THE VALUES OF SOCIALISM BY Phil Sharpe

INTRODUCTION

In a capitalist society based on the accumulation of wealth and the status represented by consumer goods the importance of values seems to be irrelevant. However the result of this indifference is that the role of values becomes relegated to the private sphere of the individual and the family, whilst the omnipotence of economic laws which are differentiated from ethics becomes unquestioned. The result is the acceptance of bourgeois economics masquerading as common sense. This means that the assumptions of the ideology of the market are accepted as the standpoint of popular culture and all forms of oppositional views are considered to be irrelevant or even detrimental to the fabric of society. Thus the conception of equality is considered to uphold welfare dependency and the supposed inability of sections of society to find employment. In these circumstances it would seem logical for Marxists and socialists to develop an alternative to this ideological conformity that was based upon the standpoint of community, co-operation and the common good. But this task is not recognised as being of importance because the perspective of socialism is considered to be upheld by notions of historical necessity, or the collapse of capitalism and the logic of class struggle. In this context the aims of socialism are separated from the role of ethical claims, and this standpoint is justified by the view that Marx was indifferent to the importance of moral principles. The result of this indifference is that Marxists do not recognise the significance of socialist values. What is not understood is that the process of transformation to socialism is connected to the working class being changed from an unwilling instrument of capital accumulation into a spiritual community of resistance and opposition to the imperatives of the present economic system. The very infusion of a collective form of love and solidarity would represent the transformation of the ‘class in itself’ into a ‘class for us’. This development would mean that the passivity and apathy generated by uncritical acceptance of the present would instead become a dynamic expression of the generation of forms of socialism within capitalism. Instead of the atomisation and suspicion of neighbours and strangers, the working class would re-gain a sense of community and recognition of the principles of fellowship.

Marxist organisations could have a crucial role in this process, but instead they are demoralised or residing in a world of illusions. They rely on elaborating conceptions of an automatic demise of capitalism rather than promoting the values of ethical socialism. Implicitly they accept that the prospect of socialism has been undermined by capitalist economic development and sociological changes within the class structure. The success of Conservatism or New Labour has disorientated them and they refuse to tackle the theoretical challenges posed by the contemporary era. They lack the creativity that could revive their perspectives of socialism. In other words there is a failure to address the very reasons that promote the acceptance of bourgeois ideology within the working class. Instead the working class is written off as a reactionary mass, or else is considered to be ‘ready for revolution’. Both of these caricatures fails to tackle the complexity of the tasks involved in providing the arguments that can promote the development of the connection between the working class and socialism. Hence the very anger and alienation of the working class is not perceived and instead the forces of Marxism are mainly comfortable in their own milieus and happy with nostalgia about the past. The actual theoretical work of Marxism is increasingly the output of a small intellectual elite. Consequently the result of this demoralisation and marginalisation is decline and dogmatism.

In order to tackle this process of decline it is necessary to outline the importance of the connection between ethics and socialism. This task must do more than indicate the relationship between capitalism and alienation. Such a connection has been outlined in the past, and requires no elaboration. What is more appropriate is to outline the values which will attempt to provide an alternative to the present alienated condition. In this precise manner we can attempt to outline how it is possible to generate struggle to transform alienation into an opposite of collective autonomy and solidarity. However we must avoid the mistakes of orthodox Marxism which is to define this task exclusively in practical terms. Instead we have to elaborate what we mean by fellowship and the promotion of togetherness. In this context Marxism and ethical socialism instead of being antagonistic competitors blend together. The argument will be that if the working class is to be an ethical community it will have to overcome alienated acceptance of capitalism. Consequently there is not an opposition between class struggle and the role of the ethical but instead these two aspects are united in the form of the generation of a community that is opposed to the objectives and interests of capitalism. This means that lack of recognition of the role of the ethical is an expression of an inability to develop a strategy for socialism.

DISCUSSING THE VALUES OF MARXISM

Marxism is considered to be opposed to the role of ethics because morality represents the role of bourgeois ideology and is also a science that does not require ethical justification. However it could be argued that the claim that socialism is superior to capitalism cannot be separated from moral reasoning. This perspective cannot be simply outlined in terms of the conception that socialism represents historical progress in comparison to capitalism but rather this claim is connected to arguments that imply that the exploitation of capitalism is morally unjustified and therefore the argument for socialism is partially ethically motivated: “If the facts are as Capital says, then the claim that socialism is superior to capitalism on moral grounds is as objective a value judgement as saying that it is wrong to enslave people.”(1) Marx used moral terms which suggests that capitalism can be criticised because it did not correspond to the ethical norms of a socialist perspective, but this standpoint was only implicit and was actually repressed because morality was considered to be an aspect of bourgeois ideology. George Panichas explains that Marx’s German Ideology suggests that morals have a basis within the social-historical context: “Moral ideas, concepts, discourse and theories are explained as constituting part of the socio-historical character of the epoch in which they arise, and to which they contribute. It follows that certain moral principles and theories may well be appropriate to some historical moments but not others.”(2) However this very approach was utilised in order to reject important aspects of the philosophical thinking of Kant and others. The very historical content of ethics indicated its limitations and did not seem to suggest the necessity for the elaboration of an alternative form of ethics. Instead what was implied was the development of the materialist conception of history.

This point could be outlined differently: the requirements of the class struggle demanded a critique of morals because ethical principles represented bourgeois ideology. Marx’s standpoint was not that of the radical moral sceptic who held that moral reasons were dogmatic or irrational. Instead he expressed an ambiguity towards ethics which maintained that it was difficult to develop a morality that corresponded to the aims of the class struggle.(3) This standpoint meant that the very demands of the political situation could express the imperatives to develop socialist morality. Such a viewpoint could be connected to the problem of the corruption of power that occurred in relation to the Bolshevik revolution. In other words ethics was the incomplete aspect of Marxism, and its development could be suggested by the very complexities of the class struggle. Unfortunately this recognition of the importance of ethics was repressed because of the failure of Marx to develop a socialist morality. Instead the totalitarian associations of Stalinism suggested the significance of a Marxist ethics.

However despite these ambiguities it could also be argued that the very character of the claims of Marxism to be a science are integrally connected to the role of ethics: “Marxist political practice does not rely simply on predicting the abolition of capitalism and the advent of socialism and/or communism nor in explaining how and why this is bound (or at least extremely likely) to occur; nor, even, does it rely solely on the above propositions plus appeals to the self-interest of the workers and other oppressed sections of the population. Marxists, in addition to all of the above, also appeal to workers (and to people in general) on the basis that socialism is better (ie, morally better) than capitalism on the basis, for example, that it promotes freedom, community, self-actualization, and human well-being in general better than any form of capitalism, or for that matter, any form of state socialism, does or can.”(4) This effective appeal to the role of ethics has been historically denied as being opposed to the importance of Marxism as a science. Indeed, the equation of morality with ideology means that the aim to elaborate a socialist morality has been repudiated despite the empirical utilisation of ethical aims as a part of the Marxist appeal to the working class. The paradox is that this dogmatic explicit rejection of the role of morality means that it is not possible to thoughtfully demarcate between ethical principles that uphold capitalism from those that justify the struggle for socialism. As Peffer argues: “The two most important misconceptions of morality that Marx and Engels exhibit have to do with the supposed facts that: (1) the use of moral discourse, ie, the making of moral judgements etc, commits one to unacceptable ontological or epistemological positions, positions not in line with the sort of rational, scientific, and materialistic world view to which Marx and Engels were committed, and (2) the use of moral discourse, ie. the making of moral judgements, etc, commits one to the view that the propagation and inculcation of moral principles or theories is the primary, or at least one of the most important ways to attain the amelioration and/or improvement of the human condition.”(5)

In other words, Marx and Engel did not recognise that it was possible to develop a socialist morality that could be compatible with the role of the materialist conception of history. Instead they equated morality with the standpoint of utopian socialism and the conflation of the ‘is’ with the ‘ought’. Hence they effectively argued that moral indignation was against the standpoint of materialism and science. It was not recognised that an ethical approach could be complementary with the development of scientific socialism. Thus it was implicitly suggested that the emphasis on fact could be separated from that of value. But the result of this perspective was that the ethical became the repressed aspect of Marxism because morality was an integral part of the class struggle as indicated by values like solidarity, co-operation and the common good. Consequently the Marxist standpoint became justified by the uneasy co-existence of moral indignation and the sober reflection of the role of a science. It would have been more constructive to transform this emotivism into a systematic collection of socialist values. Instead of this approach Marx and Engels considered that moral views were misleading and an expression of ideology rather than an inherent aspect of how we should consider the class struggle and its development.

Furthermore, Marx and Engels considered that moral preaching could not transform society in terms of the transformation of the ‘is’ into the ‘ought’. This criticism is astute to the extent that the role of morality cannot transcend unfavourable historical conditions and the immature level of the productive forces. However if we accept this qualification that morals cannot create change in voluntarist terms it is still possible to suggest that ethical principles can contribute to the development of a strategy of change, and in this manner morality is not simply ideological or undermining for the class struggle. Instead it is possible to suggest that even moral principles that have originated outside of the Marxist discourse can contribute to the development of the class struggle under favourable conditions for the realisation of socialism. For example, the general strike requires patience, solidarity and co-operation for its success. If the working class is influenced by this form of socialist morality the prospects of the success of the general strike will be enhanced.

Indeed it could be argued that the class struggle will spontaneously develop its distinctive ethic, and the progressive task of Marxism will be to indicate this morality rather than attempt to repress its expression. In this context it is possible to differentiate between moral preaching that encourages a lack of reflection about society from moral discourse that contributes to the development of revolutionary strategy. In order to succeed in this task we should not be satisfied with the fact that Marx’s discourse never reconciles the tension between his effective repudiation of ethics in some works combined with the overall un-theorised acceptance of the importance of moral discourse. What is required is that the unsystematic lack of a moral theory in the work of Marx be transformed into ethical principles that contribute to the development of the materialist analysis of society and revolutionary strategy. In this manner the undoubted ethical aspects of Marx’s early understanding of alienation can be strengthened, and the theoretical problems caused by the explicit rejection of morality in the German Ideology can be overcome. Therefore the reduction of values to being an expression of bourgeois ideology can be modified in the following manner: “If, on the other hand, values or moral theories can be demonstrated to serve generalizable and public interests in a given society, they are not simply to be denounced as ideology, but are to be seen as part of a genuinely socialist morality. For example, if values of co-operation, developing one’s individual and social capabilities, and producing for human needs rather than profit can be shown to be serve the interests of promoting the general welfare and of helping produce a socialist society that overcomes alienation and the other evils of capitalism, then such values can be said to transcend a class ideology.”(6)

Thus it is possible to differentiate between a value system that upholds bourgeois ideology and acts to defend capitalism from an alternative ethical approach that is critical of society and so can become a useful part of Marxist theory. The ultimate test of this socialist morality is that its validity would be tested in practice. However, what is controversial is whether Marxism itself is amenable to being supplemented by ethical principles. It could be argued that Marx has outlined important reasons in the ‘German Ideology’ that indicate why capitalism is most compatible with the standpoint of moral values. In this context the alternative of socialism is based on the rejection of moral reasoning. Kellner rejects this view and suggests that Marx provides important arguments that would connect his approach with morality. However the most important reason that would suggest why we need ethical socialism is connected to the very complexity of the class struggle. The conception of historical necessity has not realised the success of socialism and instead the very complexity of the class struggle means that we require the development of Marxist theory and strategy. In this context the development of Marxist ethical socialism would contribute immensely to the arguments that could be made in favour of the reasons as to why capitalism should be replaced by socialism. We cannot rely on historical inevitability as justification for the demise of capitalism and the onset of socialism, instead ethical socialism provides crucial arguments as to why the present system should be replaced with an alternative.

Andrew Collier provides important arguments as to why Marxism should not be influenced by ethical socialism.(7) Collier argues that what is unique about Marxism in its mature form – the work of Capital – is that an attempt is being made to explain the economic and political system as a science. Only in this manner can commitment to the working class be combined with the aim of understanding the exploitative character of capitalism. This science does not require moral and value laden embellishment. It is possible that the exposition of a theory may seem to have emotional or moralistic overtones but what is useful is its ability to explain the facts and structures of the system. In this manner the working class interest is upheld by the generation of the most scientific knowledge that is possible, and in this sense revolutionary practice is promoted. Hence Hiferding’s view that Marxist social science lacks political consequences, whilst its morality facilitates practice, is false. Instead Marxism as an explanatory theory generates practical aspects and promotes the class struggle. Only in this manner can theory be a guide to practice. If theory was prone to instability because of the influence of moral judgements it would not be a reliable guide for the class struggle: “At the same time we are on a completely different ground from what may be called the politics of categorical imperatives. People are not being told what they ought to want. It is not a matter of deducing a political goal from some theory and then trying to find an instrument to implement it; the theory can only arise in answer to questions that the workers in struggle are already asking. There is no question of an elite of theorists using the day to day struggles of the workers for their own, independently motivated ends, for the whole case for those ends rests on the existing class interests of the workers, together with knowledge given by the theory about how those interests can best be served.”(8) Furthermore: “The fact that Marxist theory is reliant for its practical effects on the wants and the struggles of an already existing class, already engaged in class struggle, and that it transforms the aims of that class only by raising the level of its objective understanding of society, distinguishes it sharply from a moral theory or ideal.”(9)

This point would be completely convincing if it could be proved that the class struggle always corresponded to the explanatory objectives of Marxism as a science, but it is the very complexity of the actions of the working class that indicate the importance of ethical principles. The very development of mass action results in ethical impulses and the justification of conflict in terms of morality. Hence morality is not something imposed onto struggle because of the external influence of bourgeois ideology, instead it is the very internal product of militancy. Consequently the aim should not be to extract theory from moral impurities, but instead to indicate how the class struggle can be advanced by the explicit recognition of the moral ought. This means exploitation is not something that can be reduced to the role of science instead it is something that is experienced by the working class as an immoral limitation that has to be challenged. Consequently, if Marxist science is to remain explanatory it has to explain the ethical dynamics within the class struggle. The prospect of revolutionary activity is connected to the aspiration to transform a moral ought into what could be. Instead of this recognition of the close relation of science to morality, Collier represses the ethical in the name of science and the aims of the explanatory theory. This is a one-sided approach which is unable to explain the multi-faceted aspects of the class struggle. The point is that it is idealist to expect that reality will conform to the requirements of science because important aspects of that very reality is explained by the role of ethics and other diverse factors. We cannot reduce important aspects of society to the norms of the theory; instead the theory has to be expanded in order to provide explanation for new and novel facts, and as a result we accept that reality will not conform to the original propositions of the theory. Failure to be flexible in these terms will reduce the theory to a rigid doctrine, and in that sense all contemporary and new developments will be treated with suspicion. Thus rather than justifying Marxism as a closed science it would be more convincing to accept that the founders of the theory did not adequately understand the importance of ethics for socialism. This means studying morality as part of the class struggle rather than as being inherently anti-scientific and an expression of bourgeois ideology. However none of this criticism is meant to deny that Collier is wrong to argue that theory should primarily be about scientific explanation. Forms of subjectivism should not influence the role of theory. But this commitment does not mean that the importance of ethics should be denied. Instead the very aim of theory as science should include explaining the significance of morality for the class struggle. It would actually be dogmatic to deny this importance in the name of a purist conception of science. The problem is that Collier considers the approach of the ‘German Ideology’ as being the last word on the relationship of science to morality. He tends to justify dogma in the name of science.

Specifically, Collier contends that particular values like equality are vague and do not explain the social conditions of socialism when compared to explicit Marxist aims concerning the class struggle.(10) However he contradicts his argument and admits that the value of equality can be made compatible with the standpoint of Marxism in terms of the concept of equal collective power over the resources of society: “And if common ownership is to be more than a legal fiction, it must mean everyone having an equal share in the democratic procedures by which the collective power is exercised.”(11) Unintentionally Collier makes the point that in their spontaneous and underdeveloped form values may be unsatisfactory when considered in connection to the role of theory and explanation. But the very process of refining values like equality can indicate their relationship to the aims of Marxism and socialism. Equality becomes transformed from a vague sentiment into a precise expression of the principles of socialism when it is connected to the collective aspirations of the socialist society. Hence equality becomes a principle that is interwoven with the importance of social ownership and the manner in which resources are utilised within socialism. But it is also important to recognise that despite its traditional vagueness equality is also an oppositional value that is contrasted with the uneven distribution of wealth of capitalism. This understanding of equality should not be rejected and replaced with more scientific concepts, instead we should make the aim of equality more precise and related to the task of socialism. To some extent this task was carried out by Tawney.

Collier is on stronger ground when he considers that values like freedom and liberty can be conceived in terms compatible with bourgeois ideology. This criticism should not mean that we reject the task of refining these values in socialist terms. The alternative is not Collier’s suggestion that we reject moral values in favour of scientific study of the present system: “The failure to carry out this process of value elimination has serious consequences. In the first place, such failure results in coming complacently out of one’s theoretical work with the same values and practices as one went into it. Yet the whole point of theoretical knowledge is to transform the practices to which it was applied.”(12) What is not recognised by this approach is that values are not necessarily prejudices; instead values can be what motivates a person to become critical of capitalism and an adherent of socialism. An alternative to the futile task of rejecting values in the name of science would be to connect our values, which motivated the very support for socialism, with the process of theoretical refinement. The question would be: how can we modify our values so that they are more connected to the aims of socialism? Instead of this recognition, Collier suggests the even the task of creating a new socialist morality and humanity is likely to become distorted by the interests of a party elite. This observation may represent some historical truth but the principled conclusion is not to reject the role of values, and instead the task should be to promote values that uphold socialist democracy rather than the regime of the monolithic state.

Anthony Skillen adopts a different viewpoint to that of Collier. He considers that the theoretical tensions in Marxism are caused by the failure to connect the reject of the authoritarian morality of the existing system with constructing an alternative of socialist ethics. The result of this omission is that the conception of the morality of the class struggle tends to adopt the values of self-interest which are expressed by bourgeois ideology.(13) Hence Marx’s emphasis on collective organisation combined with historical necessity will express the dynamics of transition to communism. Skillen does not consider that this approach is adequate, and he comments that: “Marx tended to write as if it was solely in the struggle against the dominant class that masses would gain the dispositions and capacities fitting them for self-emancipation. But independent organisation that is solely oppositionist and whose connection to production is essentially negative is poor preparation, since the virtues it engenders are essentially virtues of subordinate resistance.”(14) Unfortunately, Skillen does not elaborate what socialist morality could consist of that would be able to overcome these limitations of the Marxist conception of class struggle. Specifically, he does not indicate that the role of socialist morality is connected to establish the contradiction between capitalism and the ethical principles of socialism. The conclusion is that only under socialism can moral values like equality and co-operation be realised. Thus adherence to ethics actually motivates and offensive struggle for socialism and rejects any tendency to accept the limitations of defensive class struggle. The point is that Marx’s ambiguity about the role of ethics may express a lack of sufficient motivating dynamics as to why the class struggle should become transformed into a conscious attempt to realise socialism and communism. In this context the role of ethics provides an alternative to the limitations in the strategy of Marx. Instead what is recognised is that the contradiction between capitalism and the realisation of ethical principles like equality can only be resolved by the role of revolutionary practice.

THE VALUES OF SOCIALISM

(1)The first value of socialism is aspiration. This value may seem surprising because it is considered to be a classic expression of the values of a capitalist type society. However it is necessary to clarify and indicate that all people of whatever type of social situation aspire to achieve improvement in status and income via the prospects for social mobility. In contrast those sections of society that consider they are unable to improve their condition are liable to become demoralised. Hence it would be an important principle of a socialist society that it would be possible for all the sections of the population to be able to improve their status and occupational opportunities. It is not possible for society to be static in relation to social mobility, and the very prospect of social mobility would be the result of the development of a decent education service. Obviously critics of socialism would argue who would be at the bottom of this egalitarian society? To some extent some people would be content with the ability to practice their skills in manual work, but it can also be argued that nobody would want to clean the toilets or be engaged in other forms of unpleasant work that generally are regarded with low esteem by society. Consequently it would be the task of society to modify the rigid division of labour by the voluntary encouragement of the carrying out of unpleasant work by those that have the most rewarding occupations. It is also possible that the development of the industrial democracy will mean that various forms of manual and white collar work can be rewarding and creative such as construction and computers. In other words it will be those that are engaged in the process of production and services who are able to establish their conditions of work, and so overcome the aspect of alienation that has been inherited from capitalism. But one of the most important criteria of success will be the possibility for children to realise a type of work and opportunity for improvement in contrast to the social circumstances of their parents. This means that the unskilled working class is able to attain skilled work or become part of the white collar or professional occupations. Socialist society will aim to end the dependency of sections of the poor on the welfare state not by means of coercion but instead by enhancing the cultural capital of those that have often endured unemployment under capitalism.

How will it be possible to achieve a society of social mobility without the inequality of hierarchy and status? This task will be difficult because the very principles and character of social mobility implies that someone will be at the bottom of society, and there will be a middle strata and an elite. Hence we have to accept that what is occurring is unique: the attempt to realise a process of upward movement within society without the development of social stratification and the creation of inequality. This process will be difficult and it could be argued that those without initiative, creativity and average dynamism will inevitably end at the bottom. We have to avoid this situation by an effective cultural revolution that challenges fatalism within the people who have been poor within capitalism, and also oppose any sense of snobbery and elitism within those that have the occupations with the greatest prestige. An important aim is to undermine the possibility for the professional strata and managers of enterprises from becoming a class that extracts a surplus from those that are manual workers and white collar staff. This task will be facilitated by having a multi-party democracy that undermines the possibility of developing a party state. Consequently the aim of this society is to promote the transformation of ability and attitudes so that all working people have an optimistic attitude that they will be able to make individual progress and overcome the disadvantages of the past. In order to ensure this possibility it is necessary that society is not dominated by a party of the privileged elite and instead the state is composed of those that are genuine public servants and have a high level of civic spirit. Being part of the state will not represent the potential to develop political and economic power.

It will be difficult to develop a society that is guided by strict principles and values and so accountability of the state to the organisations of democracy is vital. In this context being part of the state should be recognised as an act of public welfare rather than the accumulation of power. Hence it will be part of the constitution that the accumulation of power by the party and an individual dictator should be understood as being against the principles of society. This situation will mean that democratic socialism is ended by the influence of elitism. Thus society is not opposed to social mobility but it is against the concentration of power that brings about the demise of industrial and political democracy. The development of corruption means the effective replacement of socialism by a new form of class society. This possibility can only be undermined by the effective operation of democracy that is the only principled basis to oppose the emergence of the rule of a tyrant or single party. Thus it is multi-party democracy that is the only credible alternative to the development of an authoritarian state.

(2)The above analysis indicates that socialist society can only be successful if it rejects the aim of political power. Hence the necessity of the authority of the state should be differentiated from the corrupting influence of power. Anarchists would argue that the activity of the state cannot be separated from the exercise of power. The problem with this standpoint is that the perspective of the demise of the state does not indicate what should be an important expression of authority within society. How can law be created if society lacks a legislative organ like the state? Thus what is required is the development of a democratic state that did not impose itself onto civil society and instead is an expression of consent and based on the role of participation of civilians. The state would be accountable to the people and so the unrealistic aim of its abolition would be replaced by the aspiration to make the state an entity that is not remote and coercive.

(3)Another important aim and value of socialist society would be equality. This value indicates that capitalism is morally unacceptable because it promotes inequality and denies many people the ability to realise their material needs. Inequality is created by the system of economic domination of the large transnational corporations and the influence of the financial institutions. Thus in order to promote the end of inequality we would suggest that nationalisation of these organisations under workers control is necessary. However we recognise that a society claiming to be socialist can generate its own forms of inequality in terms of the monopoly of political power of the single party. This corruption of power can only be ended by democratic socialism and the consolidation of a multi-party system that does not allow for the domination of a single party over the state and economy. Politicians should not be a separate and privileged layer within society. The principle of equality does not mean equal incomes because it is necessary to recognise the continued importance of incentives within socialism. Instead equality will be promoted by the end to the domination of society by a ruling class and instead expresses the generation of a classless society based on equality of social conditions. All members of society will have the right to decent education, health care and decent housing. The expression of equality will mean the possibility of cultural development and the opportunity to develop sporting potential. However, it may be unrealistic to assume that the creation of a society based on the realisation of common need will mean the end to inequalities generated by differences between individuals. We should not aim to produce a homogenous society based on a dogmatic conception of the importance of equality.

(4)In order to generate the dynamic of equality within society it is necessary that the aim of the common good and unified social purpose be recognised. Without solidarity between the different members of society about its goals it is possible that the role of co-operation will be replaced by the development of struggle between individuals and the emergence of class differences as a result of this antagonistic situation. However the success of a society based on equality will consolidate the importance of solidarity within society. It is also necessary to recognise that the solidarity required to transform capitalism into socialism will be an important legacy that will promote the development of socialism in terms of realisation of the common good. But it is also necessary to remember that socialism will require the development of political economy so that scarce resources can be distributed efficiently in accordance with the principle of equality. It is also possible that equality may have to be combined with altruism because the aim of a society of abundance may have to be replaced with ecological sustainability that suggests needs have absolute limits.

(5)The principle of justice is controversial within Marxism. Some commentators have suggested that capitalism is just because the transaction between capitalist and worker is based on the exchange of equivalents.(15) This view has been contested and it is argued that the conception of what is justice within capitalist society does not overcome the dynamics of the exploitation of labour power. The point is that what is justice within a socialist society would be based on its principles and so correspond to the standpoint of equality and the common good. Furthermore justice would represent an important criteria of relations between people without exploitation and domination: “Furthermore, even if communism did represent an ideal beyond justice, the history of the twentieth century shows that between capitalism and communism lies an unpredictably long transition period in which antagonistic relations remain and with them the potential for oppression in new and old forms. Without a theory of justice, a theory of what individuals owe to and are owed by one another, a theory of the rightful limits of the group’s authority over the thoughts and actions of its members – Marxists are simply without a theoretical defence against oppression.”(16) Furthermore, the principles of justice are the basis of the conception of rights which are important in order to defend the interests of the individual against the state. The role of justice is connected to the system of law and the rejection of any view that the state is omnipotent because it represents the interests of the working class. People can appeal to the claims of justice if they consider wrong doing has been committed and therefore justice is the alternative to any tendency to utilise power and coercion at the expense of both individuals and social groups.

(6)The principle of freedom seems to be the most controversial. On the one hand the aspiration for freedom has been raised in many situations where the society is based on the domination of tyranny and despotism. On the other hand freedom could imply the freedom to utilise property, resources and opportunities at the expense of other people. These issues have been discussed in a work by Gerry Cohen.(17) The problem is that he is trying to reconcile Marx’s understanding of socialism with various themes in libertarian philosophy and so he does not systematically discuss the relationship of freedom to communism. He does outline that self-ownership may not be incompatible with socialist economic activity but he seems to accept that freedom is most compatible with the ideological standpoint of capitalism. To Paul Mason, freedom is a dynamic produced by the very logic of capitalism, and represents the aspiration: “What if – instead of waiting for the collapse of capitalism – the emancipated human beings were beginning to emerge spontaneously from within this breakdown of the old order?”(18) In this context, freedom is ontological and has been created by the very logic of the economic system and represents the prospects of transition from the old forms to the new. This technological determinist argument suggests that the imperatives of the economic system are generating the prospect for political change. What the result is could be said to be indefinite, and so these infinite possibilities can be defined as freedom. The old traditional perspective of emancipation defined as communism is being replaced by this new project and its connection to the aspiration for freedom. However what is problematic about this approach is that it cannot articulate the significance of agency, and the role of humanity in the process of transformation is being replaced with the claims of an economic reductionist standpoint. Mason may have grasped the process of change within the economic form but this perspective is based on the rejection of the class struggle. Ultimately the aspiration for freedom will become part of the impetus to aim for communism or else freedom will become incoherent and be diluted into the acceptance of the latest process of capital accumulation. We can begin with freedom, but the only valid emancipatory logic is the ability of humanity to realise communism. In this context of class struggle the vague aspiration for freedom can become communism.

FOOTNOTES:

(1)William H Shaw Marxism and Moral Objectivity In Kai Nielsen Editor, Marxism and Morality Canadian Jounral of Philosophy, Supplement Volume vii, Edmonton, 1981 p33

(2)George E Panichas: Marx’s Moral Scepticism, ibid p53

(3)ibid p63-65

(4)R.G Peffer: Morality and the Marxist Conception of Ideology, ibid p69-70

(5)ibid p88-89

(6)Douglas Kellner, Marxism, Morality and Ideology, ibid p115

(7)Andrew Collier: Scientific Socialism and the Question of Socialist Values ibid p121-154

(8)ibid p139

(9)ibid p140

(10ibid p141-143

(11)ibid p143

(12)ibid p147

(13)Anthony Skillen: Workers Interest and the Proletarian Ethic: Conflicting Strains in Marxian Anti-Moralism p155-170

(14)ibid p170

(15A.W. Wood: The Marxian Critique of Justice, Philosophy and Public Affairs 1 (1971-72) p224-282

(16)Jeffrey H. Reiman: The Possibility of a Marxist Theory of Justice, op cit p317

(17)G.A. Cohen: Self Ownership, Freedom and Equality, Cambridge University Press, 1995

(18)Paul Mason: Why Its Kicking Off Everywhere, Verso, 2012 p145