

## Chapter 2

# Marx and Engels's Vision of Building a Good Society

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### 1. Introduction

Any conceived alternative to the currently existing social order can be characterized by, and even defined in terms of, different institutions and practices. This has been the typical approach throughout history of religious or secular utopias, both those that were merely literary exercises and those that were intended for, or even actually used for, application in the real world. Among many others, the works of More (1989[1516]), Campanella (1988[1623]), Fourier (1971), Owen (1991[1813]), Saint-Simon (1952[1817]), Cabet (2003[1840]), Bellamy (1995[1888]), Perkins Gilman (1992[1915]), Skinner (1976[1948]), and Huxley (1962) are particularly well-known examples of such conceptions of a good society. There was seldom any discussion of how humanity could transit from the existing society to a utopian one. The implicit concept was that people would read the ideas in these works, recognize them as superior, and simply change the social institutions and practices accordingly. Those visions intended for application usually advocated small groups putting the ideas into practice, thus concretely demonstrating the superiority of the ideas and thereby winning over the rest of humanity.

Marx and Engels approached the issues involved in a fundamentally different way. They began with exactly what the others largely left aside, what caused a social order to change to a different social order, and how it changed. They looked to human history for the answers and then applied the lessons drawn from history (historical materialism) to the dominant contradictions in the present social

order to project the general outlines of a better society that would succeed capitalism.

Following the above introduction, this chapter will proceed to discuss Marx and Engels's ideas of a better society as follows. First it will address two preliminaries without which one cannot understand their ideas of a better society (or their lives' work in general): their dialectical method, and their concept of human nature. These are both very large topics in themselves, and here they will be considered only briefly, and with a focus on how they relate to their ideas on a better society. With the two preliminary aspects being established, this chapter will focus on the two essential aspects of a better society: first, the goal of such a society; and second, the transition to that goal.

A final introductory observation needs to be emphasized here. As indicated by the title, this chapter will discuss "Marx and Engels's Vision of Building a Good Society." "A Marxist Vision of Building a Good Society" would be something quite different. The issue is not that other individuals operating at the same time in history in the same general Marxist framework might have highlighted other aspects of the then-existing capitalism that were historically ready to be transcended, though that is certainly possible. The more important issue is that today, a century and a quarter after the death of Marx, particular contradictions in capitalism have become more centrally important than they were then. Specific examples include contradictions in gender, racial, and ethnic equality, in Third World versus First World equality, and in protection of the environment. As many people have noted, Marx and Engels had made references to all these issues, since all were already contradictions in capitalism in their time. However, a "Marxist vision of building a good society" today would treat these issues much more centrally, given their changed role in capitalism, than they were treated by Marx and Engels. Such a contemporary presentation, nevertheless, would rest on the approach of Marx and Engels themselves to the nature of a better society, which is the subject of this chapter.

## **2. A Better Society and the Dialectics of Marx and Engels**

For Marx and Engels, all reality, social and natural, is a process. This means that at the same time that the object of consideration is something, that object is also in the process of changing, in the process of becoming something else. To comprehend a process at a particular moment in time, one requires two understandings: (i) at that

moment, where the process is in its development, at what phase or stage it is in; and (ii) how and toward what it is changing. The latter, which pertains to the future, can of course only be understood on the basis of information from the present and past.

Marx and Engels consider the nature of the development of these processes to be a continual resolution of contradictions in them and the creation of new contradictions from those resolutions. Hence, by studying the contradictions in the present phase of a process, one can achieve some understanding of where the process will reach. "Communism is for us not a *state of affairs* which is to be established, an *ideal* to which reality [will] have to adjust itself. We call communism the *real* movement which abolishes the present state of things. The conditions of this movement result from the now existing premise" (Marx and Engels 1976[1845], 49). But it is a mechanistic error to think that one can give a detailed description of how a process will develop from an understanding of the present contradictions. This error rests on the false belief that a given contradiction has only one possible resolution. On the contrary, generally many different resolutions are possible. Which of these actually occurs will depend on the impact of additional factors. This makes processes historically contingent, or makes them open processes.

The concern here, for our issue of the good society, is with the process of human history, the process of the simultaneous development of human society and humans. It was exactly from their studies of the past, and especially the capitalist present of society, that Marx and Engels were able to sketch some general characteristics of a future better society as the result of overcoming the present contradictions.

An immediate result of this dialectical approach to progressing to a better future is that the concept of "a good society" becomes inherently dynamic. In the vision of the utopian authors indicated above, as well as that of most social reformers, the issue is to replace the institutions, norms, and relations that are not satisfactory in the current society. They operate in a comparative static frame, conceiving of a onetime change that replaces the existing static state with the static "good society." In this frame the concept of "a good society" is simply the better new static state. Marxism, on the contrary, conceives of change as a never-ending process. The word "*building*" in the title, in addition to emphasizing the necessary protagonist role of the members of the new society itself in its creation, which will be discussed below, implies a necessary time dimension. In this frame the concept of a "good society," in line with their entire dialectical worldview, is a process. Conceptually it would be more precise to talk

of Marx and Engels's vision of "a relative good society." This would emphasize that the new social order will arise out of the resolution of problematic contradictions in the present social order, and as such it will be good relative to the present. But it will also contain its own contradictions that will rise to become fundamental exactly because of the resolution of the old contradictions. In such a frame, one can understand this new society as bad in relation to the society that will arise out of the resolution of its primary contradictions. Referring to the development of "a relative good society" would help to capture the Marxist concept of a historical ongoing process of social transformation. In particular, it would emphasize that the process (of human individual, species, and social evolution) does not end with the achievement of any particularly described static "good society." Given the linguistic clumsiness of describing "a relative good society," every time I refer to Marx and Engels's vision of what will replace capitalism, this chapter will use the commonly used term of "a good society," with the understanding that for Marx and Engels the concept refers to an unending dynamic process.

Notwithstanding this difference in understanding between a static state and a dynamic process, an investigation of any of the utopian schemas for a new social order referred to above, or even most of the less-sweeping visions of change advocated by active social reformers today, makes clear that they share many characteristics with the vision of Marx and Engels's postcapitalist society. This is not surprising, since all schemas are driven by a concern with things that seem antihuman in many frames of understanding. These include gross inequality and material impoverishment for many, and alienation, intellectual impoverishment, and a lack of power over their own lives and over society for the majority, including under the undemocratic systems of capitalist democracy. Hence, while it is indeed important that a postcapitalist "good society" is not understood as a static goal, as against a phase in a process of continual transformation, Marxists must not suffer from any arrogant illusion that this failure to understand the dialectical nature of reality precludes others from championing and fighting for today's essentials for human progress.

In the political struggle to move beyond capitalism, the dialectical requirement to understand both where a process is at and where it is headed presents itself in two well-known political problems. If promoters of human progress fail to understand the general nature of where the process of social and human progress is going and how it is developing, they are likely to fall into reformism. That is, because such promoters do not understand that eliminating the fundamental problems

of the present social order requires them to resolve its contradictions, which requires moving to a new phase in social and human development, they try to find solutions to today's problems inside the frame of the present capitalist social order. On the other hand, if promoters of human progress fail to understand where at a given moment the process of ongoing social and human progress is at, they are likely to fall into ultraleftism. That is, because they do not understand the objective conditions necessary to allow given transformations and, above all, the necessary consciousness of the human actors who are the agents of social and human change, they advocate for today their vision of a more developed and distant future social order, one that in fact can be achieved only through a process of interacting institutional and human change that extends over time. The future vision is then not understood by the majority of society as either necessary or even desirable for their self-development, which is on the basis of their current understanding of their problems with the present social order. Hence, even if this vision indeed involves a resolution of many of the principal contradictions that presently constrain further human development, it nevertheless fails to bring the majority of society into action for its own collective self-interest, which is the only way to effect comprehensive social changes. Both reformism and ultraleftism serve to protect the existing social order by blocking the development by the masses of an understanding of their own self-interest in transcending capitalism.

### **3. A Good Society and Marx and Engels's Conception of Human Nature**

The goal of a better society for Marx and Engels is that humanity be allowed and socially supported in authentic self-development. They consider that such development consists of humanity continually and more fully developing its authentic nature, both as individuals and as a species. As a necessary preliminary to that, this section will discuss two particular aspects of authentic human nature that Marx and Engels maintain that capitalism presents fundamental barriers to developing.

The first aspect is the social nature of humans. This is an inherent aspect of human nature obtained under any and all social organizations. Capitalism's false ideology of Robinson Crusoe individualism both obfuscates the understanding and distorts the development of the authentic social nature of humans. As Marx and Engels made clear from their earliest writings in the 1840s, this in turn prevents the understanding of the real individual-society relationship and the development of humanity's authentic socially conditioned

individuality. They hold that developing genuine socially conditioned individuality is central to authentic human development.

It is almost impossible to read Marx and Engels and not understand that they see humans as inherently social beings. The following quote is given at some length because it clearly indicates not only the importance they give to this social nature of humans but also the problems caused by the failure to recognize this nature.

Since *human* nature is the *true community* of men,<sup>1</sup> by manifesting their *nature* men *create*, produce, the *human community*, the social entity, which is no abstract universal power opposed to the single individual, but is the essential nature of each individual, his own activity, his own life, his own spirit, his own wealth . . . as long as man does not recognize himself as man, and therefore has not organized the world in a human way, this *community* appears in the form of *estrangement*, because its *subject*, man, is a being estranged from himself. Men, not as an abstraction, but as real, living, particular individuals, *are* this entity. Hence, *as* they are, so is this entity itself. To say that *man is* estranged from himself, therefore, is the same thing as saying that the *society* of this estranged man is a caricature of his *real community*, of his true species-life, that his activity therefore appears to him as a torment, his own creation as an alien power, his wealth as poverty, the *essential bond* linking him with other men as an unessential bond, and separation from his fellow men, on the other hand, as his true mode of existence, his life as a sacrifice of his life, the realization of his nature as making his life unreal, his production as the production of his nullity, his power over an object as the power of the object over him, and he himself, the lord of his creation, as the servant of this creation. (Marx 1975[1844], 217)

A stereotype of Marxism propagated for over a century by its opponents claims that Marxism sacrifices concern for the individual with its singular focus on the community. On the contrary, beginning as early as in the 1840s, Marx and Engels's central concern has been that capitalism is a barrier to individual as well as species development, where the latter also serves individual development. What they stress, however, is that the individual can only be understood as a part of the community, and, further, that the community is more than the sum of the individuals; it includes all the interactions among them.

Above all we must avoid postulating "society" again as an abstraction vis-à-vis the individual. The individual *is the social being*. His manifestations of life—even if they may not appear in the direct form of *communal* manifestations of life carried out in association with

others—are therefore an expression and confirmation of *social life*. Man's individual and species-life are not *different*, however much—and this is inevitable—the mode of existence of the individual is a more *particular* or more *general* mode of the life of the species, or the life of the species is a more *particular* or more *general* individual life. (Marx 1975[1844], 299)

Thirteen years later, the “mature Marx” returned to the same theme in notes that were to be a basis for *Capital*. Immediately after dismissing the idea of the invisible hand as logically unfounded, by noting that uncoordinated pursuit of private interest could as logically “hinder the assertion of the interests of everyone” as serve them, Marx begins a five-page discussion on various aspects of the relation of the individual to the collective by remarking this point:

The point is rather that private interest is itself already a socially determined interest and can be attained only within the conditions laid down by society and with the means provided by society and is therefore tied to the reproduction of these conditions and means. It is the interest of private persons; but its content, as well as the form and means of its realization, are given by social conditions that are independent of them all. (Marx 1986[1857], 94)

Marx and Engels often present this essential social nature of the individual by way of the attack that they maintained throughout their lives on the Robinson Crusoe foundations of economic thought that runs from Smith and Ricardo to mainstream economics today.

Individuals producing in a society—hence the socially determined production of individuals are of course the point of departure. The individual solitary and isolated hunter or fisherman, who serves Adam Smith and Ricardo as a starting point, is one of the unimaginative fantasies of eighteenth-century romances à la Robinson Crusoe. (Marx 1986[1857], 17)

The second aspect of authentic human nature that will be discussed here, and the one that Marx and Engels repeatedly held was the *differentia specifica* of humans from other animals, is the potential human consciousness of all aspects of the world that they are part of. The just-discussed need to be conscious of humanity's inherent social nature to develop one's potentially genuine individuality is one example of this. But this need to understand goes far beyond that one issue. Expanded human consciousness of the physical and social

processes that we are part of is necessary for the continual change from being the product (object) of those processes to their producers (subject). For Marx and Engels, that in turn is the goal of human development and the realization of human nature. Engels expressed the centrality of consciousness to authentic human development and the nature of existence in a better society as follows:

With the seizing of the means of production by society, production of commodities is done away with, and, simultaneously, the mastery of the product over the producer... The struggle for individual existence disappears... The whole sphere of the conditions of life which environ man, and which have hitherto ruled man, now comes under the dominion and control of man, who for the first time becomes the real, conscious lord of nature, because he has now become master of his own social organization... Only from that time will man himself, with full consciousness, make his own history—only from that time will the social causes set in movement by him have, in the main and in a constantly growing measure, the results intended by him. It is humanity's leap from the kingdom of necessity to the kingdom of freedom. (Engels 1987[1878], 270)

#### **4. Characteristics of a Good Society: General and (Some) Specifics**

Any discussion that aspires to debate a better society logically must begin by establishing the goal it will use to measure what is better. For example, if one's goal is to have a minority of society both live better materially and exercise economic and political domination over the majority, then a capitalist political economy would be better than the socialist and communist societies (partially) envisioned by Marx and Engels.

Marx and Engels's vision of a better society has a single central goal, which can be, and often has been, expressed in many different ways. Some of the common formulations are as follows: "authentic human development," "the development of one's human potential," "the opportunity to develop potential abilities or capabilities," "becoming more fully human," "developing one's species-nature," and a phrase Marx and Engels used often, "the development of [human] freedom." The following description reflects this latter usage, and we see here also, as indicated above, their stress on the development of all (social) individuals and how they saw that as requiring collective control of (which in turn requires consciousness of) their collective productivity. "Free individuals, based on the universal development of



the individuals and on their subordination of their communal, social productivity which is their social possession [Vermögen]" (Marx 1989[1875], 95).

With this as the goal, a general way to characterize a better society would obviously be as one that allows and facilitates this goal.

What has to be done is to arrange the empirical world in such a way that man experiences and becomes accustomed to what is truly human in it and that he becomes aware of himself as a man. If correctly understood interest is the principle of all of morality, man's private interest must be made to coincide with the interest of humanity. (Engels 1975[1845], 130–131)

It is well known that Marx and Engels oppose the sort of detailed prescriptions for a better society that they attack in the work of St. Simon and Fourier. Notwithstanding this, many indications of their vision of parts of the nature of future socialist and communist societies are distributed throughout their collected writings. These arise from the combination of humanity's goal and the dialectical method of logic discussed above. Given the human drive for individual and species development and the barriers to such development presented by capitalism, Marx and Engels can project general characteristics of these better future societies as the negations of those limitations. A thorough study of their writings would yield scores of such indications of their (general) vision of a socialist and communist society. Presented below are only 13 of them. The single densest presentation of their ideas on these future better societies is found in *The Critique of the Gotha Programme*. This work will be drawn on most heavily here, but it must be stressed that these indications are dispersed throughout the whole body of their work.

As discussed above, the process of transition from capitalism to communism and beyond is understood by Marx and Engels as an uninterrupted process of human development. Earlier changes in that process will involve negations of barriers in capitalism as it exists today, while later changes will also include negations of some of those same institutions and human relations that arise as negations of capitalism. It is of course easier to see the earlier changes. This is not only because longer chains of causation are harder to understand, but more fundamentally because at every step in the process of change historical contingencies enter the process. This means that one cannot be sure of the details of what the future contradictions will be that will need to be overcome. Hence, Marx's two points concerning the communist transcendence

of socialism discussed below concern very general issues. Because of this, most of the discussion here will be of the socialist<sup>2</sup> phase or the period prior to it in that process. But because of the important issues they involve, two changes that Marx indicated would be needed to move beyond socialism to communism will be discussed at the end.

Most of the characteristics of a better society that will be listed come directly from statements by Marx and Engels, and will be so referenced. A few are logical conclusions from other points listed, which will also be so indicated. Note the nature of these characteristics, as asserted above, as negations of capitalism, and as the elimination of capitalism's barriers to authentic human development.

1. A collective society. The aforementioned discussion on humanity's inherent social nature (Marx 1989[1875], 85).
2. Democratic decision making (Marx 1975[1843], 30–31; Marx and Engels 1984[1848], 504).
3. Common ownership of the means of production (Marx 1996[1867], 89; Marx 1989[1875], 85).
4. Only the means of consumption can be individually owned (Marx 1989[1875], 86).
5. Three ways to say the same thing: (i) No production of value (Marx 1989[1875], 85). (ii) Individual labor no longer exists in an indirect fashion (Marx 1989[1875], 85). (iii) Individual labor will now be consciously applied as the combined labor power of the community (Marx 1996[1867], 89; Marx 1989[1875], 85).
6. No money. This follows directly from 5, but Marx also makes this clear in many places in his writings, such as, for example, Marx (1986[1857], 107–109).
7. The producers do not exchange their products (Marx 1989[1875], 85). There will be a division of labor and so people will consume things produced by others, but goods will not be “exchanged,” as will be explained further below. They of course could not be exchanged in the way of capitalism, since the goods do not have a value.
8. No capitalist markets. This follows directly from 5, 6, and 7.
9. Social Planning will replace capitalist markets as the mechanism that organizes the economy, both production and distribution. Point 7 implies that something other than capitalist markets must organize the economy. Marx does not use the word “planning” in this document, but in his writings throughout his life he calls for planning scores of times, as the necessary alternative to capitalist markets, to organize a postcapitalist economy.

10. A point that is often not recognized—the *socialist* system that Marx described would pay everyone the *same wage*, one “labor-credit” (a certificate to receive goods that took one hour of social labor to create) for every hour worked by *any person* (Marx 1989[1875], 86; Marx 1996[1867], 89; Marx 1996[1867], 104, fn 1).<sup>3</sup> Again, keep in mind this is a description of a *socialist* phase, *not* a phase (or phases) of a *transition from capitalism to socialism* when wages might still be unequal as in capitalism. As a process, the wage spread would therefore narrow as one approached the phase of socialism in the transition beyond capitalism.
11. Marx stresses at length that the *same principle* prevails in socialism that regulates capitalist exchange, the *exchange of equivalents*, although this principal is actually realized under socialism, while it is deformed under capitalism because of the existence of exploitation. This is a *bourgeois right* (Marx 1989[1875], 86), the capitalist concept of what is *right* or *just*. Only when the process of transformation to a better society has proceeded still further to the phase of communism will that be transcended, as will be discussed later.

The focus of this chapter is on the nearer phase of the transition beyond capitalism, socialism, because more aspects of its nature can be seen in (the negation of) existing capitalism. However, to underline the point made above concerning the nature of “the good society” as an unending process of transformation, here I will consider two characteristics of socialism that Marx argued would have to be negated to build communism.

12. The nature of work. We saw above that under socialism Marx saw people as only entitled to draw from social production goods that required the same amount of social labor to produce as they contributed to social production. This implied that one was forced to work by the need for naturally determined basic goods for survival, and for the socially determined goods required for human development in accord with the level of social development. Marx repeatedly presented two different (but compatible) ways this would have to be transcended. First, the common goal of utopians and social reformers since at least Thomas Moore, the reduction of the work time socially needed to produce these goods, thus expanding “the realm of freedom” (Marx 1998[1884], 807). The other way is more subtle. Marx also argued for transforming work to eliminate the distinction between work and non-work. This would involve both humanizing work and making humans aware that it is through work that they develop themselves as individuals and as a species. In 1857 Marx discussed

*travail attractif* or “really free work,” indicating two conditions work must have to achieve this character: (i) have its social character understood, and (ii) be such that it was not simply something that could be done by an animal or machine, but rather was something that involved controlling the natural forces involved through the human ability to make decisions and the capacity for creativity (Marx 1986[1857], 529–530). Two decades later he tersely indicated that the result would be the transformation of work so that “labor has become not only a means of life but life’s prime want” (Marx 1989[1875], 87).

13. The fundamental concept of right or justice. Given that different people have different needs, the socialist principal of right indicated above, the exchange of equivalents, would leave different people who contributed the same social labor time having their needs met unequally. Marx saw this would need to be negated to remove this barrier to human development by adopting a principal of right based on need. In a well-functioning family (where even today the law of “exchange of equivalents” does not reign), one would never think of charging a child, who had a bigger appetite, more for food, or feeding handicapped children less because they contributed less family labor than their siblings. “In a higher phase of communist society . . . the narrow horizon of bourgeois right [can] be crossed in its entirety and society inscribe on its banners: From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs” (Marx 1989[1875], 87).

## **5. A Transition to Socialism: Institutional and Human Transformation**

This chapter has repeatedly stressed that Marx and Engels think of the transition to a better society as an unending process. They conceive of the general nature of some of the characteristics of a relatively near postcapitalist society (socialism: “the lower stage of communism”) from consideration of negations of some of the major immediate barriers to the development of our human potential posed by capitalism. They have very few things to say, even more generally, about things in socialism that will need to be negated and transcended to develop a “higher stage of communism” in that unending process of improving society. While they never attempt to indicate the amount of time it would take to create even the “relatively near socialism,” their discussion of the necessity for socialism, of a process of transforming not only institutions but also humans from how we are conditioned

under capitalism, has often been taken to suggest a minimum of two or three generations. This then puts on the agenda for necessary consideration a number of issues concerning the nonnegligible period of the transition from capitalism to socialism. Of the many issues involved, this section will address six that are particularly important to today's debates: (1) what needs to change in the transition? (2) a time frame for the transition; (3) the transition by self-activating humans through praxis; (4) class struggle as the motor of the transition; (5) self-governing humans and democracy in the transition; and (6) the state in the transition. The positions taken on all these issues flow from their relation to the goals of the transition to socialism, which has, again, been presented in the previous section.

1. What needs to change in the transition? The argument has been made above that the central goal of Marx and Engels was authentic human development. This then immediately establishes the first point concerning the transition. Humans are the key objects that need to be changed to create a better society. This position must be understood in the frame of their view, also discussed above, of the social nature of humans. They hold that humans are both shaped by the institutions that they are part of and the human relations these represent, and that these institutions and relations are shaped by the socially conditioned nature of the humans that are part of them. A mode of production such as capitalism creates its own necessary inputs for continually reproducing itself, including "a working class, which by education, tradition, habit, looks upon the conditions of that mode of production as self-evident laws of Nature" (Marx 1996[1867], 726).

These considerations immediately pose the question: how can social change ever occur if humans are conditioned by society to accept and reproduce the status quo? The answer by Marx and Engels has three parts. First, the drive for human development that is part of our species-nature will necessarily generate contradictions with the barriers to this development that are part of the system. This means that at the same time that, overall, the class is conditioned as just indicated, its acceptance of that conditioning is partial and incomplete. Second, the advocates of a better world have to recognize the issues that the masses have come to understand are blocking this inherent drive (within their overall acceptance of the system). The advocates then need to work to explain (make the masses conscious) that these issues result from the system and that they are related to

many other issues that they have not yet become conscious of, which are also blocking their transition to better lives. Finally, at the same time that this awareness of the real nature of their present existence and its limitations is being developed, the masses must develop two additional dimensions of their humanity. First, they need to develop or strengthen the desire to become the producers and protagonists of their own history. This will be promoted by the work to make them conscious of what they are being excluded from by the nature of the present system that was just referred to. Second, they need to develop the skills needed to actually do this: group communication and decision-making skills, empathy for and solidarity with all of humanity, and so on. For a presentation at greater length of the nature of this process of overcoming capitalism's conditioned subaltern nature of the working class, and in particular this chicken-and-egg problem, see Campbell and Tutan (2008). Below we return to discuss further the resulting self-activating and self-governing subject and the theory of praxis.

2. A time frame for a transition. Marx and Engels never made an estimate of how long a transition from capitalism to socialism might take, but the issue is important to consider because of the dominant way of thinking about the transition that developed in the twentieth century. A nearly exclusive focus on the transformation of institutions had developed at the expense of the necessary simultaneous consideration of the transformation of the members of society indicated in point 1. This was so not only among Stalinists, whose misuse of a bastardized Marxism as a justification for their socially privileged positions required that they avoid any focus on the transformation of the masses into the subjects of history, but even among most anti-Stalinists who tried to look to Marx for their political framework. Stating this point overly tersely, one can say that institutional changes can be effected relatively quickly compared to the sort of human changes needed to make the masses the collective masters of all aspects of their own society. Certainly a minimum of several generations will be needed for society to begin to produce people appropriate for a socialist society.

The error involved actually goes deeper than this terse presentation, and it is an essential consideration for movements in the world today considering or actually attempting to build socialism. At the most basic practical level just referred to, the self-described Marxist

revolutions in the twentieth century mostly produced noncapitalist but Stalinist institutions that were not suitable for Marx and Engels's socialist-associated producers. But beyond that, on the theoretical level, it is not possible to build socialist institutions if one has not transformed the people. The authentic transformation of the institutions and the members of society must be understood as a single dialectically connected process, and must be further understood as a process with different forms during the different phases of the process. Hence, if institutional transformation is looked at properly (as it generally was not in the twentieth century) as something that is dialectically connected to the transformation of the human actors, then even consideration of institutional transformation would necessarily give the same required time frame as consideration of the transformation of the people involved, a minimum of several generations.

3. The transition by self-activating humans through praxis. From the beginning of their writings Marx and Engels held that the transition to socialism and communism required self-emancipation. In the first instance, this means that "the emancipation of the workers must be the act of the working class itself" (Engels 1990[1890], 60). Through this they become for the first time the conscious self-activating agents in human history, the producers of their own history and no longer merely its products. But there is a deeper meaning connected to this concept that relates it to point 1, just discussed. The first quote by Engels in section 4 above concerning the necessary nature of a better society does not address who will rearrange the empirical world as required to promote the key changes in the humans involved. From 1845 forward, Marx and Engels gave a clear answer.

"The materialist doctrine concerning the changing of circumstances and upbringing forgets that circumstances are changed by men and that the educator himself must be educated... The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-change can be conceived and rationally understood only as *revolutionary practice*." (Marx 1976[1845], 4)

For Marx and Engels, self-emancipation means not only that the masses collectively are the necessary conscious self-activating agents of change, but also, as in point 1, that they are the ultimate objects of that change, the ultimate object of their own activity. It is through their own human activity that they effect the revolutionary changes in both society and themselves. Gramsci gave this worldview that was

the heart of the philosophy and politics of Marx and Engels the now often used name, the *philosophy of praxis*.

Most revolutionaries would accept today that it was clear by at least the 1930s that the Soviet Union (and most of its subsequent imitators) was not a project of mass self-emancipation. A smaller subset of these revolutionaries would argue that the Stalinist USSR should not be considered an experiment in a transition to the socialism of Marx and Engels, and that its ultimate failure has little to teach us about the possibilities of such a transition. Regardless of one's position on the USSR, the discussions around socialism of the twenty-first century necessarily re-confront, although in a new historical context, a number of the historical debates related to this issue of self-emancipation. Two such key debates today concern the issue of the workers taking over and directly running the economy themselves, and the nature and role of a vanguard party.

4. Class struggle as the motor of the transition. On the simplest political level, given that in a capitalist society that Marx and Engels want to transcend the working class majority is oppressed and individually powerless to break its barriers to their human development, they must come together as a class to fight the class that uses its power to defend the capitalist system, the capitalist class. On this simple level, class struggle is the motor of the transition to socialism. While that simple level is extremely important for actually transcending capitalism, class struggle is also the necessary motor for transcending capitalism in a much deeper way in the frame of Marx and Engels's view of a better society developed in this chapter. I have not even been able to pose the first and prerequisite consideration for all of this section, point 1, on what needs to change in the transition, without repeatedly using the term "class" in both my discussion and the quote I used from Marx, and it is used repeatedly in the two points to follow. The issue is the individual-collective relation discussed above, but here set in the concrete frame of the capitalism that the transition is to transcend.

In Marx's well-known section "The Method of Political Economy" from the *Grundrisse* (Marx 1986[1857], 37 ff.), he argues that what seems like a concrete and obvious category like population or labor actually is neither obvious nor concrete. Population or labor under capitalism is something different from population or labor under a different social order. Population and labor are parts of the system of capitalism, and Marx's general point is that one cannot understand



a part of a system without understanding the whole that it is a part of—though at the same time one cannot understand the whole without understanding the parts and the interactions between them. He describes how one must first begin with population, work up to the capitalist system, and with that understanding return to the category of population, which will now be understood concretely differently as a part of capitalism.

It is in this sense that the inevitable struggle by individuals for their freedom from the barriers of capitalism is necessarily a class struggle. The individuals whose development is being blocked are social individuals, as discussed throughout this chapter. In the concrete case of capitalism that Marx is concerned with, the members of the working class are blocked in their human development by capitalism not as Robinson Crusoe individuals but specifically as members of the working class, through the roles they must be forced to carry out for the reproduction and survival of capitalism. Methodologically, their individuality, whose development is being blocked, can only be understood in terms of the class that they are part of. The general relation of individual-collective in this concrete case is very much a relation between the worker and the working class. It is in this deeper sense that the entire struggle for breaking the dominant barriers to human development at a given time, which is the motor for all social transformation as this chapter has discussed in the setting of capitalism, is necessarily a class struggle.

5. Self-governing humans and democracy in the transition. Marx and Engels's position throughout their lives that self-governance via an authentic democracy is an essential part of socialism, and their attack on bourgeois democracy as an abridgement of a more complete democracy, has been written about extensively (Levin 1989; Nimitz 2000). There was very little written by Marx and Engels about the role of democracy in the transition to socialism, largely because there was very little written by them about that transition in the abstract. One clear and widely read source, however, is the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*. Marx specifically argues that “the first step in the revolution by the working class is to raise the proletariat to the position of the ruling class, to win the battle for democracy” (Marx 1984[1848], 504). He then goes on to argue that the proletariat must use its power to take (as a process) all capital from the bourgeoisie and put all means of production in the hands of the state, which is nothing more than the proletariat organized as a ruling class. Note in particular

that nowhere here does he speak of the necessity of suspending the democratic rights of the bourgeoisie in this process. They will be a small minority and, in theory, if they do not resort to arms (which history suggests they likely will) and do subscribe to the rules of democracy, the proletariat can carry out all of this through fully democratic processes.

Since Marx and Engels hold that collective self-governance is one essential part of the authentic human development that is their central goal, they certainly are for constantly expanding authentic democracy in any situation in which it does not already exist, including, in particular, during the transition away from capitalism and its limited democracy. But in addition to this fundamental conceptual commitment to democracy, the failed twentieth-century experiments in building socialism in the Soviet Union and China have led many current Marxists to argue for democracy as necessary in the transition to socialism on narrower political grounds. Self-governance is held by many proponents of some variety of a new socialism of the twenty-first century to be the only possible barrier to the development of a privileged group that politically marginalizes the proletariat and appropriates power for itself, and with that destroys the process of the construction of socialism.

6. The state in the transition. The two key ideological contributions to the antistate positions advocated by a number of contemporary opponents of capitalism are various historical currents of anarchist thought (which Marx and Engels argued against directly in their time), and various currents of anti-Stalinist socialist thought. The general antistate position of the former is well known. The latter, whose best-known Marxist-influenced advocate is John Holloway (2002), draws similar negative conclusions about the state from the experience of its use to defend the privileges of a minority in Stalinist societies. In broad strokes, their position is that any state will necessarily be opposed to the interests of society as a whole or the working class in particular, and will come to be a barrier to the socialist project of human liberation. Instead of a having a state, everything should be exclusively from the “grass roots” (all decisions on everything made democratically in small local groups). Concerning the transition, this will cause the collapse of capitalism and be a structure appropriate for building socialism. One common argument against this position is that history has demonstrated that such an approach does not promote the building

of socialism. In a time of contested power between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, if the former does not succeed in taking and consolidating state power, the latter will. This has been the lesson of Spain, Chile, and currently Honduras, among scores of other bourgeois coups against governments that promoted the interests of workers but that did not consolidate state power.

But there is a more subtle and theoretically much deeper reason to reject this antistate approach from the perspective of Marx and Engels. This “local only” approach is theoretically incompatible with the understanding of human nature as essentially social, which is central to their ideas, as discussed in this work. Everything done by anyone affects everyone else. For some things, those effects are negligible outside of the local groups, and so the proposed local decision-making works fine and is appropriate. But other decisions strongly affect everyone in society, and hence Marx and Engels’s social understanding of human nature would argue that society needs to collectively make and execute those decisions. In the transition, the state, which Marx and Engels referred to as the “Dictatorship of the Proletariat,”<sup>4</sup> would be necessary for the proletariat to collectively determine and execute its interests. This state in fact would be nothing more or less than “the proletariat organized as the ruling class” (Marx 1984[1848], 504).

A final comment on this topic must be directed to a misunderstanding of Marx and Engels’s well-known goal of a “withering away of the state,” since many Marxists hold that this would be going on during the transition from capitalism to socialism. The misunderstanding hinges on what Marx and Engels meant by the word “state.” They used this term in two different ways, but both were fully compatible when explained. As they expressed continually throughout their lives, the primary role of the state throughout the history of class societies was as a vehicle for maintaining the rule of the dominating class, even forcibly when necessary.

Society thus far, based on class antagonisms, had need of the state, that is, of an organism of the particular class, which was *pro tempore* the exploiting class, for the maintenance of its external conditions of production, and, therefore, especially, for the purpose of forcibly keeping the exploited classes in the condition of oppression. (Engels 1987[1878], 267)

When the proletariat seizes state power and thereby begins the transformation from capitalism, it will then initiate a process to “wrest, by

degrees, all capital from the bourgeoisie, to centralize all instruments of production in the hands of the State” (Marx 1984[1848], 504). And once it “turns the means of production in the first instance into state property, . . . it abolishes itself as proletariat, abolishes all class distinctions and class antagonisms, abolishes also the state as a state” (Engels 1987[1878], 267). Without classes, there is no need for class oppression, and the state ceases to play this role that was its central characteristic as a state in class societies.

However, in another sense of the word “state,” as the vehicle to determine and administer social decisions even when no longer class-based, it of course must continue. Humanity could not decide locally how many steel plants to build, what gauge to use for railroad tracks, how to fight global warming, and so on. To have those things that must be decided supralocally decided solely locally would lead either to chaos and non-functionality, or to the antidemocratic imposition of the decisions of some locals onto other locals, thus violating the goal of making humans self-governing and the subjects of their own history. “State interference in social relations becomes, in one domain after another, superfluous, and then dies out by itself; the government of persons is replaced by the administration of things, and by the conduct of processes of production” (Engels 1987[1878], 268; 1989[1880], 321). This vehicle for the administration of things will be “the future state of communist society” (Marx 1989[1875], 95) that will remain, because of humanity’s essential interconnectedness, in a postcapitalist society.

## 6. Conclusion

Notwithstanding their much-noted aversion to detailing the nature of a postcapitalist society, Marx and Engels indeed have a broad vision of such a better society that both runs through and informs their entire lives’ work. It is rooted in their concepts of the inherently social nature of humans, the potential of authentic human development in accord with human nature, and the negation by humans as the active agents of history of the barriers posed to that development. This process is understood as a dialectical interaction of the transformation of the social institutions that influence the development of humans and the transformation of humans that influences the development of social institutions. Broadly then, their vision of a better society is one where the institutions support and promote the authentic development of humans, and where humans support and promote the continual development of new institutions that will constantly move forward the unending process of human development. Among the

specifics that they mention as characteristics of a near-term postcapitalist (socialist) society are a collective society, democratic decision-making, common ownership of the means of production, the end of money and markets and their replacement with democratic planning, individual labor carried out consciously as part of the total social labor, and an equal claim on the social product in accord with the time one contributes to social production. More abstractly, they refer to the further transcendence of this socialist phase of human development with the development of new communistic conceptions of work and justice.

How a transition will proceed from a current capitalist society to a socialist society will necessarily be historically specific. There are six general issues that they discuss in relation to the transition: (1) The heart and goal of the process will be the transformation of the humans involved (and the continued further development of their human potential), notwithstanding that this can only occur in dialectical connection with the transformation of social institutions. (2) Such a transformation of the humans involved will necessarily take at least several generations. (3) The relative emancipation involved in the transition from capitalism to socialism must be the activity of the humans involved in the process themselves, it must be self-emancipation. (4) Because this transition is coming concretely from a capitalist society, humanity's struggle for authentic self-development against the barriers of capitalism that will drive the transition must necessarily be a class struggle. (5) Socialism requires society-wide collective self-governance and self-determination. (6) The fundamental role of the state as it has existed historically in class societies, as an instrument to assure the continued subordination of the subaltern classes, will cease and the democratically controlled state will become only a vehicle to administer things and to determine and execute society's social production and reproduction.

### Notes

1. In line with the brief discussion at the beginning of this article, people today using the method of Marx and Engels would certainly use "people," "humanity," or some such gender neutral term given the increased importance of developing a consciousness of gender discrimination as part of the fight against all forms of discrimination that is a necessary part of the fight to transcend capitalism.
2. Marx generally thought of this phase as a "lower stage of communism," though he occasionally referred to it as socialism. Contrary to those who continue to claim that Lenin began the use of the term

socialism for this phase, by the 1890s Marxists generally referred to this phase as socialism. See, for example, the most widely read Social Democratic work in Germany in the early 1890s, *The Class Struggle* (Kautsky 1971[1892]).

3. Marx consistently attacked people who advocated using labor certificates in capitalism to mitigate its harmful effects, arguing that labor certificates are incompatible with commodity production. There is no such incompatibility for production by “directly associated labor,” as this note indicates Owen proposed or in Marx and Engels’s socialism. For a more extended presentation of production under a system that presupposes the social character of production versus capitalism’s *post festum* positing by elevating products to values, see Marx (1986[1857], 107–109).
4. Whenever this term is used today it must be stressed that, as this chapter has indicated above, Marx and Engels held that this state during the transition from capitalism to socialism, just like all postcapitalist states during further stages of human development, must be a democratic organization.

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