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KARL MARX ON DEMOCRACY, PARTICIPATION, VOTING, AND EQUALITY

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THE CONCEPT OF democracy raises perennial divisions among its advocates and critics that may be characterized in the following way. Defendants see it as a complex of principles and procedures designed to realize certain values—those of liberty, equality, fraternity, justice—such that it constitutes a uniquely favored species of political praxis. Critics of democracy, in sharp contrast, tend to see it as nothing more than a set of techniques designed to ensure the rule of the most powerful under the guise of popular consent. Among its critics, there is a further distinction to be made between those who see democracy as a necessarily corrupt form of rule, a political apparatus designed to ensure the rule of special interests (a number of Marxists, Leninists, anarchists, etc.), and those who see the reduction of democracy to such terms as a lamentable departure made necessary by mass politics, the military-industrial complex, etc. (Schumpeter, Bachrach, Pateman, C. B. Macpherson, more or less fitting into this category). Far from believing that democracy is corrupt *sui generis*, these latter critics condemn representative democracy as a departure from the direct democracy of antiquity and reserve hope for a return to a purer, more participatory form.

An examination of Marx's own views on democracy shows that he by no means fits easily into the positions of either the qualified or wholesale critics of democracy and that he shares more in common with classical political philosophers, notably Plato, Aristotle and Hegel, on the subject of politics and democracy than is commonly assumed.¹ Marx's views on democracy call into serious question the (revisionist) Marxist assumptions that democracy represents the political epiphenomenon of a specific economic system and, consequently, constitutes no more than a set of practices or procedures to translate economics into juridical-political terms. In addition, Marx, following Hegel, convicts advocates of participatory democracy (democracy's reformist critics) of radical

individualism for assuming that participation entails the participation of each and every individual rather than participation by the community as a whole through representatives. In response to the familiar criticisms of democracy, one can elicit from Marx's quite passionate defense of democracy three major arguments. The first is that democracy bears a peculiar relation to politics as "the essence" of the political, or as genus to which all other forms of constitution are related as species. Not only is democracy not seen by Marx as merely the political efflux of a circumscribed set of economic conditions, but he makes the positive case for democracy as bearing a peculiar and intimate relation to politics and its emergence as a historically specific cultural complex—a uniquely intimate relationship that is not shared by other regimes such as monarchies and aristocracies. It is clear that democracy as understood in this way as a unique expression of the political constitutes a complex of ideas, values, and institutional arrangements that cannot be reduced to a mere set of procedures or practices. Marx's special case for democracy rests precisely on the claim that democracy represents more than a set of legal forms or procedures, realizing "the essence of every state" in such a way that other constitutional forms appear by contrast as merely juridical entities.

Second, Marx makes the explicit argument that democracy does not require the participation of all members of society as individuals in the decision-making process and that, therefore, the debate over the relative merits of direct or representative democracy is misdirected.

Third, Marx argues that political participation turns not on the function of deputies or representatives but rather on political suffrage. Voting, "considered philosophically . . . is the immediate, the direct, the existing and not simply imagined relation of civil society to the political state," he maintains, and the unity of the social and the political is symbolized by universal suffrage. Indeed it is the struggle for universal suffrage that brings about the dissolution of the dualism of civil society and the state.

To take each of these arguments in turn, Marx's case for democracy as the authentic expression of the political is at once startling and conventional. It is startling because Marx makes a case for democracy in terms almost identical to those made for communism as a privileged social form in the *1844 Manuscripts* one year later. In the latter work communism is the resolution of the antitheses between essence and existence, form and content, individual and species; it is the riddle of history solved and knows itself to be that solution, whereas in the

Critique of Hegel's "Philosophy of Right," democracy is all of these.² Democracy is the "generic constitution" to which monarchy stands as species; "democracy is content and form" because the state is essentially the *demos* and democracy is the government of the people; democracy is the coincidence of essence and existence, the state in and for itself:

Democracy is the resolved mystery of all constitutions. Here the constitution not only in itself, according to essence, but according to existence and actuality is returned to its real ground, actual man, the actual people, and established as its own work. The constitution appears as what it is, the free product of men.³

Marx draws a parallel between democracy and Christianity. "In a certain respect," he says, "democracy is to all other forms of the state what Christianity is to all other religions. Christianity is the religion *kat' exochein*, the essence of religion, deified man under the form of a particular religion. In the same way democracy is the essence of every political constitution, socialized man under the form of a particular constitution of the state."⁴

This comparison may cast doubt on the seriousness of Marx's defense of democracy. Is not democracy, like religion, yet another epiphenomenon or ideological form under which reality masquerades? This we know is not Marx's view of religion (although that of some Marxists), which he sees as a genuine expression of the human condition and a crucial objectification of the human essence at a given historical stage. Democracy is a similar expression, also to be transcended when the unity of individual and species, private and political, form and content, of which it is expressive, is finally achieved. Thus Marx continues:

[Democracy] stands related to other constitutions as the genus to its species; only here the genus itself appears as an existent, and therefore opposed as a particular species to those existents which do not conform to the essence. Democracy relates to all other forms of the state as their Old Testament. Man does not exist because of the law but rather the law exists for the good of man. Democracy is human existence, while in the other political forms man has only legal existence. That is the fundamental difference of democracy.⁵

Marx's defense of democracy is in the context of Hegel's case for constitutional monarchy as the ultimate development of the state and "achievement of the modern world."⁶ Hegel rejected democracy as a candidate for this honor, even the "beautiful democracy of Athens,"⁷ on the grounds that none of the pure forms of regime, monarchy, aristocracy or democracy exhibited the capacity for differentiation,

durability and self-consciousness exhibited by constitutional monarchy as a complex political form.⁸ Democracy is based on the principle of virtue, Hegel maintained, following Montesquieu. It depends, therefore, on sentiment and a sense of duty, a fragile relationship that constitutes the formal weakness of democracy such that its extreme form, sovereignty of people, is a formal absurdity:

The sovereignty of the people is one of the confused notions based on the wild idea of the "people." Taken without its monarch and the articulation of the whole which is the indispensable and direct concomitant of monarchy, the people is a formless mass and no longer a state.⁹

Consistent with the Parmenidean aphorism "the rational is the real (*wirklich*)," which Hegel adopts as the foundation of his logic, he maintains that the state as an idea and a formal principle has a greater reality (*wirklichkeit*) than the people, its content. In some respects this view accords with that of the great defenders of absolute monarchy, Hobbes and Bodin, of whom Hegel's language in his discussion of the persona of the monarch is evocative: "It is only as a person, the monarch, that the personality of the state is actual [i.e., actualized]," he points out, "and that a people ceases to be that indeterminate abstraction which, when represented in a quite general way, is called the people."¹⁰ In other words, the state as a corporation or juridical entity exists formally by virtue of empowering a representative, and the sovereign, more particularly the monarch, embodies that function.

It is this very formalism of which Marx is critical, and his rebuttal of Hegel's case for monarchy is in the terms of classical theories of popular sovereignty. The logical form of the state as a juristic expression is that in which the formal and material principles coincide and the people rule and are ruled.¹¹ Under the aegis of democracy, first the abstract distinction between civil society and the state and second the state itself as an abstraction are surpassed. Thus "in true democracy the political state disappears."¹² This is because democracy as unity of particular and universal, part and whole, is no mere constitutional form but a system whose principles actually govern. It follows therefore that

in all states distinct from democracy the state, the law, the constitution is dominant without really governing, that is, materially permeating the content of the remaining non-political spheres. In democracy the constitution, the law, the state, so far as it is political constitution, is itself only a self-determination of the people, and a determinate content of the people. Furthermore it is evident that all forms of the state have democracy for their truth, and for that reason are false to the extent that they are not democracy.¹³

Although abjuring the formalism or abstraction of Hegel's argument, Marx at the same time avoids the methodological individualism of radical democracy. When he turns some 90 pages later in the *Critique* to the question of participation, he does so with explicit reference to a passage from the remark to paragraph 308 of the *Philosophy of Right*:

To hold that every single person should share in deliberating and deciding on political matters of general concern on the ground that all individuals are members of the state, that its concerns are their concerns, and that it is their right that what is done should be done with their knowledge and volition, is tantamount to a proposal to put the democratic element without any rational form into the organism of the state, although it is only in virtue of the possession of such a form that the state is an organism at all. This idea comes readily to mind because it does not go beyond the abstraction of "being a member of the state," and it is superficial thinking which clings to abstractions.¹⁴

Marx seizes on several ideas here, beginning with Hegel's notion that the demand for the participation of all in decision making involves conflating the private and political realms and admitting society to politics without the formal mediation of representatives. It is due to this categorical mistake, Hegel argues, that the mere fact of membership in the state is considered grounds for political participation, as if the state were not a complex organization with differentiated functions, but simply the shadow of society at large.

Hegel was right, but for the wrong reasons, Marx argues. It is not the demand for participation in the state by virtue of membership in society that signifies "superficial thinking which clings to abstractions," but rather the artificial distinction between civil society and the state on which Hegel's position is predicated. If "not every single person should share in deliberating and deciding on political matters of general concern," it is not for the reasons Hegel gives. To say that "the democratic element can be admitted only as a formal element in a state organism" merely bespeaks the "formalism of the state,"¹⁵ Marx argues.

In a really rational state one could answer, "Not every single person should share in deliberating and deciding on political matters of general concern," because the individuals share in deliberating and deciding on matters of general concern as the "all," that is to say, within and as members of the society. Not all individually, but the individuals as all.¹⁶

The problem of political participation framed as the alternatives of direct or representative democracy is the problem falsely posed, Marx

avers. "Hegel presents himself with the dilemma: either civil society (the many, the multitude) shares through deputies in deliberating and deciding on matters of general concern or all [as] individuals do this."¹⁷ But "the question of whether civil society should participate in the legislature either by entering it through deputies or by direct participation of all as individuals is itself a question within the abstraction of the political state or within the abstract political state; it is an abstract political question."¹⁸ This is because within the framework of individualism, representation by "all" or "not-all" makes no essential difference. Marx turns against Hegel the very argument that Hegel used against membership in the state constituting grounds for participation in decision making. It rests on the following abstraction: "Thus, the basis which Hegel himself designated as external—the multiplicity of members—remains the best reason against the direct participation of all."

In its proper form [according to Hegel] the opposition is this: the individuals participate as all, or the individuals participate as a few, as not-all. In both cases allness remains merely an external plurality or totality of individuals. Allness is no essential, spiritual, actual quality of the individual. It is not something through which he would lose the character of abstract individuality. Rather, it is merely the sum total of individuality. One individuality, many individualities, all individualities. The one, the many, the all—none of these determinations changes the essence of the subject, individuality.¹⁹

The question of representative versus participatory democracy is thus a spurious question, Marx argues. Either the people are an integral part of the state or they are not and "if they are an integral part of the state, then it is obvious that their social existence is already their actual participation in it," and this by virtue of the fact of membership of the state.²⁰ The false alternatives of political participation either as "all" or "not all" is predicated on the abstract separation of civil society and the state, which in turn falsely presumes the political to be constituted by single political acts performed by individuals, focusing exclusively on the legislature as the locus of popular participation.

[If] political matters of general concern are the concern of the state, the state as actual concern, and "deliberation and decision is [sic] the effectuation of the state as actual concern [then] it is tautology [to say] that a member of the state, a part of the state, participates in the state, and that this participation can appear only as deliberation or decision, or related forms, and thus that every member of the state shares in deliberating and deciding (if these functions are taken to be the function of actual participation in the state) the political matters of general concern."²¹

“On the other hand,” Marx points out, “if we are talking about definite concerns, about single political acts, then it is again obvious that not all individuals accomplish them. Otherwise, the individual would be the true society, and would make society superfluous.”²²

Let us note that although Marx dismisses the traditional concept of the state as a real collectivity with sovereign power that can represent and be represented, he retains the notion of society as a collectivity in which the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. One of his objections to the possibility of all participating in political decision making as individuals is that this proposition is based on a radical individualism that fails to see society itself as a corporate entity representative of the interests of the individuals who constitute it. “The question whether all as individuals should share in deliberating and deciding on political matters of general concern is a question that arises from the separation of the political state and civil society.”²³ Once this is seen,

legislative power altogether loses the meaning of representative power. Here the legislature is a representation in the same sense in which every function is representative. For example, the shoemaker is my representative in so far as he fulfills a social need, just as every definite social activity, because it is a species-activity, represents only the species; that is to say, it represents a determination of my own essence the way every man is the representative of the other. Here, he is representative not by virtue of something other than himself which he represents, but by virtue of what he is and does.²⁴

This is an argument, it should be noted, against all attempts to impose the rubric of strict equality in such a way that functional substitution becomes the test of an individual’s integrity as a person. Such leveling egalitarianism is premised on radical individualism that aims to make all persons featureless monads, alike in the sameness and incapable of actualizing the rich range of potentialities that human nature promises. Marx’s argument has serious implications for some of the campaigns for equality waged in the name of Marxist humanism, feminism, etc., which, as he predicted, merely reproduce voluntarily the prerequisites for a higher stage of capitalism that devours women and children, allowing no distinctions of gender, race, ethnicity, etc. in the battle to break down “all traditional, confined, complacent, encrusted satisfactions of present needs, and reproductions of old ways of life” and “[tear] down all the barriers which hem in the development of the forces of production, the expansion of needs, the all-sided development of

production, and the exploitation and exchange of natural and mental forces."²⁵

Does Marx's argument that each in his distinctive praxis is representative of the species-essence of all rule out a special representative function for the legislature as a political institution? Not at all. Marx accords it a specialist function beyond the representation of the whole by the part that is characteristic of every human institution and social role (i.e., the shoemaker, etc.). Marx attaches particular significance to legislative power and the struggle to achieve it as expressive in a fundamental sense of the political will of civil society:

That all as individuals want to participate integrally in the legislature is nothing but the will of all to be actual (active) members of the state, or to give themselves a political existence, or to prove their existence as political and to effect it as such. . . . The fact, therefore, that civil society invades the sphere of legislative power en masse, and where possible totally, that actual civil society wishes to substitute itself for the fictional civil society of the legislature, is nothing but the drive of civil society, to give itself political existence, or to make political existence its actual existence. The drive of civil society to transform itself into political society, or to make political society into the actual society, shows itself as the drive for the most fully possible universal participation in legislative power.²⁶

Having established that the significance of the legislature is not to be construed narrowly in terms of its representation of individuals and their interests, but rather as an articulation of the political will of the community as such, Marx then goes on to argue that not admission to the legislature as such, but the widening of the franchise constitutes the critical element in representation—an argument consistent with his democratic predilections. Universal suffrage is the expression of the ultimate unity of political and civil society, the breaking down of those artificial barriers that hitherto permitted their separation, by making the composition of civil society and the state co-extensive:

It is not a question of whether civil society should exercise legislative power through deputies or through all as individuals. Rather, it is a question of the extension and greatest possible universalization of voting, of active as well as passive suffrage. This is the real point of dispute in the matter of political reform, in France as well as in England.²⁷

Voting widely challenged by modern cities of representative democracy as a meaningless exercise, is seen by Marx, as it was by democratic

theorists of antiquity, as “the actual (*wirklich*) relation of...civil society . . . to the representative element.”

Voting is not considered philosophically, that is, not in terms of its proper nature, if it is considered in relation to the crown or executive. The vote is the actual relation of actual civil society to the civil society of the legislature, to the representative element. In other words, the vote is the immediate, the direct, the existing and not simply imagined relation of civil society to the political state. It therefore goes without saying that the vote is the chief political interest of actual civil society. In unrestricted suffrage, both active and passive, civil society has actually raised itself for the first time to an abstraction of itself, to political existence as its true universal and essential existence. But the full achievement of this abstraction is at once also the transcendence of the abstraction. In actually establishing its political existence as its true existence civil society has simultaneously established its civil existence, in distinction from its political existence, as inessential. And with the one separated, the other, its opposite, falls. Within the abstract political state the reform of voting advances the dissolution of this political state, but also the dissolution of civil society.²⁸

Marx's treatment of the question of equality as a constitutive value of democracy is in all important respects similar to his treatment of the questions of representation, the role of the legislature, and voting. Once again he affirms the Hegelian position, which is right, he maintains, but for the wrong reasons. Hegel's argument about equality takes the same form as his argument about participation. The argument for economic equality or an equal division of property, like the argument for equal participation in decision making, takes as its justification the fact that as members of the state, as undifferentiated individuals, human beings are equal. But this equality as mutually substitutable individuals is equality by virtue of a false abstraction. For what is crucial about human beings is the variety and plenitude of their talents and functions. The cultural richness and depth of society is a reflection not of mere numbers of individuals, equal and undifferentiated, but of the opposite. Thus to fix on equality as a critical concept is a sign of intellectual mediocrity that cannot cope with the problem of unity and difference, the old Parmenidean problem of the one and the many that society poses. Society's unique problem as a collectivity of which the whole is greater than the sum of its parts comes about because the relation of society to its members is not atomistic or arithmetical, a totality made up of undifferentiated units of equal value. Rather society as a complex totality is made up of highly differentiated units of varying functions

and values. In the course of his famous disquisition on property in the *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel observed:

If at this stage we may speak of more persons than one, although no such distinction has yet been made, then we may say that in respect of their personality persons are equal. But this is an empty tautology, for the person, as something abstract, has not yet been particularized or established as distinct in some specific way.

"Equality" is the abstract identity of the Understanding; reflective thought and all kinds of intellectual mediocrity stumble on it at once when they are confronted by the relation of unity to a difference. At this point, equality could only be the equality of abstract persons as such, and therefore the whole field of possession, this terrain of inequality, falls outside it.

The demand sometimes made for an equal division of land, and other available resources too, is an intellectualism all the more empty and superficial in that at the heart of particular differences there lies not only the external contingency of nature but also the whole compass of mind, endlessly particularized and differentiated, and the rationality of mind developed into an organism.

We may not speak of the injustice of nature in the unequal distribution of possessions and resources, since nature is not free and therefore is neither just nor unjust. That everyone ought to have subsistence enough for his needs is a moral wish and thus vaguely expressed is well enough meant, but like anything that is only well meant it lacks objectivity.²⁹

Marx reproduced this argument in its fundamentals, maintaining that equality as such focused on externals, irrelevant from the point of view of an essential human nature actualized in the full range of differences of particular individuals. He gave depth to the Hegelian analysis by perceiving the phenomenon of exchange, and not merely the arithmetical abstraction of society as a collection of individuals, as the basis for equality.³⁰ He was thus able to interpret the old socialist slogan demanding justice according to need not as the expression of equality, *pace* Hegel, but as its opposite, a formula tailored to the specific differences of need and capacity characteristic of individuals. When, in the *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, he boldly proclaimed that distribution according to need, rather than strict equality, would herald the crossing of "the narrow horizon of bourgeois right,"³¹ Marx meant what he implied: that equality was an extrapolation from the presuppositions of capitalism. He had said as much in *The Holy Family*, declaring that the idea of "equal possession" is a political-economic one and therefore still an alienated expression."³²

In the *Grundrisse*, Marx elaborated more fully the argument that the principle of equality is at once the juridical expression of the pre-

conditions of exchange and founded on the abstract relation between individuals aggregated by a reciprocity of interests. This artificial equality has its basis in the natural difference of individuals.

Only the differences between their needs and between their production gives rise to exchange and to [men's] social equation in exchange; these natural differences are therefore the precondition of their social equality in the act of exchange, and of this relation in general, in which they relate to one another as productive. Regarded from the standpoint of the natural difference between them, individual A exists as the owner of a use value for B, and B as owner of a use value for A. In this respect, their natural difference again puts them reciprocally into the relation of equality. In this respect, however, they are not indifferent to one another, but integrate with one another, have need of one another; so that they stand not only in an equal, but also in a social relation to one another. This is not all. The fact that this need on the part of one can be satisfied by the product of the other, and vice versa, and that the one is capable of producing the object of the need of the other, and that each confronts the other as owner of the object of the other's need, this proves that each of them reaches beyond his own particular need etc., as a human being, and that they relate to one another as human beings; that their common species-being is acknowledged by all.³³

In other words, equality is an irrelevant inference from the reciprocity of need, whose deeper significance is the need for society itself. Nevertheless, it is an inference on which the modern state is predicated "and bourgeois democracy even more than the bourgeois economists takes refuge in this aspect."³⁴ For "in so far as the commodity or labour is conceived of only as exchange value, and the relation in which the various commodities are brought into connection with one another is conceived as the exchange of these exchange values with one another, as their equation, then the individuals, the subjects between whom this process goes on, are simply and only conceived of as exchangers." Bourgeois society takes "the formal character" of individuals "as they stand to one another in the exchange relation" as the indicator of their social relation:

Each of the subjects is an exchanger; i.e., each has the same social relation towards the other that the other has towards him. As subjects of exchange, their relation is therefore that of equality.³⁵

If equality is one principle extracted from the facts of exchange based on the reciprocity of need, freedom is another:

In so far as these natural differences among individuals and among their commodities . . . form the motive for the integration of these individuals, for their social interrelation as exchangers, in which they are *stipulated* for each other as,

and *prove* themselves to be, equals, there enters, in addition to the quality of equality, that of *freedom*. Although individual A feels a need for the commodity of individual B, he does not appropriate it by force nor vice versa, but rather they recognize one another reciprocally as proprietors, as persons whose will penetrates their commodities. Accordingly, the juridical moment of the Person enters here, as well as that of freedom, in so far as it is contained in the former. No one seizes hold of another's property by force. Each divests himself of his property voluntarily. But this is not all: individual A serves the need of individual B by means of the commodity *a* only in so far as and because individual B serves the need of individual A by means of the commodity *b*, and vice versa. Each serves the other in order to serve himself; each makes use of the other, reciprocally, as his means . . . Out of the act of exchange itself, the individual, each one of them, is reflected in himself as its exclusive and dominant (determinant) subject. With that, then, the complete freedom of the individual is posited: voluntary transaction; no force on either side; positing of the self as means, or as serving, only as a means, in order to posit the self as end in itself, as dominant and primary; finally, the self-seeking interest which brings nothing of a higher order to realization; the other is also recognized and acknowledged as one who likewise realizes his self-seeking interest, so that both know the common interest exists only in the duality, many-sidedness, and autonomous development of the exchanges between self-seeking interests. The general interest is precisely the generality of self-seeking interests. Therefore, when the economic form, exchange, posits the all-sided equality of its subjects, then the content, the individual as well as the objective material which drives towards the exchange, is *freedom*. Equality and freedom are thus not only respected in exchange based on exchange values but, also, the exchange of exchange values is the productive, real basis of all *equality* and *freedom*. As pure ideas they are merely the idealized expressions of this basis; as developed in juridical, political social relations, they are merely this basis to a higher power.³⁶

Marx contrasts freedom and equality as juridical expressions of relations of production under capital with "freedom and equality in the world of antiquity, where developed exchange value was not their basis, but where, rather, the development of that basis destroyed them. Equality and freedom (under capital) presuppose relations of production as yet unrealized in the ancient world and in the Middle Ages."³⁷ There is here, it must be noted, an implied distinction between real equality and freedom (realized in antiquity?) and the spurious freedom and equality on which capitalism is predicated. Marx notes of those engaged in exchange that the other's "equality with me and his freedom" arise from his "indifference to my need as such, to my natural individuality."³⁸ The system of exchange in fact rests on compulsion; each partner, driven by the "totality of [his] needs and drives" exercises "compulsion over the other [by] driv[ing] him into the exchange system."³⁹ Since money is only the realization of exchange value, and since the system of exchange values has realized itself only in a developed money system . . . the money steam can indeed only be the

realization of this system of freedom and equality.”⁴⁰ The logic of exchange is such that “even inheritance and similar legal relations, which perpetuate such inequalities, do not prejudice this natural freedom and equality.”⁴¹ Nevertheless, this freedom and equality is a system, and not individual, related to and part of “bourgeois society as a whole. . . . [It] appears as the surface process, beneath which . . . / in the depths, entirely different processes go on, in which this apparent individual equality liberty disappear.”⁴² Exchange value “as the objective basis of the whole system of production already in itself implies compulsion over the individual, since his immediate product is not a product for him: and since the individual has an existence only as a producer of exchange value, hence . . . the whole negation of this natural existence is already implied; . . . he is therefore entirely determined by society.”⁴³ Marx castigates the “foolishness of those socialists (namely the French, who want to depict socialism as the realization of the ideals of bourgeois society articulated by the French revolution) who demonstrate that exchange and exchange value etc. are originally (in time) or essentially (in their adequate form) a system of universal freedom and equality, but that they have been perverted by money, capital, etc.”⁴⁴

The proper reply to them is: that exchange value or, more precisely, the money system is in fact the system of equality and freedom, and that the disturbances which they encounter in the further development of the system are disturbances inherent in it, are merely the realization of equality and freedom, which prove to be inequality and unfreedom.⁴⁵

It is the mistake of such socialists to assume that the concepts of freedom and equality can in some way be purified or restored to an other than juridical status. As he argued in “On the Jewish Question” and *The Critique of the Gotha Programme*, “equal right is . . . a right to inequality in its content like every right,” first because it presupposes inequality and second because *eo ipso* it ignores essential differences. Only in a higher phase of communist society will equality as the basis of bourgeois justice be transcended in favor of justice according to need.⁴⁶ In other words, equality is a superficial inference from the reciprocity of needs.

Because Marx’s views on democracy are only intimated and never fully expounded, and because of their context, embedded in a critique of Hegel, they are open to dismissal—quite wrongly, I believe—as neo-

Hegelian relics of the metaphysical baggage of his youth. Marx's special case for democracy is one that takes far better account of the historical specificity and uniqueness of politics as a phenomenon than any of the revisionist pretenders and is consistent with his most mature and sophisticated views on the ideational and practical complexity of any given cultural formation.⁴⁷

It is surely no accident that democracy as a concept has such wide reference that its various usages suggest it to be nothing more than a term of approbation. Thus American political scientists of the 1950s dignified forms of republicanism that extend even to oligarchy with the name democracy, as indeed champions of the republican ideals of liberty, fraternity, and equality have done since the days of the Roman Republic and its stoical critics. The peculiar resonance of democracy as a term of approbation from the early modern period on is due to the simultaneous, and in some respects identical, emergence of democracy with the concept of the political. The historical process that saw the expansion of the reference of *polis* as a term from the citadel of the Mycenaean kings to the community of the city state is the same process that saw the ever-widening dispersal of political power from the royal household to the limited participation of all male members of even the lowest classes. Just as the concept of the political, as such, involved creating a public space beyond the divisive constraints of primordial ties of tribe, clan, and family, so peopling that space involved conferring social power on individuals in combination with their public activities. The more the sphere of the political was enlarged to cover wider areas of communal activity the greater the amount of political power that was generated and distributed. This process was, properly speaking, one of democratization, which saw the successive experience of the three pure types of regime in Greek experience, beginning with the Mycenaean kingship, through the Homeric aristocracy, and culminating with Periclean democracy. Each phase represented a wider dispersal of power and, at the same time, the expansion of concepts of likeness; spiritual kinship, moral equality, and those presuppositions of political participation that we associate with the term democracy. It is in this sense that democracy represented the unique expression of the political: the sense of semantic identity. For democracy in this sense connotes nothing less than the totality of presuppositions of politics as a historically specific phenomenon.

It may seem paradoxical to suggest that Marx deems democracy the unique expression of the political, on the one hand, and yet denigrates freedom and equality on the other, which were valued as inseparable from the concept of democracy since the time of Cleisthenes and explicitly defined as such by Thucydides in the famous funeral oration of Pericles. It is fairly certain, however, from Marx's phraseology, that he distinguishes between the different contents in different historical epochs of these historically rooted concepts. Thus he contrasts freedom and equality as the presuppositions of exchange as "exactly the opposite of the freedom and equality in the world of antiquity."⁴⁸ Freedom in antiquity was the antithesis of slavery, and the slave "in Roman law, the *servus* is . . . correctly defined as one who may not enter into exchange for the purpose of acquiring anything for himself."⁴⁹ Equality, as we know from Thucydides and other sources, was typically defined as equality before the law, a negative conception that presupposed inequality and excluded those beyond the reach of the law, i.e., slaves and foreigners. In Plato's phraseology "justice consists of granting the equality that unequals deserve to get," granting "much to the great and less to the less great."⁵⁰ Thus in antiquity the systematic separation of manual and mental labor through the institution of slavery and equality before the law as a privilege of the free gave to the concepts of freedom and equality a specific content that is sharply contrasted with the content of bourgeois freedom and equality as presuppositions of economic exchange that is based on the (hidden) compulsion of need and the economic necessity of labor. To characterize the contents of these concepts in antiquity and modernity as opposites does not, however, rule out a process by which the former may develop into the latter. "Equality and freedom presuppose relations of production as yet unrealized in the ancient world and in the Middle Ages," Marx argues.⁵¹ Once those relations of production emerged the concepts lost their old content, but it was precisely the concepts in their ancient form that laid straight the path for the subsequent economic developments that transformed them. Thus, although Roman law as a legal system

corresponds to a social state in which exchange was by no means developed, nevertheless, in so far as it was developed in a limited sphere, it was able to develop the attributes of the juridical person, precisely of the individual engaged in exchange, and thus anticipate (in its basic aspects) the legal relations of industrial society, and in particular the right which rising bourgeois society had necessarily to assert against medieval society. But the development of this right itself coincides completely with the dissolution of the Roman community.⁵²

Marx's attitude to antiquity is not without ambivalence. The peculiar hold its values exercise over us represents quite simply a nostalgia for culture in its infancy. He maintains, "Why should not the historic childhood of humanity, its most beautiful unfolding, as a stage never to return, exercise an eternal charm?"⁵³ The eternal appeal of these values "is inextricably bound up . . . with the fact that the unripe social conditions under which they arose and could alone arise, can never return."⁵⁴ Nevertheless, despite this apparent total reductionism, Marx seems to attribute more than apparent transcendence to the values of freedom, justice, beauty, social harmony, etc., which he frequently invokes in his allusions to the society of the future. Does he believe, therefore, that these ancient values contain arrested possibilities such that under socialism they will be more than the mere juridical expression of the (bad) capitalist conditions for exchange? It is entirely consistent for him to do so. In this curious way Marx can make a case for the correct form of each of these values that thinkers before and after him have made using philosophical rather than historical argument.

This difference having been noted, the similarity between Marx's view and those of his predecessors on the correct form of equality, justice, etc., is quite striking. Like Plato and Hegel he maintains that once the just measure for the distribution of social goods has been established ("according to need") equality should be proportional and not strictly distributed. And like the ancients, and particularly Aristotle, Marx conceives of freedom not as a concept describing juridical status but as describing a moral condition: that of the moral agent who can subjugate instinct to reason.⁵⁵ He has scant regard for the notion of justice and equality as "natural rights," a concept unknown to the ancients and deemed by Marx a bourgeois fiction extrapolated from the conditions of exchange. On this, more than one modern philosopher can agree.⁵⁶

Marx's general nostalgia for the transparency of social relations in antiquity and the Middle Ages can be construed as a lament for the loss of community in modern society. For the substance of the values of freedom and equality in antiquity and the Middle Ages, built as they were on the foundations of slavery and serfdom, was nevertheless determined by a system of cosmic order that had its counterpart in the social structure of the community and the highly specified networks of moral and social relationships. The deficiency of these concepts in bourgeois society is the deficiency of a social system in which only the

relics of traditional communal life and its framework of cosmic order are retained. That those relics live on at all is, moreover, only because they are legitimations of the very activity (economic exchange) that eroded their meaning. Marx's critique of the values of capitalism is close in tone and substance to the laments of Plato and Aristotle over the corruption of the Athenian polis and of the Roman stoics and the Church Fathers over the decline of the Roman Republic. In each case the corruption of a moral community was accompanied by an erosion in the meaning of values that have been handed down to us as the vestiges of a community and its cosmic system that have been lost.

NOTES

1. Treatments of Marx on democracy abound but none, to my knowledge, analyzes closely the passage of Marx's *Critique of Hegel's "Philosophy of Right"* and the *Grundrisse* to make the arguments advanced here. Maximilien Rubel in his introduction to Volume 2 of the *Bibliothèque de la Pleiade* edition of Marx's writings (republished in English as Essay 3 of *Rubel on Karl Marx, Five Essays*, ed. Joseph O'Malley and Keith Algozin, Cambridge University Press, 1981) briefly discusses Marx's defense of democracy in the *Critique of the Philosophy of Right*. Rubel's earlier essay "Notes on Marx's Conception of Democracy," (*New Politics*, vol. 1., no. 2, 1962, pp. 78-90) sheds interesting light on the genealogy of Marx's concept of democracy as derived from Spinoza. Rubel maintains that "Marx's concept of socialism and communism is derived from the concept of democracy he held before his conversion to communism" (p. 89). This conclusion is shared, with reservations, by Shlomo Avineri in his standard account of *The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx* (Cambridge University Press, 1968), which gives a brief account of Marx's views in the *Critique*, focusing on the notion of "true democracy" realizing "man's communist essence." In an earlier essay entitled Marx's *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right in Its Systematic Setting* (*Cahiers de l'Institut de Science Economique Appliquée*, Series 2, no. 10, August 1966, pp. 45-81), Avineri also focused on the question of whether Marx's views mark a transition from Jacobin democracy to communism, placing, it seems to me, undue emphasis on Marx's use of the term "kommunistische Wesen," which might better be translated as communal existence than "communist essence" (pp. 69-75).

2. Reference to Marx's *Critique of Hegel's "Philosophy of Right"* are to the edition by Joseph O'Malley (Cambridge University Press, 1972). References to Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* are to the edition by T. M. Knox (Oxford University Press, 1967) and to Marx's *Grundrisse der Kritik der Politischen Ökonomie* are to the edition by Martin Nicolaus (Penguin, 1973).

3. *Ibid.*, pp. 29-30.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 30.

5. *Ibid.*

6. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, remark to para. 273, p. 176.
7. *Ibid.*, addition to para. 279, p. 288.
8. *Ibid.*, remark to para. 279, p. 183.
9. *Ibid.*, remark to para. 279, pp. 182-183, reproduced by Marx in his *Critique*, loc. cit., p. 29.
10. Marx, *Critique of Hegel's "Philosophy of Right,"* p. 29.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 30.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 31.
13. *Ibid.*
14. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, p. 200, Marx's *Critique*, p. 115.
15. Marx's *Critique*, p. 116.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 117.
17. *Ibid.*
18. *Ibid.*
19. *Ibid.*
20. *Ibid.*
21. *Ibid.*, pp. 117-118.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 118.
23. *Ibid.*
24. *Ibid.*, pp. 119-120.
25. Marx, *Grundrisse*, pp. 409-410.
26. *Critique of Hegel's "Philosophy of Right,"* pp. 118-119.
27. *Ibid.*, pp. 120-121.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 121.
29. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, remark to para. 49, p. 44.
30. Hegel's attack on strict or arithmetical equality, like that of Marx, bears striking parallels to the distinction made by Aristotle between two kinds of equality derived from the Pythagorean, Archytas of Tarentum. The distinction, for which there are mathematical formulae, as set out by Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (V, iii, 7-12, 1131a 30-1131b 10), is the basis for his theory of economic exchange on the basis of need, his theories of distributive, corrective, and commutative justice, and his distinctions between "equal" and "unequal" friendships. For a useful exposition of the theory see: F. D. Harvey, "Two Kinds of Equality," *Classica et Mediaevala* (vol. 26, 1965), pp. 101-140. Treatments of Aristotle's economic theory that also discuss the legacy of Archytas include Joseph Soudek, "Aristotle's Theory of Exchange," *American Philosophical Society Proceedings* (vol. 96, no. 1, 1952), pp. 45-75; B. J. Gordon, "Aristotle and the Development of Value Theory," *Quarterly Review of Economics* (vol. 78, 1964), pp. 115-128; and the article by Cornelius Castoriadis, "From Marx to Aristotle, from Aristotle to Us," *Social Research* (vol. 45, 1978), pp. 667-738.
31. *Critique of the Gotha Programme, Marx/Engels Selected Works*, Vol. 3 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1966), p. 19.
32. *The Holy Family* (London: Lawrence and Wisart, 1956), p. 60. This has been noted by Agnes Heller in her excellent study *The Theory of Need in Marx* (London: Allison and Busby, 1976), p. 123, who cites this translation. For a slightly different translation see the *Marx/Engels Collected Works* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1975, vol. 4), p. 43.

33. Marx, *Grundrisse*, pp. 242-244.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 240.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 241.

36. *Ibid.*, pp. 243-245.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 245.

38. *Ibid.*

39. *Ibid.*

40. *Ibid.*, p. 246.

41. *Ibid.*, p. 247.

42. *Ibid.*

43. *Ibid.*, p. 248.

44. *Ibid.*

45. *Ibid.*, pp. 248-249.

46. *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, loc. cit., p. 19.

47. Marx's doctoral dissertation and the research in preparation for it demonstrated a competent classical scholar as judged by his academic peers (see Cyril Bailey, "Karl Marx on Greek Atomism," *Classical Quarterly*, vol. 22, 1928, pp. 205-206); but more importantly, classical writers and themes continued to exert a profound influence on the formation of his concepts long after he had departed from the field of ancient philosophy. For instance, I am sure that Marx's thesis of class struggle, generally considered to be his unique contribution to a science of political economy otherwise heavily indebted to eighteenth-century sources, is in fact derived from the Thrasymachan thesis of Plato's *Republic* that society is ordered by the outcome of a struggle for power in which the ruling class rules in its own interests. G.E.M. de Ste. Croix, in his superb life's work, *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World* (London: Duckworth, 1981), although not going so far as to make this claim, emphasizes Aristotle's preoccupation with the Thrasymachan thesis, with which Aristotle more or less agrees by virtue of according property ownership the central role in determining the class interests of a regime (*Ibid.*, II, iv, p. 71-76). Ste. Croix reminds us, at the same time, of Marx's indebtedness to Aristotle, whom he refers to variously as "the acme of ancient philosophy" (*Marx/Engels Collected Works*, vol. I, p. 424), "the greatest thinker of antiquity," "a Giant thinker," etc. (*Capital*, vol. I, London: Lawrence & Wishart, n.d., pp. 384, 64-66). Although Marx wrote no extended work on antiquity after his doctoral dissertation of 1840-1841 he reread the classical authors, usually in the original, throughout his life, referring in 1855 to his revision of Roman history up to the Augustan period, in 1861 to his rereading of Appian on the Roman civil wars in the original Greek, and again in 1861 to his rereading of Thucydides. He made a careful study of Roman Republican history using Neibuhr, Mommsen, and other contemporary authorities, and his works are full of allusions to Greek and Roman authors, as Ste. Croix notes (*Ibid.*, I, iv, p. 24). Different aspects of Marx's relation to the ancient world from the standpoint of his later writings, in particular the *Grundrisse* and the *Ethnological Notebooks* of 1880-1883 (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1974), are investigated in Patricia Springborg, "Democracy: Method or Praxis?," *Thesis Eleven* (no. 9, forthcoming), and "Marx, Democracy and the Ancient Polis," *Critical Philosophy* (vol. 1, no. 1, forthcoming).

48. *Grundrisse*, p. 245.

49. *Ibid.*

50. Plato's *Laws*, 757 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), p. 230.
51. *Grundrisse*, p. 245.
52. *Ibid.*, pp. 245-246.
53. *Ibid.*, p. 111.
54. *Ibid.*
55. Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, *Marx/Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 3, p. 276.
56. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (London: Duckworth, 1981), p. 67ff.

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