

## **Did Marx really think that capitalism is unjust?**

### **Abstract**

Marx is typically and commonsensically seen as the arch moral critic of capitalism. But Allen Wood, in his celebrated but provocative 'The Marxian critique of justice', argued that in fact Marx held that capitalism (the capitalist mode of production) is not unjust, and indeed that it is perfectly *just*. His reasons in support of this attribution issue directly from Marx's overarching social scientific and historical-cum-philosophical paradigm, 'historical materialism'. Very few Marxists or exegetes of Marx have been persuaded by Wood's radical reading of Marx on justice. G A Cohen, for example, dismisses it as an 'unlikely thesis'. But I will argue that Wood's 'anti-injustice' reading of Marx is essentially sound, though his key arguments for it are hostage to some subverting incoherencies. I go on to proffer a pared-down rendition of the defensible core of Wood's anti-injustice reading of Marx.

### **Keywords**

Marx, justice, historical materialism, capitalism

## 1. Introduction

If we know one thing about Marx, it's that he denounced the modern economic system that we now call 'capitalism'<sup>1</sup> for being immoral and unjust, didn't he? To question whether Marx thought, and said, that capitalism is morally unjust seems tantamount to asking: Is the Pope Catholic? But just as there are some Catholics who do not accept that modern Popes have bone fide papal status, so there are some Marxists who argue that Marx didn't condemn capitalism for being morally wrong and unjust. The principal scholar to attribute this stance to Marx is Allen Wood, in his landmark 'The Marxian critique of justice' (1972). As he later (2004: 159) reaffirmed, with decided unequivocalness, 'Marx does not condemn capitalism on grounds of justice or on any other moral grounds'.<sup>2</sup>

Wood's anti-injustice reading of Marx sparked a lively and protracted debate in the philosophical literature. Most respondents found Wood's argument hard to swallow, with the premier 'analytical Marxist' G A Cohen (1983: 442) dismissing it as an 'unlikely thesis'. The prevailing view is that Marx patently didn't eschew moral condemnation of capitalism (e.g. Pfeffer, 1990). Cohen is prepared to acknowledge that Marx may have *thought* that he believed capitalism was not unjust. But if so, Cohen (1983: 444) contends, Marx's second order belief about what he believed on capitalism's justness was mistaken, and he may have been 'confused about [the concept of] justice'. This counter thesis seems to me at least no more plausible than the one it opposes.

I hope to show that the question of Marx's attitude to justice, moral discourse and moral judgment can be of interest and significance to a much broader audience than that of dyed in the wool Marxists. In addition to the intrinsic interest of Wood's anti-injustice reading of Marx (if only on account of its sheer counter-intuitiveness), I think its re-examination may bring philosophical illumination to the social structure and conditions of moral life, moral perception, moral judgement, and moral practice.

---

<sup>1</sup> The word 'capitalism' does not appear in volume one of *Capital* (2015) until page 414, and only once thereafter (the German equivalent, '*Kapitalismus*', is not used in *Das Kapital*). The opening line of *Capital* introduces the reader to 'the capitalist mode of production', but Marx's referential term of choice is 'capital'. I think he uses 'capital' to emphasise the continuous process of reproducing the system (the mode of production) through incessant interaction between buyers and sellers of labour power. For brevity, I sometimes just use the word 'capitalism' as shorthand for 'the capitalist mode of production'.

<sup>2</sup> This article is a re-reading of Wood's 'The Marxian critique of justice', but it incorporates his subsequent 'Reply to Husami' (1979) and chapters 9 and 10 of his 1981 book [2002]. Apart from some reflections at the very end of this book's chapter 10, on which I comment in section 5 below, this body of work is an organic continuation of Wood's original thesis. Most of it repeats, expands, and elaborates on the original thesis, and there is nothing that can be identified as a substantial change in stance, interpretation, or exposition in the later work. For this reason, I rarely differentiate between the original and the later writings.

In section 2 below I give a synoptic exposition of Marx's overarching social scientific-cum-philosophical research paradigm, 'historical materialism', which furnishes the theoretical and conceptual basis for Wood's anti-injustice reading of Marx. Section 3 then focusses on Wood's arguments for his anti-injustice reading, identifying its three core strands. I diagnose some subverting incoherencies in his arguments, and in section 4 I pare down to what I take to be the defensible core of his anti-injustice reading. In the final section I proffer a non-Marxist case for the otioseness of purportedly moral critiques of the basic structure of the capitalist mode of production.

## 2. Historical Materialism and Morality

Nearly everyone believes they know that Marx was, foremostly, a vehement *moral* critic of capitalism. Did he not denounce the rapacious exploitation on which it is founded, and the endemic alienation that estranges the worker from the product of their labour, from each other, and from the social conditions of their existence? Conversely, didn't he predict the imminent arrival of communist society, in which there would be no class-based exploitation and oppression, no alienation, equality for all, and thereby the end to the moral evils of capitalism? These, at any rate, are the grounds for 'the common and natural supposition that Marx did think [capitalism] unjust' (Cohen 1983: 442). However, there are also strong reasons pointing emphatically in the opposite direction.

There is one prominent piece of textual evidence - which seems to have escaped notice - that speaks in favour of, or at least is consistent with, the proposition that Marx did not morally condemn the capitalist mode of production. Consider the title of his three-volume magnum opus: 'Capital: A critique of political economy'. If Marx were proffering a moral critique of capitalism, wouldn't he have subtitled the great work: *a critique of the capitalist mode of production*?<sup>3</sup> As it is, the subtitle implies that the work is offered as more of a critique of the scientific discipline that studies the capitalist mode of production, than a moral critique of that mode of production itself. Admittedly, this does not show that Marx eschewed or refrained from moral critique, but I suggest that, given that the title advertises the critical nature of the work, if it were being offered as moral critique of the capitalist mode of production this would be explicitly stated in the title.

More substantively, Wood's anti-injustice reading of Marx is based squarely upon historical materialism, the philosophical-historiographical paradigm which he (1859) describes as 'the guiding principle of my studies'. Historical materialism consists in an evolutionary, or quasi-evolutionary, conception of the nature and development of human society. Its pivotal analytical concept is *mode of production*, which denotes 'the economic structure of society' (Marx 1859). The economic structure positions, orders and organises all individuals in relation to production,

---

<sup>3</sup> Karl Popper (1962) notes that 'the first English translators of *Capital* [mis – N.P.] translated its sub-title as *A Critical Analysis of Capitalist Production*'.

distribution and consumption in civilised, class-divided, societies. The economic structure also nurtures and stimulates growth in the power and sophistication of economic productive capacity. This stimulating power of a mode of production is eventually exhausted, whereupon it ceases to be a nurturant to the development of the 'productive forces' (essentially, technology and productive capacity) and becomes instead a hindrance to their further development. At this point, the exhausted mode of production structurally transforms into a new one with renewed nurturing effects on the productive forces. Marx identifies a succession of modes of production, with the 'Ancient' transforming into the 'Feudal', and the 'Feudal' into the 'Capitalist'. He argues that the economic structure of the capitalist mode of production, just like those of previous modes, is or will become a fetter on the productive forces and therefore will transform into something more conducive to the productive forces, namely, communism.

Modes of production, according to historical materialism, consist of the society's economic 'base', out of which 'arises' its 'legal and political superstructure' containing 'definite forms of social consciousness' that 'correspond' to its economic base (Marx 1859). At the heart of historical materialism is the proposition that a people's moral and political consciousness is formed and shaped by the economic structure of the mode of production in which they are embedded. This idea has often been expressed in a crudely deterministic manner, wherein it is said that the economic structure causes the *contents* of people's moral and political beliefs. Marx's (2015: 58) programmatic formulation encourages this tendency: 'the mode of production determines the character of the social, political, and intellectual life generally'.

I think it makes much better sense (and coheres with what Marx does in practice) to conceive the economic structure as issuing in the higher-level moral, legal and political concepts, categories, and principles via which people acquire, hold and examine their moral and political beliefs. In other words, what the economic structure generates and 'determines' is what Wood (1972: 270; and 2004: chs 9 & 10 *passim*) refers to as the 'standards of justice' via which members think about and deliberate on contested features of its public way of life, its major practices, institutions and structures. Wood goes further though, maintaining that a mode of production's economic structure also determines which acts, practices, and institutions within it are in fact morally justified (see section 3.III below). That it is only the operative standards of justice that are given to ('determined' for) a mode of production's denizens by its economic structure will be a central feature of the revision that I go on to make to Wood's anti-injustice reading of Marx.

A society's central moral and political ideas, concepts, and principles (its standards of justice) are, famously, accorded the status of *ideology* by Marx. This means that they are not, as they are typically experienced as being, timeless, placeless, universally applicable vehicles of normative guidance, assessment, and judgement. Rather, the core moral ideas, concepts, and principles, via which a society's social relations and interactions, institutions, and practices are assessed and evaluated by its members, issue from the workings of that society's basic

economic structure. These moral ideas, concepts, and principles are extensions and reflections of the normative relations that constitute a society's fundamental means of sustaining itself - its economic way of life. Under the capitalist mode of production, these are the rules that regulate the economic 'sphere', where the 'exchange of commodities takes place' (Marx 2015: 123). Here, Marx (ibid.) extols, with ironic delight,

rule Freedom, Equality, Property....Freedom, because both buyer and seller of a commodity, say of labour-power, are constrained only by their own free will...Equality, because each enters into relation with the other, as with a simple owner of commodities, and they exchange equivalent for equivalent. Property, because each disposes only of what is his own

Thus, the operative ideas, concepts, and principles that Marx takes to be intrinsic to legal, moral, and political thought and life under the capitalist mode of production are:

*Self-ownership*: the institutional foundation of private property ownership and transfer - 'the individual' offers their labour-power for sale as a commodity, and 'in order that [the worker] may be able to' do this, 'he must have it at his disposal, must be the untrammelled owner of his capacity for labour, i.e., of his person' (ibid.: 119).

*Right*: the legally guaranteed ownership of property, including one's self and one's labour-power - seller and buyer of labour-power 'deal with each other as on the basis of equal rights' (ibid.).

*Freedom*: the individual's ability to choose with whom to contract and exchange commodities, including their labour-power.

*Equality*: the fundamental principle of exchange amongst a citizenry bearing the foregoing powers - seller and buyer of labour-power are 'equal in the eyes of the law' (ibid.).

The concepts of *right*, *freedom*, *equality*, and *property* are brought into being, given to us, and made real and actual in virtue of their foundational role in constituting and regulating our economic form of life under the capitalist mode of production. For the first time in human history, under the capitalist mode of production, everyone enjoys the right of property ownership over *themselves*, including ownership of their own labour-power, such that they are free to offer this power, or not, as they choose, for sale on the market for commodities. The right of self- and commodity- ownership, and the freedom to exchange commodities, are given to all, equally. However, the benefits that derive from the implementation of these principles are massively to the advantage of those that, through ownership or control of 'the means of production',

have the ability to purchase and deploy labour-power productively, thence to receive the fruits of its utilisation. This, along with their role in serving to legitimise, celebrate, and thereby sustain the economic structure that generates them, is what makes these principles ideological, according to historical materialism.

Wood (1984: 10) maintains that Marx 'shows a consistently hostile attitude toward moral values and conceptions generally' and some other Marxists have also suggested that Marx rejects or scorns 'the moral point of view' as such (Miller 1984: 16). If so, it is not just capitalism that Marx refrains from criticising morally, but anything at all. It is apparent that Marx found much of contemporary moral discourse obnoxiously moralistic and – variously - distasteful, objectionable, duplicitous, reactionary, distracting, and pointless. But this attitude is largely his reaction to the *misuse* of morality; it is not symptomatic of him eschewing 'the moral point of view' as such. I will argue later that a revised anti-injustice reading of Marx has no need to attribute to him any such eliminativist view of morality.

### **3. Wood's Anti-Injustice Reading of Marx**

I have identified three main strands to Wood's anti-injustice reading of Marx: (I.) his central argument that Marx doesn't, and one cannot rationally or sensefully, claim that the capitalist mode of production itself is unjust; (II.) that Marx does, with perfect sense, nevertheless condemn it, but only on 'non-moral' grounds; and (III.) the attribution to Marx of a functionalist metaethical theory according to which the justness of any act, practice or institution is determined by its relation to the mode of production in which it is located. I will critically examine each strand in turn.

#### *I. The 'internality' argument*

Marx does not say or think that capitalism itself is unjust, according to Wood's reading, because he takes the very principles (standards) by which we assess and judge justness to be *internal* to that mode of production. So the argument is not only that Marx himself didn't find capitalism unjust, but that given the internality of standards of justice, *no-one* under the capitalist mode of production can. For someone to cast judgement on the justness of the capitalist mode of production itself would be, says Wood (1972: 270) with palpable irony, to treat 'the social whole as if he, in his sublime rationality, could measure this whole against some ideal of right or justice completely external to it'. In reality, Wood asserts, there is no 'Archimedean point' (ibid) outside of all modes of production from which the justness of the economic structure of a particular mode of production can be judged. Judgements of justness can only be made via the principles of justice that are generated by the economic structure of the mode of production in which the judger is embedded (because that is how the denizens of a mode of production *have* their principles of justice). It also makes no sense to pass judgment on the justness of one mode of production from the evaluative standpoint of another. This holds a fortiori in the case of the capitalist mode of production being 'condemned as unjust by applying to it

standards of justice or right which would be appropriate to some postcapitalist mode of production' (ibid) that has not yet come into existence. Wood maintains that historical materialism shows that any move to pass judgement on the justness of the capitalist mode of production, either from an imagined standpoint internal to a future 'postcapitalist mode of production', or from an equally imaginary Archimedean point outside of all modes of production, and hence outside of history itself, is 'mistaken, confused, and without foundation' (ibid). Wood's exegesis of this central feature of historical materialism is historicist in nature, but the same point can also be made perspicuously from the standpoint of contemporary social ontology.

From this standpoint, the economic structure of the capitalist mode of production can be seen as having the form of an all-encompassing game in which we are inescapably all players.<sup>4</sup> The structure of the economic market game is constituted by a core set of '*constitutive* rules' (Searle 1995) which embody the principles of self-ownership, freedom, right, and equality. These rules define, and thereby create and sustain, the permissible moves available to players, which revolve around the exchange of commodities between seller and buyer – 'the dominant relation between man and man, is that of owners of commodities' (Marx 2015: 40). Marx (2015: 123) describes acting in accordance with the central constitutive rules of the economic game thus: 'buyer and seller of a commodity' (whether they be rich or poor, weak or powerful), buying and selling raw materials, consumable products or labour-power, contract with one another as 'free agents', as permitted by the *regulative* rules<sup>5</sup> and laws of legitimate exchange. In the course of the endlessly iterated game, 'each enters into relation with the other, as with a simple owner of commodities' (whether that be consumable goods or their labour power), and proceeds to 'exchange equivalent for equivalent' in exchanging their commodities, for example, a week's labour power for a week's wage (ibid.; see also 131, 136). Thus, to declare capitalism unjust on the grounds that it denies freedom to those that have to sell their labour-power, generates economic inequality, or violates workers' rights (e.g. to the full value of what their labour produces), is akin to declaring that the game of football does not permit players to score real goals. And to assert that capitalism is unjust from the standpoint of a postcapitalist mode of production (communism) is akin to declaring that rugby is a superior game to football (or that American football is superior to soccer) because it allows teams to score more goals. These are evident absurdities. Just as the rules of football/soccer determine what *counts* as scoring a goal, so the rules constitutive of the capitalist mode of production set the standards of what counts as just in the society it structures.

---

<sup>4</sup> F.A. Hayek (1976: 71), one of the staunchest advocates of the market economy, maintains that it is 'wholly analogous to a game' – a 'game partly of skill and partly of chance'.

<sup>5</sup> To illustrate Searle's distinction between constitutive and regulative rules, think of how language works. Roughly, constitutive rules constitute (create and sustain) word-meaning, and regulative rules regulate the use of words into grammatical sentences. Essentially, constitutive rules bring into existence the possibility of acting in particular ways, and regulative rules regulate (make more orderly) forms of already existing behaviour.

The crux of the debate over whether Marx condemned the capitalist mode of production on moral grounds fixates on whether its constitutive relation, that between seller and buyer of labour power, is equality-denying, or equality-asserting. It is undeniable that Marx depicts this relation as one of structural exploitation. But what is disputed is whether he understood this exploitation in the positive sense of *making productive use of* the seller's labour power, or in the negative sense of *taking unfair advantage of* the seller. Wood insists that it is the former, positive sense, that Marx invokes; his critics counter that it is the latter, negative sense.

Wood points to the fact that Marx describes the relation on which the capitalist mode of production is founded as one in which 'equivalent is exchanged for equivalent', which, Marx (2015: 136) muses, is 'good luck for the buyer, but by no means an injustice [Unrecht] to the seller'.<sup>6</sup> He takes this as conclusive evidence that Marx didn't think, and couldn't have thought, it unjust, for if he did, he would be subverting his own theory of historical materialism. Critics argue that here, and other places in which Marx asserts that the buyer of labour power is the rightful owner of a fructifying commodity that has been freely offered for sale and exchanged for a commodity of equal value (the wage), is being ironic or satirical (Ziyad Husami [1978: 30] was the first to claim this). But Wood rejoins, plausibly I think, that there is no incompatibility between Marx allowing some irony or satire into his description of the exchange relation and yet insisting that the relation is not unjust.<sup>7</sup> Another possibility, I think, is that Marx sometimes slips into the 'moralising' attitude himself (don't we all?) in his deployment of colourful descriptive language. This jars with his considered view from the standpoint of his social scientific theory of historical materialism, according to which capitalist exploitation of labour power *cannot* be structurally unjust. To deem the exchange relation not unjust is not thereby to endorse, approve, or welcome it (indeed, it coheres with Marx's ambivalence towards it). Likewise, recognising that people being susceptible to painful, incapacitating, and deadly disease is not an injustice does not entail that one welcomes its occurrence. In any case, the object of Marx's irony and satire might be not the exchange relation itself, but the political economists that exalted it as the realisation of Divine Providence (he is, after all, offering 'a critique of political economy').

Wood goes further though, arguing that for Marx, not only is the economic structure and pivotal mechanism of the capitalist mode of production not unjust, but that 'capitalism' and 'capitalist exploitation' are perfectly *just* (1972: 272; 1979: 269).

---

<sup>6</sup> Most commentators on this passage accept the Moore and Aveling translation of 'Unrecht' as 'injury', but Wood is surely right to translate it as 'injustice' in his (1972: 263) quotation.

<sup>7</sup> Husami and other critics of Wood point to the language of 'robbery' and cognates that Marx sometimes uses in his description of the exchange relation. But compare this with ordinary language expressions such as 'I was robbed' after buying what one thinks is a pricy product – this clearly isn't meant literally, and doesn't mean 'I was treated unjustly'. Wood (2004: 139) later notes that in response to Adolph Wagner's exposition of Marx on the exchange relation, Marx flatly denies that this relation amounts to 'only a deduction or "robbery" of the worker'.

He hastens to add that he sees this as no normative defence of capitalism. Even so, I think it unwarranted to attribute to Marx the evaluative attitude that capitalism is just. I suggest that, from the perspective of historical materialism, the moral status of the capitalist mode of production is best characterised in the way that Wittgenstein (1968: §50) regards ‘the standard metre’ that is kept in Paris. Of this universal standard of measurement, Wittgenstein insists, ‘one can say neither that it is one metre long, nor that it is not one metre long’. This is because of the special role of this entity in being the guarantor of the metric system of measurement. Likewise, I suggest, if one accepts the ‘internality’ argument for the originating and sustaining source of the standards of justice operative in modern society, then one should think of the capitalist mode of production neither that it is just, nor that it is unjust.<sup>8</sup>

It might be objected that this is not a good analogy because like is not being analogised with like - the standard metre is an instrument of measurement, whereas the capitalist mode of production is an institutional framework that generates instruments (principles as standards) for the measurement of justice. If so, the proper analogy with metric measurement would be that it can be said neither that the standards of justice are themselves just, nor that they are unjust, which is an obvious truism. But, on the one side of the analogy, the standard metre was also generated by something that is not an instrument of measurement, namely, ‘one ten-millionth of the length of a quadrant of the meridian’,<sup>9</sup> which the standard metre bar was constructed to embody. Strictly, then, we should perhaps say only of *that* distance, that it is neither one metre long, nor that it is not one metre long. On the other side of the analogy, the standards of justice are the very same principles that, in rule-form, constitute and thereby make possible and sustain, the capitalist mode of production. Therefore, when seen in the context of the means of their generation, the standard metre bar (or the distance it was constructed to embody) and the capitalist mode of production are relevantly analogous. Both the standard metre bar and the capitalist mode of production are ultimately grounded in the ontology of what Searle calls ‘institutional facts’, which are generated by a community of agents constructing and following constitutive rules in the form of ‘X counts as Y in C’ (‘one ten-millionth of the length of a quadrant of the meridian counts as one metre’). Both the metric system of measurement and the standards (principles) of justice are experienced by their users as objective, universal and autonomous means of assessment that transcend the practicalities and contingencies of any particular mode of social life, and yet they emerged from, and are sustained by, very particular interests, agreements and social practices, and have a definite historical origin.

---

<sup>8</sup> Bernard Williams (1993: 117) claims that precisely this is what ‘most people’ (with the striking exception of Aristotle) in Ancient Greece thought of the institution of slavery, i.e. that it is neither just nor unjust.

<sup>9</sup> *OED Online*. Oxford University Press.

<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/117647?result=2&rskey=ztWwMz&> (accessed September 24, 2021).

In sum, it is for the very same reason that the capitalist mode of production cannot sensefully be said to be unjust that it cannot be said to be just either. If we only have the concepts, standards, and principles by which to evaluate the justness of social phenomena in virtue of the capitalist mode of production embodying and incessantly reproducing them, then evaluating *it* for justness is like attempting to measure that which constitutes the standard of measurement (the metre stick) by itself.<sup>10</sup>

## II. Marx's 'non-moral' condemnation of the capitalist mode of production?

Norman Geras (1985: 47) asserts that, for both anti-injustice and 'injustice' readings of Marx, 'the question...is not that of whether Marx did indeed condemn capitalism...All parties to this dispute agree that he did'. This is probably right, but I will shortly argue that anti-injustice readings *shouldn't* agree to it. Geras continues, 'the question' is, rather, 'the more specific one: does Marx condemn capitalism in the light of any principle of justice?' But if this is all the dispute is about it seems to me hardly worth the bother. If everyone agrees that Marx did condemn capitalism and the dispute is only over whether this condemnation was informed by any *principle* of justice, the answer must straightforwardly be No, and surely comes as no surprise. Clearly, Wood (1972: p281) concurs, saying 'it would be wrong...to suppose that Marx's critique of capitalism is necessarily rooted in *any* particular moral or social ideal or principle'. I would be more unequivocal and plainly assert that moral condemnation doesn't require reference to, or invocation of, any particular principle of justice (slavery is manifestly unjust; no principle of justice is needed to show that, or why, it is). Nor do I think there is any important difference between condemning something as unjust and condemning it as morally wrong (to say that slavery is unjust and to say that it is morally wrong is to say practically the same thing).

It will be useful at this point to pose, for clarification, the following questions on Marx's normative attitude towards capitalism:

### i. Does Marx condemn capitalism on grounds of justice?

---

<sup>10</sup> There is also an interesting analogy between the practice of measurement and the function of money in the capitalist mode of production. Just as *the* metre stick (and for all intents and purposes, any metre stick) can't itself be 'measured' because it constitutes the very standard of measurement, so likewise tokens of a post- gold standard currency have no value in themselves because they are the medium for the exchange of valuable things. Searle (1999:128) observes that British banknotes still carry the declaration from the issuing bank: 'I promise to pay the bearer on demand the sum of ten [or five, twenty, or fifty, depending on its value] pounds'. But how could that promise be fulfilled? Imagine taking one's ten-pound note to a bank and demanding redemption of the promise on it. The bank could only give one another ten-pound note in 'exchange'. Cf. Wittgenstein again: 'Why can't my right hand give my left hand money?' (1968: §268).

- ii. Does Marx condemn capitalism by reference to any particular *principle* of justice?
- iii. Does Marx condemn capitalism on moral grounds other than on grounds of injustice (if there is any difference between the two grounds)?
- iv. Does Marx condemn capitalism at all?

As we have seen, Wood answers No to questions (i.-iii.). But as we are about to see, he answers Yes to question (iv.). In my view, anti-injustice readings should answer No to question (iv.) too.

Notwithstanding his argument that Marx does not condemn capitalism on *moral* grounds, Wood insists that Marx does nevertheless condemn it, only on *non-moral* grounds. He avers that 'Marx's reasons for condemning capitalism' are that it is 'a system of slavery' (1972: 281), which 'condemns the vast majority to lives of unfreedom, alienation, and misery' (1979: 284). But slavery is an unfortunate metaphor for Wood to deploy (I assume it is only a metaphor), because if it is modern, 'New World' slavery that he has in mind, it subverts his argument that Marx regards capitalism as not unjust. For Wood would be saying that capitalism is, or is akin to, a system of exploitation that he elsewhere calls unjust ('under capitalist production...direct slavery is unjust' [1972: 257]) – and which is, of course, an undisputed paradigm of injustice. Wood does say that *Ancient* slavery was just (ibid.; see note 13 below), but it would be very odd if he meant that capitalism is a form of Ancient, but not modern, slavery. It might be thought that I am being uncharitably pedantic here, but Wood himself warns against the emptiness of 'abstract[ing] from a concrete historical context' (ibid.), and that seems to be precisely what he is doing in claiming that Marx sees capitalism as 'a system of slavery'. I offer my own view of Marx's use of the language of 'slavery' in section 4 below.

In saying that Marx's grounds condemning the capitalist mode of production are that it 'starves, enslaves and alienates people' (Wood 2004: 130), one might well think that this amounts to robust *moral* condemnation. But Wood resists this natural interpretation by distinguishing *moral* good / bad / evil from *non-moral* good / bad / evil. By the light of this distinction, he maintains that the slavery, alienation, and poverty generated by capitalism are evidently bad, indeed *evil*, for the people that have to endure them, but they are not *moral* evils. Therefore, it is not the case that this 'non-moral evil' (Wood 1979: 290) *ought*, morally, to be eradicated, or that the people that suffer it have a *right* to a way of life free from it, on the grounds that 'justice (or some other moral norm) demands it' (Wood 2004: 129). Thus Marx, Wood insists, 'consistently refuses to attack capitalist social relations themselves as unjust or morally wrong in any way'. Rather, he continues, they are 'consistently attacked on exclusively nonmoral grounds' (ibid.: 153). So Wood conceives non-moral goods and evils as things that it is good or bad for people to have in virtue of the kinds of beings humans are. In other words, non-moral goods and evils are of the

kinds of things that are conducive or inimical to our physical and mental health and wellbeing.

Critics have found Wood's application of the distinction between moral and non-moral goods and evils to be peculiar and idiosyncratic. Rodney Peffer and Michael Rosen, for example, insist that what Wood claims to be Marx's merely non-moral condemnation of the evils of capitalism is downright *moral* condemnation. They maintain that the very invocation of such evils as servitude, slavery, alienation and starvation, and the counterpart goods of freedom, self-realisation, community, and ample sustenance (to be provided by socialism / communism) entails moral condemnation and commendation of these evils and goods. Rosen (2000: 37) insists that these conditions are 'good (or bad) as such', and Peffer (1990: 342) similarly maintains that by their very nature, to identify these conditions as bad / evil or good is ipso facto to morally advocate their eradication or pursuit.

The disagreement between Wood and his critics thus turns on whether, *in virtue of what they are*, the evils inflicted by the capitalist mode of production are to be categorised as moral or non-moral evils. But I think both sides deploy the moral / non-moral distinction untowardly. On the one hand, I agree with Wood that such things as servitude, unfreedom, exploitation, alienation, and starvation *can* be non-moral evils. But on the other hand, I also agree with his critics that, as he documents them, they *are* moral evils. What makes them so is not their intrinsic badness or evilness, but that under Wood's description they are 'needlessly' inflicted and 'remediable' (1979: 289, 290). Were it not for their needlessness and remediability, Wood could perfectly coherently claim them to be non-moral evils. But he couldn't then hold that Marx has good reason to (non-morally) condemn capitalism for inflicting them. 'Non-moral condemnation' to my ears is oxymoronic. One can certainly regret and be sad about the existence or occurrence of non-moral evils, but it's unclear to me what non-moral condemnation of them would consist in and look like. Condemnation of a non-moral bad or evil can serve an expressive function (as when one expletively 'denounces' the boulder that trips one up), but otherwise it is pointless to condemn something that one takes to be necessary and irremediable (or inert). Moreover, Marx of all people – given his aversion to moralising – is unlikely to indulge in such merely expressive condemnation, which amounts to no more than moralising. Still, it is possible that Marx on occasion lapses into such expression. But if he does, we shouldn't take it as his considered, theoretically informed, view.

If one takes Wood's statements on the evils of capitalism to be moral condemnation in non-moral clothing (as do Peffer and Rosen), then there's no need to seek evidence in Marx's texts to counter Wood's anti-injustice reading, for Wood himself would already have subverted it. The proposition that capitalism *needlessly* inflicts slavery, unfreedom, servitude, exploitation, alienation, and starvation on the vast majority of its citizens, and that this state of affairs is *remediable*, surely entails that it is unjust. However, Wood could resist this conclusion and sustain his anti-injustice reading by revising the moral status he accords to these evils of capitalism. For them to be genuinely non-moral evils they must be *irremediable*, 'necessary evils'. They would then be akin to incurable malignant diseases, which are 'evil' in

virtue of the suffering and loss of life they inflict, but not *morally* evil or unjust. There are strong reasons to suggest that Wood should think this, by the lights of central tenets of historical materialism that he endorses.

As Wood (2004: p. xxiv) points out, historical materialism directs us to attend to the prodigious development of productive capacity that the capitalist mode of production has enabled. This historic achievement is eulogised in *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, where Marx and Engels (1888: 18-9, 16) enthuse that the capitalist mode of production has enabled the bourgeoisie to build 'more massive and more colossal productive forces than have all preceding generations together', via which it has 'accomplished wonders far surpassing Egyptian pyramids, Roman aqueducts, and Gothic cathedrals'. The condition of possibility for this collective accomplishment is the economic structure of capitalism that also generates the evils that Wood documents.

But according to historical materialism, there comes a point in the life of a mode of production when its economic structure is no longer conducive to further development of the productive forces it houses. Wood (1979: 293) seems to think that the capitalist mode of production arrived at that point long ago, referring to it as 'an obsolete and inhuman social system'. He also thinks that Marx too thought that point had been reached, speaking of 'irrationalities in capitalism' which 'were for Marx at once causes of its downfall and reasons for its abolition' (1972: 281). But when the capitalist mode of production is 'obsolete' and apt for 'abolition' (or rather, transformation into a revolutionarily new mode of production), the evils that issue from its structure are no longer necessary and irremediable.

History has shown that in fact the capitalist mode of production was far from exhausting its capacity to promote the growth of the productive forces at the time of Marx's writing. Therefore, the evils that it generates were, at that time – according to historical materialism - necessary and irremediable. This makes them non-moral evils, and only on this basis can Wood's claim that Marx thought the capitalist mode of production not unjust stand (though not the claim that Marx condemned it non-morally).<sup>11</sup> But given that Wood says that Marx thought that the capitalist mode of production has exhausted its capacity to promote the development of the productive forces, the evils that it generates are no longer necessary and irremediable, so it

---

<sup>11</sup> Another way of saving Wood's thesis that Marx did not condemn capitalism on the grounds of injustice would be to interpret Wood as holding that the evils generated by capitalism are needlessly inflicted and remediable vis-à-vis the productive forces, but necessary and irremediable vis-à-vis maintenance of the mode of production itself. Under this scenario, the evils generated by capitalism would be necessary and irremediable features of the functioning of a mode of production that has itself become unconducive to the nurturance of the productive forces. This rather convoluted reinterpretation of Wood's thesis goes against the import of historical materialism, because it would mean that a dysfunctional mode of production is nevertheless not unjust even though it has become a hinderance to the productive forces.

seems that he should have concluded that Marx thought it unjust.<sup>12</sup> In short, either the harms and suffering generated by the capitalist mode of production are necessary and irremediable, and therefore non-moral evils, in which case it is not unjust, or they are not necessary and not irremediable, in which case it is unjust.

### *III. Wood's functionalist metaethics*

In addition to his central argument that, according to Marx and historical materialism, the capitalist mode of production itself is not unjust, Wood (1972: 255, 256) argues that acts, practices and institutions are morally justified if they are 'adequate to' or 'correspond[ ] to the prevailing mode of production', and unjust if they do not. Being adequate, or corresponding, to the mode of production consists in acts, practices and institutions being conducive to its efficient functioning. He thus depicts the Marxian conception of morality in functionalist terms, as 'an essentially conservative institution' (Wood 1984: 10), the *raison d'être* of which is to give normative sustenance to the mode of production.

On Wood's view, then, when people deliberate, judge, or argue on matters of social justice they are not – as they appear, and take themselves, to be doing – assessing the permissibility, acceptability, rightness, and justness of particular acts, institutions, or social structures, as such and in their own terms. What they are actually doing is judging in accordance with the 'concrete fittingness' of the acts, institutions, or social structures in question 'based on their concrete function within a specific mode of production' (Wood 1972: 257). Wood offers little by way of examples of such judgement, but does proclaim that slavery under the capitalist mode of production 'is unjust' (1972: 255).<sup>13</sup> The basis for this proclamation is not

---

<sup>12</sup> Wood (2004: xxiv) later conceded that Marx was 'optimistic' in 'believ[ing] that capitalism's instabilities, its periodic crises and internal irrationalities, meant that its period of dominance is coming to a close'. But he evidently does not take this as reason to revise the conclusion of his original reading, that Marx thought capitalism not unjust.

<sup>13</sup> Whereas for Ancient slavery - which according to historical materialism was the constitutive 'mode of exploitation' in the Ancient mode of production - Wood (1972: 257) avers that it 'was, as Aristotle argued, both right and expedient'. Later though, he (ibid.: 259) equivocates, stating that 'if' slavery 'played a necessary role in' the 'prevailing mode of production', then 'in the Marxian view the holding of slaves by the ancients would be a *just* practice'. He should really have said '*when* slavery played a necessary role' it was a just practice, because, according to historical materialism, a mode of production's constitutive mode of exploitation gives it its identity, so slavery couldn't not have played a necessary role in the Ancient mode of production. However, given that the Ancient mode of production transformed into the Feudal mode of production, there would have been a time towards the end of its lifespan when slavery was no longer necessary for, and indeed became a fetter on, the development of the productive forces. The moral status of slavery at that point, from the standpoint of historical materialism, raises the same issue pondered above of

that slavery *as such* is intrinsically morally wrong, but that slavery under the capitalist mode of production is a hindrance to its efficient functioning. However, there are two big problems with judging modern slavery by this functionalist criterion.

First, there is the obvious observation that hardly anyone would agree that what *makes* modern slavery wrong is that it is out of kilter with the economic structure of the capitalist mode of production. It *might* have been the case that being out of kilter with the economic structure of the capitalist mode of production is what enabled, or helped, abolitionists to reach the judgment that slavery is irredeemably morally wrong. However, as a matter of empirically established fact, at the time of its abolition slavery was *not* out of kilter with the economic structure of the capitalist mode of production.<sup>14</sup> This fact raises the second problem for Wood's functionalist theory of moral judgement, namely, that historians of slavery now agree that, at the time of abolition, not only was slavery not unconducive to the functioning of the capitalist mode of production, it was the driving force of its economic success. Indeed, 'the 1807 abolition [of the slave trade] act came at a time when Britain [ ] led the world in plantation production' (Davis 2009). The historian Seymour Drescher (1977) went so far as characterise abolition as an act of national 'econocide'. The upshot of this is that Wood, by his own theoretical lights, turns out to be incorrect in pronouncing modern slavery 'unjust' and should actually have considered it to have been perfectly *just*, at the time of its abolition.<sup>15</sup> The proposition that it was a *just* institution that the abolitionists disposed of is surely untenable to the modern moral sensibility.

Consider another, currently contentious, example: the exploitation of non-human animals for food production and scientific research. I would think that both the existence and the abolition of these vast and ubiquitous institutionalised practices is more or less equally conducive to the healthy functioning of the capitalist mode of production. But if both the existence and the absence of a practice is (equally) conducive to the functioning of a mode of production, how is its justice to be judged according to Wood's interpretation of the historical materialist theory of justice; is it both just and unjust, or neither just nor unjust? I offer this observation, and the

---

whether it would be unjust because it was a hinderance to the productive forces, or just because it was necessary to the 'prevailing mode of production' it was a constitutive part of.

<sup>14</sup> The idea that slavery had become unconducive to the functioning of the capitalist mode of production and that this explains its demise was influentially argued by the Marxist historian Eric Williams (1944). The argument has subsequently been conclusively disproven (see Drescher 1977). There are, though, more sophisticated explanations for the causes and conditions of abolition which are at least partly inspired by, or resonate with, historical materialism (see Pleasants 2010).

<sup>15</sup> It should be noted that Drescher's work, which 'presented the first full-scale attack on Williams's thesis' (Davis 2009) that slavery had become a hindrance to the capitalist mode of production, was published in 1977, i.e. after Wood's 'The Marxian Critique of Justice', in 1972.

previous one on the moral status of slavery at the time of its abolition, to be a *reductio* of the functionalist metaethical thesis that Wood attributes to Marx.

In sum, if Wood's anti-injustice thesis requires a functionalist theory of 'what morality *is*' (2004: 151) that hardly anyone, including most Marxists (and Marx himself?), could endorse, then that thesis is not very substantial, interesting or challenging. It would resolve into a merely (controversial) metaethical thesis rather than a substantive one, which would be quite ironic given what virtually everyone agrees is Marx's rejection of theoretical ethics. For the anti-injustice thesis to be interesting, substantial, and challenging, therefore, I contend that it can and has to be couched in standard moral language and concepts, where 'justice' and cognates mean what most people ordinarily take them to mean. *Pace* Wood, historical materialism should explain the origin, foundation, and sustenance of the moral concepts we think with and the standards of justice we act upon, without explaining moral judgement away.

Nevertheless, the foregoing criticisms and objections notwithstanding, I still think that the core of Wood's anti-injustice reading of Marx on the moral status of the capitalist mode of production is insightful, interesting, relevant, and challenging. But to be so it needs to be pared down and reconfigured, which I proceed to do.

#### **4. A Pared-Down Version of the Anti-Injustice Reading of Marx**

As we saw above, the principal 'non-moral' evils that Wood lays at the door of the capitalist mode of production are that it 'starves, enslaves and alienates people'. I now want to distinguish between the basic structure of the capitalist mode of production, and the acts, practices, institutions, and states of affairs that (contingently) arise and occur within that structure. Wood treats the three principal evils that capitalism generates as all being intrinsic to it, but starvation and extreme poverty are, I contend, only contingently related to it. I will cast further doubt on the appropriateness of attributing to Marx the view that its structure imposes a form of slavery.

##### *I. What, and how, Marx condemns*

In addition to its theoretical and conceptual analyses, Marx's *Capital* abounds with critical observation and commentary on the appalling conditions that industrial workers faced in pursuit of their families' subsistence in nineteenth century Britain. Page after page documents the dangerous, back-breaking, limb-mutilating nature of work and working conditions, the horrendously long hours, and of course the pitiful wages. These conditions constitute one of the three principal 'non-moral' evils that Wood attributes to capitalism (that it 'starves'). Marx *could* have simply recorded these conditions in factual reportage without expressing any moral attitude towards them (in the way that a medical report describes a patient's illness). But he did not hold back from expressing moral outrage, with patent abandon. He was particularly appalled at the way young children were drawn into and broken by the labour

process and how working conditions were as destructive of family life as slavery ever was.

Indeed, the moral condemnatory concept that Marx incessantly deploys in his depiction of working conditions is *enslavement*, one of the other 'non-moral' evils that Wood attributes to capitalism (that it 'enslaves'). However, he invokes this concept for two quite different purposes in *Capital*. One is theoretical / conceptual, where the condition of slavery and status of the slave is deployed as a foil to highlight the distinctiveness of wage labour and the worker's self-ownership:

the owner of the labour-power should sell it only for a definite period, for if he were to sell it rump and stump, once for all, he would be selling himself, converting himself from a free man into a slave, from an owner of a commodity into a commodity (2015: 119).

In these theoretical passages Marx uses the concept of slavery positively in relation to the capitalist mode of production, to showcase its advancement over the Ancient (and the Feudal) mode of production: it is better to be *owner* of one's labour-power, as a commodity, than *to be* a commodity. Moreover, it is central to historical materialism that the condition of wage labourers under capitalism, however materially abject, and notwithstanding Marx's rhetorical invocation of the concepts *slavery* and *slave*, is not (*pace* Wood) one of actual slavery.

His other purpose in invoking the concepts *slavery* and *slave* is to mobilise them as vehicles of moral condemnation of the awful conditions of work and residence that prevailed under the capitalist mode of production in his day. However, on most of the occasions that he does this he is not using the concepts *slavery* and *slave* conditions in first-hand mode. Rather, he condemns the conditions second-hand, through quoting other sources in which the deployment of *slavery* and *slave* is first-hand. Marx quotes extensively, from a wide range of sources, including parliamentary commissions and committees of inquiry, government appointed factory inspectors, coroners and medical practitioners, clergy, newspaper editorials, and members of parliament – pretty much the full panoply of the respected bourgeoisie. This is typical of the sources quoted:

Children of nine or ten years are dragged from their squalid beds at two, three, or four o'clock in the morning and compelled to work for a bare subsistence until ten, eleven, or twelve at night, their limbs wearing away, their frames dwindling, their faces whitening, and their humanity absolutely sinking into a stone-like torpor... The system, as the Rev. Montagu Valpy describes it, is one of unmitigated slavery, socially, physically, morally, and spiritually [Broughton Charlton, county magistrate, *The Daily Telegraph*, 17<sup>th</sup> January, 1860] (Marx 2015: 168)

It is evident that Marx wholeheartedly endorsed the moral attitudes expressed in the sources he quotes - that is, after all, his reason for selecting them. But, as can

be seen from the social status of the sources, there is nothing peculiarly 'Marxist' to the biting exposé of working and living conditions, and the comparisons to conditions under slavery, that he presents in *Capital*. So, whilst Marx does advance moral critique and condemnation of the working and living conditions people had to endure under the capitalist mode of production of his day, he does so qua ordinary bourgeois social critic. In using the language of *enslavement*, *slavery* and *slave*, Marx was drawing from the register of bourgeois critical social commentary, not the technical vocabulary of historical materialism.

The central point that I want to draw from the foregoing is that if the working conditions that Marx morally condemns are only contingently related to the economic structure in which they existed there is no inconsistency in morally condemning the conditions but not the structure itself. If that is so, then moral condemnation of the working conditions does not entail moral condemnation of the economic structure under which they occur. Much of the critical response to Wood's argument seems to assume that it does. Jonathan Wolf (2017), for example, remarks that it 'simply seems obvious' that Marx's depiction of workers 'find[ing] work a torment', suffering 'poverty, overwork and lack of fulfilment', 'amount[s] to a moral criticism of capitalism'. But the subsequent history of institutional reform (Factory Act legislation; progressive taxation; establishment of the welfare state), driven by organised labour movements, shows that the working conditions that Marx morally condemned were in fact only contingently related to the basic structure of the capitalist mode of production. Moreover, the efforts of organised labour were surely aided by its ability to appeal to the central moral and political principles afforded by the capitalist mode of production (equality, freedom, self-ownership, and rights) in its demands for employment justice.

Criticism of the evil of extreme poverty endured by working people under nineteenth century capitalism does not, contra critics of the anti-injustice thesis, amount to moral condemnation of the basic economic structure of the capitalist mode of production. Given that those conditions evidently were neither necessary nor irremediable, as Marx and his fellow bourgeois social critics clearly saw, they cannot be categorised as merely non-moral evil, and the abundant criticism of them marshalled by Marx is perspicuously *moral* condemnation. On the other hand, the evils of alienation and exploitation (which supervene on commodity production and exchange as such) that Wood also lays at the door of the capitalist mode of production are intrinsic to its economic structure. They are, therefore - until such time as they are not necessary and irremediable (vis-à-vis the productive forces) – properly categorised as non-moral evils.

Let me now summarise what I endorse and what I reject in Wood's anti-injustice reading of Marx. First, I endorse the core of what I referred to as Wood's 'internality' argument for the anti-injustice reading of Marx. Second, contrary to Wood's deployment of the moral / non-moral distinction, the capitalist mode of production can only be deemed not unjust on the basis that the evils that it generates are necessary and irremediable (for the time being). Third, *if* Marx had thought the evils that it generates are needless and remediable, as Wood claims, then he should

have condemned it as unjust. Fourth, because Marx doesn't condemn the capitalist mode of production on moral grounds, and because he (like most of us) finds moralising objectionable, he can't be said, contrary to what Wood asserts, to condemn it on non-moral grounds, nor indeed to condemn it at all. Fifth, it should be borne in mind that Marx's non-condemnatory attitude towards the capitalist mode of production applies only to its basic economic structure.

## **5. A non-Marxist case for the non-unjustness of the capitalist mode of production**

I have agreed with Wood that the core of the anti-injustice reading of Marx yields strong reasons for thinking that Marx did not regard the basic economic structure of the capitalist mode of production as unjust. I now want to consider briefly whether there are good reasons for *us* to share Marx's view, and moreover, whether there are reasons that do not depend on buying into historical materialism, but which are not incompatible with it.

First, I concede that a natural reaction to the conclusion of Wood's 'internality' argument, is to retort incredulously: Why on earth *can't* we critically assess capitalism for its justness? It certainly seems to be a quite straightforward thing to do, and it seems that we can indeed do it. This, in essence, is the reaction of Cohen, Husami, and most other philosophers that have entered into the debate. Furthermore, it is the reaction that Wood (2004: 160) himself eventually reports, after more than 40,000 words of exposition and response to critics, over a period of nearly 10 years in defence of his anti-injustice reading of Marx: 'Most of us who think Marx is right in claiming that capital exploits labor and dehumanizes workers ... find it quite natural to express our indignation by saying that capitalism is a social system that is deeply *unjust*.'<sup>16</sup>

So, second, rather than simply reiterating, in classical Marxist mode, that one *cannot* sensefully assess the capitalist mode of production for justness - because of what justice, metaphysically / metaethically, *is* – I make a Wittgensteinian move. 'The great difficulty' in much of philosophical discourse, Wittgenstein (1968: §374) counselled, is 'not to represent the matter as if there were something one *couldn't* do'. In this spirit, I pose the reflective question: What would *count* as authentic moral criticism of the capitalist mode of production, and what counts as authentic moral

---

<sup>16</sup> I can't help but wonder why: i. Wood takes so long to reveal eventually that he himself doesn't endorse the stance that his anti-injustice reading attributes to Marx; ii. why he devotes so much attention to the exposition and defence of a view on the justness of capitalism that he himself cannot endorse; and iii. why he attributes to Marx moral views that he himself finds unacceptable, namely, a 'highly deflationary conception of morality' and a 'reductive and dismissive treatment of moral conceptions' (Wood 2004: 160)? I hope to have shown in the text that these attributions are unwarranted, and that removing them from the anti-injustice reading makes its central thesis much stronger and more plausible.

criticism of social phenomena more generally, in contrast to mere moralisation (which is often tempting)?

Consider, for example, a sensitive bourgeois soul in eighteenth or nineteenth century Britain (of which there were plenty) vociferously bemoaning the suffering of faraway plantation slaves, whilst taking no action that could be seen as militating against the institution of slavery, and continuing to enjoy its fruits. This is pseudo moral criticism, a paradigm case of moralising. It is nothing more than what historians call shedding the 'delectable tear' of sentimentality (Brown 2006: 52).

John Locke is generally taken to have been a forceful critic of the institution of slavery: 'opposition to slavery is the leitmotiv of Locke's *Two Treatises*', proclaims Jeremy Waldron (2002: 199). In its famous opening sentence, Locke (2016: 7) pronounces that 'slavery is so vile and miserable an Estate of Man, and so directly opposite to the generous Temper and Courage of our Nation', etc. But he held financial investments in plantation slavery and the slave trade, and co-authored *The Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina* (then a slave state) (ibid.: 204). Waldron struggles vainly to resolve what looks like a glaring contradiction between Locke's putative moral opposition to slavery and his personal implication in it. In my view though, there is no contradiction to resolve. Locke's purported moral denunciation of slavery is just abstract criticism of the *idea* of slavery, not criticism of the actual existence of institutionalised slavery in his social world. It should not, therefore, be taken as bona fide moral criticism of actually-existing slavery. My point is not that these pseudo critics *could not* have morally condemned slavery, but to illustrate that often what looks like moral criticism really isn't.

It is not difficult to utter or entertain the proposition 'the capitalist mode of production is unjust'. But, as Williams (1993: 117) observes in relation to Ancient slavery, 'to say that [an institution] was unjust would imply that ideally, at least, it should cease to exist'. He adds that 'few, if any' Ancient Greeks 'could see how that might be', that is, how Greek society could function without slavery. I think it is equally hard, though not generally recognised as being so, for us to see how our way of life could function without the basic institutional structure of the capitalist mode of production. Let us remind ourselves what this structure consists of. It consists essentially, as Marx brilliantly sets out from page 1 of *Capital*, in commodity production, exchange, and consumption, via the vehicles of the market and what Marx dubbed 'the universal equivalent' par excellence – money. It is easy to say in the lyric of a pop song 'imagine there's no money', but not so easy to articulate what realistically could take its place, unless one is to imagine a simplistic society with nothing like the productive and distributional power, and goods and services made possible by the capitalist mode of production. As Marx (2015: 64,n4) remarks of 'petit-bourgeois socialism', which, he says, aspires to be a commodity producing society that has 'abolish[ed] money itself': 'We might just as well try to retain Catholicism without the Pope'. I am not saying that the basic structure of the capitalist mode of production cannot be surpassed or evolve into something quite

different; just that, from our current standpoint *within* it, we are in no position to see what its future evolution will look like.<sup>17</sup>

Even the most radical of egalitarian critiques of economic injustice can cohere with the proposition that the capitalist mode of production itself is practically immune from moral condemnation. Contemporary socialist advocacy has found it hard to come up with anything beyond market socialism, a form of society which remains compatible with the basic economic structure of the capitalist mode of production (see Cohen 2009). The essential criterion of authentic moral criticism is that the critique not only pronounces on what is wrong with its object, but is supported by some reasonable idea of how it could be changed or what could take its place for the better. Without the latter, purportedly radical critiques are in danger of collapsing into emptiness, posturing, moralising, or nonsensicality, which is exactly what Marx accused his contemporary ‘utopian socialists’ of.

I realise that what I am claiming – that it is hard to imagine, from our current standpoint, what might replace the capitalist mode of production whilst sustaining our modern way of life – might be thought by fellow egalitarians to be distastefully conservative. But if the only social phenomenon that is immune from moral condemnation is the *basic structure* of the current mode of production, that leaves everything else open to moral critique, criticisable via the conceptual resources that this structure affords us. Just as Marx was able effectively to morally condemn capitalist employment practices and laws without morally condemning the mode of production itself, so too can we morally condemn as unjust capitalist practices such as insider dealing, market monopolisation, privatisation of public utilities, inadequate welfare provision, taxation regimes that allow the rich to get richer, even economic inequality per se (Cohen 2009), etc., without morally condemning the mode of production as such. And we inevitably invoke those principles (standards of justice) that constitute and emanate from its basic structure in order to do so.

## 6. Conclusion

Marx is commonsensically seen as the arch moral critic of capitalism. Any suggestion, therefore, that he did not think capitalism – the capitalist mode of production – unjust is bound to evince considerable bemusement. However, as Wood has shown, there is a very strong case to be made that this is indeed what Marx thought. But the case Wood makes loses focus on its central insight (the ‘internality’ argument), stretches too far, and ends up resting on the attribution of a conception of justice and morality that bears no resemblance to our ordinary understanding and use of those concepts. I sought to show that the case is more

---

<sup>17</sup> For Marx, acknowledgement of the limitations imposed by one’s embeddedness in a mode of production is not an admission of epistemic weakness. For even the ‘giant thinker’ Aristotle, he (2015: 58) says, was prevented from achieving understanding of the social and moral enabling conditions of commodity production and exchange in virtue of his living in a society the mode of production of which structurally precluded those conditions.

plausible, more interesting, and more engaging, if it sticks to ordinary moral concepts. I went on not only to endorse the essence of Wood's argument that Marx thought the capitalist mode of production not unjust, but to propose a non-Marxist case for its basic economic structure to be practically immune to moral condemnation until we have a clearer view of what realistically can succeed that structure.

I am well aware though, that these endeavours might be read as a conservative moral defence of 'capitalism'. I have no such intention. It follows from the argument I have clarified, reconfigured, and endorsed, that capitalism is *not just* either. My aim, rather, has been to seek clarity on what can, and what cannot, sensefully and usefully be called into question in the course of fundamental moral and political reflection and criticism.

*Nigel Pleasants*

*n.j.pleasants@ex.ac.uk*

**Acknowledgements:** I dedicate this paper to Willie Watts Miller, a wonderful lecturer at the University of Bristol when I was undergraduate there 1989-92. Willie introduced me to Wood's article and argument when I was in my second year. This paper began in 2018 when I wrote a much earlier version for a Workshop on 'Wittgenstein and the Political', hosted by Dimitris Gakis at KU Leuven. The subsequent expanded and refined version benefitted from sharp and helpful comments and suggestions by Terrell Carver, Cecilie Eriksen, Fernando Rudy Hiller, Andres Luco, and Neil O'Hara. This final version was greatly aided by the generous and perspicuous comments and suggestions of a referee for this journal.

## References

- Brown, C. (2006) *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press
- Cohen, G. A. (2009) *Why Not Socialism?* Princeton University Press.
- Cohen, G. A. (1983) 'Karl Marx, by Allen W. Wood', *Mind* 92 (367), 440-445
- Davis, D. B. (2009) 'The Universal Attractions of Slavery' *The New York Review of Books* 56 (20)
- Drescher, S. (1977) *Econocide: British Slavery in the Era of Abolition*. University of Pittsburgh Press
- Geras, N. (1985) 'The Controversy about Marx and Justice', *New Left Review* 150, 47-85.
- Hayek, F.A. (1976) *Law, Legislation and Liberty*, vol. 2. London: Routledge.
- Husami, Z. (1978) 'Marx on distributive justice' *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 8 (1), 27-64.
- Locke, J. (2016) *Two Treatises of Government* Indianapolis: Focus.

- Marx, K. (2015) *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume I*. Progress Publishers: Moscow.
- Marx, K. (1859) A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1859/critique-pol-economy/preface.htm>
- Marx, K. and Engels, F. (1888) *Manifesto of the Communist Party*. Chicago: Charles H. Kerr & Company
- Miller, R. (1984) *Analysing Marx: Morality, Power and History*. Princeton University Press.
- Peffer, R. (1990) *Marxism, Morality, and Social Justice*. Princeton University Press.
- Pleasants, N. (2010) 'Moral Argument Is Not Enough: The Persistence of Slavery and the Emergence of Abolition', *Philosophical Topics* 38:139–60.
- Popper, K. (1962) *The open society and its enemies*, Vol.2. London: Routledge
- Rosen, M. (2000) 'The marxist critique of morality and the theory of ideology', in E. Harcourt (ed.) *Morality, Reflection, and Ideology*. Oxford University Press
- Searle, J. (1999) *Mind, Language and society*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson.
- Searle, J. (1995) *The Construction of Social Reality*. Penguin
- Waldron, J. (2002) *God, Locke, and Equality*. Cambridge University Press
- Williams, B. (1993) *Shame and Necessity* Berkeley: University of California Press
- Williams, E. (1994) [1944] *Capitalism and Slavery*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press
- Wittgenstein, L. (1968) *Philosophical Investigations* Oxford: Blackwell
- Wolff, J. (2017) 'Karl Marx', *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2017/entries/marx/>>.
- Wood, A. (2004) [1981] *Karl Marx* (2<sup>nd</sup> edn). Routledge: London
- Wood, A. (1984) 'Justice and class interests' *Philosophica* 33 (1), 9-32.
- Wood, A. (1972) 'The Marxian critique of justice' *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1 (3), 1972, 244-82.
- Wood, A. (1979) 'Marx on Right and Justice: A Reply to Husami' *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 8 (3), 267-95