



Reading Political Philosophy: From Machiavelli to Mill

Marx: Derek McTravers and Jonathan Wolff

Derek McTravers

Hello, I'm Derek McTravers, and I'm here with Jonathan Wolff, who is reading Philosophy at University College, London. Jonathan, why does Marx maintain the view in *The German Ideology* that a person's identity is bound up with or even constituted by the need to produce things?

Jonathan Wolff

I think to understand Marx it's important to understand some of the philosophical background against which he was writing, and in particular to consider a question that Marx himself asked which was, what makes human beings special, that is what the difference between human beings and other members of the animal kingdom? Philosophers throughout history have given all sorts of answers to this question, but one very important tradition going all the way back to the Ancient Greeks is to think that what is special about human beings is that they're capable of thought, capable of consciousness, so human beings are special because they are thinking beings, and their prime relation to the world is that they can think about the world, and conceptualise the world in various ways. This gives rise to a type of idealist tradition in which the mind or ideas are primary in our relation to the world. Opposed to that is a type of materialist position which thinks that human beings are simply part of the natural world, part of the material world, like anything else in nature. That's one philosophical dispute. Another issue concerns how human beings interact with the world, which is what is a direction of causation between human beings and the rest of the world? So, on one view human beings are very passive, that they simply receive information from the world, so we think about the world and see the world as it is. Another view is that human beings are active, intervening in some ways in the world. Now for Marx all these views have something of the truth but none of them have exactly the right truth. One view that he was very keen to argue against is a view that human beings are simply a product of their circumstances. On this view human beings being the product of their circumstances are changeable by changes in their circumstances, so if you want to make people better, you just should put them in better circumstances. If you make the world a better place, people will be better people, so this is a view that Marx often is thought to hold. But his view is much more complicated than that. His view is that we're not simply passive receivers from the world around us, but rather we create the world that has this effect on us. So human beings have a type of interaction with the world whereby by producing on the world we change the world and we change ourselves at the same time. This, I think, is why productive activity is important for Marx. He wants to say by thinking and acting on the world we change the world, but we also change ourselves as we do that. We change ourselves by enriching our needs, enriching our concepts, enriching our capabilities. Having done that, we interact on the world again, and this changes us and changes the world once more. I think this is why productive activity is so important to Marx.

Derek McTravers

Right, thank you very much. Man as a producer seems to be in some way bound up with Marx's concept of alienation. What do you think Marx meant by alienation?

Jonathan Wolff

Well alienation was a very common term used by thinkers and writers of that time. Marx in particular was influenced by Feuerbach's account of religious alienation, and this is an idea that can very easily be expressed. Feuerbach thought it wasn't the case that god made human beings in god's image, rather he inverted this and said that human beings had made god in human beings' image. This was put by ancient fingers, if triangles had a god it would have three sides that we project our own essence onto an imaginary being, so in this way we

become alienated from our essence which we project onto alien being of some sort. So the basic idea of alienation is simply the things that belong together, in Feuerbach's case human beings and their essences come apart. In the case of religious alienation they come apart to such an extreme that we don't recognise these things as our essence, and rather than enjoying them on earth we bow down and worship them.

Derek McTravers

How does Marx use this idea when talking about, for example, the things that people produce?

Jonathan Wolff

Well, alienated labour is probably the most important form of alienation for Marx, particularly in his early writings, and he distinguishes actually four different elements of alienated labour in the 1844 manuscripts, now called *Alienated Labour*, where he discusses this, and what he says is that first of all human beings are alienated from their product of production, so what this means on a most simple level is that under capitalism workers produce goods which are taken away from them, they produce goods which become the property of other people. Secondly, they're alienated in their productive activity so the type of work they perform is alienating, and here Marx had a mind, modern production technique methods of production, so the worker's life is reduced to a type of repetitive, dull toil in which the worker is unable to find any type of meaning or unable to express their will or consciousness. And this leads to his third claim that we are also alienated from our species' essence. I think this is very important indeed. The idea for Marx we've already seen is that we are essentially productive creatures, this means that producing objects in the world is part of our essence as human beings, and that we are able to create according to our will and consciousness in a very elaborate way. But workers under capitalism, Marx thinks, very rarely have the opportunity to express these powers, so Marx says from a human being the worker is reduced to an abstract activity and a stomach, so rather than being a human being able to express our essence, we are like little machines ourselves. So that's the third thought, we're alienated from our species' essence. And the fourth thought is a consequence of this, that we are alienated from other human beings. But I think the most important aspect of alienation for the young Marx is something that is not explicitly stated in these texts but I think is there, which is the idea that we human beings create a world which comes to dominate us, so that everything we see around us, all the social relations and material facts that we see around us, are things that we human beings have collectively created, yet we find ourselves oppressed by these objects we've created. We've become subservient to them, dominated by them, enslaved to our own products, so a modern example is that of the City of London, or the banking sector, that the banking sector that we human beings have created, we created it initially for our own convenience, presumably, but now even governments have to listen to the City of London because if the City threatens to lose confidence, then there will be some sort of economic crisis, so we human beings, ordinary human beings, become enslaved by something that we initially created for our own convenience.

Derek McTravers

This leads us on to a particular example of this that Marx discusses in another of his early essays on the Jewish question where he describes the state as being an alienated entity. Could you just take us through that?

Jonathan Wolff

Well it's a very perplexing thought at first because Marx says that the state is a form of alienation and this is a very hard idea to understand because it sounds like there's something missing in this sentence, but I think the way to understand this is on the model of religion being a form of alienation, or rather a form of fake community, because one aspect for Marx of the human essence is that we are part of a community. We don't recognise this in our day-to-day lives, I mean it's very striking how, in a way, individualistic our lives are under current societies. We only need to stop and think for a moment about in the goods you enjoy you enjoy in your daily life how many people are involved in producing these, to realise how dependent you are on other human beings. Even in the simplest products we're dependent on a huge number of people, we're part of an immense division of labour, but we don't recognise this, so we are part of a real community. Now Marx thinks only under communism

will we enjoy the fact that we're members of a community, but this fact still exists under other forms of organisation, so Marx thinks at one time religion played the role of fake community for us, so rich and poor would pray together in church but with the splitting up of people into different religions after the Protestant Reformation Marx thought the church could no longer play the role of fake community because we weren't all members of the same church. At this point the modern political state comes into being, and I think Marx's view is at that point the state takes on the role of fake community, that we think we're equal citizens, equal under the eyes of the law, and this gives us a type of realm of community, yet it's not genuine, true community, it's a fake community that we have under bourgeois society.

Derek McTravers

So in bourgeois society we have two identities then, we have our identity as a citizen and our identity in what he calls 'civil society'.

Jonathan Wolff

That's exactly right, and our identity in civil society is our, as it were, real day-to-day existence where we might exploit each other, we'd be out for all we can get, at the level of the state we are all equal citizens, equal in the eyes of the state. This is sham in a way because the laws and edicts at the level of the state often have little effects on how people actually live their lives and what happens in the real world, and we can see this very clearly in our own situation in terms of equal pay for men and women, 'cos for more than twenty years now we've had legislation saying there shouldn't be discrimination, it's illegal to discriminate on grounds on gender in terms of pay, but when you look at the statistics women tend to be classed at around the bottom of salary grades, they don't get promoted in the same way. At the level of the state men and women are equal, at the level of civil society they're still very much unequal, so it's a type of sham equality, formal equality, equality in words alone.

Derek McTravers

In your book you put this under the general heading of a critique of Liberalism. Why is that, what would Liberalism hold and why does Marx's view in this area undermine it or attempt to undermine it?

Jonathan Wolff

Well my view on this, and I don't know if this is a universally shared view, but the paper on the Jewish question is probably the most important paper published of all the possible critiques of Liberalism that have been given. It's maybe a surprising thing to hear that because it's such a hard paper to understand but the key idea, I think, is a very deep idea which Marx doesn't bring out as explicitly as he might, and that is that the liberal rights' right to liberty, security, property, and so on, Marx says that these are all rights of separation, they separate you from your fellow being, so each one of these demarcates some sort of private sphere which gives you a protection from other human beings. Now if you think that's important, you think that it is important that human beings should be protected from each other, so again this is a very individualistic notion. It treats other human beings as a threat to you, rather than a source of self realisation, or a source of fulfilment. Another way of putting this is that, generally speaking, where there are rights where people are only of a mind to assert that they rights, or want rights, in cases of conflict. Where there is no conflict we don't think anyone needs to assert a right so at the moment, for example, no-one claims any rights over oxygen in the countryside because although it's absolutely vital to life there are no disputes about who should get oxygen. But we could imagine circumstances in which oxygen becomes very scarce and then we might start thinking people have rights against each other. Because oxygen is scarce there will be conflicts about how it might be used, and we need to give people rights to resolve these conflicts, so if you think the task of political philosophy is to give people rights, and that is the primary task of political philosophy, it seems that you've already implicitly assumed a conflict model of society where people have interests against each other. Now that might be perfectly correct and this might just be what the human situation is, it might be that we are in conflict with each other and that we are a threat to each other as, say, Hobbes thought we were in the state of nature, but I think the important point to bring out is that this is an assumption and it needs to be defended, and there are other possible views. For example, one view of communism is that we will find realisation in other people's pleasure, so we will be essentially co-operative rather than essentially competitive.

Derek McTravers

Could you just characterise what a Liberal's take on the state and society would be, just so we can get a contrast between what Marx claims and what the Liberal claims?

Jonathan Wolff

Well Liberalism isn't so much a view as a name for a very wide range of views. A Liberal typically thinks that liberty is very important, that the state should exist in order to protect the liberties of the individual. Beyond that there's a wide range of views about distributed justice, should we have more equality or less equality? But the key Liberal claim, I think, or at least among contemporary Liberals, is the thought that the liberal state is one which keeps its nose out of people's business, that there's a limit to how much the state may pry in individual lives, so this is often put these days in the following terms, that we all have our own individual conception of the good, and as long as following our conception of the good doesn't do any harm to anyone else then the state should leave us alone, so the state should be neutral, at least between reasonable conceptions of the good, it's not the state's business to pronounce on how I live my life, so if this means that I choose to live it one way, perhaps I might be a very religious person, it's not for the state to cast judgement on that, or if I am an atheist, it's not for the state to cast judgement on that. If I decide to put certain substances into my body, as long as this doesn't harm anyone else, it's not for the state to pronounce on the rights or wrongs of doing this, so a liberal state is a neutral state. Now neutrality is often contrasted with a view known as 'perfectionism', which isn't a very good term for it, but a perfectionist is someone who believes that some conceptions of the good are better than other conceptions of the good, first of all. Well a lot of people would believe that, but also believes that the state has a role in promoting the superior conceptions of the good and reducing, or eliminating entirely, the inferior conceptions of the good. So if you think there is a good way that human beings can live their lives, or several good ways that human beings can live their lives, and one or many bad ways, and that the state should have some role in telling us which ways to live our life, then you will be a state perfectionist and not a Liberal. And on those grounds Marx is definitely a state perfectionist, that a non-alienated life, a co-operative life, a life where we enjoy communal relations with others, is a better one than a life which doesn't have these features and it should be for the communist state, in so far as there is one, to encourage people to live according to these good, perfectionist models of human nature.

Derek McTravers

Kymlicka accuses Marx of being a perfectionist in the sense that Marx has got a single minded drive to eliminate alienated labour and Kymlicka wants to say well should we assume that this is the only good that people would want to pursue, why can't people trade off, say, a little bit of alienated labour for various other goods, such as spending more time with their family, or pursuing other leisure interests? Do you think Kymlicka is right about that and do you think that there's a reply that Marxists could give to deal with this point?

Jonathan Wolff

Well I think he would have to come up with some better examples than that if he was going to make the point. Robert knows if the libertarian philosopher has made this point in a very graphic way and perhaps Kymlicka is picking up on this, that the contemporary way of talking about alienation, or non-alienation, is in terms of meaningful work, and so there are people who say they don't want to work for capitalism, they don't want to work for big companies, they want to do some sort of meaningful work, so meaningful work could be thought of as a gloss on the idea of non-alienated work, and so it's often made as a complaint against capitalism, that it doesn't offer enough meaningful work. Now Nozick says in reply to this, if meaningful work was more productive than unmeaningful work then capitalism would certainly provide meaningful work because capitalism is only interested in making a profit. So we can take it for granted that meaningful work is less productive than unmeaningful work. So this means that each individual has to make a decision in their own lives about whether to carry out lower paid meaningful work, or higher paid meaningless work, and put in these terms it does seem right that the state shouldn't decide this for us, the state shouldn't outlaw meaningless, high-paid work, because after all some people might prefer to do that, if only for a short time or whatever. Of course what we all want is meaningful, high-paid work but it's assumed that this is not going to be on offer, or not to very many of us. Put in those terms I

think Kymlicka is right, but I would also say that isn't a very good way of putting Marx's own concern, because Marx's concern wasn't whether people should be allowed to perform, or required to perform meaningful work under capitalism. He was posing a choice between different types of social and economic system, so alienation can't just be identified with unhappy work, but a whole way of life, and it does seem rather perverse, I mean it's like saying the state shouldn't make a judgement about whether its people should be happy or unhappy, because what about those people who want to be unhappy, we should leave it to individuals to decide whether they should be happy or unhappy. You say, well, let's create the conditions in which everyone can be happy if they choose, and if they then want to go off and be unhappy that's up to them, but it doesn't seem right to say we should be at the outset neutral between happiness and unhappiness, so I think Marx would say it's wrong to think that we should be neutral from the outset between alienation and non-alienation.

Derek McTravers

Gerry Cohen, as we'll see, just makes a similar point and says that Kymlicka and Marx just seem to have different conceptions of politics.

Jonathan Wolff

That might be right. I think Kymlicka's writings on Marx has to be seen in a context of a general discussion of contemporary political philosophy, and so Kymlicka is less concerned with the project of rendering the true Marx than trying to think how elements from Marx's thought can be made to apply to contemporary political philosophy. I think what we learn is that this is not a very happy project.

Derek McTravers

Right, could you just briefly outline what you understand by historical materialism?

Jonathan Wolff

Well, there are three main claims to historical materialism, and here I owe the exposition very much to Gerry Cohen's work. The first claim of historical materialism is that human productive power grows, or tends to develop, over history so human society becomes increasingly productive or at least has increasing capability for production over time, and this Cohen calls rightly, I think, the development thesis. The second claim is that economic structures tend to rise and fall, depending on whether they increase or frustrate the growth of human productive power, so an illustration of this would be that capitalism came about because it was at the time best able to preside over the development of technology and on this very orthodox view of historical materialism it will wither away, to be replaced by something else, when it can no longer develop the product forces as well as some other economic structure might do. The third claim is the idea that the institutions of law, and perhaps morality and politics, exist in order to meet the needs of the economic structure so, in other words, to give an example, we have the laws we do, we have the political system we do, because this is in the interests of big business, and so the super structure is explained by the economic structure. Those are, I think, the essential three claims of historical materialism.

Derek McTravers

Historical materialism, as you've described it, seems to involve a mode of explanation that is quite obviously problematic; to take an example you gave, you said capitalism exists because it develops the productive forces and that explains something in terms of its effects, and that doesn't seem to make any more sense than saying things such as, 'the alarm clock went off because it work Fred up' – what do you think is the best way of getting around this?

Jonathan Wolff

Well, I think this whole issue has become much more complicated than it needs to be. The question we have is how can we say something comes into being in order to have an affect? I think the way to understand this is to use the analogy with the evolutionary theory, that is an evolutionary theory – we might say, 'tigers have got stripes so they can hide in the grass', but we might press a question, 'that doesn't really explain how they got stripes' because, after all, do we say god created tigers with stripes so they could hide in the long grass? Rather we tell a different story now, we say that probably once upon a time there were creatures very like tigers that didn't have stripes, and through random genetic mutation, some developed stripes,

and those with stripes managed to survive. Now the reason why they managed to survive is that they could hide so it is true that there's a sense in which they have stripes so they can hide. But they didn't get stripes in order to hide, they got stripes through random mutation, so I think the important distinction is the distinction between how things came about and the reasons why they persist. In evolutionary theory we have two stories, random mutation and the survival of the fittest. We can tell the same story, or the same combination of stories in relation to historical materialism as a way, I think, of understanding these functional claims. So when we ask why capitalism came about we should say not it came about in order to develop the productive forces. Probably the reason it came about was that people are always trying out new relations of production as an experiment, or perhaps not as a deliberate experiment, it just drifted into that type of economic structure from something else, so capitalist relations of production came about probably for entirely random reasons, then we have a separate question, which is why did it catch on, and develop to the extent that it did, and dare I think that we can say that it caught on because quite literally it was the fittest economic structure that was being tried at the time, that is in competition with other types of economic structures, capitalism won. So now the question is: why did it win? And the Marxist answer has to be because it was able to develop the productive forces. So capitalist economist structures beat out feudal economic structures because they were better able to preside over the development of the productive forces. And in the orthodox story communist relations of production will eventually be better able to preside over the development of the productive forces than capitalist ones, and at that time we will get a communist economic revolution, not a political revolution, and this is not something that will happen overnight, we're not there yet, maybe we'll never get there, but the prediction is that we will. And just to add one more point here, just an evolutionary theory, the animals that survive are the ones who are better able to survive than those other animals that they're in competition with. You don't have to say they are the most perfectly adapted. Optimality is never required, all that's required is superiority and the same thing is true, I think, in historical materialism. We shouldn't say capitalism was the very best able to develop productive forces, rather of all the economic structures that were tried out, this was better than the competitors.

Derek McTravers

Thanks, that's very interesting. Do you think it's surprising that philosophers who studied Marx would come up with different stories about how Marx's thought works?

Jonathan Wolff

There is no text in which Marx set out his theory of history, or at least no detailed text. There are parts of *The German Ideology* quite clearly where he sets out the beginnings of the theory. In some of the later writings, the 1859 Preface, as it's come to be known, Marx summarised the theory in two or three pages, but he never wrote a book called 'my theory of history, and if he had done, perhaps there would be far less room for diverse interpretations, but in interpreting Marx on this question, as in any other question, people are looking text written over perhaps forty years, maybe even more than forty years apart, and trying to get a coherent single doctrine out of someone who was a restless thinker, whose ideas were developing enormously during the period that he wrote, so it's not all surprising that people can find diverging interpretations and also not at all surprising that people can find Marx contradicting himself because, after all, most of us do this in the course of one article or book, never mind a career over forty years.

Derek McTravers

Jonathan Wolff, thank you very much.