

Blackledge, Paul. *Marxism and Ethics*. Ithaca, NY: State University of New York Press, 2011.

What do Marxists have to tell us about ethics? After the events of the twentieth century, many would be tempted to reply “nothing,” and many Marxists might even agree with them. Paul Blackledge disagrees, though. His book is a powerful attempt to develop a Marxist ethics that is relevant to contemporary society and that avoids many of the caricatures that Karl Marx has suffered in the century and a half since his death. In particular, Blackledge is concerned with restoring to prominence a tradition of Marxism which is just as critical of the statist forms of socialism that once dominated much of the globe as it is of capitalism. Moreover, he argues that a renewed version of this tradition offers a compelling alternative to contemporary models of anti-capitalist politics, such as those offered by thinkers like Slavoj Zizek, John Holloway, and Simon Critchley. In his own words:

[C]lassical Marxism, once adequately reconstructed and disentangled from its Stalinist caricature, provides the resources to underpin an ethical political practice that is able to move beyond the negativity of anti-capitalism toward a positive socialist alternative to capitalism. (p. 4)

As the above quotation suggests, this book is unashamedly partisan, in the sense that it starts from a fairly basic assumption that Marx’s criticisms of capitalist society are substantively correct. You will not find here much in the way of detailed explanations and justifications of why wage-labor is necessarily exploitative, or why gross inequalities of wealth and power deserve to be condemned. What you will find is an impressive interpretation of Marx’s own ideas about ethics, followed by an equally impressive narrative of the subsequent development of ethics by Marxists. Both of these things ought to be of value to anyone interested in the history of critical thought, particularly in the twentieth century.

Marx’s own relative silence on explicit questions of ethics means that they have been the subject of major controversy in the twentieth century. Loosely, Marx’s explicit rejection of (at least certain varieties) of moral thought has led his interpreters down two distinct paths. The first emphasizes the “scientific” aspect of Marxism, suggesting that the absence of normative concerns is only to be expected, and perhaps even a virtue, since Marx’s theory is intended as purely descriptive and explanatory and aimed at demonstrating the necessary emergence of communism from the failures of capitalism. The second argues that this, in fact, is a fatal weakness; if Marxism is to be an effective instrument of social change, it must be supplemented with normative resources not to be found in Marx.

Blackledge rejects both of these approaches, arguing that Marx’s work contains within it an implicit ethics, specifically a form of virtue ethics

which privileges human freedom. This is an ethics that does not accept the traditional separation between “ought” and “is,” seeing human goods as rooted in human practices. This means that Marx’s theory has to be understood as simultaneously descriptive and normative; “is” and “ought” are two sides of the same practice. As a result, he sharply rejects what is sometimes described as the “ethical turn” in contemporary political theory, in which ethics is developed as something distinct from and in addition to descriptive theory. In his criticism of this “ethical turn,” Blackledge endorses Alasdair MacIntyre’s vision of contemporary ethics as “a cacophony of incommensurable perspectives” (p. 4):

Contemporary morality is consequently characterised by ‘interminable’ disagreements which seem immune to rational closure: debates on war, rights, and justice, etc. each generate a multiplicity of rationally justified opposing positions which exclude reason as an independent arbiter. (p. 5)

Blackledge is heavily influenced by MacIntyre, in particular MacIntyre’s early Marxist writings, of which Blackledge has edited a collection. MacIntyre abandoned Marxism, but Blackledge evidently believes that he did so prematurely (“a minor intellectual tragedy” [p. 193]), and that a suitably modernized virtue ethics can provide the solution to this apparently interminable conflict.

Blackledge endorses MacIntyre’s Aristotelian claim that ethics must be concerned with goods that are internal to practices. This means that any adequate ethical criticism of capitalism must be rooted in particular practices and must come from a standpoint within these practices. He argues that Marx himself adopted this substantively Aristotelian position, albeit filtered and modernized through G. W. F. Hegel. From Hegel and the radical Enlightenment, Marx inherits a historicized concern for freedom, in which freedom is understood as the *human essence itself*, realized differently at different stages of human history and understood as self-determination through (rather than against) society. Marx thus rejects a purely egoistic and individualistic conception of freedom, arguing instead that true self-determination can only take place in and through social forms.

According to Marx, capitalism is incapable of realizing this self-determination. The egoism and alienation integral to it give rise to contexts in which these sorts of social forms can develop, but only in opposition to it:

Marx suggested not only that workers feel compelled to struggle against the power of capital, but that in so doing they begin to create modes of existence which also offer a virtuous alternative to the egoism characteristic not only of capitalist society generally, but also of working-class life within that society more specifically. (p. 93)

This is because “the collective struggles of workers underpinned the emergence of virtues of solidarity and sociability which pointed beyond the limitations of liberalism’s world of egoistic individuals” (p. 92). The realization of a higher kind of freedom, understood as self-determination, was possible through the institutions and practices of struggle that develop in the antagonism between workers and capitalists.

It is sometimes unclear what exactly the relationship is between these virtues of solidarity and the specific concern for freedom. The language of freedom in Blackledge’s discussion gives way quite quickly to the language of solidarity, and the relationships between the two are under-examined. Toward the end, he suggests that working-class solidarity is “the concrete form taken by freedom as self-determination” (p. 198). But why exactly is it that *solidarity* as a virtue permits a greater degree of *self-determination*? Blackledge does make an important point about Marx’s treatment of the relationship between freedom and democracy, in which I think he is on strong ground. This reformulates the conception of freedom as “self-determination through democracy” (p. 58), and follows Marx in suggesting that “freedom consists in ‘converting the state from an organ superimposed upon society into one completely subordinate to it.’” However, it would have been good to hear more about this.

Having established this basic framework, Blackledge then traces the development of Marxist thought through the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The great strength of his account is that it links this intellectual history to the history of the working-class struggles which he considers to be central to Marx’s perspective. Thus, the various developments in the Marxist tradition are not put down to intellectual fashion or moments of insightful genius, but to the growth and subsequent decline of working-class institutions. Most notably, Blackledge identifies the development of a purely “scientific” socialism which sought to sever completely Marx’s explanatory theory of history and economics from any normative concerns with the growth of a reformist, state-focused socialism that was no longer interested in the independent action and institutions of the working-class.

In reaction to this, a renewed revolutionary tradition developed around thinkers like Lukács, Lenin, and Gramsci, a tradition which is inextricably connected to the development of vibrant and dynamic organizations in Hungary, Russia, and Italy. The factory councils and soviets were institutions that allowed both for the development of solidarity, and also posed questions of political power that allowed for the development of a new form of democracy:

Lukács extended Lenin’s conception of soviet democracy to suggest a potential bridge between the ‘is’ of existing society and the ‘ought’ of socialism. Workers’ councils or soviets, he argued, had since the Russian Revolution of 1905 spontaneously emerged in periods of heightened class struggle. . . . These spontaneous institutions of workers struggle provide a

potential ethical basis from which to criticise the alienation of capitalist society. (pp. 128-29)

The discussion of these thinkers is particularly rich and interesting, showing, if nothing else, the sheer creativity and diversity of the Marxists of the early twentieth century, as they attempted to interpret and re-interpret Marx in the midst of revolutionary upheavals and against the orthodoxy which had gone before. His discussion also offers a significant departure from accounts of Lenin and the Bolsheviks which stress a crude instrumental approach to ethical questions, permitting anything in service to the revolution. Rather, Lenin saw the self-activity of the proletariat as central to the project of socialism, and directed his activity accordingly. In re-instating activity at the heart of Marxism, Blackledge argues, Lenin offers pointers toward a Marxist ethics, even if it remains under-theorized.

However, it is in the discussion of the period following World War II where Blackledge's most significant arguments, at least for contemporary debates, emerge. Blackledge, rightly, in my opinion, draws a sharp distinction between the revolutionary tradition of Lenin and the later rise to power of Stalin. In the context of the rise of Stalinism in the Soviet Union and the absence of class struggle in the West, many Marxists retreated from their earlier revolutionary positions. In the context of the decline of the institutions that had in a previous era grounded a Marxist ethics, commitment to Marxism increasingly took the form of what Blackledge calls (following Lucien Goldmann) a tragic wager:

From this perspective, Marxism involves not a determinate prediction of the socialist future of humanity, but a wager on the revolutionary potential of the proletariat. Precisely because it takes the form of such a wager, [Goldmann] suggests that the defeats experienced by the labour movement in the mid-twentieth century led some of the most honest thinkers of the period to recognise the existence of a 'dichotomy . . . between man's hopes and the human predicament.' They found themselves in a situation where the forces that had offered the potential to move beyond the tragic condition appeared no longer to exist. (p. 142)

This notion of a wager on the radical potential of the working class provides an important underpinning for Blackledge's own project. He clearly and unambiguously sides with those who maintain a confidence in this radical potential even in the most difficult circumstances. It is, however, worth noting that a wager is not the same as an article of faith or a blind commitment. A wager, if it is to be a good one, ought to be informed by research, analysis, and experience, even if its outcome is necessarily uncertain. This means that while it does depend on confidence in the future, it avoids the charge of teleology or inevitability that has been levelled (often rightly) at many

varieties of Marxism.

It is on the question of whether this is a good wager where Blackledge, ultimately, diverges from MacIntyre, who is the subject of the entire final chapter. Blackledge focuses on MacIntyre's mature critique of Marx, in particular on a 1985 article entitled "The Theses on Feuerbach: A Road not Taken," in which he argues that while Marx had correctly identified the way in which capitalism pushed workers into resistance, he had failed to realize that capitalist ways of life simultaneously eroded the kinds of moral resources that would allow workers to challenge capitalism itself. He specifically makes reference to the Silesian Weavers revolt of 1844, the first major political event in which Marx had identified the radical significance of working-class struggles. The weavers had moved rapidly from narrow economic demands to raising broad social questions, leading the young Marx to conclude that "every economic revolt contains a universal soul." However, according to MacIntyre, this was due to the virtues involved in their small-scale community life, something that the advent of industrial capitalism was systematically destroying. The largely pre-capitalist weavers retained virtues which did not exist in the newly formed industrial proletariat.

For Blackledge, it was MacIntyre, and not Marx, who took the wrong road. Far from eroding the virtues of community and solidarity, the growth of an industrial working class made possible new, different, and arguably higher forms of them. Blackledge argues for this, in part, through an examination of the history of working-class struggles, with a particular focus on mining communities in Britain. He suggests that these indicate, against MacIntyre's pessimism, that it remained possible to move from the sectional struggles of trade unions to a broader sense of community and solidarity, including a committed internationalism: "[W]hile there was not automatic relationship between the trade-union struggles in the pits and the formation of the broader mining communities, neither was there, as MacIntyre's mature critique of Marxism seems to suggest, an unbridgeable gulf between these two processes" (p. 192). These experiences suggest an ongoing basis for the wager on the revolutionary potential of the proletariat: The persistence of working class struggle means that institutions can emerge which point beyond capitalism.

However, I think that Blackledge underestimates the problem faced by the *absence* of particular institutions of working-class struggle. It is all very well to expect them to emerge, and to have good (if defeasible) reasons for that expectation, but this does not get to the heart of the problem. If these institutions offer the vantage point from which to both criticize capitalism *and* to offer an alternative, then their contemporary absence presents a problem—namely, that we do not have that vantage point. Thus, on what basis can we in the present criticize capitalism or offer alternatives? This points to a general ambiguity in Blackledge's account of the perspective internal to working-class struggles from which we are to criticize capitalism, which he sometimes calls "the standpoint of the proletariat." Is it a standpoint which is *always* available, or one which only exists in a given historical moment, when certain specific

institutions come into being? Sometimes, it seems like the position is available in the everyday life of the working class, in their daily struggles and relations with one another, but at others it seems that it emerges in particular special institutions, like the workers councils in Russia, Hungary, and Turin. While these institutions emerge out of these daily struggles, they do not clearly do so inevitably or necessarily.

I think Blackledge ought to prefer the second option, since it is far clearer in what sense these institutions can be said to “point beyond” capitalist society; they provide a possible alternative way of organizing social life. However, this confronts him with the problem I have already referred to: what do we do when such institutions do not exist? One solution to this might be to separate out more clearly the two different functions which Blackledge ascribes to the standpoint of the proletariat. On the one hand, there is the negative function of criticizing or denouncing capitalist society. On the other hand, there is the positive function of offering an alternative to it. Perhaps it is correct to say that in the absence of emerging institutions of solidarity it is impossible to say very much about what an alternative to capitalism might look like. However, this does not necessarily prevent us from *condemning* it. This, I would argue, would be consistent with what Marx himself said and did, rejecting speculation about the details of a post-capitalist society as “writing recipes for the cookshops of the future.” However, to say this would depend on the claim that it is possible to *criticize* capitalism without simultaneously offering an alternative, something which Blackledge does not discuss or defend.

This would also be compatible with the great strength of Blackledge’s account, which is that he does not perceive socialism as one particular vision to be built or imposed on society, but as the outcome of collective self-determination. Socialism is not just one possible outcome from the collective self-determination of the proletariat. Rather, socialism *is* the collective self-determination of the proletariat. Thus freedom is “simultaneously the means to and end of the struggle against capitalism” (p. 16).

Nonetheless, all of this shifts the burden of responsibility onto both examining and encouraging the practices developing within communities that might permit this kind of self-determination. It requires close analysis and engagement with such practices, as well as attempting, where possible, to spread and propagate them. If encouraging more people to do that, whether Marxist or not, is the consequence of Blackledge’s book, then it will be no small achievement.

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