Anyone who has argued for the desirability of socialism will be familiar with this response:

There's a lot wrong with our society, but it's better than Russia - if that's socialism, you can keep it. But anyway, just what is this future society you talk about, you're asking people to follow you, but you're not prepared to spell out where you think you're going.

Bertell Ollman believes that it is now politically possible, and necessary, to counter arguments like this by explicating the vision of communism which informed Marx's critique of bourgeois society; and which can be pieced together from hints, asides and statements throughout his work. He does this in 'Marx's Vision of Communism: A Reconstruction', in *Critique*, No. 8, Summer 1977. He writes that: the inability to conceive of a humanly superior way of life, an inability fostered by the same exploitation, has contributed to the lassitude and cynicism which helps to thwart class consciousness ... giving workers and indeed members of all oppressed classes a better notion of what their lives would be like under communism ... is essential to the success of the socialist project. p9 - [all page numbers appearing in brackets, without other indication, refer to the above article]

This is surely correct. The everyday, the commonsense, the news media, the films, the advertisements, all overwhelm us with the message that the appearance is the real, is the rational; this is how it is and how it must be. Human Nature is the determinant of social relations. Look at China, they're discovering that ... given a chance they want perms and fashionable clothes ... we're all greedy ... look at the Ford workers ... there'll always be wars ... look at Vietnam and China.

Because mass consciousness is necessary for socialist construction this ideology must be overcome. It cannot be shattered by arguments alone; because it is constantly affirmed and confirmed, minutely and globally, by the content and texture of social life in capitalist society. But perhaps argument can begin to work on the fissures along the lines of strain; which must then be widened by practice.

The purpose of this Reply - almost wholly negative and critical - is to show that Ollman's strategy of 'reconstructing Marx's vision of the future because making a case for communism as a possible successor to capitalism is generally enough to convince people that they must help to bring it about' (pp9&41) - is a dead-end. Firstly, it considers Ollman's justification for his project; secondly, briefly discusses some of his remarks on the transitional society; thirdly, and mainly, considers his account of communist society and argues that his excavation of Marx's texts is insufficiently delicate, that we should be critical of some of Marx's own prescriptions, and that on one point - private property - Ollman reverses Marx's meaning; finally, it offers a personal response to his utopia.

I The Justification for Utopian Speculation

Marx did not himself present an account of communist society. Ollman argues that this was because he wished to distinguish himself from other socialists for whom prescriptions of the future were the main stock-in-trade' (p8). This, he argues, need no longer inhibit marxist socialists because the utopian sects have disappeared. As well as this tactical objection Marx had - or so it is often thought - an over-riding principled objection to such speculation. Namely, that he regarded theory as the condensation, through conceptual work, of social reality; and remained enough of a follower of Hegel to agree that:

every individual is a child of his time; so philosophy too is its own age apprehended in thoughts ... if theory really goes beyond the world as it is and builds an ideal one as it ought to be, that world exists indeed, but only in the philosopher's opinions, an unsubstantial element where anything you please may, in fancy, be built. (1)

Ollman states that Marx did not have such a principled objection; further that:

Projecting the communist future from existing patterns and trends is an integral part of Marx's analysis of capitalism, an analysis which links social and economic problems with the objective interests that incline each class to deal with them in distinctive ways. (p7)

For this, he offers a textual argument and a theoretical argument.

The textual argument is based on an 1851 letter of Engels to Marx; of this, Ollman writes:

judging from an 1851 outline of what was to become *Capital*, Marx intended to present his views on communism in a more systematic manner in the final volume. The plan changed, in part because Marx never concluded his work on political economy proper, and what Engels in a letter to Marx refers to as 'the famous "positive", what you "really" want!' was never written. This incident does point up, however, that Marx's objection to discussing communist society was more of a strategic than of a principled sort. (p8)

David McLellan mentions this letter and reproduces part of it (2). He points out that Engels was advising Marx on his current plan for the Economics, which was to consist of three volumes: 'A Critique of Economics', 'Socialism', and 'History of Economic Thought'; he supported a publisher's suggestion that the History come first and suggested that it be expanded into two volumes -

After this would come the socialists as the third volume - the fourth being the Critique - what would be left of it - and the famous Positive, what you 'really' want... For people of sufficient intelligence the indications in the first volumes - the Anti-Proudhon and the Manifesto - will suffice to put them on the right track. The mass of buyers and readers will lose any interest in the History if the great mystery is already revealed in the first volume.

It seems to me that Ollman has a slim basis for asserting that the positive refers to future communist society. It could as well refer to a positive account of bourgeois society, following on from the critique of contemporary economic theory. Furthermore, no hint of it appears in the sketch of the contents in the 'General Introduction' to the Grundrisse (3).

The theoretical argument is that 'as opposites alienation and communism serve as necessary points of reference for each other' (p40). This is circular, it presupposes just the complementarity between critical analysis and theory of the future society which it is meant to establish. Ollman's account of communism does indeed implicitly rely on the ideas developed in his Alienation (4), and my criticisms of this account do imply some aspects of a critique of the theory of internal relations.

II The Transitional Society

Ollman here bases his account on Marx's Critique of the Gotha Programme, and its claim that between the political victory of the working class and the functioning of communist society there must pass a transitional phase in which bourgeois institutions, values, practices are eliminated or transformed; during this phase, certain bourgeois categories will still circumscribe practice, but within this the foundations of communism will be constructed (5). Ollman discusses the features of this construction in the above-mentioned work, from the Manifesto of the Communist Party and The Civil War in France. This account is of incidental relevance for the purpose of showing that communism is a desirable future state. Its importance should be to show that the Soviet states are not organised in the ways that Marx ascribed to the Proletarian Dictatorship; so that not only are these states not communist, but they are not moving towards it. However, Ollman does not do this, but discusses the programmes of these texts as if they were now relevant in the same way as when Marx wrote them.

Ollman briefly mentions Marx's criticism of Bakunin's State and Anarchism, where Bakunin argues that workers 'once they become rulers or representatives of the people, cease to be workers' (p17). He approvingly cites Marx's rejoinder that this is no more true of a worker than it is true that a capitalist ceases to be a capitalist when s/he becomes a member of a town council. Many interpretations of the Soviet experience would hold that this is indeed a case of workers becoming rulers and ceasing to be workers - for whatever reason this happened; But Ollman states that this is irrelevant, because: 'what has happened in present day communist countries cannot really be used to settle this dispute since the social, economic and political pre-conditions which Marx thought necessary have never existed in these countries.' (p17). But, clearly, several of the measures advocated in the Manifesto have been effected in the Soviet states, such as centralisation of credit, and state ownership of the means of production. There is a historical connection between Marx's views on socialist construction and the Bolshevik Revolution; and Bakunin was more prescient than Marx on the estrangement of the 'workers state' from the working class. Stalinism (or, on another interpretation, Leninism-Stalinism) cannot be regarded as a mere mistake, an aberration. 'Mistake', as an explanatory category, is an ideological notion; it can have no place in a scientific analysis, which must show how the events mystified by this notion were rendered possible. The next section will discuss one area - the management of the labour process - where we can see a definite line between Marx's 'vision of communism' and Soviet society.

In his consistent refusal to relate Marx's writings to their subsequent use, or even to their practical relevance, Ollman is led to make this absurd remark:

'Marx states: 'Empirically, communism is only possible as the act of the dominant people, "all at once" or simultaneously'. There is no need, therefore, to advise the workers' government on how to deal with the remaining capitalist powers, nor is there any need to provide for a standing army' (5). The sentence in The German Ideology following the one just quoted (6) states that the proletariat is created as a global class through expanding capitalist production generating the world market, and that at this stage the workers are 'cut off ... from even a limited satisfaction of their needs and, hence ... their utterly precarious position'. In other words, this claim for the simultaneity of revolution was made in the context of a prediction of the increasing absolute immiseration of the proletariat. But as this prediction was abandoned, together with the theory of wages it was based upon (7), there would have to be an independent argument for the simultaneity of revolution. But even if there were, it would not prove Ollman's point. Events can only be said to be 'simultaneous' relative to a given timescale. From the perspective of a century, events a month apart appear simultaneous, but in the history of a revolution this is a long time; and can be enough for the workers' state to be crushed by counter-revolution. Ollman is virtually asking the working class to disarm itself on the basis of a text.

2 In Karl Marx: His Life and Thought, Macmillan, 1973, p94. Also, Marx's Grundrisse, Macmillan 1971, p6
4 2nd ed. Cambridge UP, 1976. See Richard Gunn's criticism of the internal relations of Radical Philosophy 7, Spring 1976; Ollman's Reply to this in RP13 appears as the appendix to the 2nd ed. of his book.
5 For a discussion of this notion which maintains that the USSR is a transitional society, see Mandel's 'Ten Theses on the Socialist and Economic Laws Governing the Society Transitional Between Capitalism and Socialism', Critique, No. 5. Adam Black: In 'The Myth of the Transitional Society', Critique, No. 5 argues that Mandel illicy changes Marx's notion of a 'transitional period' into that of a whole historical epoch - the 'transitional society'. See also an article by Bakunin's letter to Critique in Critique, No. 5.
6 In Marx/Engels Collected Works vol 5 (CW), p49 (Arthur's ed.).
III Communist Society

The discussion of this is the major part of Ollman's paper; it is here that we are offered the vision, point of reference and image to aid socialists in breaking the grip of the ideology of the Everyday and Commonsense on the critical imagination. The basis of this society is that all residues of alienated culture have been dissolved, both 'in the mentality of the people and in their conduct, depriving the political dictatorship of the proletariat of its main raison d'être' (p21). Materially, the potentialities of the productive forces constrained by bourgeois social relations have been actualised: production is efficient and humane; material scarcity - the basis of political economy - has disappeared; production is guided by the logic of the plan, not the market. Utopia is here.

Ollman systematises Marx's comments on communism into 6 points:
(1) Division of labour has been abolished.
(2) Communal activity 'at work, in consumption, and during free time, has become a prime want, and occupies most of the life of every individual' (p21)
(3) Private property has been abolished; all objects are socially owned.
(4) Humanity, collectively, has attained complete control over the natural world, 'instead of submitting to chance as formerly, people, through their knowledge and control over natural forces, make their own chance.' (p21)
(5) There are no external compulsions on behavior, 'with the exception of productive work' (p21)
(6) All previously known forms of individually differentiating human division have disappeared.

The Abstract Universal

Ollman's basis for his claim that Marx believed that under communism all hitherto known social groupings (apparently with the exception of sex and gender) will have dissolved is a couple of sentences in The German Ideology's polemic against Stirner: Even naturally evolved differences within the species, such as racial differences ... can and must be abolished in the course of historical development.... spontaneously evolved speech has been turned into a national language. As a matter of course, the individuals at some time will take completely under their control this product of the species (8) Ollman's interpretation of the last sentence is that 'one language will replace the thousands now in existence' (p29). The conceptual basis for this appears to be the notion of dialectic as the fragmentation of a primitive wholeness, through stages of estrangement into the final resolution of a mediated totality.

But the account given is actually inconsistent with this notion, because it invokes the notion of an unmediated identity of elements in abstract relations with each other. It suggests that a future unified humanity could only be so through being in a crude sense ... the same. This echoes the familiar remark that communism aims for the suppression of all individuality and the sinking of persons into an amorphous mass. It is the formal thinking that 'where it manages to see difference, it does not see unity, and where it sees unity, it does not see difference' (9). To claim that by being free of the 'bounds' of locality, culture, group and language 'each person is able to express his emotions and thoughts in a universal manner' (pp34-35) is to use a notion of universality as the complete abstraction from particulars and indifference to variety (10). Marx regarded capitalism as progressive in its establishment of the world market, through the generalisation of exchange relations overcoming the rigidities of local boundaries. But to the extent that this process liquidated human characteristics into the flux of market values it must be subject to Marx's criticism of money as the force which equalises qualitative differences into the empty abstractness of exchange - the 'universal solvent'. This dialectic is lost in Ollman's utopia.

The Division of Labour

There are points in Marx's own discussions of division of labour where this abstract universality is praised. Ollman writes that:

by the time of capitalism each class is shut up in its own enclosure.... The final turn of the screw is applied by 'modern industry' where machines usurp the few human skills that remain, leaving most men with the minute and highly repetitive operations involved in machine minding. (p22)

This gloss on Marx attributes to him the view that the deskilling of work under capitalist industry is dehumanising and worse than the situation under feudalism. Ollman here refers to the discussion of machinery in The Poverty of Philosophy, where Marx does write that:

10 Philosophy of Right, para 207 (Knox trans., pp133-34).

A man actualises himself only in becoming something definite i.e. something specifically particular it is false to regard a particular social position .... as a restriction on ones universal character and as a necessity imposed .... purely ab extra .... if the concept is to be determinate it must first of all advance into the distinction between the concept and its real existence and thereby into determination and particularity. See also, Noel Parker's discussion of Regis Debray's thoughts on individuality, class and political commitment, RP20, esp. pp37-39.

24 The chair in the British Museum reputed to be Marx's favourite.
What characterises the division of labour inside modern society is that it engenders specialised functions, specialists, and with them craft-idiocy (11).

However, in this discussion, it is clear that Marx regards deskilling as a positive advance over 'craft-idiocy', and that the destruction of this by the 'automatic workshop' is its 'one revolutionary side'. He ends this discussion with a blast of contempt for Proudhon's 'petty-bourgeois' ideal that 'it is enough ... to have created a masterpiece once in one's life, to have felt oneself just once to be a man' (12). These remarks on the positive value of alienated labour suggest, at least, that we should be wary of citing isolated comments of Marx's to derive a picture of his view of the division of labour under communism.

Ollman goes on to quote Marx's claim that: ... in communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity ... each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, shepherd or critic. (13)

He takes this as a literal prescription for the facility with which communist personality will pass from one occupation to another. But to take it in this way forgets the polemical function of the German Ideology. It is now a commonplace that we cannot take literally, as positive positions, such remarks as 'forms of consciousness ... no longer retain the semblance of independence, they have no history, no development' (op. cit. p37) - that these were a necessary exaggeration in Marx and Engels' corrosive attack on the fantastic idealism of the post-Hegelians. Why, then, should we ignore the polemical context and function of the hunting and fishing quote? This could, with like validity, be regarded as a necessary exaggeration. In this case against Feuerbach's doctrine that:

The essence of a being is recognised, however, only through its object; the object to which a being is necessarily related is nothing but its own revealed being.... He who cultivates the soil is a farmer; he who makes hunting the object of his activity is a hunter; he who catches fish is a fisherman; and so on. (14)

But even if we do take this statement of Marx's literally, it must be argued that this is a progressive and liberatory doctrine, rather than a static reflection of the tendencies of bourgeois society. One way of reading this quote about the hunting, fishing, criticising communist person is that under communism such roles exist as socially objective structures which the free-floating individual takes on, operates with and then changes for different ones. But if social relations are thus utterly external to the individual, then how are we to understand the subject in any other way than as a Cartesian self whose identity is of an ontologically different kind to his/her social being? On this view, the self is an asocial 'substance', distinct from socially material roles; a privileged selector of social identities, and not in any sense constituted by them. Even more directly than in the case of cultural divisions this position is open to Hegel's argument on the vacuity of abstract universality. If it is correct that the Cartesian ego and the universality of contentless form are themselves the products of generalised commodity production, then Marx's notion of the free individual appears to be the quintessence of bourgeois material categories (15).

It may be that it is 'difficult for the uninitiated to grasp' that 'the individual's victory over the division of labour is ... the central feature of communist society' (p22); it would be easier if it were explained just what this means, in terms other than a re-phrasing of the German Ideology quote. Does it mean the dissolution of all interpersonal differentiations, as the reactionaries and Ollman seem to feel? And if so, the argument must be answered that it is difference that permits identity; that difference is not necessarily a barrier to freedom, but its prerequisite.

The Organisation of the Labour Process

However, there is one division of labour that Marx, ambiguously, and Ollman, straightforwardly, want to retain: that between mental and manual labour. Despite his statement that 'Division of labour only becomes truly such from the moment when a division of material and mental labour appears' (16), there is an important and politically crucial sense in which Marx regards this division as a socially necessary use-value: it is the sociology of soul-selling.

11 International Publishers, New York, 1971, 144
12 This echoes a similar comment in The German Ideology
13 Ibid. p47 (ibid p53)
15 This echoes the criticism by Gouldner of the dramaturgical sociology of the ethnomethodologists. See Martin Shaw 'The Coming Crisis of Radical Sociology' (in Ideology in Social Science, ed. Blackburn, Fontana, 1973, p43).
16 German Ideology, CW5, pp44-45 (Arthur ed. p51)
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Praxis, P.O. Box 1027, Goddav, California 92627 USA

Wittgenstein does not tell us whose authority this area is subject to. But in practice, it is the priest. So when the self-dissolving organs of the transitional phase leave productive activity untouched, subject to the authority of the manager; whose authority is the amorphous 'realm of freedom' subject to?

Marx does, after all, write that 'all labours, in which many individuals co-operate' require a directing will. But on Ollman's account, there will be many forms of co-operation outside the factory - communal raising of children... group living... It is obviously the case that work involving several persons in co-operation requires organisation but organisation in the general sense of an overall consensus as to the goals and to the co-ordination in the manner of achieving them. This very abstract category could be regarded as one of the 'general abstract determinants which obtain in more or less all forms of society', in the words of Marx's 1857 plan for his projected Economics (17). To move from that level to considering the particular concretisations of this determinant is to move to local, limited and historically specific social forms. The abstract level of the necessary determinants is one that Marx does not systematically discuss; his comments on the nature of these determinants tend to be hypostatisations of the local categories of capitalism, just the move which the 1857 Introduction condemns in the political economists (18). The statement that organisation is necessary for joint production in no way entails that it be organised in a hierarchial manner, with the task of co-ordination being the specialism of the managing apex of the pyramid. To just assert, with Marx, that all labors, in which many individuals co-operate, necessarily require for the connection and unity of the process one commanding will [emphases supplied] (19) is to accept as an ahistorical determinant one of the most 'common sensical' and pernicious props of bourgeois ideology. This is not argued for, it is accepted as obvious, and illustrated by the example of an orchestra requiring a conductor - which is a bad example for Marx's argument as an orchestra is one form in which musicians may co-operate to produce music, but there are forms which do not require conductors (20).

Ollman relates the absence of organisation in communism to the functions that the organisations of the proletarian dictatorship would have: With the sole exception of production, all forms of organisation adopted in the phase of the dictatorship of the proletariat serve in the role of Wittgenstein's ladder for communist man; they enable him to climb into communism, only to be discarded when he gets there (p31).

This is a deeply unfortunate analogy. If we compare organisations in this phase with 'Philosophy is not a body of doctrine but an activity (Tractatus 4.112), then presumably it is not a body of institutions, but the continual critique of institutions. But Wittgenstein gives philosophy this task for a purpose - 'Philosophy sets limits to the much disputed sphere of natural science' (Tractatus 4.113); in demarcating the area of natural science it leaves this area alone and subject to the authority of the scientist only. Outside this area of the propositions of science there is the unspeakable totality of the 'world as a limited whole' - mysticism, ethics and aesthetics.

17 Grundrisse, Nikolai trans., Penguin, 1972, p108
18 ibid, p63-68
19 Capital Vol.III, trans Unterwurff, Kerr ed. 1908. This uses language more baldly authoritarian than the FLP 1969 cited in Ollman.
20 This position, with the same example, is expressed in Capital Vol. I, ch. XIII, 'Co-operation', Torr ed., p321
21 Selected Works of Marx and Engels, in one volume, Lawrence and Wishart, 1968, p47
Commune (22). As with the German Ideology, Marx in the Manifesto held to the theory of the absolute immiseration of the working class as capitalism expanded; on this model capitalism would itself liquidate all forms of pre-bourgeois property relations. On the question of non-bourgeois property extant at the time of revolution, Marx has nothing to say. With the dropping of the theory of absolute immiseration, the model of pre-revolutionary society must contain elements of non-bourgeois property (tools, personal belongings, etc.) but Marx offers no suggestion that these should all be socialised.

Nowhere does Ollman justify his absorption of personal effects into the category of property which is to be socialised. There are at least two places in Marx where this is disavowed. One is in the very section of the 1844 MSS from which Ollman quotes that 'Communism is the positive transcendence of private property' (p26)(23). This section of the MSS, entitled by its editors 'Private Property and Communism', is conceptually difficult; but it is clear that it is used by Marx in the framework of a dialectical teleology of the aufheben of alienation - but for us to accept a programme based on this theory, it must be shown that it really is adequate to comprehend the construction of communism. What Ollman refers to as the liquidation of all personal property seems to be what is regarded in this text as 'universal private property' ... in this the relationship of private property persists as the relationship of the community to the world of things' (24). Marx condemns this notion of communism as crude and undialectical and regards its real essence as the abolition of marriage in favor of the 'community of women ... universal prostitution' (25). Ollman misreads Marx as holding that under communism the material category of property will persist, but all property will be in the hands of the community. Marx's point is that the material category itself will disappear, though something like the relation of a person to effects that we now refer to as 'ownership' will not.

This is confirmed by Marx's criticism of Stirner's argument that property exists in any society because an individual can be said to 'have' his/her bodily sensations, thus:

after the abolition of (actual) property it is, of course, easy to discover still all sorts of things which can be included in the term 'property'. In reality, of course, the situation is just the reverse. In reality I possess private property only insofar as I have something sellable... My frock coat is private property for me only so long as I can barter, pawn or sell it, so long as it is marketable. If it loses that feature... no economist would think of classifying it as my private property, since it does not enable me to command any... of other people's labour. (26)

22 'The Civil War In France', op. cit., p294
The commune intended to abolish that class property which makes the labor of many the wealth of the few... It wanted to make individual property a truth by transforming the means of production ... into more instruments of free and associated labour.
23 CW3, p296 (Bruck ed. Lawrence & Wishart, 1973, p135)
24 loc. cit. p294 (loc. cit. p132-33)
25 Russell Jacoby uses the notion of abstract negation and Marx's rejection of 'crude communism' in his discussion of the relation between the hostility to monogamy, privacy, property and personal property amongst sections of the American New Left - 'The Politics of Urbanity', in Social Amnesia, Harvester, 1975 is slightly altered version of his article in New Left Review 79, May-June 1973. This is a brilliant and passionate denunciation of fake-marxist mysticism and a certain kind of 'personal politics' as being a pure reflex of bourgeois relations and ideology.
26 German Ideology, CW5, p229 (Arthur ed. p131-82)