesses it is therefore possible, Lewis maintains, to refute them without postulating the existence of further metaphysical entities, or 'vital principles', which have been held to determine the difference between organic and inorganic matter. Vitalism, however, has been dead for over half a century. Little would be gained by its resurrection. Yet, if there is no 'vital principle' which distinguishes man from computers, apes, or a chance collection of molecules, what is unique about the human species? In the absence of any 'vital force' the following view, put forward by Monod, must seem very plausible:

*... everything can be reduced to simple, obvious, mechanical interactions. The animal is a machine and there is no difference at all between men and animals.*¹

It must be recognized that science can, in principle at least, explain everything about physical phenomena, but explaining everything from the standpoint of a particular science does not include an explanation of how things are seen from another standpoint. The company's accounts explain everything to the accountant about the running of the company, but they tell us nothing about the 'goings on' in the canteen. Physics and chemistry