# Marx's Critique of the Utopian Socialists

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## I. Introduction

BECAUSE MARX AND ENGELS used their critique of the "utopian socialists" as a means to develop and refine their own theories, an examination of it might play an important role in unraveling some of the complexities of these theories. Unfortunately, due in part to their seemingly ambiguous and changing attitude toward utopianism—which Steven Lukes once characterized as an "anti-utopian utopianism"—their critique is not entirely clear (Lukes 155). As a result, it is open to—and has been given—a number of different readings. In this paper, I examine four existing readings and suggest a fifth. I argue that, while none of these readings is entirely satisfactory, a systematic examination that considers all of them together can provide some important insights into Marx and Engels's ambiguous relationship both to the utopian socialists and to utopian thought more generally. Moreover, such a reading can help clarify their critique of bourgeois society and their views as to its possible alternatives.

## II. The Utopian Socialists

One of the difficulties in understanding the Marxist critique of the utopian socialists is that the utopian socialists do not form a natural class. Marx and Engels adopted the term, "utopian socialism," from other writers who used it to refer indiscriminately to the ideas of Henri Saint-Simon, Charles Fourier, and Robert Owen (and sometimes to Étienne Cabet, as well), despite the fact that these men held many contradictory views and were mutually unsympathetic. Marx and Engels further muddied the waters by attempting to fit the utopian socialists into a classification scheme they developed to explain the history of socialist thought in terms of their own theory. According to this scheme, various socialists were grouped together on the basis of the supposed class origins of their ideas. Thus, there were various types of "reactionary socialists" whose ideas reflected a feudal worldview, "conservative socialists" whose ideas reflected the interests of the emerging bourgeoisie, and communists whose ideas reflected the position of the proletariat (Marx and Engels, *Communist Manifesto* 491–99). Unfortunately, the utopian socialists did not fit comfortably into this scheme. Like the communists, the utopian socialists were progressives who

wrote in opposition to the bourgeois order, however, writing too early in the modern period to understand the nature and role of the proletariat, they could only criticize the emerging bourgeois society on what Marx and Engels took to be highly questionable moral grounds. As a result, they failed to reflect clearly the interests of any class, but instead adopted ideas from a variety of classes including the proletariat, the bourgeoisie, and even some feudal classes. Consequently, it was difficult for Marx and Engels to apply just one of their standard criticisms to the utopian socialists and, thus, their critique was somewhat confused.

Insofar as they shared anything in common, the utopian socialists could be described as theorists who combined "a rationalist faith in science with a radical critique of individualism" to argue that society should be radically reorganized to promote social harmony (Lichtheim 4). They did not emphasize political activity (as that phrase is normally understood), but focused instead on devising plans to make society more cooperative, production more efficient, and distribution more fair (Cole 4–5). For example, to realize their vision of social harmony, they proposed educational programs to strengthen various 'socializing' influences and to weaken competitive and individualistic attitudes and beliefs. In addition, they proposed a variety of changes involving such things as the public ownership of the land, the rationalization of industry, the end of class distinctions, and the redesign of cities and towns. They combined these proposals into internally consistent and tightly integrated visions of the ideal society.

These proposals can be understood as arising from a single, generally-shared approach to political theory and practice consisting of three elements. The first of these elements was a particular type of humanist moral theory that conceived of the highest good in terms of the fair satisfaction of human needs and argued that the development of a society which makes possible this fair satisfaction is an overriding moral duty. As the first step towards achieving this goal, the utopian socialists developed visions of ideal societies which were portrayed as "earthly paradise[s] . . . in which man's various needs, both physical and spiritual [would] find complete satisfaction" (Taylor 1). To say that the utopian socialists shared this element is not, however, to say that they agreed as to what these human needs were. Fourier, for example, produced extensive lists of specific needs which he thought were grounded in fixed aspects of human nature (Fourier 215–24), while Saint-Simon and Owen understood human nature and its needs more abstractly as desires which, in part, were socially constructed and, therefore, subject to change through education (Taylor 54–62; Claeys xlvii; Owen 1: 41–42). Thus, while Fourier sought to devise a society that could fairly satisfy these relatively fixed needs, Saint-Simon and Owen sought to devise a society that would shape needs in such a way that they could be fairly and efficiently satisfied. These plans for ideal societies were put to two uses. On the one hand, they were used as action-guiding goals—as blueprints to be realized. On the other hand, they were used as standards by which to measure and criticize existing society (Lichtheim 3–14).

The utopian socialists also agreed on a second element: their proposals must be based on a social science closely modeled on the recently developed and highly successful natural sciences. Indeed, it was because they believed that their proposals were grounded on a scientific analysis of human nature and social processes that the utopian socialists felt they could reject the charge that their ideas were 'merely utopian' (Taylor 2). Unfortunately, as Marx would point out, this grounding was more asserted than real. Saint-Simon, who, of the group, had the best grasp of contemporary science, believed that his social doctrines could be grounded on physiological principles, but he did not actually attempt this reduction (Saint-Simon 111–23). Fourier and Owen, on the other hand, generally limited themselves to the claim that their theories were based on a close and systematic observation of society, while Cabet tended only to pay lip service to this idea. Despite these differences, however, they all believed that their ideal societies were firmly grounded in scientific theories. Saint-Simon, Fourier, and Owen even felt justified in comparing their work to Newton's, claiming that they were merely applying his substantive ideas and his methodological approach to the understanding of society (Manuel and Manuel 584).

Finally, the utopian socialists believed that, in order to realize their various visions of an ideal society, it would be helpful to construct small scale socialist communities to demonstrate empirically that their ideal societies were both possible and desirable. Therefore, they designed or described a number of small communities that incorporated their ideas. These descriptions, in turn, inspired the construction of a number of short-lived utopian communities—whose failures seemed to prove the opposite thesis. Moreover, as Marx and Engels often noted, the description and construction of these demonstration communities often diverted the utopian socialists from more direct—and possibly more productive—political activities.

Beyond these moral, methodological, and political similarities, the utopian socialists disagreed on many points. However, these disagreements are of less interest than the similarities which drew Marx and Engels's critical attention: basing their arguments on a type of humanistic moral theory combined with a rudimentary form of social science, the utopian socialists advocated a more cooperative society that would fully and fairly satisfy human needs. Although occasionally drawn into flights of fantasy, the utopian socialists developed what many thought to be an admirable approach to social theory and political practice. In particular, Marx and Engels explicitly and repeatedly stated that they owed a great debt to the utopian socialists, who, according to Engels, are to be "reckoned among the most significant minds of all time" (*The Peasant War in Germany* 33).

As I argue below, Marx and Engels incorporated a number of the proposals first made by one or another of the utopian socialists into their own description of an ideal society. In addition to these particular proposals, however, Marx and Engels took from the utopian socialists a specific conception of what it was to be a politically engaged utopian thinker, from which a working definition of (political) utopianism can be derived. Utopianism,

on this view, is a *political* project involving the description of an ideal society to be used both as a goal to guide social reform and as a normative standard to critically evaluate existing societies. This ideal society cannot be pure fantasy, but must be both scientifically and morally justified; that is, not only must utopians demonstrate scientifically that their societies are possible (i.e., consistent with both human nature and any unchangeable social realities that may exist), but they must also demonstrate that the various elements and institutions that constitute their utopian societies are morally required. In support of these arguments, utopians may construct small-scale demonstration projects to show that their ideal is both plausible and desirable. This definition of utopianism is, of course, itself cast in terms of an ideal and it is possible to be a utopian without developing a *complete* description of an ideal society, a *rigorous* argument demonstrating that the proposed ideal is actually achievable, or a *fully-developed* moral justification. Eventually, however, if these failures become severe, the thinker ceases to be a utopian and becomes something else (a novelist?); but as long as a writer intends to develop a (political) utopia, he or she can be criticized for any of these failings—and Marx and Engels, as we shall see, did just that.

## III. Five Interpretations of the Marxist Critique

Marx and Engels criticized the utopian socialists on a variety of grounds. Unfortunately, their criticisms are scattered throughout their work and not systematically developed. Consequently, they are open to at least five interpretations. In what follows, after explaining each interpretation, I will critically evaluate it, both as a *criticism* of the utopian socialists and, more generally, as a criticism of the utopian project. Finally, I will evaluate it as an *interpretation* of the writings of Marx and Engels.

### *A. The Tactical Criticism*

The first interpretation of the Marxist critique of the utopian socialists is based on the idea that it is addressed primarily to other, politically active socialists. On this interpretation, which has been advanced by Lukes and Joseph Schumpeter, among others, while Marx and Engels believed that there is nothing wrong in principle with the private construction of theories of ideal societies, they believed that utopianism is a *political* trap that should be avoided at all costs, as it is a mistake to spend much time on the elaboration of such dreams and an even greater mistake to debate the relative merits of alternative ideal societies in public. This is the case, not because it is impossible to develop a morally and scientifically well-grounded utopian theory, but because, politically, it is a waste of valuable time and energy to do so (Lukes 160). Despite its emancipatory potential, therefore, in practice, utopianism is a conservative trap which diverts energies better channeled into more productive political activity.

A number of passages could be marshaled to support the claim that this is the right interpretation of the Marxist criticism of the utopian socialists. For

example, Marx and Engels argued that "communism is for us not a state of affairs which is to be established, an ideal to which reality will have to adjust itself. We call communism the real movement which abolishes the *present* state of things" (*Collected Works* 5: 49, emphasis added) In *Capital*, Marx argued that "the construction of the future and its completion for all times is not our task. . . . We do not anticipate the world dogmatically, but rather wish to find the new world through criticism of the old" (1: 51). Finally, Marx has been quoted as asserting that "the man who draws up a programme for the future is a reactionary," presumably because this will divert attention from, and thereby make more difficult, the revolutionary task at hand (Sorel 150).

In general, three arguments could be advanced to support the view that utopianism has no place in a revolutionary movement. First, utopian speculation is not needed as an organizational tool as the problems of capitalism are so severe and the conditions of the working class are so bad that they will, of themselves, lead to revolution. Marx wished to "shorten and lessen the birth pangs" of the new society and this requires both knowledge of the problems of capitalism and some organizational skills, but it does not require a detailed plan of the future society (*Capital* 1: 20). Second, utopian speculation is an unnecessary diversion from the task at hand as it takes a great deal of time to publicly work out and justify the details of the ideal society. Finally, utopian speculation tends to be divisive as every detail in the description of an ideal society can and will be challenged, leading to endless and unproductive arguments. Therefore, for these purely political reasons, utopian speculation should be avoided.

Although these criticism can be applied to the work of the utopian socialists, it is a mistake to reject utopianism as such on these grounds, as utopian speculation, while admittedly difficult and time consuming, can play an essential role in the revolutionary project. Indeed, it has been argued that the general rejection of utopianism has undermined Marxism in several ways. First, it has contributed to the abstract nature of Marxist theory and its inability to offer solutions to particular existing social problems. As Lukes put it, "Marxism has failed to clarify its ends and to explore the institutional and political forms that could embody them. . . . [As a result, it has] totally failed to bring social and political imagination to bear upon . . . [existing] problems" (166). Second, the failure to sketch out the details of an alternative society has made the misuse of Marxism almost inevitable. Without an authoritative picture of the new society, virtually anyone can claim to be building a Marxist society without fear of contradiction. As Schumpeter argued, "in trying to distance himself [from utopia], the Socialist not only is being ungrateful to the wave that carries him, but he is also courting the danger that its forces might be harnessed into other service" (308). Finally, the failure to outline and defend a vision of an ideal society can contribute to what might be the greatest existing barrier to social change; namely, the belief that no alternatives are possible. As Bertell Ollman put it, "the inability to conceive of a humanly superior way of life, has contributed to the lassitude and cynicism which helps to thwart [revolutionary] consciousness" (9).

Although Marx and Engels did think that utopian speculation can harm a revolutionary movement, this seems to be a poor interpretation of their criticism of the utopian socialists. Although some passages can be found to support it, the fact that they went on at great length to criticize the details of the utopian socialists' theories makes it unlikely that this simple criticism was their main point, as there would be no reason to criticize details if the project as a whole is flawed. Moreover, the fact that they developed their own vision of an ideal society should, by itself, be enough to warrant the rejection of this interpretation. Given their views on the political failings of the utopian socialists, Marx and Engels were understandably worried about the negative effects of utopian speculation, but they did not completely reject utopianism on these narrow tactical grounds.

### *B. The Strategic Criticism*

On this interpretation, the Marxist criticism of the utopian socialists is based on the idea that, while Marx and Engels shared their ends (their vision of the general shape of the ideal society) and were, therefore, utopians themselves, they believed that the means the utopian socialists proposed to attain those ends were insufficient. As opposed to the utopian socialists, they thought that an ideal society could only be attained through violent revolution guided by a materialistic social theory. In part, this idea follows from the failure of the utopian socialists to realize their utopian dreams: not only had they failed to transform society as a whole, but each of their demonstration projects—their Home Colonies, Phalansteries, and Icarias—had also failed. Of course, in each particular case, a variety of reason—from bank failures to malaria—could be cited for these failures; but beyond these particular causes, it simply seemed to be impossible to build a successful utopian community within existing bourgeois society. As bourgeois society had easily turned aside the utopian socialists' peaceful program, it seemed obvious to many that violent revolution was the only alternative.

This is perhaps the most common interpretation of their critique; one advanced by Karl Kautsky, Georg Lukacs, Maurice Meisner, and Frederick Jameson, among others (Webb 5–9). For example, Kautsky argued from within the Marxist tradition that utopian socialism was "utopian less on account of the impracticability of its aims than on account of the inadequacy of the means at its disposal for their achievement" (15). From a different perspective, Ruth Levitas outlined a similar argument: "The difference between Marxism and utopian socialism does not . . . rest on the existence or otherwise of an image of a socialist society to be attained, nor even on the content of that image. It rests upon disagreements about the process of transition" (45).

This interpretation is based on several points. First, it accepts the idea—ignored by the previous interpretation—that Marx and Engels developed and championed a sophisticated picture of an ideal society. Ollman has argued this point in detail, pointing out that Marx and Engels have given

detailed descriptions of, not one, but two stages of their utopia (4–41; but for a different view see Webb 36–57). During the first stage, they argued, communists will bring about several changes, including such things as the abolition of ground rent and rights of inheritance, a heavy progressive income tax, the establishment of a monopolistic central bank, the centralization of communication and transportation, the socialization of industry and agriculture, and free public education (Marx and Engels, *Communist Manifesto* 21–22). During this short stage, the government will take the form of a "dictatorship of the proletariat" which would be modeled after the workers government of the Paris Commune. It would be a government characterized by universal suffrage, short and revocable ministerial terms, and some type of direct ballot initiative process (Marx, *Civil War in France* 618–25). This government would completely control the economy, improve working conditions, cut the working day in half, and insure that everyone would receive a fair return for their work (Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Program* 525–41). The second stage would be reached when the dictatorship of the proletariat successfully abolished the last vestiges of the class structure. In this stage, there would be no private property and the division of labor would be abolished, freeing people to do whatever kind of work they desired. There would be no restrictive rules, no coercion, and no punishment; and the state itself would wither away. All social divisions, such as those between nations, races, and religions, would have disappeared. And activity with and for others, would become life's prime want and occupy most of the life of every individual (Ollman 21–22).

Second, this interpretation emphasizes the fact that many of these elements of the Marxist utopia were borrowed from the descriptions the utopian socialists gave of their utopias. As Kumar has noted, Marx and Engels took over many things from the utopians socialists, including such as the slogans "from the government of men to the administration of things" and the idea of the "withering away" of the state and the idea that "in any given society the degree of the emancipation of women is the natural measure of general emancipation"(52). Leszek Kolakowski has noted many similarities between the utopian visions of Marx and Engels and the utopian socialists including the abolition of the private ownership of the means of production; a planned economy on a national or world scale; the right to work as a basic human entitlement; the abolition of class division; voluntary economic cooperation; the abolition of the division of labor; and the abolition of the difference between town and country (1: 201).

Third, Marx and Engels were aware of the origins of these ideas and gave credit where credit was due. For example, Engels praised the utopian socialists for their insight into the nature of socialist society, saying that he and Marx ". . . will never forget that [they] stand on the shoulders of Saint-Simon, Fourier, and Owen, three men who despite their . . . utopianism . . . anticipated with genius, countless matters whose accuracy we now demonstrate scientifically" (*The Peasant War in Germany* 33). Marx also acknowledged his debt to the utopian socialists, arguing that their work contains

> . . . a critical element. They attack every principle of existing society. Hence they are full of the most valuable materials for the enlightenment of the working class. The practical measures proposed in them . . . point solely to the disappearance of class antagonisms which were, at the time, only just cropping up, and which, . . . [in their writings] are recognized in their earliest, indistinct and undefined forms only. (Marx and Engels, *Communist Manifesto* 498)

While Marx and Engels accepted many of the details of the ideal society suggested by the utopian socialists, they rejected the means by which they hoped to reach those ends: "From the moment the working men's class movement became real, the fantastic utopias [of the utopian socialists] evanesced, not because the working class had given up the *end* aimed at by these utopians, but because they had found the real *means* to realise them" (Marx, *Civil War in France* 262). Specifically, Marx and Engels rejected the idea that the ideal society could be achieved through gradual change driven by moral arguments and by small demonstration projects, particularly when those moral arguments were aimed at the bourgeoisie (Lovell 189). As they put it:

> The underdeveloped state of the class struggle . . . [caused the utopian socialists] to consider themselves far superior to all class antagonisms. They want to improve the condition of every member of society, even the most favoured. Hence, they habitually appeal to society at large, without distinction of class; nay, by preference, to the ruling class. For how can people, when they understand their system, fail to see in it the best possible plan for the best possible state of society. Hence, they reject all political and especially all revolutionary action. . . . They wish to attain their ends by peaceful means, and endeavour, by small experiments, necessarily doomed to failure . . . to reconcile class antagonisms. They still dream of [the] experimental realisation of their social Utopias, of founding isolated "*phalanstères*,". . . "Home Colonies,". . . [and] "little Icarias". . . and to realise all these castles in the air, they are compelled to appeal to the feelings and purses of the bourgeois. (*Communist Manifesto* 498–99)

The means adopted by the utopian socialists—moral arguments and demonstration projects—are insufficient for three reasons. First, they ignore the fact that the bourgeoisie's interests are rooted in their class position and that they will not sacrifice their interests to attain some purely moral end. Second, these moral arguments are, in any case, wrong for, according to bourgeois morality, the present system is already morally well-ordered. Third, their plans ignore the fact that the state is a tool of the ruling class that will only be used to support projects that further secure their position. Because the current social structure is maintained by this combination of economic interests, moral intuitions, and coercive institutions, it can only be overthrown by violent revolution. Marx condemned the utopian socialists for their failure to realize these truths, noting that, as a result of their misguidance, the proletariat had thrown ". . . itself into doctrinaire experiments . . . [that seek] to achieve . . . salvation behind society's back, in private fashion, within . . . limited conditions of existence, and hence necessarily suffer a shipwreck" (*Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* 601). Thus,

according to this view, the utopian socialists were good socialists and good utopians, but they were bad politicians and worse revolutionaries. Their political programs would not only not lead to socialism, but they would actually confuse the workers and dissipate their energies, thereby delaying the changes the utopians socialist so rightly championed.

There are a number of problems with this criticism of the utopian socialists. Perhaps most important, it overestimates the possibility that violent revolution can produce a truly ideal society, while underestimating the power of moral criticism. Moreover, it falsely portrays people as simple victims of the dominant ideology and/or as completely controlled by their narrow economic and class interests. However, this rejection of the power of moral argument to motivate people has been shown to be false by the history of Marxism itself, as it has been moral arguments that have moved many people from a variety of social classes to join this cause. It also underrates the ability of utopian visions—including Marxist utopias—to cause people to seek political change. History suggests, therefore, that, although small scale utopias are perhaps doomed to failure and although sudden violent revolutions can sometimes succeed, there are no good political reasons to reject in principle gradual, morally-motivated utopianism.

There are, however, good reasons to reject this reading as an interpretation of Marx and Engels's views. Although, generally, they did advocate violent revolution, there are a number of passages in their works that hint at a different and deeper criticism of the utopian socialist's theories. These passages suggest a more philosophical critique of the utopian socialists' utopian visions and indicate that Marx and Engels would criticize the utopian socialists even if the latter abandoned their pacifism and became advocates of revolutionary violence. These passages point in two different directions; some seem to be part of a critique of the utopian socialists' "scientific methodology," while others seem to be part of a critique of their ends.

### *C. The Materialist Criticism*

According to this interpretation, the Marxist criticism of the utopian socialists focuses on their methodology. Those who adopt it argue that, in Marx and Engels's view, the utopian socialists' mistake was not simply that they publicly debated the shape of the ideal society, nor that they selected inadequate means to realize their various utopias; instead their more fundamental mistake lay in the fact that they based their utopian visions entirely on epistemologically questionable moral principles. Engels, in particular, emphasized this point, criticizing the utopian socialists for the *way* they developed their utopian proposals: "Society presented [them with] nothing but wrongs; to remove these was the task of reason. It was necessary, then, to discover a new and more perfect system of social order and to impose this upon society. . . . These new social systems were foredoomed as Utopian; the more completely they were worked out in detail, the more they could not avoid drifting off into pure fantasies" (*Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*

687). According to this interpretation, Marx and Engels rejected the utopian visions of the utopian socialists because they were unjustifiable fantasies and chose instead to promote the revolution by developing a scientific analysis of existing societies. As Melvin Lasky put it, seeing that at the time they were writing, socialism was caught "between the ethical projection of the ideal and the critical analysis of the real," Marx and Engels decided to reject the former and engage in the latter; and criticized the utopian socialists for doing the reverse (593).

The materialist interpretation is usually associated with orthodox Marxism. Lenin, for instance, espoused this view when he argued that "in Marx, you will find no trace of utopianism in the sense of inventing the 'new' society and constructing it out of fantasies." Similarly, Lenin believed that even he could not "outline Socialism [for what it] . . . will look like when it takes on its final form we do not know and cannot say" (Buber 99). However, this interpretation is not the exclusive possession of orthodox Marxists. Darren Webb, for example has recently defended this interpretation of Marx's criticism, arguing that

> Marx was not a utopian system builder. He did not sit alone at night sketching plans for a better society, nor did he spend his time deliberating on the form that communism would . . . take once the proletarians had . . . shed their chains and gained the world. Marx's opposition to utopianism was total and unwavering. Those socialists who did construct utopian systems were criticized on the grounds that their political methodology implied an elitist process of prophetic messianism founded on nothing short of deceit. (Webb, 1)

A number of passages could be cited in support of this interpretation. Most famously, in *Capital*, Marx claimed that, unlike the utopian socialists, he confined himself to the "critical analysis of actual facts, instead of writing recipes . . . for the cook-shops of the future" (1: 26). In addition, Engels argued that one of the "most pleasing differences between [scientific socialism and its predecessors] . . . lies in the complete disappearance of utopian concepts" from the former, adding that "as it is not our task to create utopian systems for the arrangement of the future society, it would be more than idle to [discuss such questions]" (Qtd. in Kumar 51). This position reflects the fact that, according to Marx, "the working class . . . [*themselves*] have no ready-made utopias to introduce. . . . They have no ideals to realize, but [seek only] to set free the elements of the new society with which the old collapsing society itself is pregnant" (*Civil War in France* 635).

It is possible to give this interpretation a relatively narrow reading by focusing on the fact that the utopian socialists wrote during the very early stages of industrial capitalism and were, therefore, unaware of the vast social and technological changes that capitalism would soon bring about and of the nature, needs, and world view of the emerging proletariat. As a result, their utopian visions were too abstract and disconnected from these emerging realities to serve as a blueprint for the future society. As Engels put it, the historical situation of early capitalism ". . . dominated the founders of socialism. To the crude conditions of capitalistic production and

the crude class conditions, correspond crude theories. The solution of the social problems, which as yet lay hidden in the undeveloped economic conditions, the Utopians attempted to evolve out of the human brain" (*Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* 687). In saying this, Engels was only echoing Marx's more sophisticated view:

> So long as the proletariat is not yet sufficiently developed to constitute itself as a class, . . . and the productive forces are not yet sufficiently developed . . . to enable us to catch a glimpse of the formation of a new society, these theoreticians are merely utopians who, to meet the wants of the oppressed classes, improvise systems and go in search of a regenerating science. But in the measure that history moves forward, and with it the struggle of the proletariat assumes clearer outlines, they no longer need to seek science in their minds; they have only to take note of what is happening before their eyes. . . . So long as . . . they are at the beginning of the struggle, they see in poverty nothing but poverty, without seeing in it the revolutionary, subversive side, which will overthrow the old society. From this moment, science, which is [itself] a product of the historical movement, . . . has ceased to be doctrinaire and has become revolutionary. (*The Poverty of Philosophy* 125)

In this passage, Marx introduces an additional element into his criticism: it is not just that the utopian socialists were directly aware only of an early underdeveloped stage of capitalist society, but they also lacked an adequate social science that could have allowed them to foresee its future. They were forced, therefore, to create their utopias 'out of the human brain,' unaided either by appropriate observations or sound scientific theory.

Understood in this narrow way, however, this interpretation does not accord with many of the texts used to support it. On this reading, Marx and Engels were not opposed to utopianism in principle; instead, they were only opposed to the sort of premature and ungrounded utopianism practiced by the utopian socialists. The *only* problem with the utopian socialists, on this view, is that they wrote too early in the history of capitalism and without the benefit of a sound predictive scientific theory. It follows, however, that there should be nothing wrong with utopian constructions that are based on valid scientific theories or that are developed during capitalism's maturity. Of course, given that Marx and Engels believed themselves to be in possession of a sound social science and to be writing during capitalism's final stages, they could not have thought that this criticism applied to their own utopian constructions. As Webb makes clear, however, many passages can be found in which Marx and Engels criticize *every* attempt to develop a detailed blueprint for the ideal society (Webb 19–22). But if this is the case, then the problem with the utopian socialists cannot simply be that they wrote too early or that their speculations just happened to be scientifically ungrounded; instead, the problem must be inherent in utopianism itself.

On a broader reading, the Marxist critique of the utopian socialists focuses on their failure to understand the structure of society as it is revealed by the science of Historical Materialism. In particular, they failed to understand that the social function of morality is to accommodate people

to the existing economic base and, in particular, to its class structure. Unaware of this scientific principle, the utopian socialists simply accepted as universally valid a number of moral principles present in their society and used them to criticize that society and to project a better one. As Engels put it, society presented them with 'nothing but wrongs, which they immediately tried to rectify' through the development of a fully moral society. In doing this, however, they failed to realize that their moral critique and ethical projection were based on inherently bourgeois moral concepts and could, therefore, never reveal the real underlying problems of bourgeois society. Any ethical projection based on such a critique could never provide a radical alternative.

Marx and Engels tied this relatively abstract analysis to a more specific critique of the central moral principles accepted by the utopian socialists as a basis of their work; namely, "justice," "just distribution," and "equality." They argued that these terms refer to inherently bourgeois values that find their place in the present social structure and cannot legitimately be abstracted from it (Marx, *The Critique of the Gotha Program* 528). On their view, bourgeois society already generally conforms to these ideals and, if it was forced to conform to them completely, as the utopian socialists demanded, the result would be, at best, a form of 'state capitalism' which would be politically little better—and economically much poorer—than the original (Engels, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* 711). Even worse, because the utopian socialists' notion of human needs was based on a "pastoral ideal," borrowed from an earlier, quasi-feudal, stage of bourgeois society, if the utopian socialists' proposals were adopted, the results could only be reactionary and oppressive (Engels, *The Housing Question* 29–30).

On this broader reading, therefore, there are two related problems with the utopian socialists' project, one methodological and one moral. The methodological problem arises from the fact that the future society with its qualitatively different economic and class relationships must necessarily reflect a radically different morality. If that is the case, and if, as Hegel argued with his famous "Owl of Minerva" metaphor, philosophical understanding is always retrospective, it is simply impossible to determine in advance the exact form of this qualitatively different future society. Because Marx and Engels accepted both this theory of morality and this view of the essential epistemological limitations on scientific knowledge, they were committed to the rejection of *all* moral critiques and *all* ethical projections. Thus, utopianism necessarily lacks the epistemological grounds that all political utopians—including the utopian socialists—assume it must have: it is methodologically flawed in principle.

The moral problem arises from the fact that the utopian socialists sought to impose a moral world view on the inhabitants of their utopian societies. Arguing on the basis of the principles of "proletarian self-emancipation and self-determination," Marx claimed that this amounted to a morally objectionable "philanthropic paternalism" and a "messianic elitism" and argued that the proletariat, the real inhabitants of the future society, should be

allowed to develop its own social institutions and practices according to its own lights. Anything less would violate proletarian autonomy (Webb 24–33, 79–90). Thus, the utopian socialists' program is not only methodologically flawed, it is morally flawed as well.

Instead of engaging in such ungrounded and immoral utopianism, Marx and Engels took a different, 'scientific' approach. As Webb points out, they began with an analysis of existing society that was both materialistic and dialectical. This analysis revealed that bourgeois society was producing the material conditions (a 'revolutionary class' and a 'sufficiently developed' productive capability) necessary for its own overthrow and the creation of an emancipatory classless society. As Webb points out, however, although Marx argued that Historical Materialism demonstrated that a communist society was inevitable, consistent with the epistemological limitations of scientific knowledge he also argued that it could not foretell the precise nature of that qualitatively different future society. This 'scientific' approach to socialism, would have several advantages over more utopian approaches:

> first, by establishing that the emancipation of the proletariat is grounded in the material conditions of the present, Marx's claims are kept within . . . [proper] epistemological confines; second, by establishing, through mere observation, that the emancipation of the proletariat is grounded in the material conditions of its own existence, Marx avoids the idea that these conditions have to be imported from the outside and manages, therefore, to uphold the principle of proletarian self-emancipation denied by the utopian philanthropist; third, because it is the material conditions for the emancipated society, and not the nature of that society itself, which are grounded in the present, the future is not foreclosed and the principle of proletarian self-determination escapes unscathed. . . . This is what Marx's critique of utopian socialism was all about—[Historical Materialism] could do everything that utopianism could do, but it could do so without foreclosing the future and without resorting to philanthropic paternalism or messianic elitism. As a consequence, utopian socialism, in an era of materialistically critical socialism, could only be 'silly, stale, and reactionary from the roots up.' (Webb 90)

Although this broad reading is a better reading of this criticism, it can be faulted on a number of grounds. First, it rests on very insecure foundations; namely, the unwarranted scientific pretensions of Historical Materialism. Not only has Historical Materialism failed as a predictive science, but it rests on an implausible economic determinism and entails a relativism which would undermine Marx's many categorical moral judgments, including his principle of proletarian self-determination. Moreover, as Webb argues, in an attempt to make this theory compatible with his socialist program, Marx unconsciously adopted a number of flawed—and essentially utopian —concepts to fill several gaps in his theory. (Therefore, on Webb's view, Marx was an "accidental [i.e., unintentional] utopian" [Webb 109–37].) Second, Marx was inconsistent in his views concerning the limitations of science. It should be noted that Marx was unable to defend the limitations he placed on scientific prediction. Nevertheless, if they are accepted, then, *either* Historical Materialism should be able to predict *both* that the coming

revolution will produce an emancipatory society *and* the structure that its institutions will take *or* it should be able to predict *only* that a revolution is coming without being able to predict the form of the new society's institutions or whether or not they will be emancipatory; it cannot predict that the revolution will produce an emancipatory society without being able to predict its structure. Finally, if the real thrust of this criticism is moral—grounded on the principle of proletarian self-determination—then Marx's socialist program itself seems to be based on an unwarranted ethical projection.

In addition, this broad reading fails as an interpretation. First, it conflicts with the passages cited above in support of the narrow reading. Second, it does not square with the fact that Marx and Engels, as I argued in the previous section, themselves gave a description of the shape of a utopian society, including detailed descriptions of many of its institutions. Finally, it does not square with the fact that Marx and Engels themselves authored a moral critique of capitalism which, as I argue below, they used to ground a utopian vision.

### *D. The Humanist Criticism*

On this interpretation, Marx and Engels, like the utopian socialists, were utopian humanists who believed not only that utopian speculation must play an important role in guiding political activity, but that utopian ideals must be based on moral principles derived from a well-grounded conception of human nature. Their only disagreement with the utopian socialists, on this view, was based on their belief that the utopian socialists adopted a mistaken conception of human nature and derived from it a false set of moral principles and utopian ideals. To correct this error, Marx and Engels's developed an alternative conception of human nature from which they derived a different set of principles and ideals. Unlike the utopian socialists' view of human nature, which stressed the existence of a fixed set of natural human needs, Marx and Engels's conception stressed the capacity of human beings to develop new abilities, new relationships, and new forms of life, all of which contributed to the development of new—but still natural and human—needs. These differing conceptions of human nature imply differing moral principles and differing critiques of the existing society. Thus, while the utopian socialists criticized bourgeois society on the grounds that it failed to fully and fairly satisfy these human needs, Marx and Engels criticized bourgeois society for preventing human development and creating widespread alienation. Finally, these criticisms supported different utopian visions. Whereas the utopian socialists championed static utopias in which a limited set of fixed and harmonious human needs could be satisfied, Marx and Engels championed a dynamic utopia which promoted continuous mutual self-development and self-realization.

A number of writers have adopted this interpretation. For example, Kolakowski argued that "Marx's starting point . . . is not poverty [and inequality] but dehumanization" (222). Building on this idea, Lukes argued

that Marx developed a vision of utopia in which all people would be able to engage fully in "the self-transforming and self-realizing process of emancipation" (161). Ollman has developed this notion of a humanistic Marxist utopia most fully in his argument that Marx designed his utopian society in such a way that its inhabitants could achieve a "complete victory over the alienation that has characterized humanity's existence throughout class society" (39–40). Norman Geras has made a similar argument.

This humanistic interpretation is based on the idea that, far from rejecting the ethical projection of utopia, Marx and Engels actually developed a humanistic moral theory which informed both their criticism of bourgeois society and their utopian vision. While this interpretation of the Marxist criticism of the utopian socialists conflicts with the materialist interpretation in that it assumes that Marx and Engels subscribed to what they took to be a universally valid morality, a number of passages throughout Marx's and Engels' works can be marshaled in its support. For example, Engels argued that "a really human morality which stands above class antagonisms . . . [is] possible [but it can be realized] only at a stage of society which has not only overcome class antagonisms but has even forgotten them . . ." (*Anti-Dühring* 726). Eugene Kamenka has argued on the basis of passages such as this that Marx and Engels not only accepted the existence of a 'truly human morality,' but that they developed a philosophical defense of it. According to Kamenka, their theory was based on the idea that

> man, as an empirical being, has certain purposes, needs, and requirements which form part of the description of man and which must be recognized by any science that has man for its subject. Man's moral demands . . . [prescribe the fulfilment of] these requirements, . . . [and the realization of] these needs. Provided the attempts are realistic and take into account objective conditions and realities, they are norms which any . . . [impartial observer] must accept as built into the nature of man . . . . [Marcuse offered a plausible interpretation of this view when he argued that Marx attempted] to ground this humanistic ethic in logic by arguing that 'man' as a class-concept or universal necessarily involves criteria or principles by which we distinguish the human from the non-human. 'Man' is thus a normative concept from the start; to describe or define man is already to recognize goals toward which man works or ends towards which he strives. (47)

This approach to morality is virtually identical to that which I argued above was adopted by the utopian socialists, differing only in its underlying conception of human nature.

This conception of human nature differs from that of the utopian socialists in that it stresses the importance of autonomous self-development and realization. This same emphasis can be found reflected in Marx and Engels's moral theory, their vision of utopian society, and their moral critique of capitalist society. In his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts,* Marx argues that our "species-being"—our essential nature—is nothing more than our ability to engage in self-conscious, self-transforming labor and that we are truly free only when we are so engaged (70–81). In *Capital*, Marx con-

nects freedom with self-development and describes both in Kantian moral language as being "ends in themselves" (3: 820). Again, in *Capital*, Marx argues that the realization of a "realm of true freedom" is required by morality (3: 820). This reflects his earlier and more famous description of the future communist society as "an association in which the free development of each is a condition for the free development of all" (Marx and Engels, *Communist Manifesto* 491). Finally, Marx and Engels repeatedly condemn capitalism for separating people from their essential nature, arguing that this alienation makes revolution a moral necessity as it destroys freedom and dehumanizes people:

> Communism [is] the positive transcendence of . . . human self-estrangement, and therefore [is] the real appropriation of the human essence by and for man; communism therefore [is] the complete return of man to himself as a social (i.e., human) being. . . . This communism, as a fully developed naturalism, equals humanism, and as fully developed humanism equals naturalism; it is the genuine resolution of the conflict between man and nature and between man and man—the true resolution of the strife between existence and essence. (Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* 84)

According to this interpretation, Marx and Engels designed the institutions of their utopian society in light of their humanistic moral theory to enhance both freedom and self-development. They understood this to require the sweeping away of those bourgeois institutions—alienating working conditions, the division of labor (in particular, the divisions between intellectual and manual labor and between town and country), the class structure which impoverishes the members of the lower classes, the oppressive state, etc.—that prevent people from expressing their true humanity. Because theirs is both a humanist and a naturalist theory, they took this to be an essentially negative task; a matter of destroying old alienating institutions and allowing people the freedom to express their inner nature, rather than a matter of building new non-alienating institutions. Nevertheless, they argued that some institutions have to be more positively transformed. For example, in the ideal society, the state will not simply take over the task of economic administration, but it will also promote education and culture, while cultural institutions, freed of their old ideological functions, will play an active role in promoting self-expression and development.

Oddly, despite their rejection of the utopian socialists' specific conception of human nature and the moral principles and utopian ideals it supported, the institutional changes proposed by Marx and Engels closely paralleled those proposed by the utopian socialists. However, there is one major exception to this rule. Apart from Saint-Simon, the utopian socialists were virtual luddites whose static utopias were based on an unchanging technology. In these utopias, people would work the fields or engage in craft-based manufacture in order to supply the simple consumer goods needed to satisfy their limited needs. Because they only worked to satisfy these needs, their work would not be onerous and because the products of their work were to be fairly distributed, they could all lead pleasant lives.

On the other hand, in the utopian society envisioned by Marx and Engels, people would make use of a highly advanced and constantly developing technology to satisfy their continuously changing needs. Moreover, automated industrial technology would not just produce more and better products, it would also serve a much more important function: it would produce an abundance of free time, during which people could turn their attention to the task of self-development (Marx, *Capital* 3: 820). As a result, not only would they escape the alienation intrinsic to both bourgeois society and other utopian societies, but in this 'developmentalist' utopia the arts, sciences, and humanities would flourish as never before. As a result, this utopia would be incredibly dynamic: new scientific discoveries and new technological wonders would delight the involved citizenry; new theories of the self and society would be developed and explored; and new artistic creations and new types of beauty would help people develop new aesthetic capacities. This developmentalist utopia would incorporate the dynamism of capitalism, but only after stripping it of its oppressive characteristics. Most important, however, the inhabitants of this utopian society would take the greatest pleasure in the process of self-development. In a virtuous circle, individual development would drive social development, which in turn would re-energize individual development.

In comparison, the generally pastoral consumerist utopias of the utopian socialists seem, at best, a bit dull. Moreover, as Marx and Engels argued, their attempts to maintain a fair distribution of the few goods they do produce might easily cause a turn toward authoritarianism. In addition, given their inefficient technological bases, it is likely that the people in these utopian communities would be relatively poor and, because they must spend most of their time inefficiently producing their necessary goods, they would have little free time. Finally, it would be impossible for people in these societies to satisfy the greatest human need, the need for autonomous self-development For these reasons, Engels argued that, in fact, these utopias would be rigid, oppressive, and reactionary societies (*Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* 711–12).

Despite the advantages of their developmentalist utopia, it is not without its problems. Philosophically, these problems revolve around the basic concept that Marx and Engels used in its construction; namely, "human nature." The first of these problems is that the concept of "human nature," which is most at home in ancient philosophy, conflicts with more modern—and presumably more well-grounded—scientific and philosophical conceptions of humanity. Second, it is not clear how a thing's essential nature is to be determined. As Kamenka implies, "human nature" is not a purely descriptive concept, but it is also, at least in part, a moral concept. If so, it would not be possible to discover this underlying reality simply through observation, especially in those societies characterized by alienation. Thus, humanistic moral theories cannot be based on observation alone. As a result, it would seem that there is a great danger that these theories will be based on circular reasoning: having settled on a moral view, humanist

philosophers project onto humanity an essential nature consistent with that moral view, and then deduce various moral ideals from that reality. Therefore, it is difficult, if not impossible, to say which theory—that of Marx and Engels or those of the utopian socialists—is better grounded. Third, as a number of philosophers have recently argued, *regardless of its content,* when the concept of "human nature" is used to shape social institutions, it becomes totalizing and the resulting institutions, necessarily oppressive and unjust (Young 35–37 and 96–107).

In addition to these philosophical problems, there are a number of problems with this reading as an interpretation of Marx and Engels's work. The first problem is that, as Webb documents, Marx and Engels do not write like humanist utopians: contrary to what one would expect from a humanist utopian, Marx and Engels rarely try to derive specific social institutions from their concept of human nature (Webb 58–78). Moreover, in a number of passages, Marx explicitly rejects humanistic approaches to social theory. For example, he criticized socialists, who "hunt everywhere for the words 'man' and 'human' and condemn when [they] cannot find them," as being necessarily a-historical and idealistic, arguing that these writers, "transform the relations of . . . particular [historically-situated] individuals into relations of "Man". . . [and in doing so] they have abandoned the real historical basis [of scientific thought] and returned to that of ideology" (Qtd. in West 82–84). While Geras has presented a strong argument against the view that Marx completely rejected the concept of "human nature" and for the idea that Marx used this concept both to criticize capitalism and to construct his utopian alternative, passages like these demonstrate that Marx harbored deep reservations about its use in philosophical and moral arguments. Moreover, Marx developed a peculiar definition of human nature which is incompatible with its use in most humanistic moral theories, where this concept is used to name an unchanging reality—an Archimedean point—lying outside of society from which social institutions and practices can be criticized. Marx's definition, however, asserts that human nature ". . . is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality, it is the ensemble of social relations" ("Theses on Feuerbach" 145). Although, as Geras argues, this passage should not be taken to mean that Marx rejected the concept of human nature, nor that he objected to the use of the concept of human nature in ethical theories, as Marx allows that human nature can be shaped by social processes, it cannot, *on its own,* ground a critical moral theory, as it is insufficiently distant from society to provide the necessary perspective. Thus, to the degree Marx accepts the view of human nature implied by his definition, he must distance himself from all humanistic moral theories. Finally, there are the many passages emphasized by Webb in which Marx and Engels criticize the utopian socialists in the name of proletarian self-determination for their philanthropic paternalism. If Marx and Engels are humanistic utopians, who disagree with the utopian socialists only in their conception of human nature, it would seem that they, too, have failed to respect the moral principle that "the emancipation of the working class must

be [worked out] by the working class themselves" (Marx, *The First International and After* 82).

### *E. A Metaethical Criticism*

In *The Civil War in France,* Marx claimed that

> the workers themselves have no ready-made utopias to introduce. . . . They know that in order to work out their own emancipation, and along with it that higher form to which present society is irresistibly tending . . . , they will have to pass through long struggles, through a series of historic processes, transforming [both] circumstances and men. They have no ideals to realise . . . , [they seek only] to set free the elements of the new society with which [the] old collapsing bourgeois society itself is pregnant. (635–36)

As I argued above, Webb uses passages like this to support his materialistic interpretation, arguing that they indicate that Marx could not have been a utopian who attempted to construct scientifically grounded pictures of the ideal future society, because Marx believed that it was impossible to have the detailed knowledge of the future that this project required. However, at various points Webb also allows that this passage might reflect a *moral* position to which Marx subscribed; namely, the principle of proletarian self-determination that requires workers "to work out their own emancipation, and along with it that higher form to which present society is irresistibly tending." Because he accepted this principle, Webb argues, Marx refused to speculate about the future society as this would have been to infringe on the autonomy of the working class. One problem with this last argument, however, is that it seems to ground Marx's anti-utopianism on an undefended moral assumption. In this section, I attempt to reconstruct Marx's argument for that assumption. I then use that argument to develop a new "metaethical" interpretation of Marx's criticism of the utopian socialists, which shows Marx to be a utopian thinker, albeit an anti-humanistic one.

In *The Ethical Foundations of Marxist Thought,* Cornel West argues that Marx developed a particular "historicist" metaethical theory. Although I believe that this argument is basically sound, I will use the term the term "discursive" to refer to Marx's metaethical position, as it is both more accurate and less confusing, given the unrelated attacks launched by Karl Popper on Marx on the grounds that he was a 'historicist.' West argues that what is unique to Marx's theory is that it denies that morality rests on "philosophic grounds . . . that carry the weight of rational necessity and/or universal obligation" (West 1), without falling into the trap of a relativism that holds that, since "there is no Archimedean point from which to adjudicate conflicting ethical beliefs or judgments," all moral judgments are equally ungrounded (West 8). Instead, according to West, Marx adopted a discursive metaethics that held that, although morality has no philosophical foundations, people can still make rational

> . . . ethical judgment[s] in light of moral principles, employ [reasonable] criteria to understand such principles, and give reasons to justify their criteria, principles,

> and judgments. But it claims that these judgments, principles, and criteria are philosophically groundless . . . [as they] do not rest upon philosophic foundations. . . . [Therefore, on this view,] the task of ethics is not *philosophic*, it is not to put forward irrefutable justifications of particular moral viewpoints. Rather the task of ethics is [*practical*]: the task is to discover ways in which to develop a larger consensus and community, such as through example . . . and persuasion. . . . If one disagrees with a particular consensus or community, the task is . . . to put forward a reasonable alternative, a new possibility for consensus and community, and then to make it attractive to others. . . . [The] only plausible candidates for the criteria, grounds, or foundation [of morality are] the *contingent, community-specific* agreements people make in relation to particular norms, aims, goals, and objectives . . . [which], owing to their dynamic character, do not carry the weight of rational necessity or universal obligation. (1, 2–4)

West claims that attempts to establish a new, wider consensus often require discursive thinkers to challenge the old consensus, but in doing this they cannot argue that it conflicts with some philosophically unimpeachable conception of human nature; instead, they must call the old consensus into question by arguing either that it is internally inconsistent or that it was originally adopted for illegitimate ideological reasons or imposed by force. Therefore, discursive thinkers will often turn to historical accounts of morality that offer "plausible descriptions and explanations for the emergence, dominance, and decline of particular moral principles under specific social conditions in the historical process . . . [and in doing so, they will prefer to use sociological] notions such as role, function, description, and explanation" (West 2). These accounts, however, are not offered in order to call morality *as such* into question; instead, their targets are always particular existing moral structures. Therefore, these accounts must always be combined with attempts ". . . to put forward moral guidelines or insights as to how to solve particular pressing problems . . . and alleviate specific hardships" (West 3).

West argues that there is a close connection between this view of morality and Hegel's theory of the dialectical development of social institutions, according to which it is possible to understand the historical development of institutions in terms of the rational unfolding of their implicit purpose through a process involving the overcoming of their implicit internal contradictions. Marx, of course, made use of a similar idea. However, while Marx adopted this approach from Hegel, he modified it in two ways. First, he rejected Hegel's idealism, arguing that the forces driving this rational development are not to be found 'internally' in the structure of the Idea, but are located 'externally' in social interaction. Second, he increasingly turned his attention to those political, social, and economic elements in a society which *prevent* this rational development from occurring. Ultimately, this led him to develop a theory of society—Historical Materialism—to explain the development of these alienating and oppressive social institutions. However, this theory makes sense as a *political* theory connected to a political praxis only if it retains its links to a vision of non-oppressive society that transcends these problems. Therefore, although Marx developed a

morally informed critique of the alienating institutions of bourgeois society in order to call into question bourgeois morality, because such an attack would be pointless apart from a vision of an alternative, morally well-ordered society, he also had to provide such an alternative vision. Therefore, utopianism is essential to Marx's practical political theory: far from being an 'accidental utopian,' as Webb argued, a utopian vision was required by Marx's metaethical theory and he consciously set out to develop one.

Originally, his utopianism was focused on the idea that a truly moral society must be free of alienation. This led Marx and Engels to develop their picture of the developmentalist utopia implied by the humanistic criticism of the utopian socialists. However, as his metaethical views evolved, Marx came to realize that these views put severe constraints on utopian speculation. Specifically, he could not ground his utopian vision on humanistic foundations for, according to his metaethics, morality has no such foundations. In fact, he could not ground his utopian vision on any fixed first-order moral principle, for (he came to believe) these principles can be justified only on the basis of community-wide consensus and it is almost certain that this consensus will be "dynamic;" that is, that it will change as a result of ongoing discursive interactions. Given Marx's metaethics, therefore, not only could he not base the utopian vision his theory required on philosophical grounds, but, because the outcomes of the discursive interactions that must take place in the future utopian society cannot be predicted and because those outcomes will help shape its institutional structure, Marx was in no position to describe that utopia in detail. He was, however, not completely without resources. If that utopian community is to be morally well-ordered, it must be designed so as to permit free and effective discursive interaction. Therefore, its inhabitants—the proletariat—must remain free to determine the details of their society's social structure. In effect, these considerations led Marx to adopt the "principle of proletarian self-determination" (albeit as a metaethical—not a first-order moral—principle) to guide his utopian speculation.

But what type of utopian society would follow from such a principle? Of course, most of the particulars of this society could not be determined in advance, for, on this principle, a utopia is not a society that conforms in all its details to some predetermined conception of the good; instead, a utopia is a society that permits, even encourages, its members to develop (and change) social institutions in accordance with the (changing) ideas of the good arrived at through free and open dialogue. Because they must do this through such an ongoing process, this 'discursive' utopia must be designed in such a way as to guarantee the permanent possibility of such a discussion. Therefore, it is necessary that such a utopia include a set of *framework institutions* to institutionalize this free and effective discursive process. These institutions would include virtually the same set of institutions that Marx envisioned to guarantee individual self-development in his developmentalist utopia, as these institutions would also guarantee the appropriate type of free debate essential to his discursive utopia. Thus, in both utopias, the state

would shrink and focus on 'the administration of things,' a free education would be offered to all, private ownership of the means of production would be prohibited, individuals would be guaranteed the leisure to develop themselves, and the arts and humanities would be encouraged. In addition, however, in a discursive utopia, efforts would be made to strengthen the public sphere so as to facilitate free, open, and effective political discussions. In contrast to the utopian socialists' relatively unchanging utopias, both the discursive and the developmentalist utopias must be *dynamic* utopias. However, while developmentalist utopias would be designed primarily to promote personal development, discursive utopias would be designed to encourage its citizens to design and redesign their society so that it conforms to their discursively determined notions of a good and just society.

Given this metaethical theory and the discursive utopia based upon it, it is easy to construct a critique of the utopian socialists' utopian project. That project went wrong, on this interpretation, in that it was based on a set of dogmatically held first-order moral principles derived from a flawed humanist philosophical theory. Those principle led the utopian socialists to champion a variety of static utopias that would be oppressive in practice and unjustifiable in theory. They would be oppressive, not because they would not encourage self-development, but because they would not encourage effective political discourse. They would be unjustified, not simply (as on the materialistic criticism) because they were utopian, but because they were based on a dogmatic moral philosophy. As Engels argued:

> "What we can conjecture at present about [what will take place] after the impending effacement of capitalist production is, in the main, of a negative character, limited mostly to what will vanish. But what will be added? That will be settled after a new generation has grown up. . . . Once such people appear, they will not care a rap about what we today think they should do. They will establish their own practice and their own public opinion . . . and that's the end of it." (Qtd. in Webb 33)

## Conclusions

There is something of value in each of these five readings of the Marxist critique of the utopian socialists. Together, they all contribute to our understanding both of Marx's and Engels's political theories and of the problems and promises of utopian thinking in general; and, together, they show that Marx stood in a complex and changing relation to utopianism and to the utopian socialists. Clearly, he was concerned with a number of practical political issues raised by utopian thought. As is emphasized in the strategic interpretation, he was concerned that many utopians thought that utopia could be achieved easily and without struggle. He was also worried that a focus on utopian system building would be a tactical mistake as it would draw people away from more direct political activity. Throughout his career, he was also concerned with limiting the scope of utopian speculation. He believed that such speculation must be grounded in science and

respond both to existing problems and to ongoing social developments, and that it must not foreclose the future. In particular, he believed not only that utopian speculations had to respond to poverty and unwarranted inequalities endemic to capitalist society, but that it must also respond to the problem of alienation. Finally, he was aware of the dangers inherent in ethical projection and believed that utopians must avoid grounding their views on dogmatically accepted moral principles, but must, instead, ground them on a more dialectical understanding of morality.

The most significant advantage of the metaethical interpretation of Marx's critique of the utopian socialists is that it is consistent with all the seemingly contradictory ideas on the promises and problems of utopianism found in Marx's and Engels's many works: it not only allows for a coherent reading of their "anti-utopian utopianism," but it makes sense of most of the passages which partisans of the various other positions use to support their position. First, it fits with those passages in which Marx and Engels praise the utopian socialists for their clear vision and it explains why Marx and Engels adopted many of the utopian socialists' proposals in their descriptions of the future communist society. On the other hand, it explains why Marx and Engels consciously refrained from adding to those proposals, why they did no more than sketch their utopian society, and why they criticized the utopian socialists for their endless elaborations. This restraint was not based on the idea that science could tell us nothing about the future for, indeed, they thought that they knew a great deal about the future; instead, it was based on their belief that the shape of the future society should be determined by its inhabitants. Finally, this belief was not based on the kind of dogmatically held first-order moral belief similar to those that grounded the utopian socialists' vision; instead, it was based on a careful metaethical analysis of such beliefs.

On the other hand, this interpretation is not free of problems. Its most important problem is that, although it is not contradicted by the texts, nowhere does Marx explicitly adopt or argue for a discursive utopia. Not only does he not use the term "discursive utopia," but he does not describe his utopian vision in discursive terms. Moreover, he does no more than hint at the argument for it that I have attributed to him. Finally, it is difficult to tease a metaethics from his writings. It is true, of course, that Marx was not the most careful or systematic of writers, however, his silence on these points is striking. Thus, while this interpretation's greatest strength is that it ties together a variety of otherwise conflicting claims and positions, its greatest weakness is that virtually all the evidence in its favor is indirect.

If that evidence is accepted, however, it shows that Marx and Engels's "anti-utopian-utopianism" is, in fact, a special sort of utopianism that takes as its ideal a *dynamic* utopia, a utopia that is constantly changing as a result of the development and dialogue of its inhabitants. While Marx and Engels favored this type of utopia, they were opposed to all *static* utopias and, therefore, to all attempts to describe the ideal society in detail. Consequently, although they were sympathetic with many moral critiques of capitalist

society, they were wary of any attempt to ground a vision of utopia on an ethical projection that seeks simply to avoid the many problems found in that society. These are the main reasons why they objected to the utopias of the utopian socialists. Not only have these socialists paid too little attention to political questions and underestimated the stability of bourgeois society, but they have failed to see that their utopian ideals have been borrowed—with potentially disastrous results—from that society and that they have foreclosed the possibility that the citizens of their utopias might wish to modify the institutional structure under which they live. While the utopian socialists' opposition to the poverty and inequality of bourgeois society is to be commended, the static, hierarchical utopias they have proposed must be condemned.

If the metaethical interpretation is correct, Marx and Engels criticized the utopian socialists' approach and rejected their detailed accounts of the structure of utopia without rejecting utopianism entirely; instead they embraced a dynamic utopia, based first on humanistic grounds and then later on discursive grounds. This dynamic utopia is best understood as a type of "utopia of temporal process" (Harvey 133–96); that is, as an open-ended utopia that can develop according to the free and open practical dialogue engaged in by its citizens and guaranteed by its framework institutions. It is this utopia that, for Marx and Engels, formed the real alternative to bourgeois society. It is still, I would add, a worthy and attractive utopian vision.

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