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We Cease to be Mere Fragments: Justice, Alienation, Liberalism and Socialism

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What is the relationship between liberalism and socialism? Partisans of each political tradition often focus on the shortcomings of the other, with socialists charging liberals with defending merely formal ideas of freedom, which lead them to a naïve defence of the status quo, while liberals often view socialists as excessively utopian, and as blind to the ways in which collective forms of economic organisation can lead to oppression. This article examines the prospects for a more eirenic understanding of the relationship between liberalism and socialism, by means of examining the significance of the main points of contention between canonical representatives of each tradition, Rawls and Marx. By examining questions relating to the limits of liberal rights, the problems of alienation and self-realisation in work, the place of distributive principles in socialist views, and the possibility of a society beyond justice, the article defends a partial reconciliation between these two traditions.

We Cease to be Mere Fragments: Justice, Alienation, Liberalism and Socialism

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I. LIBERALISM AND SOCIALISM: OPPONENTS OR ALLIES?

What is the fundamental relationship between liberalism and socialism? Partisans of these two political traditions often see one another as ideological opponents: socialists often view liberals as defending merely formal varieties of freedom (and of other political values) that leave liberals as no better than naïve apologists for the worst excesses of capitalism; while liberals often view socialists as insufficiently attuned to the significance of human liberty, and beset by a rival form of naïveté that blinds them to the oppressive dangers of hubristic attempts at collectivist forms of economic organisation. On these mutually hostile interpretations of liberalism and socialism, the two stand in fundamental opposition to each other, and the prospects for their reconciliation seem remote.

Yet at the same time, there exist a more eirenic perspective on the relationship between these two traditions, with more reconciliatory views seeing broad agreement between liberals and socialists on many central normative values. From this perspective, the real disagreement between liberalism and socialism is confined to their rival accounts of the concrete economic and political institutions that would be needed in order to realise those shared values in practice. On this latter view, the prospects for productive engagement between liberals and socialists seem much stronger, such that one might even come to think, as Lea Ypi has recently put it, that socialism is just 'liberalism minus capitalism'.[1]

In what follows, we make progress on elucidating the nature of the relationship between liberalism and socialism by examining the emblematic encounter between two canonical representatives of these two traditions: Karl Marx and John Rawls. On

[1] Ypi 2024. See also Smith 2017 and McManus 2025.

the face of it, Marx and Rawls occupy deeply opposed positions in political philosophy. While Marx was a social scientist whose ultimate aim was to 'lay bare the economic law of motion of modern society'[2] Rawls has been portrayed as a moralist who was 'inattentive' to the 'neoliberal transformations of capitalism, the state, and society' that took place during his lifetime.[3] Similarly, while Marx is seen as a pioneer of a practical theory that seeks to uncover various forms of real-world power and domination, Rawls has been cited as an exemplar of a form of inert ideal theory that illicitly ignores the most egregious forms of racist, sexist, and class-based domination.[4] And finally, while Marx is a trenchant critic of capitalism, Rawls has frequently been seen as an apologist for contemporary capitalist societies, developing principles of justice that enunciate the spirit of 'unfettered industrial capitalism'[5] and offer a 'philosophical version' of 'trickle-down' economics.[6]

Rawls's direct engagement with Marx in some ways furthers the idea that their approaches to political philosophy stand in fundamental opposition. While Rawls, in his discussions of other canonical figures from the history of political thought, usually aims to find points of contact between his views and the figures he discusses, his engagement with Marx in the *Lectures on the History of Political Philosophy* constitutes a departure from this approach. Rawls treats Marx as a 'critic of liberalism' and shows how Rawls's own view of justice as fairness has the resources to respond to these criticisms. To be sure, in keeping with Rawls's background methodological commitment to interpretative charity when engaging with canonical figures in the history of political thought, Rawls's treatment of Marx is not dismissive or hostile.[7] Rawls speaks of Marx's 'marvelous gifts' and, acknowledging the practical difficulties of Marx's life, and his existence outside of the formal structures of the university system, Rawls judges that 'his achievement as an economic theorist and political sociologist of capitalism is

[2] Marx 1867/1996, p. 10.

[3] Forrester 2022, p. 3.

[4] Mills 2005, 2008, 2017; cf. Shelby 2013.

[5] Wolff 1977, p. 86.

[6] Geuss 2014.

[7] As Rawls (2001b, p. 428) puts it, 'All the great figures lie to some degree beyond us, no matter how hard we try to master their thought. […] Like great composers and great artists—Mozart and Beethoven, Poussin and Turner—they are beyond envy. It is vital in lecturing to try to exhibit to students in one's speech and conduct a sense of this, and why it is so. That can only be done by taking the thought of the text seriously, as worthy of honor and respect. This may at times be a kind of reverence, yet it is sharply distinct from adulation or uncritical acceptance of the text or author as authoritative.'

extraordinary, indeed heroic'.[8] However, in treating Marx as a potential critic of justice as fairness rather than a precursor who contributed to its central insights, Rawls's treatment of Marx seems to support the idea that liberalism and socialism are deeply opposed to each other.

In this article, we focus on Marx's and Rawls's normative views about work, justice, and the human good.[9] We argue that their views on these topics are closer than many commentators realise.[10] Perhaps most significantly, their views are also far closer together than Rawls himself realised. We focus on two directions of interaction between the two theorists, examining in turn: (1) Marx's critique of liberalism (as interpreted by Rawls), and (2) Rawls's direct critique of Marx. With regard to (1) we show that while Rawls argues that Marx's criticisms do not apply to his own version of liberalism, Rawls allows that those criticisms do hit home against other versions of liberalism that lack his theory's egalitarian commitments and institutional requirements. Thus, Rawls can be seen as accepting a surprisingly large part of Marx's critique of capitalism. With regard to (2) we show that Rawls's criticisms of Marx rely on a misinterpretation of Marx's views. On a more plausible interpretation, Rawls's criticisms lack force and, moreover, Marx's views anticipate some of Rawls's own positions in a way that Rawls himself did not appreciate.

While disagreements between Marx and Rawls remain, we show that these disagreements are different to, and more interesting than, the disagreement that Rawls takes himself to have with Marx. By providing a fuller and more accurate understanding of the relationship between Marx and Rawls, we thereby contribute to a clearer view of the relationship between liberalism and socialism, which addresses their (often overlooked) common ground as well as their (often exaggerated) differences. While liberalism and socialism are, of course, both rich traditions of political thought and practice, with great internal diversity, Marx and Rawls plausibly stand as the canonical modern representatives of each tradition.[11] Their shared project of critiquing the

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[8] Rawls 2007, p. 319.

[9] Of course, there is a fierce debate about whether Marx has normative views at all, and especially about justice. See Geras 1985 for a comprehensive survey of the debate. Our view is that Marx has normative views, including views on justice.

[10] For other accounts stressing similarities between Rawls and Marx see: Peffer 1990; Di Quattro 1998; and Reiman 2012. Our approach is closest to Brudney 1997, 2013, 2023 (but see fn. 88 for areas of divergence).

[11] For this diversity, see Bell 2014, and Fawcett 2014/2018 (on liberalism), and Gilabert and O'Neill 2024 (on socialism). For a critical history of liberalism from a socialist perspective, see Losurdo 2005, 2011 (on Losurdo's relationship to liberalism see also O'Neill 2023).

normative failings of contemporary forms of market capitalism, and of imaging the emancipatory possibilities for what could be put in its place, point towards a broader convergence between liberalism and socialism.

The article proceeds as follows. In Section II we consider Rawls's response to Marx's critique of liberal conceptions of individual rights (as developed in his 'On the Jewish Question'). Next, in Section III we address Rawls's response to Marx's critique of capitalism in terms of the problem of alienated labour (as developed in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*). We then turn to Rawls's criticisms of Marx's view of justice under communism, starting with his criticisms of the lower phase (Section IV) before considering his account of the undesirability of the 'evanescence of justice' in the higher phase (Section V). Section VI concludes by examining how a more careful understanding of the relationship between Rawls and Marx can lead to a more perspicacious view of the relationship between liberalism and socialism.

II. THE LIMITS OF LIBERAL RIGHTS

We start with Marx's critique of liberal rights as found in 'On the Jewish Question'. Rawls distinguishes two lines of criticism that he discerns in that text: one focusing on Marx's critique of the atomistic and egoistic conception of society implicated by the traditional liberal 'rights of man' and another focusing on the merely formal nature of the 'rights of the citizen'. We consider each in turn.

A. The Rights of Man: Atomised, Degraded and Egoistic?

Marx's first objection to liberal rights turns on the way that the liberal conception of the 'rights of man' presuppose and reinforce a particular view of individuals and their relation to society. Rawls outlines Marx's objection and his response:

> To Marx's objection that some of the basic rights and liberties— those he connects with the rights of man (and which we have labeled the liberties of the moderns)— express and protect the mutual egoisms of citizens in the civil society of a capitalist world, we reply that in a well-ordered property-owning democracy those rights and liberties, properly specified, suitably express and protect free and equal citizens' higher-order interests.[12]

[12] Rawls 2007, pp. 320–1; see also Rawls 2001a, pp. 176–7.

In this passage, Rawls is responding to Marx's famous argument that the 'rights of man'—Marx follows the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* in speaking of rights to 'equality, liberty, security, property'—presuppose an atomistic view of human relations that is antithetical to true freedom and meaningful community.[13] Consider the right to liberty. Marx interprets this—in a manner that anticipates J.S. Mill's famous harm principle—as a 'the right to do everything that harms no one else'.[14] While this may sound unobjectionable, Marx argues that the right implies that people are at risk from their fellows, that they require protection against them, and that they themselves may wish to act in ways that harm others. Consequently, the right 'makes every man see in other men not the *realisation* of his own freedom, but the *barrier* to it'.[15] As Marx goes on to develop this idea, '[n]one of the so-called rights of man, therefore, go beyond egoistic man, beyond man as a member of civil society, that is, an individual withdrawn into himself, into the confines of his private interests and private caprice, and separated from the community.'[16]

The view Marx has in his sights here is an atomistic one that views individual citizens as essentially independent of one another, with society seen as an external imposition on an essentially private existence. However, this form of atomistic individualism – which is perhaps recognisable in contemporary forms of libertarianism – is certainly not the view held by Rawls. For as Rawls emphasises, the rights and liberties protected by his first principle of justice are not those of competitive, antagonistic and egoistic property-owners, brought warily and uneasily into social contact, but the rights of free and equal citizens who are participating in the shared project of realising and sustaining a cooperative social system.[17]

Rawls's view of the basic rights and liberties is rooted in his view of 'free and equal' citizens conceived of as exercising the 'two moral powers' – firstly, the power to frame, revise and pursue a conception of the good, and secondly a 'sense of justice'.[18] The ability to pursue a conception of the good involves citizens' ability to shape and advance their own sense of what is valuable in living their lives, but there is no reason to imagine that this need be a selfish or egoistic conception; it can encompass the kind of social commitments that Marx also values. Citizens' 'sense of justice' is in its nature social

[13] Marx 1844a/1975, p. 162.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid., p. 163.

[16] Ibid., p. 164.

[17] Rawls 2001a, §2.

[18] Ibid., §13.

and relational rather than a feature of atomistic individuals; it is citizens' conception of how they can best live together with each other, participating in the large-scale ongoing shared social project of building and sustaining legal, political and economic institutions together, on terms that everyone can accept as just. Rawls sees the rights and freedoms protected by the first principle as those needed to protect the exercise of citizens' two moral powers within what he calls the 'two fundamental cases',[19] concerning (a) 'the application of the principles of justice to the basic structure and its social policies' through 'the free use of public reason', and (b) through the exercise of practical reason in 'forming, revising, and rationally pursuing such a conception [of the good] over a complete life'.[20]

It is also important to note here that Rawls—unlike libertarians and classical liberals[21]—does not treat the right to private property in productive assets as a fundamental right.[22] Such fundamental rights find no justification on Rawls's account of the derivation of the basic liberties in terms of the exercise of the two moral powers, given that property rights are only justified derivatively as a means of satisfying the principles of justice. While Marx's list of what he takes to be the canonical group of liberal values includes 'equality, liberty, security *and property*' (our italics), the Rawlsian conception of core liberal values excises 'property' from that list, at least when it is understood in terms of the standard classical liberal conception of an unlimited right to private property. Hence, Rawls's version of liberalism is consistent (as Rawls himself emphasises) with a socialist mode of economic organisation, in which most productive property would ultimately be owned either by the state or by worker cooperatives.[23] Although it is left implicit rather than made explicit, Rawls's line of response to Marx here suggests that on Rawls's view any version of liberalism which ruled out a socialist system of economic organisation would by virtue of that feature show itself to be defective.

Thus, the role of liberal rights and freedoms for Rawls is very different to the picture offered by Marx; rather than protecting antagonistic property-holding individuals from one another, as in Marx's picture, liberal rights are instead a framework within which free and equal individuals can both pursue lives worth living on their own terms (which will itself involve a range of social commitments) and pursue their shared

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[19] Ibid., §13.4.

[20] See Rawls 2001a, §32.4, pp. 112–3. See also the discussion in O'Neill 2008.

[21] See, e.g., Tomasi 2013.

[22] Rawls 1971/1999, p. xvi; p. 54.

[23] Rawls 2001a, p. 138.

project of creating a stable just society together. Indeed, the picture is not that far from Marx's description of future society as one in which 'the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all', a formulation which might be thought to suggest that individuals have a concern both for their own good (the free development of *each*) as well as others' (the free development of *all*).[24]

While Rawls does not think that Marx's criticisms hit home against his own account of the limits and justification of the rights and freedoms protected by the first principle of justice, it is important to note that Rawls does not say that Marx's criticisms are without foundation. Forms of liberalism that do not ground their account of rights in an account of the moral powers of cooperating citizens would fall foul of Marx's critique. Moreover, the very fact that Rawls treats Marx's critique as significant, and responds to it in the terms that he does, suggests that on Rawls's view it is true that other, less successful, versions of liberalism do indeed make exactly the mistakes that Marx diagnosed.

B. The Rights of the Citizen: Beyond Merely Formal Rights

Turning now to the second part of Marx's criticism, concerning the merely formal nature of the rights of the citizen, Rawls writes:

> To the objection that the political rights and liberties of a constitutional regime are merely formal, we reply that by the fair value of the political liberties (together with the operation of the other principles of justice) all citizens, whatever their social position, may be assured a fair opportunity to exert political influence. This is one of the essential egalitarian features of justice as fairness.[25]

In 'On the Jewish Question' Marx distinguishes the 'rights of man' from the 'rights of the citizen', understood as rights to political participation (e.g., the right to vote and hold political office). As Rawls rightly says, Marx's attitude to these two varieties of rights diverge in important ways: 'The latter [the rights of the citizen] he greatly values and he thinks that in some form they will be honoured under communism; but a role for the former [the rights of man] would seem to disappear.'[26] While Marx recognises the value of the 'rights of the citizen', he thinks that under liberalism these rights are

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[24] Marx and Engels 1848/1976, p. 506.

[25] Rawls 2007, p. 321; see also Rawls 2001a, p. 177.

[26] Rawls 2001a, p. 177, fn. 60. For excellent discussion Marx's diverging attitude towards these two different sort of rights, see Leopold 2007, pp. 150–163.

'merely formal' in the sense that although they are held by all citizens equally, the rights are not enjoyed by all citizens equally on account of the deep inequalities of power and wealth under which these rights are exercised. To make this point, Marx gives the example of the removal of the property qualification on the right to vote. 'The state', he says, 'abolishes, in its own way, distinctions of *birth*, *social rank*, *education*, *occupation*, when it declares that birth, social rank, education, occupation, are *non-political* distinctions, when it proclaims, without regard to these distinctions, that every member of the nation is an equal participant in national sovereignty.'[27] As Marx goes on to explain, however, this does not mean that people enjoy equal political power. On the contrary, 'the state allows private property, education, occupation, to *act* in *their* way, i.e., as private property, as education, as occupation, and to exert the influence of their *special* nature.'[28]

As with the first criticism, Rawls responds here not by offering a general defence of the adequacy of liberal political rights, but by pointing to a special feature of his own particular conception of justice. It is a distinctive feature of Rawls's approach to the basic liberties that he defends not only a formal set of personal and political liberties, but that he further argues for the necessity of the protection of the *fair value of the political liberties* (FVPL).[29] This ancillary demand for FVPL imposes a requirement on the political sphere that is broadly similar in structure and function to Rawls's principle of fair equality of opportunity (FEO) for positions within the economic sphere. FVPL transforms the political rights protected by Rawls's first principle from merely formal protections into substantive entitlements to have an equal chance to participate in political life and to influence political outcomes. As Rawls emphasises in *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement* this aspect of his theory allows his view of justice to 'meet the familiar objection, often made by radical democrats and socialists (and by Marx), that the equal liberties in a modern democratic state are in practice merely formal'.[30]

If we turn to its institutional requirements, Rawls's commitment to FVPL would have transformative effects on the operation of politics within democratic states. Rawls saw FVPL as mandating strict limitations on political donations by the wealthy, and as justifying state funding of elections and perhaps of political parties. When taken

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[27] Marx 1844a/1975, p. 153.

[28] Ibid. Marx's critique of merely formal liberal rights here parallels Rawls's (1971/1999, §12) critique of the idea of formal equality of opportunity as 'careers open to talents'. For a recent account of the political aspects of Marx's view, see Leipold 2024, ch. 7.

[29] Rawls 2001a, §45.

[30] Ibid., §45, p. 148.

together with FEO, the requirement for FVPL would also justify the aggressive forms of inheritance taxation and capital transfer taxation that Rawls saw as being required by justice. Indeed, Rawls took the impossibility for familiar forms of welfare state capitalism to meet the demands of FVPL as a powerful support for his conclusion that justice requires the rejection of the capitalist welfare state in favour of either a property-owning democracy or a form of liberal democratic socialism.[31]

As with Marx's first criticism of the liberal state, Rawls's argument that Marx's second criticism does not hit home against his own version of liberalism tacitly accepts that it does strike its target with regard to many other forms of liberalism, as it condemns all those forms within which adequate protections for (something at least close to) FVPL have not been put in place. Rawls's response to Marx is therefore one that grants the power of Marx's criticism in showing a fundamental failing of democratic rights as they have existed in reality, and which tacitly concurs in a devastatingly negative assessment of the democratic failures of liberal capitalism, which – as Marx and Rawls would agree – has been 'democratic' only in a worryingly superficial way.

III. ALIENATION AND SELF-REALISATION IN WORK

We now turn from Marx's objection concerning the poverty of liberal political rights to his objection that capitalism produces alienation and undermines the possibility of self-realisation in work. While Rawls's response to Marx's critique of liberal political rights is convincing, we argue that Rawls's response to Marx's charge that capitalism produces alienation is less clearly decisive and illuminates important questions for Rawlsian political economy.

Rawls outlines two different Marxian objections that touch on these issues:

> To Marx's objection that a constitutional regime with private property secures only the so-called negative liberties (those involving freedom to act unobstructed by others), we reply that the background institutions of a property-owning democracy, together with fair equality of opportunity and the difference principle, or some other analogous principle, give adequate protection to the so-called positive liberties (those involving the absence of obstacles to possible choices and activities, leading to self-realization).

[31] Ibid., pp. 135–40. For discussion of Rawls's rejection of welfare state capitalism in favour of either property-owning democracy or liberal democratic socialism see: O'Neill and Williamson 2012; O'Neill 2012, 2020, 2023; Thomas 2016; Edmundson 2017; and Ypi 2018.

> To the objection against the division of labor under capitalism, we reply that the narrowing and demeaning features of the division should be largely overcome once the institutions of a property-owning democracy are realized.[32]

The Marxian criticisms of liberalism that are laid out by Rawls open up a distinct line of critique that stands apart from the line of argument embodied in Section II and brings the argument onto the territory of Marx's idea of alienation.[33] Famously, Marx describes four forms of alienated labour under capitalism. These are the alienation of the worker: 1) from the product of their labour (which dominates them); 2) from their labour activity (which they experience as a torment and only perform out of economic necessity); 3) from their own 'species-being' (which they cannot realise); and 4) from their fellows (whom they view as competitors for jobs or as mere means for the achievement of their egoistic ends).[34] Alongside this negative depiction of labour under capitalism, Marx also puts forward a positive account of what would happen if we 'carried out production as human beings'.[35] This account sees human beings as achieving self-realisation in work that provides others with the goods and services they need to pursue their flourishing.[36] In a nutshell, Marx's objection to liberalism is that, by defending some form of capitalism, liberals effectively allow workers to lead lives of alienated toil, depriving them of the good of self-realisation in work.

Before we consider Rawls's response, it is worth emphasising that the very fact that Rawls thinks this objection requires a careful response is itself telling. On some views, ideas of alienation are thought to rely on a 'comprehensive' perfectionist conception of the good. Given the association of liberalism with neutrality between different conceptions of the good, one might have thought that a concern with alienation in work would simply be beyond the remit of liberal political philosophy, as a number of prominent liberal theorists have argued.[37] However, notwithstanding his own neutralist commitments, Rawls is himself clearly concerned with the 'narrowing and demeaning' character of work under capitalism and the way in which it may become inimical to

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[32] Rawls 2007, p. 321; see also Rawls 2001a, p. 177.

[33] For lucid discission of alienation, see Leopold 2022.

[34] Marx 1844c/1975, pp. 270–8. Rawls discusses these four kinds of alienation in some detail at Rawls 2007, pp. 362–4. For discussion of alienated labour see: Brudney 1998, pp. 169–192; Leopold 2007, pp. 229–234; Kandiyali 2020; Gilabert 2023, ch. 6; Brixel 2024a. For a Marx-inspired discussion of alienation and markets, see Maguire 2022.

[35] Marx 1844b/1975, pp. 227–8.

[36] See Kandiyali 2020 for this formulation.

[37] See e.g.: Arneson 1987; Brighouse 1996; Kymlicka 2002, ch. 5; Parr 2024.

self-realisation.[38] This concern is brought vividly to life in Rawls's autobiographical writing, in the example of Ernie, a colleague Rawls met when he was a young man, during a summer working in a doughnut factory in downtown Baltimore, as he saved for a sailing expedition. Although Rawls's stint in the factory was brief, he recounts how encountering Ernie's predicament of a lifetime of hard, repetitive, mundane work ('6am to 6pm, six days a week', 'it seemed he'd be there forever, breathing flour dust all his life') affected him:

> I came to feel very sorry for Ernie. Often I've felt my days at the doughnut factory and Ernie's decency and stoicism in view of his fate – or so it seemed to me – made a lasting impression. So that was how most people spent their lives, of course not literally, but to all practical purposes: pointless labour for not much pay, and even if well paid it led nowhere.[39]

Alongside this concern with work under capitalism, Rawls sometimes even appears to be attracted to something like Marx's idea of self-realisation in work. In a revealing passage in *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls states that '[i]t is a mistake to think that a just and good society must wait upon a high material standard of life':

> What men want is meaningful work in free association with others.... To achieve this state of things great wealth is not necessary. In fact, beyond some point it is more likely to be a positive hindrance, a meaningless distraction at best if not a temptation to indulgence and emptiness.[40]

Rawls maintained an acute awareness of both the value and significance of work (as a source of meaning and a basis for citizens' self-respect)[41] and of its possible dangers and pathologies (as when its effects can become 'narrowing and demeaning').[42] This double awareness required both that work be securely accessible to all, but that the work available should be of a sufficient quality. Rawls came to respond to the requirement of the *availability* of work in a very direct way, arguing that an employment guarantee

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[38] Rawls's view should therefore be understood as seeing 'self-realization' as generating a structural concern that transcends any particular conception of the good, one that can be shared by all free and equal citizens and is, therefore, compatible with the requirements of liberal neutrality. For related interpretations see Shiffrin 2004 and Taylor 2004.

[39] Rawls 2002, pp. 14–15.

[40] Rawls 1971/1999, pp. 257–8.

[41] For the link between work and self-respect in Rawls, see Shiffrin 2004 and Moriarty 2009.

[42] Rawls 2001a, p. 177; Rawls 2007, p. 321.

with 'society as an employer of last resort through general or local government'[43] was not just an institutional requirement for a just society, but a more fundamental requirement of stability for any well-ordered liberal political society.[44]

Whereas Rawls's appreciation of the value of secure employment was, by the time of the full development of his view in his late writings, to bring him to specifying access to secure work as a direct requirement of justice, his response to worries about work quality, and hence his response to Marxian concerns regarding alienation, are by contrast rather more indirect and elliptical. Rawls's writings suggest two distinct lines of response to Marx's challenge. The first points to the way that the concern with alienation in work can be mitigated through the operation of Rawls's principles of justice, in particular FEO and the Difference Principle. Simply put, Rawls's thought is that the worst forms of alienation will exist in societies marked by severe economic inequality, where the most disadvantaged workers are effectively forced to accept exploitative offers out of sheer necessity and are then subject to alienation in work. By contrast, in a just society possessing good levels of public provision and highly constrained economic inequality workers would be under less pressure to accept demeaning job offers and hence less subject to alienation at work. As Rawls puts it, in a just society 'no one need be servilely dependent on others and made to choose between monotonous and routine occupations which are deadening to human thought and sensibility'.[45]

Rawls's second line of response requires more explanation. In both the *Lectures on the History of Political Philosophy* and in *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*, Rawls's brief reply to Marx's criticism concerning alienation gives a reference to the discussion of 'The Idea of a Social Union' in *A Theory of Justice*,[46] and in particular to the discussion of the idea that what Rawls calls the Aristotelian Principle 'holds for institutional forms as well as for any other human activity'.[47] Now the Aristotelian Principle is the idea that 'other things equal, human beings enjoy the exercise of their realized capacities (their innate or trained abilities), and this enjoyment increases the more the capacity

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[43] Rawls 1993/2005, p. lvii.

[44] In defending the idea of 'society as employer of last resort', Rawls (1993/2005, p. lvii) gives a vivid sense of the dangers of both unemployment and insecure employment: 'Lacking a sense of long-term security and the opportunity for meaningful work and occupation is not only destructive of citizens' self-respect but of their sense that they are members of society and not simply caught in it. This leads to self-hatred, bitterness, and resentment.'

[45] Rawls 1971/1999, p. 464.

[46] Ibid., §79.

[47] Ibid., p. 463.

is realized, or the greater its complexity.'[48] While Rawls presents this as an empirical claim about motivation, held to be consistent with his rejection of perfectionism about the good, in some respects it functions more like a normative claim about the nature of human excellence, and hence not so different in kind to Marx's own claims about our 'species-being' as involving free, creative production.

In his discussion of 'The Idea of a Social Union', Rawls presents the institutional analogue of the Aristotelian Principle in this way:

> In a well-ordered society each person understands the first principles that govern the whole scheme as it is to be carried out over many generations; and all have a settled intention to adhere to these principles in their plan of life. Thus the plan of each person is given a more ample and rich structure than it would otherwise have; it is adjusted to the plans of others by mutually acceptable principles. Everyone's more private life is so to speak a plan within a plan, this superordinate plan being realized in the public institutions of society.[49]

How does this respond to the Marxian concern with alienated labour? Imagine living within a just society, the institutions of which have been arranged to be justifiable to all its members. Suppose that in this society you find yourself with one of the less attractive jobs, lacking some of the variety or creativity of the work done by some of your fellow citizens. What Rawls is saying is that, where this really is a just society, and where those shared institutions are the expression of a multigenerational commitment to create and sustain a system of social cooperation justifiable to all, your relation to your occupational role will be completely different to what it would be within an unjust society. You can see your own role – even if it is not especially intrinsically rewarding, creative, prestigious etc., – as a valuable part of this collective, multigenerational endeavour. And you are thereby able to identify with the whole range of achievements of your society, which have been achieved within the framework of the collaborative production of an institutional structure that affirms the standing and dignity of all of its members as free and equal citizens. As Rawls puts it, 'the good attained from the common culture far exceeds our work in the sense that *we cease to be mere fragments*: that part of ourselves that we directly realize is joined to a wider and just arrangement the aims of which we affirm'.[50] Once citizens have good reason no longer think of

[48] Ibid., p. 374.

[49] Ibid., p. 463.

[50] Ibid., p. 464 (our italics).

themselves as 'mere fragments' but as cooperating participants in a sustained collective social achievement, the threat of alienation can be greatly diminished.

As with his response to Marx's critique of liberal rights, note that Rawls's response to the alienation objection turns not on defending liberalism or capitalism *per se*, but showing how only a seriously egalitarian liberal regime could successfully escape Marx's criticisms. The implication indeed is that, under forms of substantially *less egalitarian* liberalism, workers would be condemned to lives of alienated toil and have no opportunity for self-realisation in work. As a result, they would also be unable to identify with their occupational role, take pleasure in the achievements of their fellow citizens, or avoid alienation from their social and political institutions. Again, then, Rawls's response to Marx is tacitly critical of existing capitalist societies, which manifestly fail to live up to the egalitarian commitments embodied in justice as fairness.

Nevertheless, Rawls's explicit response to Marx's alienation objection is not clearly decisive and generates a number of further questions concerning possible ways of organising work and production in a just society. Beginning with Rawls's first reply: while FEO and the Difference Principle certainly seem likely to improve the quality of work available to the least advantaged citizens, it is doubtful that they would fully address the problem of alienated labour. Consider FEO.[51] FEO requires that citizens with the same talents and motivation enjoy the same employment opportunities irrespective of their class background and position in society. Put this way, FEO is a radical principle, mandating (among other things) a well-resourced and highly egalitarian educational system that removes the pernicious effect of class-based privilege. However, FEO does not directly alter the sum total of meaningful work within society.[52] Its concern is only that everyone has an equal opportunity to access meaningful work. This is consistent with that good being enjoyed by some and not others who, lacking the talent and/or motivation of their fellow citizens, may still be 'debarred from experiencing the realization of self which comes from a skilful and devoted exercise of social duties'.[53]

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[51] The following draws on the powerful arguments of Gomberg 2007, ch.3. See also Gomberg 2010 for a slightly different case against FEO.

[52] It may be the case that a society that implemented FEO would, as a side-effect, create a higher proportion of meaningful jobs within the economy (e.g., in high-quality healthcare and education provision). But there will be some complicated empirical dependencies here, and it is nevertheless the case that FEO does not directly aim at the provision of meaningful work (as opposed to the fair allocation of individuals to whatever range of jobs exist within that society).

[53] Rawls 1971/1999, p. 73.

We can say similar things about the Difference Principle. The Difference Principle allows inequality only on the grounds that it maximally benefits the least well-off. In a society which enacted the Difference Principle, it seems plausible that workers would not be forced to accept exploitative employment offers out of sheer necessity. With greater wealth at their disposal, workers could push for better pay and working conditions. Consequently, they would be able to avoid the most egregious forms of domination that exist within contemporary labour practices. Again, however, none of this fully precludes the possibility of alienated labour.[54] It rather suggests that alienated labour would be done under better terms than at present. While this is certainly preferable to the status-quo, it seems to miss Marx's real concern. Indeed, Marx himself was contemptuous of the idea that an increase in wages extinguishes the concern with alienation, saying that such an increase 'would be nothing but better *payment for the slave*, and would not win either for the worker or for labour their human status and dignity.'[55]

Much then depends on Rawls's second reply, encapsulated by the idea that, under conditions of justice 'we cease to be mere fragments'. Recall here the idea that, in a just society, even if you find yourself with a routine job that lacks the variety, creativity, and complexity of the work done by some of your fellow citizens, your job would not be alienating because it plays a role in the ongoing collective endeavour of maintaining just institutions with which you identify. But if the worry with Rawls's first reply was that it does too little, the worry with this second is that it proves too much. For if identification with the valuable collective project of maintaining justice is sufficient to address alienation, why do we need meaningful work ourselves? Why can't we just identify with the larger project of maintaining just institutions irrespective of our 'monotonous and routine' occupation? This appeal to identification with a larger project may seem implausible in the face of the 'narrowing and demeaning' lived experience of low-quality work. Returning to the example of Ernie and the doughnut factory, it might seem like scant consolation to be told that he is engaged in a cooperative joint endeavour with his better-paid and more engagingly employed colleagues.[56]

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[54] The conclusion is partially mitigated if we remember that the Difference Principle is not only concerned with the distribution of income and wealth but also with the 'powers and prerogatives of offices and positions of authority and responsibility' (see *JF*, 58–9) – a point emphasised by O'Neill 2008, pp. 48–52 and Arnold 2012. While this interpretation of the Difference Principle provides a more direct route to respond to Marxian concerns with alienation in work, the exact consequences of it are uncertain, both because of complex empirical questions and because work can still be traded with other primary goods. For these reasons, it remains the case that the Difference Principle does not preclude the possibility of alienated labour.

[55] Marx 1844c/1975, p. 280.

[56] For similar concerns with Rawls's argument here, see Hasan 2015, p. 490 and Vrousalis 2024.

How could Rawls reply when the alienation objection is pressed further in this way?[57] One approach would be to explore ways in which, through some variety of increased economic democracy, the power of workers to influence their working conditions is enhanced. We can imagine here three different kinds of strategies, increasing in strength. A first approach might be for the state to take a 'promotive stance' towards labour unions, by implementing a regime of labour law that was conducive to their growth and development.[58] A second approach could be to go somewhat further, in creating structures for industry-level codetermination, allowing unions to play a greater role in the shape of economic development, and thereby to influence the evolution of employment conditions, in a more general and strategic manner. Waheed Hussain has eloquently defended such Rhenish or Nordic policies of codetermination (or *Mittbestimmung*) as representing the most faithful institutional realisation of an economy that sought to realise Rawls's principles of justice.[59] A third and more interventionist approach would be to mandate the democratic organisation of all workplaces. A justification for this kind of generalised workplace democracy can be developed making use of materials available within Rawls's overall system, either in terms of creating the kind of socioeconomic conditions that are necessary for the secure development of citizens two moral powers, or in terms of the protection of the social basis of citizens' self-respect.[60]

On each of these three strategies, workers would have an institutional basis to secure effective power at work, and would thereby have significant influence over the structuring of economic production. Under such conditions one would naturally expect that the organisation of production would reduce the prevalence of alienating forms of work, with more scope for the reorganisation of work tasks within economic units so as to ensure that work could be experienced as meaningful for more workers than

[57] Another approach would be to explore working-time restrictions that guarantee that citizens could enjoy a certain substantive amount of free time (for a classic proposal of this kind, see Gorz 1983, 1985). A justification for such a policy could potentially be made on the grounds that free time is a primary good, something that people need whatever their plans of life (Rose 2016). With more free time, alienation would be a less significant issue than it is in a society like our own, where people have to spend a considerable portion of their life at work. Nevertheless, there would under such arrangements still be people like Ernie who are tied to 'monotonous and routine occupations', even if they might benefit to some degree from a reduced working week.

[58] O'Neill and White 2018; White 1998.

[59] Hussain 2009, 2012; see also O'Neill 2017, pp. 366–7.

[60] See here the 'Democratic Character Argument' and the 'Democratic Equality Argument' presented in O'Neill 2008. See also Rawls 2001a, pp. 178–9.

it would have been under an economic regime where workers' power to shape the organisation of production was much weaker.[61] Nevertheless, although these strategies would have the potential to achieve a great deal in this direction, none of them would provide a guarantee of non-alienating work, for a variety of reasons, whether because the relevant institutions (unions, works councils etc) would still have limited power to effect outcomes, or because such institutions might nevertheless democratically chose to make different trade-offs between work quality and other desiderata, such as economic efficiency.[62] Moreover, it is worth noting that – like FEO and the difference principle – all of these strategies remain *indirect* in terms of their capacity to reduce alienation at work, with none guaranteeing outcomes where 'narrowing and demeaning' work is avoided altogether.[63]

A more radical alternative would be directly to mandate a regime of sharing burdensome work, i.e., work that, though necessary, does not call on an array of human powers. This radical move might be thought to be implied by Rawls intriguing suggestion that in a just society '[e]ach can be offered a variety of tasks so that the different elements of his nature find a suitable expression'.[64] The thought here is that the tasks that can neither be automated away, nor made meaningful for the workers performing it, should be shared between everyone able to perform them.[65] This would not be a society in which people do 'one thing today and another tomorrow', hunting in the morning, fishing in the afternoon, rearing cattle in the evening, and criticising after dinner' but one in which people share the burdensome toil involved in maintaining society over time.[66] By sharing such work, there would be no more Ernies spending their entire working lives performing relentlessly 'deadening' tasks.

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[61] It is worth noting that Marx sometimes suggests that alienation can be reduced by giving workers greater control over their labour. In the third volume of *Capital*, he writes that whereas under standard forms of capitalism workers 'relate to the social nature of their labour, to its combination with the labour of others for a common purpose, as to an alien power…the situation is quite different in factories owned by the labourers themselves, as in Rochdale, for instance' (Marx 1894/1998, p. 89).

[62] For a systematic assessment of each of these strategies, stressing their limitations at delivering 'good work for all', see Brixel 2024b.

[63] We are grateful to Seana Shiffrin for pushing us towards greater clarity on this distinction between direct and indirect approaches to addressing issues related to work within Rawls's theory.

[64] Rawls 1971/1999, p. 464.

[65] For defences of this 'burden sharing' approach see: Gomberg 2007, ch. 7; Kandiyali 2023.

[66] Marx and Engels 1846/1975, p. 47.

While the 'burden sharing' approach provides a more direct response to the problem of alienated labour, the mandatory sharing of burdensome work would appear to be in tension with other concerns of justice, such as freedom of occupation and economic efficiency. Since both freedom of occupation and economic efficiency are important elements of justice as fairness, it is not clear that the 'burden sharing' response is straightforwardly compatible with Rawls's theory of justice. If this is right, then it looks as though Rawls's ability to respond to the alienation objection might be constrained. More precisely, it would appear that Rawls would be forced to choose between indirect strategies that mitigate but do not overcome alienation, and direct strategies that take alienation off the table but at the expense of other concerns of justice. Our present aim is not to settle the question of which of these strategies promises the best way forward, but simply to give a clear account of the normative terrain: either strategy could potentially be defended, but neither is costless in normative terms.

IV. BEYOND THE NARROW HORIZON OF BOURGEOIS RIGHT? SOCIALISM AND JUSTICE

We now turn from Marx's criticisms of liberalism to Rawls's criticism of Marx. Drawing on G.A. Cohen's strikingly individualistic interpretation of Marx's views of communist society, Rawls argues that Marx was committed to (A) a principle of self-ownership that precludes the redistribution of income and wealth; and (B) a 'technological fix' that creates limitless abundance and so transcends the circumstances of justice.[67] Rawls subjects both views to criticism. However, these criticisms rely on a misunderstanding of Marx's views. On a more plausibly social interpretation of Marx's vision of the good society, these criticisms lack force, and Marx and Rawls are closer together than Rawls realised.[68]

A. Self-Ownership, Redistribution, and the Difference Principle

Rawls's first criticism focuses on what Marx calls the lower phase of communism, i.e., the stage that immediately follows the revolution. Rawls's criticism is that Marx would reject redistributive principles, such as FEO and the Difference Principle, that Rawls takes to be necessary for 'maintaining background justice over time'.[69] Following G.A. Cohen, Rawls argues that Marx was committed to a principle of self-ownership. As

[67] Cohen 1995a.

[68] For a full development of this more social interpretation, see Kandiyali forthcoming.

[69] Rawls 2007, p. 368.

defined by Cohen (and cited by Rawls) the principle states that '[e]ach person has full self-ownership in his own person and powers; and so each person has the moral right to do what he likes with himself, provided that he does not violate the self-ownership rights of anyone else'.[70] Rawls argues that Marx's commitment to self-ownership precludes him from supporting principles such as FEO or the Difference Principle. For self-ownership 'means that no one can be required to benefit himself only in ways that contribute to others' well-being.' This stipulation would be coercive: 'It would amount to giving rights to some people (those being aided) as to how other people shall use their powers'.[71]

Rawls's view that Marx was committed to a principle of self-ownership may seem surprising. However, the interpretation enjoys a *prima facie* plausibility when we consider Marx's concept of exploitation. For on one prominent interpretation of Marxian exploitation, again defended by Cohen, the charge of exploitation ultimately relies on the thesis that workers have ownership over their own bodies.[72] Thus, when workers mix their labour with the material on which they work, they come to have a claim of ownership over the output of their labour, such that the capitalists' appropriation of their product represents a form of robbery.

Putting aside whether this is the right interpretation of Marxian exploitation, Rawls's claim that a principle of self-ownership is honoured in a future communist society is mistaken.[73] In the *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, Marx criticises the very distributive principle that a commitment to self-ownership would appear to mandate, namely the principle that workers should get the 'undiminished proceeds of labour'.[74] In reply to that demand, Marx argues that workers cannot receive the *undiminished* proceeds of their labour because provision must be made for education, healthcare, and for the welfare of those who are unable to work. Moreover, he makes clear that these provisions will grow in 'proportion as the new society develops'.[75] Hence, Marx's vision of the development of communism is far from a society in which self-owning workers each receive the undiluted proceeds of their labour (as Rawls's interpretation seems to suggest), but rather a society in which communism develops

[70] Ibid., p. 367.

[71] Ibid., p. 368.

[72] Cohen 1995b.

[73] For an alternative account of exploitation, see Vrousalis 2023. For a critique of Rawls's misinterpretation, see Gilabert 2023, p. 127.

[74] Marx 1875/1989, p. 84.

[75] Ibid, p.85.

over time through the collective development of a range of shared institutions that cater to the needs of all citizens.

Once we see that Marx does not accept a principle of self-ownership of the kind that Rawls (following Cohen) mistakenly attributes to him, the question of whether Marx could accept Rawls's principles of justice (or something close to them) becomes more complex and interesting than Rawls himself recognised. To make headway on this issue, we must pay attention to Marx's distinction between the lower and the higher stage of communism. Marx believed that in the lower stage, which immediately follows the revolution, workers own the means of production and, after the deductions for healthcare, education and the involuntarily unemployed mentioned above, resources are distributed according to the principle 'to each according to his work'. Call this the *Contribution Principle*.

Marx argues that the Contribution Principle represents a significant improvement on distribution under capitalism, where some people who do not work get rich from the labour of others. Yet he also thinks that the Contribution Principle has two serious problems. First, the Contribution Principle unfairly rewards people's innate natural abilities. By calibrating pay to labour contribution, 'it tacitly recognises the unequal individual endowment and thus productive capacity of the workers as natural privileges'.[76] Marx's thought here anticipates Rawls's own critique of desert, which also holds that differences in innate abilities do not justify inequality. Second, the Contribution Principle ignores the fact that people have different needs and circumstances: 'one worker is married, another not; one has more children than another'.[77] With these different needs, then 'given an equal amount of work done…one will in fact receive more than another, one will be richer than another'.[78] Marx claims that these shortcomings are inevitable in the lower stage of communist society, which is 'economically, morally and intellectually, still stamped with the birth-marks of the old society from whose womb it emerges'.[79] However, in time he thinks that society will move towards the higher stage. Famously, Marx takes this to be typified by the principle, 'From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs!'[80]

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[76] Ibid., p. 86.

[77] Ibid, p.87.

[78] Ibid.

[79] Ibid.

[80] Ibid., p. 87. Note that the principle was widespread across the socialist movement and not original to Marx. Its roots may lie in the New Testament (see Bovens and Lutz 2019). For an interesting interpretation and development of the principle see Gilabert 2023, ch. 3.

Could Marx accept the Difference Principle? The main problem concerns economic incentives. As is well understood, the Difference Principle retains a role for incentives to elicit the productive contribution of talented citizens. From the perspective of the higher phase of communism, such incentives are unnecessary and unjust. They are unnecessary because in a truly good society, in which citizens are properly concerned for each other, and work is 'life's prime want', there would be no need to provide people with additional income to get them to produce according to their abilities. The intrinsic satisfactions of one's work, and the meeting of the needs of one's fellow human beings, is incentive enough. They are unjust because such incentives treat 'unequal individual endowment and productive capacity of the workers as natural privileges'. Rawls agrees that no one deserves to benefit from their superior abilities, but the Difference Principle nonetheless continues to allow the talented to benefit from their productive advantages.

However, this does not rule out the possibility that Marx might find the Difference Principle acceptable for the lower phase of communism. For, as we have seen, Marx himself accepts that incentives are necessary at this phase. They are necessary because residual bourgeois attitudes, such as the attitude that one ought to be rewarded for one's superior productivity, coupled with the need to build abundance, make dispensing with incentives impossible in the society that immediately follows the revolution. This suggests that, if we limit ourselves to the somewhat non-ideal circumstances of the lower phase of communism, where moderate scarcity and a capitalist mentality prevail, Marx and Rawls's views about justice are not that far apart. Indeed, although a full consideration of this issue goes beyond the scope of this article, one may even suggest that the Difference Principle represents an improvement on the Contribution Principle that Marx himself adopts for the lower phase.[81]

B. On the Evanescence of Justice

Rawls's second criticism focuses on Marx's view of the higher phase of communism. On Rawls's reading, Marx's account of the higher phase of communism is a society 'beyond justice in the sense that the circumstances that give rise to the problem of distributive justice are surpassed'.[82] Here Rawls invokes (as he does in *A Theory of Justice*) Hume's famous idea that justice presupposes circumstances of limited altruism and moderate

[81] For further discussion of this issue see: Elster 1983, p. 230; Peffer 1990, pp. 418–483; Brudney 2013, pp. 453–4; and Gilabert 2023, pp. 126–128.

[82] Rawls 2007, p. 321.

scarcity. Drawing on Cohen's interpretive work once more, Rawls interprets Marx as saying that communism will transcend the circumstances of justice. More specifically, by developing the productive forces to an unprecedented level, communism would generate a limitless abundance that would mean that each individual would be able to have whatever they may want to have without thereby depriving anyone else of what they may want to have. In this society, there is no need for principles of justice to adjudicate between competing claims.

In his discussion of this view, Cohen argues that such a 'technological fix' represents an untenable view because it is inconsistent with ecological constraints.[83] Rawls accepts Cohen's interpretation of Marx but develops a different and more fundamental line of criticism. On Rawls's view, the idea of moving beyond justice – achieving, as Rawls puts it, 'the evanescence of justice' – is *not merely* infeasible given the finite nature of natural resources but is 'undesirable as such' insofar as it involves transcendence of concern for others.

> The absence of concern with justice is undesirable as such, because having a sense of justice, and all that it involves, is part of human life and part of understanding other people and of recognizing their claims. To act always as we have a mind to act without worrying about or being aware of others' claims, would be a life lived without an awareness of the essential conditions of a decent human society.[84]

Rawls's idea here is that, even if under the imagined future conditions of communist superabundance, humanity had been freed from the Humean circumstances of justice, so that every individual could lead their own lives freely without needing to constrain their activity in view of the material claims of others, the 'evanescence of justice' should then be seen not as a pure state of liberation, but as a regrettable loss of something of great value. On Rawls's view, the formation of individuals' moral personalities could not be achieved in a society beyond justice, as the two moral powers of free and equal citizens could not develop under conditions where the 'sense of justice' had no application, and in the absence of conditions for its nourishment and development. To put Rawls's idea here in Marxian terms, we might say that, in a society beyond justice, we would become alienated from each other, and from our sense of shared participation with others in human life.

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[83] Cohen 1995a.

[84] Rawls 2007, pp. 321–2.

However, it is likely that Rawls and Cohen misunderstand the ways in which Marx sees communist society as moving beyond 'the narrow horizon of bourgeois right' as Marx puts it in 'The Critique of the Gotha Programme', understanding this in excessively technological terms.[85] For crossing 'the narrow horizon of bourgeois right' involves not only a transformation of the productive forces—a move towards greater, though surely not limitless, abundance—but also a transformation of the individual and their motivations, as people come increasingly to pursue their self-realisation in ways that contributes to the flourishing of others. On this view, society does not move beyond justice in the sense that individuals no longer have to attend to each other's needs; after all, Marx is clear that work under communism remains a 'means of life' as well as 'life's prime want'.[86] Rather, they realise a just distribution of resources precisely *because* they attend to others' needs, the concern with the needs of others being part of their self-realisation. As we have seen, Marx speaks of communist society as able to 'inscribe on its banners: From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs'.[87] What we are arguing here is that this is not a society that moves beyond the circumstances of justice through ignoring questions of distribution, but a society that achieves its favoured form of distribution— 'to each according to their needs'—through each of its members making a concerted attempt to produce for the needs of others.

Crucially, then, the transcendence of the narrow horizon of bourgeois right does not involve a lack of awareness and appreciation of others, as Rawls claims; rather, an awareness and appreciation of others' needs is a central commitment of communist citizens. On this latter interpretation, Rawls may well think that this kind of uncoerced fulfilment of the demands of justice is a practical impossibility given familiar problems about knowledge and economic coordination; but the objection that it is 'undesirable as such' would lose its bite. Indeed, Rawls and Marx would be at one in thinking that a central element of a good society is a commitment to the needs of one's fellows.[88]

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[85] Marx 1875/1989, p. 87. For a critique of this overly technological interpretation of what makes communism possible see Geras 1985, pp. 81–85 and, especially, Kandiyali 2024. It is also worth noting that the interpretation of abundance as limitless in Cohen (1995a) is in tension with Cohen's interpretation of abundance as limited in his earlier *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence*. In that earlier work, 'the promise of abundance is not an endless flow of goods but a sufficiency produced with a minimum of unpleasant exertion' (Cohen 1978/2000, p. 307).

[86] Marx 1875/1989, p. 87.

[87] Ibid.

[88] For excellent discussion of this theme, see Brudney 1997, 2013, and 2023. While our account has much shared ground with Brudney's, we note two significant differences between our respective approaches in thinking through the relationship between Rawls and Marx. First,

Thus the transformation that Marx looked for under the higher phase of communism relied to a greater extent than Rawls appreciated on a transformation of the soul rather than a transformation of the conditions of production. On this view, moving beyond the narrow horizon of bourgeois right is not a matter of people being liberated from a concern with others' needs, but of integrating that concern for others into their own conception of the good. This is still a utopian idea, but it is a very different form of utopianism from the 'technological fix' that Rawls rightly criticises. Moreover, it is a form of utopianism to which Rawls was not entirely averse, given his own, albeit later abandoned, attempt to show congruence between the right and the good in Part Three of *A Theory of Justice*. Rawls's deep philosophical antipathy to countenancing the evanescence of justice therefore should not have led him here to accentuate his differences from Marx; on the contrary, their views are closer together here than Rawls imagined.

V. LIBERALISM AND SOCIALISM: CEASING TO BE MERE FRAGMENTS?

Rawls's engagement with Marx is in many ways both surprising and suggestive. It reveals both Rawls's high ambition to have developed a form of liberalism that could avoid the most powerful lines of socialist critique, while at the same time tacitly showing Rawls's clear-eyed assessment that most defences of liberalism and capitalism – as well as liberal capitalism in its actually-existing varieties – are devastatingly caught by those very lines of socialist critique. Rawls as a reader of Marx is clearly a theorist who has no illusions about the realities of capitalism, but who nevertheless retains a clear core of hope for the prospects for a form of egalitarian liberalism that go beyond the limitations of the capitalist economic system.

Yet Rawls's encounter with Marx at the same time seems like a missed opportunity; there was more potential here for productive engagement if Rawls's reading of Marx were not so distorted by the starkly individualistic interpretation of Marx's view of the good society that he took over from Cohen. The dispute that Rawls took himself to be

as regards interpretation, Brudney (like Rawls and Cohen) views Marx's endorsement of the principle, 'from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs' as a description of a communist society that is beyond scarcity and justice (Brudney 2013, p. 452) – an interpretation that differs from the one we develop in Section V. Secondly, on substantive normative matters, even when we argue for the same conclusion as Brudney, we sometimes do so for different reasons. For instance, Brudney argues that a 'constrained Marx', i.e., a Marx that accepted material scarcity, would likely accept the Difference Principle. For Brudney, however, this is because such a Marx would feel the pull of a prioritarian concern for the worst off (Brudney 2013, p. 453), which gives a different normative basis for this potential alignment to the one we have developed in this section.

having with Marx on the nature of justice was in many ways much less interesting than the dispute he could have had. The real issue here, with regard to the kind of social transformation that Marx thought possible, is about the nature of justice itself – whether we should 'take people as they are', with their limited capacities to act towards the flourishing of others, and build our just institutions with those limited capacities in mind; or whether instead we could hope that a transformation of the institutions within which we live our shared social and economic lives could in time bring about the 'alteration of men on a mass scale'[89] that would allow for an even more egalitarian and emancipatory form of society.[90]

The irony here is that that this issue is essentially at the heart of Cohen's own critique of Rawls's approach to social justice; and this is clearly the substantive issue that Cohen takes to go to the very heart of the limits of egalitarian liberalism, and to what is at stake between liberals and socialists. By convincing Rawls of an impoverished reading of Marx's view of communism and the role of justice within it, Cohen pushed Rawls into a less substantive and significant engagement with Marx's ideas, and away from the very issues that Cohen himself took to be of prime importance in thinking about the borders of liberalism and socialism.[91] On the view we have outlined above, the *real* action with regard to the normative engagement between Rawls and Marx is located not so far from the core of the substantive dispute between Rawls and Cohen. We have raised the question of whether the Difference Principle, on Rawls's *own* understanding of that principle's demands (where such demands are largely consistent with 'taking people as they are') might have a place within a revised Marxian account of the lower stage of communism. Alternatively, the more demanding and socially transformative 'Cohenite' reading of the Difference Principle, as involving a reconfiguration of individual ethos and outlook, brings us very close to Marx's own account of justice under the higher stage of communism.[92]

What then does our exploration of the relationship between Rawls and Marx tell us about the relation between liberalism and socialism? We have shown how much of Marx's critique of capitalism can be endorsed by Rawls, while Rawls's own highly egalitarian liberalism plausibly evades most Marxian worries about liberal political positions. Marx's target for attack here was, after all, a form of classical liberalism that Rawls also repudiated. We have also shown how much of Rawls's critique of

[89] Marx and Engels 1846/1975, p. 52.

[90] For discussion of this issue in Rawls, see J. Cohen 2001.

[91] As discussed in Cohen 1997, 2000, 2008.

[92] We are grateful to Philippe Van Parijs for pointing us towards this way of thinking about Rawls's and Cohen's rival interpretations of the Difference Principle.

Marx can be dissolved away as soon as we free ourselves of the effects of some unfortunate misreading that misdirected Rawls in his engagement with Marx's ideas. In all of these aspects, our conclusions point towards reconciliation between the two traditions.

And yet, while our discussion of Marx and Rawls suggests that liberalism (at least in its egalitarian form) and socialism should not be seen as fundamentally opposed to one another, we have also given some reasons for thinking that socialism is not just (to return to Lea Ypi's phrase) 'liberalism minus capitalism'. Our conclusion is therefore not the fully reconciliatory position outlined as a possibility at the outset, as residual normative disagreements do persist. One source of disagreement concerns alienation and self-realisation in work. As we have seen, Rawls stands apart from other prominent liberal theorists in taking Marx's concerns with alienation and self-realisation in work seriously; and he offers substantive (albeit indirect) responses to these concerns, while further responses can be constructed on the basis of other elements of Rawls's view. However, we have argued that none of these indirect Rawlsian responses provide an entirely satisfying response to the 'alienation objection', while more direct lines of response stand in tension with Rawls's other commitments. The difficulty here suggests an underlying tension between liberalism and socialism: the socialist concern with alienated labour is not one that can be easily addressed within liberal political philosophy, at least not without sacrificing (or at least diluting) some of its other central commitments, such as freedom of occupational choice and the concern with economic efficiency.[93]

The other residual disagreement between Marx and Rawls, which suggests another potential source of conflict between liberalism and socialism, brings us back to the question of human nature and parallels a tension within Rawls's own thinking, between realism and utopianism.[94] In his acceptance of economic incentives, Rawls's Difference Principle accepts the (moderately) self-interested motivations of people under capitalism as a fixed point of the theory. This 'concession to human nature'[95] is one that many socialists, including Marx and Cohen, do not want to allow. While

[93] A related disagreement concerns the role of markets within a socialist society. Rawls is optimistic that that problems with markets can be overcome through the operation of the institutions mandated by his principles of justice. Marx, by contrast, sees markets as inherently alienating. Whether the market is, or could be made to be, an acceptable feature of a socialist society points towards a series of complex questions that we cannot resolve here. See also: Satz 2010; O'Neill 2020, secs. 3–4, pp. 180–95.

[94] Rawls 2001a, §1, pp. 1–5.

[95] Rawls 1958, p. 173.

Marx is fully alive to concerns about political feasibility, the concessions he allows under the lower stage of communism are not concessions to human nature as such but to human nature as shaped by capitalism, and are therefore conceived as strategic, temporary, and self-limiting; waypoints on the onward journey towards the socialist transformation of human motivations and sociality. In this aspect of his thinking, Marx embodies a socialist optimism that goes beyond anything that liberals such as Rawls can countenance.

It would be much too simple, though, to draw a line between realism and utopianism, or between pessimism and optimism about the transformation of human motivations, putting liberals on one side and socialists and the other. On the one hand, both Rawls *and* Marx are concerned with political feasibility; on the other hand, both Marx *and* Rawls are deeply engaged in thinking about the ways in which the political and economic institutions under which we live can shape and reshape our outlook, motivations, and self-conception. The conclusions of their political thinking diverge, but there is much that is shared in both their values and their sense of the political and intellectual problems that need to be faced when think carefully about what it would be to realise a society that was truly justifiable to those who live within it. In parallel to how things stand between Rawls and Marx, so too things stand with egalitarian liberalism and socialism: neither deeply opposed nor seamlessly reconciled, but two sibling political traditions that share more than they realise, not least their shared tendency to overestimate their distance from one another.

As we have seen (in Section III above), Rawls wrote movingly of how, in a just society, our self-conception could be transformed through an appreciation of how what we achieve on our own is just part of a broader achievement of social cooperation, 'the aims of which we affirm'. Under such conditions 'we cease to be mere fragments'.[96] There is an arresting moral grandeur to this idea, but it can also be transposed from institutional life to the level of theory itself; from a description of the alignment of aims between citizens, to a way of thinking about the alignment of aims between socialism and egalitarian liberalism. Each tradition has its distinctive identity, but each can also be thought of in its best light not as an isolated fragment, but as a collaborative constituent element of a broader shared human endeavour: the project of conceiving of an emancipatory 'alternative to capitalism'[97] that 'abolishes the current state of things'.[98]

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[96] Rawls 1971/1999, p. 464.

[97] Rawls 2001a, pp. 135–6.

[98] Marx and Engels, 1846/1975, p. 49.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors declare that they have no competing interests

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