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Capabilities, Equality, and Class Justice: A Reply to Wilde

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Introduction

It is unfortunate but perhaps unsurprising that the global justice debate has largely ignored Marx, as Lawrence Wilde argues in “Marx, Morality and the Global Justice Debate.” Marx is routinely overlooked in many debates where he is of direct relevance—especially but not only in my own field of economics, where he presented what remains the most compelling investigation of capitalism to date. Indeed, in the context of the current crisis many mainstream economists are dusting off their Keynes to see what they may have missed in his work, or perhaps forgotten, while Marx remains off the reading list except among those radical economists who never lost sight of his myriad contributions. And in the field of moral philosophy, things are even worse. Here, Marx himself is partly to blame, as Wilde and others rightly note. Marx so often ridiculed talk of ethics among socialists and other revolutionaries. He disdained naïve utopianism that was not grounded in “objective” analysis of the material basis of social formations—in the forces and relations of production, and in the material contradictions that gave rise to both the need for social transformation and the obstacles and opportunities that presented themselves in any particular historical conjuncture. Moral claims that were not grounded in material conditions were dismissed as obfuscatory and otherwise wrong-headed. Moral thought, after all, largely reflected the world view of the dominant classes. How then could it also provide the basis for emancipation?

Wilde wants us to see that Marx’s disdain for ethics was strategic and not fundamental. He was manoeuvring to defeat the idealist form of socialist thought that predominated among the radical philosophers and social movements of his day. He sought to promote awareness of the material basis of politics and ethics, to demonstrate that ethical aspirations that were not tied to material conditions were dead ends that would entrap rather than liberate the oppressed.

Wilde notes that many (perhaps even most) Marxists reject this view, and essentially take Marx at his word on the matter. I will not try to go beyond Wilde in adjudicating the issue here. Instead, I will admit my own sympathy to Wilde’s view so that I may move on directly to engage the substantive claims he makes about the value of the capabilities approach for Marxian scholars. I have examined this issue

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previously (see DeMartino 2000 and 2003); and I will draw liberally on that work to complement Wild's arguments. My point of departure will be to emphasize something that is central to the Marxian enterprise but largely missing from Wilde's essay—the matter of *class*. Wilde is largely silent on class, I presume, because his point of entry into ethical discourse is explicitly humanist. If one enters through that door, one may be apt to focus exclusively on individual freedoms at the expense of processes that operate on other levels. But since my goal is not to offer a critique of humanism (or Wilde) here, I will leave that matter aside and turn immediately to the issue that is, for me, paramount.

That issue may be put simply: the capabilities approach of Martha Nussbaum, Amartya Sen and others, especially when combined with egalitarian sensibilities and claims, does indeed open up to Marxian ethical concerns, as Wilde argues here. But these concerns do not comprise just individual flourishing (and the overcoming of alienation), which is Wilde's chief interest. They also include the uncompromising demand for what I will call "class justice."

On Class

To sustain this claim I have to take a moment, first, to discuss what is meant by class and then, second, to examine the meaning of class justice. Here I follow in the tradition of what is variously referred to as the Althusserian/post-Althusserian or post-structuralist approach to Marxism that emerged in the U.S. context first in the work of Steve Resnick and Rick Wolff (1987) and then in the work of their many students and other academics who were arriving at a similar interpretation of the Marxian tradition (at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst and elsewhere). Readers may know of this school of thought through the journal *Rethinking Marxism*, which often publishes work in this tradition; and/or through the work of David Ruccio and Jack Amariglio (Ruccio and Amariglio 2003); or J.K. Gibson-Graham (1996; 2006) and their own students and like-minded scholars and community activists who have formed the Community Economies Project (see <http://www.communityeconomies.org/Home>). This school of thought tends to object to the claims of humanist Marxism (Wilde cites the work of S. Charusheela on this point). But for present purposes what is more important than the anti-essentialism/post-structuralism of this approach is its interpretation of Marx on the matter of class.

From the perspective of this school, the explicitly Marxian notion of *class* refers to the production, appropriation and distribution of surplus. Simply put, societies must produce a surplus in order to sustain themselves.² Those whose labor produces the goods and services upon which human survival depends cannot just produce enough to reproduce themselves, since at any moment many members of society cannot produce to meet their own needs. This group includes, for instance, infants, the elderly, and the infirmed. These members of society must be supported by the labor of others—and this extra production by producers, which they will not themselves consume, is surplus. It arises from what Marx calls surplus labor, or the

² Though see Resnick and Wolff (1988) for a discussion of the possibility of "class-less" communism.

extra time that workers labor beyond what is necessary to sustain themselves; and it takes the form of surplus product.

It follows from the above that the existence of surplus is not itself ethically indictable. We can imagine surplus that takes the form of willful and voluntary nurturing of others, gifts, and other forms that express the fully human connections among society's members—what Nussbaum calls affiliation and which Wilde values in this essay. I labor voluntarily so that you may thrive—this may not be the site of oppression, but instead may express our deepest human connections.

Where there is surplus, there must be surplus production, appropriation and distribution. Someone must generate the surplus, through the performance of surplus labor. This is the moment of surplus production. The surplus so produced falls to someone in the first instance who receives it juridically and perhaps even physically—either the producers themselves or others. This is the moment of surplus appropriation. Finally, the surplus so appropriated will be distributed across some or all of society's members. This is the moment of surplus distribution.

For Marx, then, the term class designates *a diverse range of social activities*. Moreover, it is the study of these activities—along with the institutions that structure them and the knowledges and beliefs that sustain them—which forms the basis of the uniquely Marxian approach to political economy.

On Class Justice

All his ridicule of ethical thought aside, Marx was deeply invested in moral critique of class injustice. As I have argued in “Realizing Class Justice,” an appreciation of Marx's view on this matter must recognize his distinct but combined treatment of the separate moments of the class process. Marx gave us the basis for theorizing a composite notion of class justice that comprises three elements: *productive justice*; *appropriative justice*; and *distributive justice*—where all three are defined in class terms.

“*From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs!*” Though this passage in Marx is among the best known by Marxian scholars and non-Marxian theorists as well, its class significance is often overlooked. The passage speaks directly to two elements of class justice. From each according to ability speaks to the matter of productive class justice. Who should produce the social surplus, and how should that burden be distributed among society's members? For Marx, those who can produce more surplus ought to do so. But why is that? Wilde identifies one important part of the answer—one that draws on the humanist impulses that we find especially in the early Marx. Marx theorized *human* production as that which arises only after the compulsion of need is overcome. Human production is a domain of free activity, wherein the essential creativity of humanity expresses itself. But if this is correct, then Marx could not be indifferent to efficiency concerns. Wastage of (human and other) resources would interfere with the achievement of freedom from need-based productive activity. Hence, seeking the greatest contribution from those with the greatest ability was pivotal to the achievement of human freedom.

This formulation begs the difficult question as to how the greatest contribution from the most able is to be secured. A fuller account of productive justice would have

to wrestle carefully with that question. Neoclassical economists, for instance, claim that this can only be achieved in a free market system where wages are tied to marginal productivity. Tying reward to contribution provides the incentive for each agent to enhance his/her human capital, so as to be able to contribute more and, hence, receive greater income. This surely was not Marx's view.³ But how then is differential contribution to be achieved in an ethically suitable way—and one that also promotes rather than undermines the affiliation among human beings that Marx sought? Are we willing to hope that human sensibilities will evolve in a post-capitalist society such that this effort is freely forthcoming? Or ought we presume that, like the other two aspects of class justice that I will discuss momentarily, this domain is and will forever be fraught? The post-structuralist approach to Marx argues for the latter view, with which I concur. But I won't argue the point here. My goal instead is to expose an area in need of careful attention by Marxian scholars who take up Wilde's challenge to take seriously the idea of Marxian ethics.

In contrast, "to each according to need" speaks only but importantly to the third moment of class justice—to the distribution of the social surplus. This aspect of Marxian ethics has appeared occasionally in the contributions of Amartya Sen to debates over equality and the capabilities approach. Indeed, Sen's critique of Rawls and other theorists who propose the equal distribution of primary goods, resources and the like is based on the idea that an equal distribution may yield unequal freedoms since different people have distinct needs owing to their physical and mental attributes, age, environment and so forth. Different people enjoy different abilities to convert means into ends. And since that's the case, egalitarians ought to advocate the unequal distribution of resources (based on need) so that all may enjoy relatively equal ability to live valued lives (Sen 1992).

To be sure, those like Sen who draw on Marx in this context do not think or speak of the distribution of the *surplus*. Neither do many Marxists. Marx is read as simply making an ethical argument in favor of distribution of goods and services. But if we understand the focus of Marxian political economy as building class knowledge of society (and securing class emancipation), then we are encouraged to theorize distribution in terms of the surplus. In this case, distributive justice has to do with the final allocation of shares of the social surplus across society's members, for their own uses. It does not speak to the allocation of surplus to non-consumption uses—that, as we'll consider next, is a matter that pertains to appropriative justice. Of the surplus that is not to be used for reinvestment, infrastructure projects, the arts, spiritual pursuits, and so forth, how is it to be divided up among all of society's members?⁴ Marx suggests that *that* distribution should be based on need.

This stance raises as many questions as it answers, of course. How is need to be assessed? For which needs that individuals experience are they themselves to be held accountable, and for which, alternatively, are they to be forgiven? For instance, if a person chooses to live in a particularly dangerous way of life, and suffers severe injury, is her greater consequent need for healthcare to be validated? If a person is

³ Many difficult issues arise in this context which I cannot explore here (but see DeMartino 2003).

⁴ I don't refer here exclusively to the distribution of private income—but also to the provision of public and other services upon which society's members depend.

lazy, is this propensity to be taken as a natural state over which she has no control—and is she therefore to qualify for additional income or other services? And what is society to do about the moral hazard problem, when some purposely cultivate need so as to secure a greater share of the surplus?⁵ Finally, should those who come to ethics with Marx in mind to wrestle with these questions, or are we to presume (as above) that in a post-capitalist world human subjectivity will evolve in a manner that makes these questions somehow moot?

Note that “from each according to his ability; to each according to his needs” says nothing at all about what I am calling appropriative justice. Who should enjoy the first claim on the newly produced surplus, and what institutions, norms and other mechanisms should support whatever arrangements are deemed just? On this, Marx had much to say. More excoriated exploitation, which in this approach seems to entail any situation in which those who produce the surplus do not appropriate it—and when, consequently, non-producers are the first receivers of the surplus that the producers generate. The critique of exploitation was absolutely central to Marx’s project—indeed, Marx’s disdain for exploitation is at the heart of his mature political economy, including of course, *Capital*. Marx ridicules bourgeois political economists on grounds that they failed to recognize the social theft at the heart of capitalist accumulation. Distracted by the apparent equality that arises among (equally) free men in the marketplace, where labor power is bought and sold, they never pierce the veil to recognize that workers are free only in the formal sense of nominally owning their labor power. For Marx, workers’ bondage arises from their dispossession of the means of production which leads to their inability to appropriate their own surplus. Under what Marx referred to as wage slavery, workers therefore typically receive a wage that compensates them only for their necessary labor. Making matters worse, Marx demonstrates that the working class as a whole receives wages for their labor in any one period that is derived from their past unpaid labor. Hence, the payment of wages in exchange for labor power amounts to theft in two senses: workers are forced to do some amount of unpaid labor each day; and even the compensated part of the workday is paid for with money that was previously stolen from them. The situation would be no different were the capitalist to pay workers with money that he’d just picked from their pockets.

Now, just what does appropriative justice entail, precisely? Unfortunately, it is far easier to identify cases of appropriate injustice than it is to speak of appropriative justice. For Marx it is clear that when the workers do not appropriate their own surplus, there is injustice. But what of a case where workers participate meaningfully but alongside others in the processes of appropriation? In a worker-run cooperative factory, for instance, what is to be the role in appropriation of “unproductive workers”—those who provide conditions of existence for surplus production, but do not themselves produce surplus? Think of the mechanic who maintains the machines; or the clerical workers who keep track of inputs and outputs? In contemporary workplaces, these unproductive workers may far outnumber productive workers. Are they to be excluded from the process of appropriation simply because they do not

⁵ These questions are not peculiar to Marxian-inspired ethics. They arise equally in any egalitarian framework that ties distribution to need.

directly produce surplus? Is this what Marx had in mind—a case where only a minority of workers enjoy the right of appropriation—and is this how we should theorize appropriative justice?

Again, I will not offer an answer here (but see DeMartino 2003 and the citations therein). Instead, I only mean to suggest that these important questions become visible once we take up Wilde's challenge of recognizing the ethical saturation of Marx's critique of capitalist (and other forms of) exploitation.

This discussion raises another difficult question: *why* does Marx rail against exploitation? What is it that makes exploitation so indictable? Why, after all, does it matter who gets first claim on the surplus? One answer is suggested by Wilde's humanism. To be exploited is to be alienated from one's labor—and thereby, from one's species being. Another is to see exploitation, simply, as theft—as Marx's own prose (cited in Wilde) suggests. Something is being taken without compensation from workers that is rightly theirs. But this notion depends on a view of *property rights* attaching to those who contribute labor to production—a view that seems on its face to be more consistent with a Lockean view of property rights than a Marxian conception, as Steve Cullenberg (1998) has argued. Or it might have to do with the illegitimate sacrifice of responsibility for one's actions that exploitation entails. Workers are not taken to be fully responsible agents when they do not control the output that they themselves generate. They are treated merely as means toward others' ends, and not ends in themselves—in violation of the Kantian categorical imperative, as Burczak claims (Burczak 1998, 2001 and 2004, which draw on Ellerman 1992).

Another view—more complementary than hostile to these arguments—emerges once we recognize the right of appropriation as entailing also the right (within limits) to decide how the surplus is to be utilized. The appropriator is in position to make decisions the consequences of which can reverberate across society (and even be epoch making). How much of the surplus should go to new investment, and what particular form should that investment take? Should production be expanded here, or moved over there? Should this or that technology be introduced, should this or that good be produced—and how will these decisions bear on quality of life of the workers and the broader community? *Understood in this way, appropriation rights are nothing less than economic governance rights.* The right to receive and make decisions about how the surplus will be used have enormous consequences not just (or even primarily) for those making the decisions, but for all of society—present and future—and for the natural environment. To be deprived of appropriation rights, then, is to be disenfranchised from some of the most important decisions that a community must make.

This way of thinking connects with Wilde's view on the harm to individuals that arise from exploitation, despite the fact that it is not grounded in the humanism that he embraces.⁶ Of particular relevance in this regard is the work of the Community

⁶ Nor is the harm rooted necessarily in private property rights, as Wilde suggests, since public property rights enjoyed by the state can be just as effective a means as private property rights for sustaining exploitation (see Resnick and Wolff 2002; Gabriel 2006). In the absence of a discussion of class as surplus production, appropriation and distribution, Wilde falls back in this essay onto a property based notion of capitalism and exploitation.

Economies Collective (2001), which argues that an anti-essentialist approach encourages recognition of the way in which patterns of surplus appropriation constitute individual subjectivity and construct relations among individuals in the formation of society. In their words,

Thinking of the surplus not as property and prize but as the origin of distributive flows [offers] a new understanding of class exploitation. The trauma of exploitation is not that something belonging to you is taken from you. Rather, it is that you are cut off from the conditions of social possibility that the surplus both enables and represents. Restricted to the necessary labor that sustains you, separated from the surplus that sustains the larger society, you are constituted as an “individual” bereft of a possible community and communal subjectivity.

In an explanatory footnote the authors continue as follows:

Under capitalist relations of exploitation, the surplus is appropriated by the capitalist or the board of directors of the capitalist firm. They then distribute it—it may go into capital accumulation, higher management salaries and consumption, acquisition of other firms, speculation in real estate, bribes to officials, dividends to shareholders, or a wide variety of other destinations, in the process constructing “society” and social possibility. At the same time the laborer is paid a wage, which is the monetary form of her necessary labor and presumably sufficient to reproduce her. The wage payment restricts the worker to her necessary labor, imposing an imaginary completeness as a self-contained individual. Though connected to the larger community through the distributions of her surplus that sustain and nourish it, she is not aware of her connectedness; though sustained and reproduced by that larger community, she is not aware of her incompleteness (in the dimension of labor, at least). Communism, or communalism, in this vision becomes not only the communal appropriation and distribution of surplus labor but the conditions of possibility of a communal subject: connected and incomplete, living in the awareness that the existence of others is the effect and also the condition of one’s own being.

As I’ve now argued and as these quotations indicate, appropriative justice bears not just on the matter of receipt but also on the subsequent dispersal that this receipt entails. We have already considered the distribution of that share of the surplus that is destined for consumption goods and services, this being the domain of distributive class justice. One of the distinguishing features of Marxian class justice is that it reaches beyond this limited (though important) domain, and highlights the normative significance of the processes by which a society allocates its social surplus across *all* uses and purposes. Authority over surplus allocation comprises decisions over investment in productive enterprises, housing, and other private institutions—something that is treated today in most societies as a right that attaches to the ownership of capital—as well as over the nature and quality of public services, and so forth. This allocation shapes society’s institutions and practices, modes of political

and social interaction, forms of cultural production and representation, and much more. Allocating surplus is therefore fundamental to the processes of social (and personal) construction, expression and experimentation. To be “cut off” from this process is therefore tantamount to disenfranchisement in a most fundamental sense. It is to be denied not one’s rightful *property*, but ones rightful *participation* in a process that defines one’s community, and even oneself. Clearly there is far more at stake here than the level of wages workers receive for their labors, the distribution of income across society’s members, or the alienation from one’s labor that arise when other control the labor process.⁷

On Capabilities Equality and Class Justice

Having elaborated a Marxian perspective on class justice, just one step in the argument remains. I would suggest that not only does the capabilities approach to justice open up contact with the Marxian concern for alienation, as Wilde argues in his essay, but it also is amenable to extension to incorporate class justice. This is particularly true if, following Sen, we define and advocate equality in terms of capabilities (see Sen 1992).

The capabilities approach to equality focuses our attention on the fact that human freedom has many distinct, non-fungible components. To be substantively free is to enjoy a wide set of capabilities to achieve functionings that one has reason to value. It encompasses the ability to achieve what Sen calls “basic” functionings, such as being well nourished and housed and avoiding preventable morbidity. But it encompasses as well more complex functionings, such as appearing in public without shame, and achieving political efficacy and control over one’s environment. For Nussbaum in particular, it entails substantive freedom of affiliation, whereby one is able to work freely in concert with others to chart the course of one’s community.

From a Marxian perspective, the capabilities approach must incorporate among valued functionings those that pertain to class—especially but not only appropriative justice. The Marxian approach sheds light on the powerful impact of surplus appropriation on one’s life and the life of one’s society. To be excluded from meaningful participation in this process is to be “cut off” from a most fundamental aspect of political life—and to thereby be deprived of self-governance. This runs contrary to the spirit that animates the capabilities project. Political efficacy is hollowed out when it does not range over the domain of the uses of the social surplus, where some of the most important political decisions must be made. Moreover, the deprivation that arises from class injustice cannot be compensated for with greater provision of other goods. For instance, higher compensation that allows for the pursuit of many functionings cannot offset class disenfranchisement—just as it cannot compensate for the loss of freedom of speech or association, even if some are willing to make that bargain. To be denied any important functioning is, under this approach, to be un-free.

⁷ Wilde’s humanism leads him to raise concerns about the absence of control of the *labor process* by those who perform the work. While this is an important issue in the Marxian tradition, to be sure, a focus on class as defined here also turns our attention to the matter of control over the uses of the *surplus*. I see these ethical concerns as complementary, not contradictory.

This brings us to the conclusion of the argument. The neglect of the Marxian tradition by so many contributors to the global justice debate renders much of that literature terribly incomplete, since it necessarily misses a central domain of social and political life. The justice it offers is overly thin and in a real sense, empty. In this, Wilde is entirely correct—and so his project is vitally important. Moreover, the capabilities approach of Sen and Nussbaum is a natural point of contact between the Marxian and non-Marxian traditions, since both emphasize human flourishing as the keystone of justice considerations. Wilde is correct on this claim as well—and his humanist stance makes this connection particularly apparent. On this count, I have tried here to add to Wilde’s humanism important insights from an alternative approach that focuses our attention explicitly on Marx’s conception of class as the production, appropriation and distribution of surplus. One of the salient aspects of the capabilities approach for Marxists is that it permits (if not welcomes) the inclusion of class considerations among the central functionings and capabilities that it seeks to equalize. Equality in terms of capabilities entails equal right to participate meaningfully in decisions over the production, appropriation and distribution of surplus. Once we recognize class in these terms, how could it be otherwise? Full and equal franchise must certainly entail the equal right to intervene in political decisions that address the nature of the most fundamental economic flows and outcomes. An arrangement wherein that right is monopolized by some (by virtue of their location in the corporation or government) is indictable on capabilities grounds, since it deprives others of their voice in processes that bear on human and social evolution.

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