

Is Marx's Thought on Freedom Contradictory?

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ABSTRACT: In *The Longing for Total Revolution* Bernard Yack argues that Marx's thought is plagued by a recurring contradiction. On the one hand, Marx criticizes his idealist predecessors for failing to get beyond the dichotomy between human freedom and natural necessity, and he identifies labour, activity determined by the necessity of having to satisfy material needs, as the primary activity of human freedom. On the other hand, Marx's account of what makes us distinctively human as well as his view that capitalism dehumanizes workers implicitly relies on the same dichotomy. In response, this paper argues that while Yack identifies a tension in Marx's writings, he overlooks the resources Marx has to resolve it.

Keywords: freedom, natural necessity, left Kantianism, Karl Marx, Bernard Yack.

Among the most important themes of Bernard Yack's *The Longing for Total Revolution* is the claim that left Kantian thought is plagued by a recurring contradiction. The contradiction runs roughly as follows. On the one hand, left Kantians reject Kant's dichotomy between human freedom and natural necessity. On the other hand, the left Kantian critique of dehumanization implicitly affirms the same dichotomy. Left Kantian thought thus relies on inconsistent premises. It is contradictory.

In what follows I focus on Yack's discussion of the most famous of all the left Kantians: Karl Marx. Yack argues that we find in Marx's writings the same contradiction that marks all left-Kantian thought. Like other left Kantians, Marx criticizes his idealist predecessors for invoking the dichotomy between human freedom and natural necessity, and he identifies labor—activity determined by need—as a free and self-realizing activity. According to Yack, however, Marx's critique of capitalism as a dehumanizing mode of production itself depends on a quasi-Kantian idea of freedom. Consequently, Yack contends, Marx contradicts himself.

In this paper I argue that while Yack identifies a tension in Marx's writings, he overlooks the resources Marx has to escape it. Central to my argument is the idea that Marx has a view of freedom that is compatible with the necessity of having to produce to satisfy needs. This view, which I argue is also central to Hegel's political philosophy, rejects the quasi-Kantian assumption that needs imposed on us by our bodily nature, and the activities that respond to them, are unfree. Carried out under the appropriate social and political arrangements, activities directed at needs are compatible with our freedom. I argue that this view of freedom escapes the contradiction that Yack identifies, and that it is, moreover, an appealing view, one worthy of further refinement.

Before I continue, a qualification. In what follows I discuss Marx's thought on freedom and necessity. However, I have a specific form of "necessity" in mind, namely the necessity of having to labor to satisfy our material needs. The essay does not cover other types of necessity, for example causal determinism.¹

¹ Like Allen Wood, "I know of no text where Marx explicitly addresses the issue of free will and determinism, and doubt that he has any firm opinion on this issue." (Wood 1981, 112).

I proceed as follows. Section I provides a brief account of the core historical claims of *The Longing for Total Revolution*. Section II then examines in greater detail Yack's discussion of Marx, focusing in particular on the claim that Marx's thought on freedom is contradictory. Section III then briefly turns to Hegel's political philosophy, arguing (contra Yack) that Hegel anticipates Marx by putting forward a view of freedom that is compatible with our bodily nature. Section IV argues that Marx shares this view, and that this resolves this contradiction that Yack identifies as central to his thought.

I. THE LONGING FOR TOTAL REVOLUTION

The Longing for Total Revolution has both historical and critical aims. In this section, I discuss its historical aim. In the next, I take up its critical one.

Yack's historical aim is to provide an account of a form of discontent that has been widespread among philosophers and social theorists since the end of the eighteenth century, a discontent that he argues can be found in the work of Rousseau, Schiller, the young Hegel, Marx, and Nietzsche. This discontent has two components. First, there is "a longing to get beyond what is perceived as the dehumanizing spirit of modern society" (Yack 1986, 365). Second, there is "a longing to eliminate the obstacles to overcoming that spirit" (ibid.). The second component is what Yack calls the "longing for total revolution." The longed-for revolution is total because it "transforms the whole of human character by attacking the fundamental sub-political roots of social interaction" (ibid., 9).

Yack argues that the preoccupation with total revolution was enabled by two conceptual innovations. The first consists in a new way of conceptualizing freedom as action that is undetermined by external ends, including ends set by our bodily nature. Yack argues that the move in this direction was originally made by

Rousseau, for whom “the mere impulse of appetite is slavery, while obedience to a law which we prescribe to ourselves is liberty” (Rousseau [1762] 1973, 178), but that the idea receives a more philosophically rigorous treatment in Kant’s moral philosophy, where it is transmuted into the dichotomy between human freedom and natural necessity. On this view, freedom is the capacity to “act independently of any alien causes” (Kant [1785] 2019, 446-47), where alien causes include our bodily desires. Yack argues that subsequent philosophers utilized the freedom/nature dichotomy (in ways quite different from Kant’s original intention) to develop a potent critique of the dehumanization wrought of by modern society. The dichotomy becomes the “conceptual foundation upon which all of the most influential nineteenth German moral philosophers and social critics . . . erect their positions” (Yack 1986, 22).

The second conceptual innovation consists in a new way of thinking about history as a succession of discrete societies, each with their own particular spirit and culture. This new way of thinking about history is important, Yack argues, because it provides justification for the claim that dehumanization is not part and parcel of human life but a historically contingent phenomenon, and so at least potentially surmountable: “If the obstacle to our satisfactions is a particular form of social interaction, then our limitations are not inescapable” (ibid., 26).

While the conceptual innovations that laid the ground for the longing for total revolution were primarily made by Kant (and to a lesser extent by Rousseau, Herder, and Montesquieu), Yack argues that the concern with dehumanization and total revolution only comes to the fore in post-Kantian philosophy. In Yack’s view, the first thinker who unites these concerns is Schiller. Although Rousseau had seen the spirit of modern society as an obstacle to the realization of human freedom,

Schiller is “the first to suggest that the transformation of one particular sphere of social interaction in modern society could effect a total revolution that would take us beyond its dehumanizing spirit” (ibid., 133).

While Schiller occupies a prominent place in Yack’s narrative on account of his being the first to demand total revolution, Hegel occupies a prominent place on account of being the first to see the futility of that demand. Yack argues that Hegel’s thought on this topic underwent an important shift. Like Schiller and the left Kantians, the young Hegel rejected the freedom/nature dichotomy, and looked to realize Kantian freedom in the world. However, the “hopes for social transformation expressed by the young Hegel are not fulfilled by his mature philosophy of freedom” (ibid., 186). This is because, in Yack’s view, Hegel comes to see that real freedom, activity undetermined by alien causes, can be achieved only in the realm of “Absolute Spirit”, i.e., in the realm of art, religion, and philosophy. Thus, Hegel’s political philosophy teaches “resignation to the limitations of our ability to achieve our practical ends in society” (ibid., 220). I shall come back to this claim in section III, for I believe that it gets Hegel wrong, and that, on a more careful interpretation, Hegel’s view is much closer to Marx’s than Yack would have us believe.

After a discussion of the left Hegelians, Yack then turns his attention to Marx, who, along with Nietzsche, is the primary target of Yack’s critique. Yack interprets Marx as a left Kantian, because he shared the discontent over the dehumanization of individuals in modern society and because he looked to realize freedom in the world, rather than beyond it (as Yack argues is the case with Kant and the mature Hegel). While Marx shared this with other left Kantians, however, he identified a new obstacle to the realization of freedom: the capitalist mode of production. His subsequent theory of history aimed to provide theoretical

justification for a view to which, Yack argues, Marx was already antecedently committed: that the obstacle to freedom, capitalism, is historically specific and hence eliminable by means of a total revolution.

II. YACK'S CRITIQUE OF MARX

Like all left Kantians, Yack argues, Marx relies on mutually inconsistent premises and thus contradicts himself, simultaneously affirming and denying the freedom/nature dichotomy.

On the one hand, Marx's early writings deny that activity undertaken in response to needs is unfree. The young Marx identifies labor—action directed at needs—as a free and self-realizing activity. He describes such labor as the human “species activity” and decries the alienation of that activity under capitalism. Furthermore, he criticizes others for viewing labor in a different way, for instance as a necessary evil or as a punishment for our fallen nature (see, e.g., Marx [1857-1858] 1975-2004, 529-30). Thus, Yack contends, Marx rejects the quasi-Kantian view that needs imposed on us by nature are a source of unfreedom.

On the other hand, however, Yack argues that Marx also implicitly affirms the view that needs are a source of unfreedom. Although Marx identifies labor as the essential characteristic of human beings, his account of what is distinctive about human labor reveals his “residual Kantianism” (Yack 1986, 292). Responding to the claim that labor is not distinctive of human beings because “animals also produce,” Marx writes that animals produce “only under the dominion of immediate physical need, whilst man produces even when he is free from physical need and only truly produces in freedom therefrom” (Marx [1844a] 1975-2004, 276). As Yack puts it, it thus appears that for Marx it is “mental freedom from external conditioning that distinguishes human activity from all other natural activity” (Yack 1986, 292).

Furthermore, Yack argues that some of Marx's most important criticisms of capitalism also rely on this Kantian view of freedom. For instance, the early Marx's critique that capitalism makes workers the "plaything of alien forces"—a critique that persists in the mature writings as a critique of fetishism—relies on the quasi-Kantian idea that freedom consists in action that is undetermined by alien causes. In this way, Yack argues that the contradiction is not confined to Marx's philosophical anthropology but pervades his thought at a more fundamental level.

Of course, Marx argues that under communism individuals will no longer be playthings of alien forces, thus denying that unfreedom is an ineliminable feature of all modes of production. Is he justified in this belief? Yack argues not. The desire to realize Kantian freedom in the world is a futile aspiration for the simple reason that our lives will always be subject to "alien causes". Far from being a historically contingent feature of pre-communist societies, various forms of necessity – including the necessity of meeting our bodily needs – will always be with us.

III. HEGEL'S VIEW OF FREEDOM

In section IV, I will present an alternative interpretation of Marx's view of freedom, one that rejects the quasi-Kantian view that activity directed at needs is unfree.

First, however, I shall first say something about the mature Hegel, who I believe anticipates this way of resolving the dilemma Yack identifies.

According to Yack, while the young Hegel hoped to realize Kantian freedom in the world, the mature Hegel came to see that this is a futile aspiration. Real freedom, freedom undetermined by alien causes, is, by its very nature, available only beyond the social and political realm, in "Absolute Spirit." Thus, although Hegel urged reconciliation with the major institutions of the modern social world, this is a social world that is "is shot through with contingency from top to bottom" (*ibid.*,

217). For Yack, therefore, Hegelian reconciliation involved a “resignation to the limitations of our ability to achieve our practical ends in society” (ibid., 220).

Now I think that this misinterprets the achievement of Hegel’s political philosophy. Yack sees this achievement in terms of a realism about the degree of freedom that is available in the modern social world: if freedom is, in quasi-Kantian fashion, action undetermined by alien causes, then freedom in the modern social world must necessarily be limited. By contrast, I see Hegel as providing a detailed account of how freedom is ultimately compatible with the fact that we are not only spiritual but also material beings who must, therefore, perform a variety of tasks to satisfy our bodily needs.² On this view, the fact that action is directed towards, and so in some sense determined by, our needs does not mean that action is unfree. Carried out under the appropriate set of social and political institutions, the activities through which we maintain and reproduce life are compatible with, and may even promote, human freedom.

This strand of Hegel’s political philosophy emerges most clearly in his account of the institutions that he takes to be central to the modern social world: the nuclear family, civil society, and the state. Of these three institutions, the first two offer the clearest demonstration of how activities and practices that have as their central goal the satisfaction of bodily needs can at the same time actualize human freedom. Thus, in his account of the family, Hegel shows how sexual activity—“the satisfaction of the natural drive”—is not an activity of mere need satisfaction. Rather, because sexual activity sustains the union of marriage, reason can endorse the need, thus stripping it of its otherness and making it consistent with our

² For further discussion of the idea that Hegel’s rational state offers a reconciliation of our material and spiritual nature, see Neuhaus 2000, ch. 5, and Neuhaus 2020.

freedom.³ Likewise, in his account of civil society, Hegel shows how the fact that we must necessarily work to produce various goods and services to reproduce human life is not a regrettable limitation on our freedom. Central to Hegel's account is the idea that in the modern economy workers do not labor to satisfy their own needs but rather adapt their activity "to the enjoyment of others" (Hegel [1820] 1991, §199). Far from seeing this working for others as a problematic aspect of modern labor (as Rousseau, for example, had), Hegel argues that it is liberating. By working for others, we are liberated from the immediacy of our natural condition and are also compelled to adopt a more social outlook, which takes into consideration not just our own needs but also those of others, in our productive activity. Crucially, Hegel thought that the adoption of this social outlook is required if human beings are to experience their social world as a home.⁴

I emphasize this aspect of Hegel's view not just because I think that Yack misconstrues Hegel here, but more importantly because I think that Hegel's view of the compatibility of freedom and our bodily nature anticipates Marx's view. That is, I take it that Marx shared with Hegel the idea that, under the appropriate conditions, activities which are directed toward the satisfaction of our bodily needs are not only compatible with, but can positively promote, human freedom. On my view, then, the difference between Hegel and Marx does not turn (as it does for Yack) on the issue

³ In line with this thought, Hegel rejected the idea that love that does not involve the satisfaction of sexual needs is more free than one that does. On the contrary, "it is a further abstraction if the divine and substantial is separated from its existence [*Dasein*] in such a way that feeling [*Empfindung*] and the consciousness of spiritual unity are categorized [*fixiert*] as what is falsely called *Platonic love*. This separation is associated with the monastic attitude which defines the moment of natural life [*Lebendigkeit*] as utterly negative and, by this very separation, endows it with infinite importance in itself" (Hegel [1820] 1991, §163).

⁴ As Hegel puts it, "'I' is at home in the world when it knows it, and even more so when it has comprehended it" (Hegel [1820] 1991, §4 Addition, 36). For discussion of the claim that being "at home in the world" requires adopting a more social outlook, see Hardimon 1994.

of whether freedom is compatible with necessity, but on the question of the social and political institutions necessary to achieve that end. I now turn to Marx's thought on this topic.

IV. MARX'S VIEW OF FREEDOM

Like Hegel, Marx holds that freedom is compatible with activity that has as its goal the satisfaction of needs. This, of course, is strongly suggested by the fact that Marx identifies labor, activity directed at need satisfaction, as a free and self-realizing activity. He describes such labor as the human "life activity," as "species life," as the "spiritual essence," and as the "human essence" (Marx [1844a], 1975-2004, 276–277). He also criticizes others for failing to see labor in this manner. For instance, Marx takes the political economists to task for viewing labor—the "wealth of human endeavour"—only in its relation to "utility," as an activity which satisfies "need...vulgar need." In reality, Marx writes, the "history of industry and the established objective existence of industry are the open book of man's essential powers" (Marx [1844a], 1975-2004, 302–303). These remarks strongly imply a rejection of the quasi-Kantian view that activity directed toward needs is unfree.

While Yack is aware of passages such as these, he nonetheless argues (as we have seen) that Marx's attempt to explain what is distinctive about human labor reveals his "residual Kantianism" For instance, he quotes Marx's remark, in the 1844 *Manuscripts*, that "eating, drinking, procreating, etc., are also genuinely human functions. But taken abstractly, separated from the sphere of all other human activity and turned into sole and exclusive ends, they are animal functions" (Marx 1844a, 275-76). Yack sees this remark as suggesting that what ultimately distinguishes human labor from animal labor is that the former is undetermined by the necessity of

having to produce to satisfy our bodily needs. But I think this is mistaken. What I take Marx to be saying is that while humans and animals share the end of satisfying their needs, there are human and animal ways of doing so. If satisfying *our own* needs is the “sole and exclusive” end of our activity, then our activity is no different in the relevant sense from animal activity. However, if we instead work with a consciousness of the end our labor serves—the development of our own *powers* and the satisfaction of *others’* needs—and accept and affirm those ends as part of our own good, then our activity, though directed at satisfying needs, is not and is not experienced as an external constraint on our freedom. Marx made the same point later in *The Grundrisse*:

Certainly, labour obtains its measure from the outside, through the aim to be attained and the obstacles to be overcome in attaining it. But [Adam] Smith has no inkling whatever that this overcoming of obstacles is in itself a liberating activity—and that, further, the external aims become stripped of the semblance of merely external natural urgencies, and become posited as aims which the individual himself posits—hence as self-realization, objectification of the subject, hence real freedom, whose action is, precisely, labour. (Marx [1857-1858] 1975-2004, 529-30).

It is worth noting that this view of freedom can still generate a critique of capitalism as dehumanizing. The criticism is not that capitalism dehumanizes workers by making them labor to satisfy external ends. As the *Grundrisse* quotation makes clear, labor will always “obtain its measure from the outside,” through the

requirements of the product to be made and the needs that must be fulfilled. For example, a tailor is constrained both by the needs of their customers and material they are working with; moreover, their activity makes little sense to them without this focus. Rather, the criticism is that is that capitalism dehumanizes us by compelling us to work to satisfy our own narrow set of biological needs. Far from being the satisfaction of my need for creative activity, or an activity through which I satisfy the needs of others (which is itself a need, for Marx), “labor becomes directly labour to earn a living”, which we only submit to “out of egoistic need and necessity”(Marx [1844b] 1975-2004, 219-220). Since labor under capitalism is undertaken for *this* end, and not for the good of the activity itself or the good of contributing to the satisfaction of others’ needs, it is not fully human.

This view of freedom informs Marx’s account of unalienated labor in the concluding paragraphs of his 1844 “Comments on James Mill” (ibid., 227-28; for further discussion see Kandiyali 2020). There, Marx describes what it would be like if we had “carried out production as human beings,” which is to say, in an unalienated fashion under communism. In such labor, Marx writes, we would enjoy an “individual manifestation of life” during the activity of labor and see the product of our labor as an objectification of our individuality. That is, our labor would be individually self-realizing. Yet what makes this account interesting from the present perspective is that such labor is also directed towards the needs of others. . Thus, in unalienated labor, I not only realize myself by developing my powers and capacities and objectifying them in the product of my labor; I am also said to derive fulfilment from “your enjoyment or use of my product” and from the knowledge that I have “satisfied a human need by my work” (ibid., 228). On this account of communist society, then, we realize our nature *through* others—by helping them satisfy their

needs. In this act of producing for others, both the individual and communal aspects of our nature are affirmed.

Is this account of Marx's thought I have sketched—containing a view of freedom, a critique of capitalism, and a vision of communism—contradictory? I think not. The key point is that, unlike the quasi-Kantian view Yack attributes to Marx, this view does not see the necessity of having to satisfy needs as opposed to our freedom. Rather, it sees freedom as compatible with satisfying needs, provided we respond to those needs in a human way, where this centrally involves satisfying those needs with the aim of realizing my individual essence and providing others with the goods and services required to realize theirs. It sees capitalism as dehumanizing because it is an economic system in which, rather than responding to our neediness in this manner, we labor only to satisfy our own “egoistic needs”. And it sees communism, not as a society in which we have escaped determination the necessity of having to satisfy our needs, but one in which we relate to our needs in the human way described above. There is no inconsistency between the view of freedom, the critique of capitalism, and the vision of communism: all are informed by the view of freedom that I have outlined, and thus hang together.

In reply, Yack might accept that this interpretation avoids the contradiction that he attributes to Marx, but maintain that the account relies on “absurdly unrealistic assumptions” (Yack 1986, 302). For instance, he might argue that my interpretation relies on an absurdly unrealistic account of human nature in which human beings find fulfilment in advancing the good of others; or a similarly unrealistic view of social coordination, in which individuals know what to produce, and in what quantities, in the absence of market mechanisms.

In reply to the first point, I would argue that many people already do find fulfilment in advancing the good of others, albeit typically in more local contexts. So, Marx is not anticipating that a form of motivation unknown to us will miraculously emerge under communism, but that a form motivation that is already familiar to many of us will become stronger and more widespread. I think it is an open question whether this motivation can become stronger and more widespread in the way Marx hoped, but I do think that a greater concern for others in our everyday lives is desirable, and I would not like to give up hope that it is feasible. In reply to the second point, I would agree that we are missing an account of how this view of unalienated labor would be coordinated in a modern economy, and I think of this as a centrally important task for contemporary socialist theory.⁵

Finally, let me be clear that in arguing that we find in Marx's writings a plausible view of freedom, I am not suggesting that Marx's thought on this important topic is free from tensions and ambiguities. On the contrary, it seems to me that Marx waivers on the important issue of whether human freedom is compatible with the necessity of having to labour to satisfy our material needs. The clearest statement to this effect can be found in the famous passage in the third volume of *Capital* where Marx says that the "true realm of freedom" only begins beyond the sphere of "material production," which is to say, beyond the sphere of activities that aim at the end of satisfying human need and reproducing life (Marx [1894] 1975-2004, 807).⁶ This passage represents a change of view from the position Marx adopted at other points in his career, because rather than seeing

⁵ For related discussion of these issues, see Cohen 2009.

⁶ For arguments that the passage from the third volume of *Capital* does not represent a change of views on Marx's part, see Klagge 1986 Sayers, 2011 and James 2017. For my view that it does (though not in the way that is commonly supposed) see Kandiyali 2014 and 2017.

activity directed at needs as compatible with real freedom, in this passage he portrays such activity as incompatible with it, and so looks to reduce work time to maximize the realm of freedom that, it is claimed, can only be had once necessary work ceases. To my mind, this quasi-Kantian view represents an unfortunate abandonment of the more Hegelian position I have sketched above, a position that finds its fullest expression in the concluding passage in the “Comments on Mill,” which sees the maintenance and reproduction of life as compatible with our freedom.

So, in conclusion, I am not denying that Marx’s thought on freedom is free from tensions. Rather, my claim is that, at least sometimes, Marx points towards an appealing way to resolve them.⁷

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