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## **Marx's Genealogy of the Idea of Equality**

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Contrary to egalitarian readings of both Marx's critique of capitalist society and its replacement by communist society, his lack of commitment to the idea of equality has been emphasized. I argue that Marx's statements concerning the idea of equality, and especially how it would represent an inappropriate norm for genuine communist society, are ultimately to be explained in terms of its relation to the exchange value that governs acts of commodity exchange. Marx wants to show how general recognition of the idea of equality and the legal and political forms that it assumes have their origin in the way in which exchange value has come to dominate social relations, leading human beings to develop an abstract conception of themselves, others and how the world ought to be that is incompatible with the goals of communist society.

### **1. The problem with the idea of equality**

The vision of a classless society suggests a commitment to the idea of equality, for if all class distinctions were abolished, would individuals not then have to be regarded as essentially equal and be treated as such? And if a society in which people are recognized by one another as equals and treat one another as equals is the desired outcome, Marx's critique of capitalist society and his theory of its replacement by communist society appear to presuppose the idea of equality, which functions as an ideal, a norm and an ultimate value. As natural as it may seem to view Marx as some kind of egalitarian, reasons for denying that he considers equality to be valuable, either in its own right or for the way in which it promotes some other human

good, have already been provided (Wood 2014). These reasons include how Marx treats equality as an essentially political, and distinctively bourgeois, concept, which serves as a vehicle of oppression by concealing relations of domination that exist in capitalist society. Another reason concerns his rejection of the idea of employing an equal standard to determine a just distribution of goods in communist society.

In the *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, Marx associates the attempt to apply an equal standard only with the first phase of communist society. This is communist society ‘not as it *has developed* on its own foundation, but on the contrary, just as it *emerges* from capitalist society, hence in every respect – economically, morally, intellectually – as it comes forth from the womb, it is stamped with the birthmarks of the old society’ (MEGA I/25: 13; LPW, 213; translation modified). During this phase of communist society, each worker is provided with a receipt which confirms the amount of labour that he or she has performed. After deductions have been made to establish and to maintain a common fund, the worker is entitled to take from society’s stores consumption goods equal in value to the value of the remaining amount of labour. This exchange presupposes that labour possesses a value that is equivalent to the value of these goods. Both the value of labour and the value of the goods received are measured in terms of abstract labour time. Thus, for each producer, ‘[t]he same quantity of labour he puts into society in one form comes back to him in another’ (MEGA I/25: 14; LPW, 213). An equal standard is at work because the same principle of distribution is applied to each producer, and each producer is formally entitled to the same benefits in so far as he or she fulfils the same obligations. The obligations condition the benefits, because that which each producer receives depends on how much he or she has contributed in accordance with the obligation to labour for society as a whole. Each and every worker is nevertheless equally subject to the same rule.

Marx goes on to argue that this application of an equal standard produces outcomes that are, in fact, incompatible with the idea of equality, of which this principle of distribution is

meant to be the practical expression, since ‘one person is physically or mentally superior to another, and hence contributes more work in the same time or can work longer’ (MEGA I/25: 14; LPW, 214). In other words, according to the mode of distribution that characterizes this phase of communist society, the person who is able to perform more labour and thus contribute more to society on account of his or her greater strength or superior aptitudes would be entitled to more consumption goods than those members of society who are able to contribute less, irrespective of whether or not the first person needs more consumption goods than these other members of society do. The application of an equal standard would therefore result in significant inequalities with respect to the possession of, and thus access to, resources, and so the right to be treated equally turns out to be ‘*in content ... a right to inequality, like all rights*’ (MEGA I/25: 14; LPW, 214).<sup>1</sup> Moreover, an unequal distribution of goods is something that Marx himself welcomes, provided it corresponds to differences in the type and the extent of the needs that individuals have. Treating everyone equally by applying an equal standard, in contrast, requires neglecting the particular differences that distinguish individuals from one another, including their different abilities and their different needs. Thus ‘rights would have to be unequal, instead of equal’ (MEGA I/25: 15; LPW, 214). Yet this inequality would violate the nature of rights, which, unlike privileges, are held to apply both equally and universally. To claim that communist society would be preferable to capitalist society in virtue of how it would be more equal and, as result, more compatible with a governing principle of distributive justice, therefore appears to get things wrong (Sayers 2011: 120-3, 126-30).

I intend to demonstrate that there is another argument that underlies Marx’s rejection of the idea that communist society would be an egalitarian society. This argument relates to his claim that the first stage of communist society ‘is stamped with the birthmarks of the old society’. I shall argue that Marx’s most fundamental objection to the view that equality provides the moral principle which ought to determine the distribution of goods and resources

in communist society is that this principle of distribution and the moral idea from which it is derived are expressive of a society characterized by commodity exchange and thus governed by exchange value. This is what one might have expected, given his claim that in the first phase of communist society the principle 'is the same as the one that applies in the exchange of commodities' (MEGA I/25: 14; LPW, 213). This will enable me to identify the grounds of the following key claims found in Marx's discussion of this phase of communist society:

(1) The claim that with respect to a division of goods undertaken according to the principle of equality and the application of an equal standard 'the operative principle is the same as under the exchange of equivalent values: a given amount of labour in one form is exchanged for an equal amount in another form' (MEGA I/25: 14; LPW, 213).

(2) The claim that the application of an equal standard to measure the contributions and entitlements of each producer requires that individuals be 'grasped only in terms of a *specific* aspect, e.g. considered in a given case *only as workers*, and nothing else about them is taken into account, all else being disregarded' (MEGA I/25: 14; LPW, 214).

These claims will be shown to be bound up with each other, in that the relevant principle and the way in which individuals are viewed under only one aspect both require abstracting from everything else. This tendency towards abstraction is in turn explained by how abstract exchange value has come to govern human relations in a society dominated by commodity exchange and thus shape how individuals conceive of themselves and others. In this way, Marx provides the basis for the claim that genuine individuality is not possible, or else very difficult

to achieve, in modern society, made by some philosophers influenced by him. This phenomenon has been attributed to the interests of an all-encompassing impersonal economic and social system that requires the suppression of particular characteristics and any other properties that serve to distinguish individuals from one another, as in the following passage from Theodor W. Adorno's *Minima Moralia*:

If the equality of all who have human shape were demanded as an ideal instead of being assumed as a fact, it would not greatly help. Abstract utopia is all too compatible with the most cunning tendencies of society. That all human beings are alike is exactly what suits society. It considers actual or imagined differences as stigmas that attest to the fact that not enough has yet been done; that something has still been left free of its machinery, is not fully determined by the totality (Adorno 2003/2005: no. 66; translation modified).

This passage might be taken to describe any totalitarian form of society that in some way seeks to legitimize itself by claiming that equality is the ideal upon which it is based, rather than only a liberal capitalist society, which, in fact, considers its ability to accommodate individuality, and even to secure the conditions of its free development, as one of its main virtues. Given the Marxist heritage of Adorno's thinking, however, one can assume that he intends capitalist society at least as much, if not more so, than other societies which repress individuality in the name of equality. The question is then how to explain the link between the levelling process that Adorno describes and liberal capitalist society in particular.

Marx's answer to this question implies that, if we delve deeply enough below the ideological surface, we shall discover that it is not simply a matter of a society failing to live up to its own standards by not accommodating individuality and facilitating its free

development, but instead also a matter of repressing and preventing them. Rather, the society in question *cannot* live up to this standard because one of its ideals, that of the moral equality of all individuals, is bound up with the ultimate source of the levelling tendencies that make genuine individuality impossible within this society, namely, exchange value and its dominance of a society based on commodity exchange. Marx's critique of the idea of equality does not, therefore, rely on demonstrating that the application of an equal standard produces outcomes that are incompatible with the principle of equality itself. Rather, this critique seeks to go beyond such surface phenomena. This critique can be classed as a genealogical one in that it seeks to locate the origin of the idea of the moral equality of individuals and its legal and political expressions in something other than this idea itself, namely, in an economic category, exchange value, which essentially belongs to a particular economic and social system. Although I shall focus on this origin and how it explains the general recognition of the idea of moral equality characteristic of political liberalism, this genealogical mode of inquiry is also concerned with the historical process whereby exchange value's growing dominance of social relations is accompanied by increasing general recognition of the idea of moral equality. I shall begin by discussing the nature of the question of this idea's origin.

## **2. The question of the origin of the idea of equality**

According to Marx, Aristotle recognized that the relation of value between one commodity and another commodity presupposes some way of viewing qualitatively different things as commensurable. If commodity X is to have the same value as commodity Y, there must be a common standard of measurement. This common standard of measurement presupposes some way in which commodity X and commodity Y can be viewed as identical, despite their different properties. Aristotle did not, however, succeed in explaining how certain quantities of different objects or the objects themselves can possess equal value. Marx, in contrast, claims to explain

this by means of his labour theory of value. The possibility of treating qualitatively different commodities as equal in terms of their value is explained by how these objects possess the common property of being products of ‘human labour in the abstract’ (MEGA II/8: 102; Cap. 1: 166). The value of each commodity can then be measured in terms of ‘socially necessary labour-time’, by which is meant ‘the labour-time required to produce any use-value under the conditions of production normal for a given society and with the average degree of skill and intensity of labour prevalent in that society’ (MEGA II/8: 71; Cap. 1: 129).

From this we can already see how applying an equal standard – in this case, that of equal value measured in terms of the time taken to produce something - involves identifying a property that different objects share, while abstracting from those properties that distinguish them from one another. The idea of equality, understood in moral, legal or political terms, likewise requires identifying a common property that all human beings possess, and which explains their equal moral, legal or political status, while abstracting from any personal or social properties that serve to distinguish them from one another. By means of this process of abstraction through which a common essential property is identified, individuals, who are otherwise qualitatively different from one another, come to be viewed as identical. In this way, an analogy between commodities and individuals begins to emerge. Commodities are reciprocally measurable and exchangeable with one another in virtue of their common property of being products of socially necessary labour-time, just as individuals can be accorded the same moral, legal or political status in virtue of their possession of a single common property, the identification of which requires ignoring all the particular properties that serve to distinguish them from one another. I shall now attempt to strengthen this analogy. Although the analogy as described so far depends on Marx’s labour theory of value, I do not intend to engage with the issue of this theory’s validity, since addressing it is not essential to the argument that I shall subsequently develop. What matters is only the assumption that there is



some way of viewing commodities as identical, and thus exchangeable, with one another, and that explaining this requires abstracting from those properties that distinguish them from one another. To explore the analogy further, I shall begin with a passage from the first volume of *Capital* in which Marx explains precisely why Aristotle was necessarily unable to discover the concept of value that would provide the solution to the puzzle that he himself had identified, namely, how qualitatively different things are reciprocally measurable, and thus exchangeable, with one another. The passage in question reads as follows:

Aristotle himself was unable to extract this fact, that, in the form of commodity-values, all labour is expressed as equal human labour and therefore as labour of equal value [*gleichgeltend*], by inspection from the form of value, because Greek society was founded on the labour of slaves, hence had as its natural basis the inequality of human beings and of their labour-powers. The secret of the expression of value, namely the equality and equal validity [*gleiche Gültigkeit*] of all kinds of labour because and in so far as they are human labour in general, can only be deciphered when the concept of human equality has already acquired the permanence of a fixed popular opinion. This however becomes possible only in a society where the commodity-form is the universal form of the product of labour, hence the dominant social relation is the relation between human beings as possessors of commodities. (MEGA II/8: 90; Cap. 1: 151-52; translation modified).

This passage contains a series of claims that need to be separated from one another:

(1) Given his historical situation and its limitations, it was simply not possible for Aristotle to achieve full insight into the essential nature of exchange value. A central feature of this historical situation was the institution of slavery, which presupposed and expressed a radical inequality of status. The fundamental difference in status between the master and the slave was explained and justified in terms of natural differences, including by Aristotle himself (Aristotle 1996: 1254a-1255b). The modern moral, legal and political idea of equality, in contrast, presupposes that one can view human beings in abstraction from all the purely natural and other contingent features and factors that distinguish them from one another, and thereby discover an essential, common property in virtue of which all human beings are identical and, on this basis, ought to be accorded the same status and thus treated equally.

(2) The modern idea of moral, legal and political equality provides the key to the discovery of an adequate theory of the value of commodities, that is to say, a theory that is able to explain how commodities are reciprocally measurable and thus exchangeable with one another. For Marx himself, this theory is the one according to which every commodity embodies a certain amount of abstract, socially necessary labour-time.

(3) It follows from (1) and (2) that Aristotle was necessarily not in the position to gain insight into the concept of exchange value, because the key to discovering both this concept and the theory of value which explains it, namely the concept of legal and political equality, was simply unavailable to him, given the historical period in which he lived. In modern liberal capitalist society, in contrast, the key to the discovery of the concept of exchange value and the theory of value which explains it is available, since

in this society the validity of the idea of the moral equality of individuals is generally recognized to the point that it has assumed ‘the permanence of a fixed popular opinion’, even if a fully consistent, universal application of this idea has yet to be achieved.

(4) The idea of the moral equality of individuals, together with the demand for its legal and political realization, achieve general recognition, however, only in a society in which the ‘commodity-form’ has begun to dominate human beings in the sense of being that which ultimately determines the relations between them as the individual owners of commodities that they exchange with one another. Thus, although general recognition of the idea of the moral equality of individuals and its legal and political expressions are historical conditions of insight into the true concept of exchange value, it is the dominance of exchange value within society that explains general recognition of this idea and its legal and political expressions. Marx himself makes this clear when he states that ‘[e]quality and freedom are thus not only respected in exchange based on exchange values but, also, the exchange of exchange values is the productive, real basis of all *equality* and *freedom*’ (MEGA II/1.1: 168; G, 245).

From (4) we can see that there are two stages and directions of inquiry. The first stage and direction of inquiry consists in inferring the concept of exchange value from the historical fact of general recognition of the idea of moral equality in so far as this recognition has achieved legal and political forms. The second stage and direction of inquiry consists in explaining general recognition of this idea and its legal and political expressions in terms of the concept of exchange value that has been inferred from it, and constitutes the ‘real basis’ of this idea and, we might say, its origin. Here, it is clear that an economic relation, the relation between commodity owners governed by exchange value, is held to explain an ideological phenomenon,

namely, general recognition of the idea of moral equality and the legal and political forms associated with this idea. If the dominance of exchange value explains general recognition of the idea of the moral equality of individuals, and both this dominance and this general recognition, are essentially historical in character as is shown by their absence in the society in which Aristotle lived, we must also assume the existence of a historical process through which exchange value came increasingly to dominate society and in so doing generated the relevant ideological forms.

I shall now focus on the second stage and direction of inquiry so as to explain the relation between moral, legal and political equality and Marx's account of a society in which social relations are governed by exchange value. In order to avoid confronting the issue of the validity of Marx's explanation of exchange value in terms of quantities of abstract, socially necessary labour-time, I shall restrict my discussion of this relation to the issue of how the dominance of exchange value in society explains how the ideas of moral, legal and political equality have also become dominant within the same society. To this extent, I presuppose only that commodities are reciprocally measurable, and thus exchangeable, with one another, while leaving open the question of how precisely this is possible. I shall now turn to Marx's account of social relations governed by exchange value and then explain their connection with the idea of the moral equality of individuals and the legal and political forms in which this idea finds expression.

### **3. Exchange value and the idea of equality**

According to Marx, a commodity has a 'double existence'. On the one hand, there is the commodity in its 'natural' existence, where it is a 'real' commodity and something particular which is exchanged because of its distinctive properties, that is to say, those properties that make it suitable to satisfy a determinate human need and thus give it use value. On the other

hand, there is the commodity in its ‘purely economic’ existence as exchange value, where the commodity’s exchangeability is made possible by the purely quantitative relation in which it stands to other commodities (MEGA II/1.1: 76; G, 141-42). A relation of this type requires viewing the object in abstraction from all properties other than that property in virtue of which it is identical with all other commodities and can thus be exchanged with them *qua* exchange values. This requirement is reflected in Marx’s description of exchange value as ‘a generality [*ein Allgemeines*], in which all individuality and peculiarity [*Eigenheit*] are negated and extinguished’ (MEGA II/1.1: 90; G, 157). This relation between commodities governed by exchange value must find symbolic expression in a third thing that can be exchanged for any commodity whatsoever, namely, money.

The ‘double existence’ of the commodity – that is, its existence as use value, on the one hand, and its existence as exchange value, on the other - mirrors the double life led by the individual in the modern state that Marx had described years before in *On the Jewish Question*. The state ‘abolishes’ any distinctions based on natural, personal or social factors that serve to distinguish individuals from one another, by treating all such distinctions as politically irrelevant. Rather, each individual *qua* citizen enjoys the same political status as others. This status is accorded to each individual on the grounds of his or her identity with others, which is achieved by viewing individuals in abstraction from all those determinate personal and social features that serve to distinguish them from one another. Thus, the individual comes to lead a double life, by existing ‘in his *immediate* reality, in civil society ... where he regards himself and is regarded by others as a real individual’, on the one hand, and by existing as someone who ‘is divested of his real individual life and filled with an unreal universality [*Allgemeinheit*]’, on the other (MEGA I/2: 149; EW, 220). In the first case, the individual is the human being ‘in his sensuous, individual and *immediate* existence’, while in the second

case this same individual is ‘abstract, artificial man, man as an *allegorical, moral* person’ (MEGA I/2: 162; EW, 234).

Three analogies here emerge. First, there is the analogy between the individual as a real, perceivable being that is ‘particular’ in virtue of being qualitatively distinct from other individuals and the commodity in its natural, real form. Secondly, there is the analogy between this same individual as an abstract political being, from which all distinctive properties have been abstracted to create an artificial entity that is numerically distinct but qualitatively indistinguishable from other all individuals and the commodity in its purely economic form. Third, this identity of individuals in the modern state finds expression in a third thing, the concept of law, since laws, in virtue of their formal character, equally apply to all individuals and unite them in a purely external way. This corresponds to how each commodity in its purely economic form is governed by the laws of commodity exchange and by exchange value in particular, and how it stands in a purely external relation to other commodities. This external relation concerns how any actual connection between commodities must first be established by an act of exchange facilitated by a third thing, money, in which the relative value of commodities finds symbolic expression, but can do so only if all properties other than their abstract exchange value are ignored.

So far it looks as if Marx has suggested some possible analogies while leaving us with the following question: how are general recognition of the idea of the moral equality of individuals and its legal and political expressions within a society to be explained in terms of how exchange value has come to govern social relations within the same society? As it stands, Marx has not shown that the correspondences between the legal and political forms in which general recognition of the moral equality of individuals finds expression and exchange value’s dominance of society are anything more than accidental ones. It could also be the case that the idea of moral equality explains the dominance of exchange value, instead of the latter being

the origin of the former. Part of Marx's answer to this question relates to another claim found in *On the Jewish Question* and its connection with the separation of the state from civil society that for Marx himself is the result of recent historical developments that culminated in the French Revolution. The claim in question is that 'species-life itself, society, appears as a framework extraneous to the individuals, as a limitation of their original independence' (MEGA I/2: 159; EW, 230).

A society in which exchange value has come to govern social relations will, according to Marx, be one in which the exchange value of commodities becomes the immediate object of production. The same would be true of any kind of productive capability or other saleable attribute over which an agent has initial effective control. The stage at which objects produced by means of human labour, productive capabilities or other saleable attributes are viewed exclusively in terms of their exchange value draws ever closer with an increasing division of labour. This is because each producer's activity becomes ever more restricted in terms of its scope, making individuals correspondingly more dependent on others to produce the means to satisfy their needs. These needs have themselves become greater in extent and more complex in character in the course of history, a phenomenon which itself presupposes an increasing division of labour, whereby 'the needs of each person have become very many-sided and his product has become very one-sided' (MEGA II/1.1: 128-29; G, 199). Given the dominance of exchange value in society, individuals cannot acquire from others the commodities that they need without first converting their own products, powers or activities into money, which is the universal medium of exchange. Once an individual has done this, he or she can exchange the value of his or her commodity for any commodity of the same value, rather than having to exchange one particular commodity for another particular commodity. Thus, economic agents are constrained to produce objects or to perform activities that can be exchanged for money, and so the distinctive properties of the commodities that they exchange become of secondary

importance to them compared to their exchange value. Even if an individual wanted to produce or to act with a view to the particular properties of an object or action, and how this object or action corresponds to the determinate needs of other individuals, he or she will be constrained by his or her needs and desire to acquire the means to satisfy them to produce something or to perform an action primarily with a view to their its exchange value. Given how each individual's ability to meet his or her needs becomes dependent on whether or not he or she can turn a commodity of which he or she is the legal owner into the symbolic expression of its exchange value, money assumes a 'seemingly transcendental power' (MEGA II/1.1: 81; G, 146). The degree of social power than each individual possesses thus becomes a function of how much exchange value, in the form of money, he or she has command over, so that, as Marx puts it, '[t]he individual carries his social power, as well as his bond with society, in his pocket' (MEGA II/1.1: 90; G, 157). The independent life assumed by the system of exchange enables the generation of exchange value to become, in the form of commerce (*Handel*), an end in itself, instead of merely a necessary means of acquiring objects of consumption (MEGA II/1.1: 83; G, 149).

The developments described above are characteristic of that which Marx calls 'bourgeois society'. This is the same society in which the legal and political equality of individuals is generally, if only imperfectly, recognized. Even if this indicates some kind of historical connection between increasing general recognition of the idea of the moral equality of individuals and exchange value's increasing dominance of society, and thus something more than a mere analogy, it has not yet been shown how the latter explains the former. To show this, Marx would have to establish some kind of causal connection between exchange value's dominance of society and general legal and political recognition of the idea of the equality of individuals within one and the same society in such a way that the former must be regarded as the ground of the latter. This challenge can be illustrated with reference to Marx's theory of



history. Historical materialism claims that in ‘the social production of their lives’ human beings ‘enter into relations that are specific, necessary and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a specific stage of development of their material productive forces’. The totality of these relations of production form the economic structure of society, to which relations between human beings established by acts of commodity exchange would presumably belong. A ‘legal and political superstructure’ arises on the basis of this economic structure, to which ‘specific forms of social consciousness’ correspond (MEGA II/2: 100; LPW, 159-60). The idea of the moral equality of individuals and any legal or political expressions of this idea would belong to this superstructure and its forms of social consciousness, and so must ultimately be explained in terms of the development of the material productive forces of society by way of the social relations of production.<sup>2</sup>

This type of historical explanation leaves us with the question of precisely *how* the economic structure of society and the dominant ideas that it generates are related in such a way that the ideas and their legal and political embodiments are the effect of an economic structure whose relations include ones that are established by acts of commodity exchange governed by exchange value. I shall focus on this question so as to avoid the further difficulties introduced by any direct appeal to historical materialism and particular interpretations of it. I shall argue that Marx provides the basis for an account of a causal connection which is compatible with the claim that material, economic factors ultimately explain ideological ones, which is a claim that Marx in some form clearly endorses. This connection is, however, a psychological one, whose strict necessity I do not pretend to demonstrate. Even if Marx’s account of how material, economic factors ultimately explain ideological ones does not require such strict necessity, it clearly does require that there is a sufficiently strong tendency for the relevant material, economic factors to produce the relevant ideological effects. In this particular case, the tendency must be sufficiently strong to explain the demands for legal and political equality

characteristic of liberal capital society.<sup>3</sup> My account of how exchange value's dominance of society explains these demands concerns a strong tendency on the part of individuals, whose relations to one another are governed by exchange value, to think of both themselves and others in a correspondingly abstract way.

In some places Marx emphasizes that commodity exchange involves abstracting not only from any properties other than the exchange value of the commodities themselves but also from any properties that serve to distinguish the parties to the act of exchange from one another. One example of this is provided by the following description of how the worker and the capitalist confront each other as owners and exchangers of commodities, which appears to treat legal equality as a logical consequence of the equality characteristic of individuals who are viewed as nothing more than owners and exchangers of commodities: 'He and the owner of money meet in the market, and enter into relations with each other on a footing of equality as owners of commodities [*als ebenbürtige Waarenbesitzer*], with the sole difference that one is a buyer, the other a seller; both are therefore equal in the eyes of the law [*beide also juristisch gleiche Personen sind*]' (MEGA II/8: 183-84; Cap. 1, 271). Here, both the worker, who owns one commodity, labour power, and the capitalist, who owns another commodity, the money to pay for the use of this labour power, are different only in that one of them is a seller and the other one is a buyer. Apart from this difference, all differences that would otherwise distinguish them *qua* natural persons and individuals with their own characters, needs, ends and interests have been abstracted from. Yet even this difference is not a fixed one, for the worker can, or rather must, also be a buyer and the capitalist must also be a seller as well as a buyer within the system of exchange as a whole. In any case, whether as buyer or as seller, each of them is identical with the other in virtue of being someone who engages in an act of commodity exchange: 'each has the same social relation towards the other that the other has towards him. As subjects of exchange, their relation is ... that of *equality*. It is impossible to find any trace

of distinction ... between them; not even a difference' (MEGA II/1.1: 165; G, 241). Viewing human beings in abstraction from any determinate features and relations is likewise necessary when it comes to recognizing individuals as legal persons who are equal before the law and possess the equal right to dispose of their property as they please. The following passages provide examples of how Marx emphasizes that commodity exchange requires abstracting from any properties that would distinguish the parties to the act of exchange and how this corresponds to the way in which the money form, in which the commodity makes its appearance, requires abstracting from the particular properties of any object of exchange:

Each appears towards the other as an owner of money, and, as regards the process of exchange, as money itself. Thus indifference [*Gleichgültigkeit*] and equal worthiness [*Gleichgeltendheit*] are expressly contained in the form of the thing. The particular natural difference which was contained in the commodity is extinguished, and constantly becomes extinguished by circulation. A worker who buys commodities for 3s. appears to the seller in the same function, in the same equality – in the form of 3s. – as the king who does the same. All distinction between them is extinguished. (MEGA II/1.1: 169-70; G, 246)

A worker who buys a loaf of bread and a millionaire who does the same appear in this act only as simple buyers, just as, in respect to them, the grocer appears only as seller. All other aspects are here extinguished. The *content* of these purchases, like their *extent*, here appears as completely irrelevant [*gleichgültig*] compared with the formal aspect. (MEGA II/1.1: 174; G, 251)

The causal connection between exchange value's dominance of society at the economic level and general recognition of the idea of equality at the legal and political levels would then be as follows. When exchange value becomes dominant within society, and thus governs social relations, not only the particular properties of the commodities exchanged but also the particular properties of the individuals who engage in acts of commodity exchange will tend to be ignored. Individuals, like the commodities that they exchange with one another, either primarily or exclusively with a view to their exchange value, will then confront one another as abstract entities, in the sense that none of them has any interest in the other as the particular individual that he or she happens to be. Instead, each individual is subsumed by other individuals under the general category of buyer or seller, or the even more general category of a person with whom one can enter into an act of commodity exchange. Thus the relation of the parties to acts of commodity exchange in a society governed by exchange value will be one in which 'they are, as equals [*Gleichgeltende*], at the same time also indifferent to one another [*Gleichgültige*]; whatever other individual distinction there may be does not concern them; they are indifferent to all their other individual peculiarities' (MEGA II/1.1: 166; G, 242).

By its very nature, therefore, a society dominated by exchange value will develop in individuals the strong tendency to regard other individuals with whom they do not stand in any kind of immediate, personal relation (for example, that of family member) or determinate social relation (for example, that of a fellow worker engaged in the common struggle against capital) as abstract entities, as opposed to human beings who differ in virtue of their particular personal and social characteristics. This abstract, merely formal conception of others finds expression in their legal and political equality, which is thus made to appear natural by how exchange value governs social relations. Yet it is not only a matter of how one conceives of others but also a matter of how one conceives of oneself. This is because the relevant relation to others tends to determine one's relation to oneself in that being viewed and treated by others as an

abstract entity, as required not only by acts of commodity exchange but also by equal legal and political recognition, encourages one to conceive of oneself in the same abstract terms, even if this abstract self-conception may be partially offset by more concrete forms of identity.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, this type of self-conception is almost bound to develop as a consequence of the additional pressure of having to conceive of one's own productive capabilities or other saleable attributes in terms of abstract exchange value.

Then there is the way in which exchange value, and thus one's own productive capabilities or other saleable attributes, assumes the immediate, sensory form of money, the units of which measure the value of those aspects of oneself that can be treated as a commodity and exchanged with other commodities, thereby providing their value with an abstract material expression. This abstract material expression of exchange value circulates in such a way that it remains independent of, and thus indifferent to, both the particular commodities exchanged and the individuals who exchange them, and so Marx speaks of how equality here posits itself objectively (*sachlich*) (MEGA II/1.1: 169; G, 246).<sup>5</sup> It is then becomes difficult to see how an individual's self-conception could remain untouched by the necessity of thinking of his or her own productive capabilities and other saleable attributes as detachable features of him- or herself in this condition of 'universal prostitution', in which social relations governed by abstract exchange value are reduced to 'the universal relation of utility and use' (MEGA II/1.1: 95; G, 163). This might involve treating even that which one takes to be unique about oneself as a commodity, so that these features of oneself are turned into something separable from oneself, and are not, therefore, viewed as intrinsic parts of oneself that serve to distinguish one from others. Adorno identifies a phenomenon of this kind in connection with the commodification of one's personality and certain idiosyncratic features of it in the following passage from *Minima Moralia*:

The individualities imported into America, and divested of individuality in the process, are called colourful personalities. Their eager, uninhibited temperament, their sudden fancies, their ‘originality’, even if it be only a peculiar odiousness, even their garbled language, utilize [*verwerten*] human qualities as a clown’s costume. Since they are subject to the universal mechanism of competition and have no other means of adaptation to the market and coping with it than their petrified otherness, they plunge passionately into the privilege of their self and so exaggerate themselves that they completely eradicate what they are taken for. (Adorno 2003; 2005: no. 88; translation modified)

I shall now summarize the argument. The way in which exchange value dominates society generates the natural tendency to think of oneself, others and how the world ought to be in terms of formal categories, including those associated with legal and political equality, which then reinforce this conception of oneself and others. This is because the detachability of productive capabilities and other saleable attributes from one’s own self demanded by a society dominated by exchange value invites the reduction of the self to a purely abstract one, which can be viewed both by the agent concerned and by other agents as ultimately independent of any given or acquired determinate characteristics or features. Instead, any such characteristics or features have become detachable, commodifiable parts of one’s own self, which has been reduced to a repository of exchange values. Legal and political equality, together with the self-conception and conception of others associated with them, likewise require an abstract view of a self. The abstract view of the self that we encounter in the first case is an effect of how exchange value governs social relations in bourgeois society. The abstract view of the self and others presupposed by legal and political expressions of the idea of the moral equality of

individuals is a reflection of this first abstract conception of one's own self and that of others, which it nevertheless reinforces. Although there may be individual cases in which exchange value's dominance of society does not produce the relevant effects, there is, on the whole, a strong tendency for it to produce them and to do so in a sufficiently widespread way. Thus, general recognition of the idea of the moral equality of individuals and the legal and political expressions of this recognition, which may phenomenally first confront the observer of bourgeois society, provide the key to discovering the concept of value that eluded, and had to elude, Aristotle, because they need to be explained and the explanation leads back to the form of value which explains how objects that are qualitatively distinct can nevertheless be treated as identical and exchangeable with one another.

This would also help to explain how increasing recognition of the idea of the moral equality of individuals accompanied by more strident demands for the legal and political realization of this idea and exchange value's increasing dominance of a society based on commodity exchange historically emerged at more or less the same time, that is to say, in that which Marx himself calls 'bourgeois society'. The 'abstract', 'artificial' and 'unreal' individual is not, therefore, to be identified with the citizen alone. Rather, this individual is also encountered at the level of civil society, which is dominated by exchange value and whose social relations are governed by it. This implies that widespread and insistent appeals to the idea of equality are most likely to be heard when, beneath the surface, abstract exchange value dominates society and governs social relations.<sup>6</sup> We are therefore now in a better position to understand why Marx would want to resist the idea that communist society is egalitarian in the sense that each and every member of it will possess the same formal moral status and in virtue of this status ought to be treated in accordance with some kind of equal standard. In the final section of this essay I shall further discuss Marx's reasons for wanting to avoid the idea that communist society would be an egalitarian society.

#### **4. The idea of equality and communist society**

Given the elements of Marx's critique of liberal capitalist society described above, communist society will presumably be a society in which individuals relate to themselves and to one another as individuals, not as abstract economic, legal or political entities. Thus the statement 'from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs!' (MEGA I/25: 15; LPW, 215) signals not only a rejection of the claim that an equal standard can, or ought, to be applied. There is the deeper problem that the application of an equal standard requires treating individuals as abstract entities instead of real individuals, thereby reproducing one of the fundamental defects of liberal capitalist society. Although this particular defect may be an unavoidable feature of communist society as well in its early stages, conceiving of oneself and others as an abstract moral entity cannot be regarded as a goal of this society. A society in which each individual contributes according to his or her abilities and each individual receives goods and resources according to his or her needs would instead be a society in which people are recognized and treated as individuals, and thus can develop the corresponding self-conception and conception of others in a secure way. Those who contribute according to their abilities are recognized as individuals who possess capabilities that not all individuals share, while those who do share them may not possess these abilities, or cannot develop them, to precisely the same degree. This recognition is manifested not only in certain benefits, such as the opportunity to develop these capabilities through the exercise of them and the enjoyment of social esteem, but also in society's expectations regarding the contribution that those individuals with the good fortune to possess these capabilities ought to make towards the satisfaction of the needs of others. Those individuals who receive goods and resources according to their needs – and individuals belonging to the previous group will form a subset of this group – will be recognized as individuals with determinate needs that not all others share



or do not have to the same degree. In this way, production and distribution in communist society, together with the social relations that they generate, would harmonize in that particular objects are produced with a view to the satisfaction of particular needs.

This brings me to a second reason that Marx has for wanting to deny that communist society would be an egalitarian one. As we have seen, in capitalist society exchange value's dominance of society and how it determines the production and distribution of goods and resources is both historically and psychologically connected with the idea of the moral equality of individuals in so far as it finds expression in the concept of the abstract legal person and the equal political status enjoyed by citizens. In each case, one views individuals in abstraction from the particular properties that serve to distinguish them from one another. Given how exchange value's dominance of society and formal legal and political categories reinforce each other, both of them represent a threat to a society in which each member contributes according to his or her abilities and receives according to his or her needs in such a way as to develop the appropriate self-conception and attitude to others, which involves thinking of oneself and others as real individuals and being motivated to treat one another as such. Although the abolition of exchange value is a necessary condition of the achievement of this goal, it is not, therefore, or so Marx suggests, a sufficient one, because formal moral, legal and political categories may continue to haunt society after having become independent of the material, economic factors that explain their emergence and their appearance of naturalness. This might lead people to advocate a model of economic life that has not sufficiently freed itself from the model provided by a society based on commodity exchange, whose social relations are governed by abstract exchange value. Indeed, this is precisely what appears to happen during the first stage of communist society. The idea of the moral equality of individuals can be said in this regard to be contaminated by its origin, which is exchange value and its dominance of society. Thus, it is not simply the case that the idea of the moral equality of individuals and the

legal and political expressions of this idea would no longer be necessary in a fully developed communist society. Rather, retaining them would threaten to prevent a clean break with capitalist society. This is not to say that Marx is committed to the view that appeals to legal and political equality would always be wrong. He himself acknowledges that, under certain historical conditions, appeals to these forms of equality are, in fact, expressive of genuine emancipatory demands, and that they may, therefore, serve as powerful instruments in political struggles, as when he claims in *On the Jewish Question* that '[p]olitical emancipation is certainly a major advance. It is admittedly not the final form of human emancipation in general, but it is the final form of human emancipation *within* the world order up to now' (MEGA I/2: 150; EW, 221; translation modified). Although Marx allows that the idea of the moral equality of individuals is the expression of a valid, deep-seated human impulse, which has, nevertheless, historically assumed inadequate or distorted forms, by the time we get to the first stage of communist society it is assumed that appeals to this idea will be misguided. For they threaten to generate confusion and claims that must be regarded as invalid, and even dangerous, within the new society.

It might be objected that the statement 'from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs!' implies the idea of the moral equality of individuals and a corresponding commitment to an equal standard whose application ensures that the demands of distributive justice are met. For example, if the demand to meet each individual's needs is subsumed under the general value of human flourishing, the statement might be thought to imply that such flourishing is something that ought to be equally guaranteed to all. Conversely, each member of society would be equally obliged to contribute towards the meeting of society's needs in so far as he or she is able to do so, with contribution being able to take forms other than the production of material goods, given the expansiveness of the notion of human flourishing (Synnowich 2018).<sup>7</sup> I do not intend to show that no covert appeal to the idea of the

moral equality of individuals and a corresponding commitment to an equal standard are, in fact, present, since I think that Marx's response to this potential objection would be a different one. This alternative response would consist in the claim that there is simply no point in reformulating the statement in question in egalitarian terms, even if it were possible to do so, for there is absolutely nothing to gain from doing so: the demand that each individual contributes according to his or her abilities and receives goods and resources from society corresponding to his or her needs is perfectly intelligible and capable of doing the work that it is meant to do without any appeal to the idea of the moral equality of individuals needing to be introduced. Its restatement in egalitarian terms, in contrast, carries with it the danger of regression to the ideological framework of bourgeois society, by reawakening the tendency to think of oneself and others in abstract terms.

One might ask against whom Marx's genealogy of the idea of moral equality and its legal and political expressions is directed. It is difficult to see what effect his account of how general recognition of this idea and the legal and political demands associated with it have their origin in exchange value and the way in which it has come to dominate and govern society could have on someone who does not value this idea, unless this person was in favour of a society dominated and governed by exchange value but did not at the same time want to accord to moral, legal and political equality a corresponding importance and value. Marx's account of the psychological as well as historical connection between exchange value's dominance of society and widespread acceptance of the idea of the moral equality of individuals could nevertheless make an egalitarian Marxist feel uncomfortable, because his or her commitment to this idea would then be explained in terms of something that he or she presumably wants to reject. One way of avoiding this discomfort would be to attempt to detach the idea of the moral equality of individuals from its origin, so as to show that the contamination that it may have suffered on account of its association with exchange value is not sufficient to demonstrate the

untruth and lack of value of this idea. Rather, the link between this idea and exchange value's dominance of society can be regarded as a contingent one. To attempt to detach the two things in this way would nevertheless involve a rejection of what I have shown to be a major element of Marx's account of how capitalism and political liberalism are bound up with each other in such a way that economic factors ultimately explain legal and political ones, namely, the idea that exchange value's dominance of society generates the tendency to think of oneself and others in the abstract terms characteristic of political liberalism. And if the economic structure of society is abolished, why should its ideological expression remain, especially when it would threaten to perpetuate central features of this economic structure?<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This idea that the application of the principle of equality within a society committed to this principle is essentially self-undermining was already developed by Hegel:

In a society based on common ownership of goods, in which provision would be made in a universal and enduring way, either each receives as much as he *needs* – in which case there is a contradiction between this inequality and the essential nature of that consciousness whose principle is the equality of individuals – or, in accordance with that principle, goods will be *equally* distributed, in which case the share bears no relation to the need. (Hegel 1988: 283; Hegel 1977: 258; translation modified).

<sup>2</sup> For example, moral notions, including the idea of equality and the subjective rights typically associated with it, especially once they have achieved legal recognition by the state, might be explained in terms of their function of facilitating the development of the productive forces by serving to maintain and promote the corresponding relations of production. See Wood 1981: 130ff.

<sup>3</sup> I do not wish to commit myself to the claim that for Marx any idea whatsoever must ultimately be explained in terms of material, economic factors, but only to the claim that ideas that are key to explaining how a particular society distinguishes itself from earlier ones are somehow bound up with a particular economic and social system that also distinguishes this society from all previous societies. The fact that the idea of equality is an idea of this kind for Marx is clear from his claim that a society based on commodity exchange is ‘the exclusive realm of Freedom, Equality, Property and Bentham. Freedom, because both buyer and seller of a commodity, let us say of labour-power, are determined only by their own free will. They contract as free persons, who are equal before the law ... Equality, because they relate to each other only as the owners of commodities and exchange equivalent for equivalent’ (MEGA II/8: 191; Cap. 1, 280; translation modified).

<sup>4</sup> Marx has been criticized for neglecting the importance of such sources of identity as religion and nationality, and this neglect has been said to reflect a more general failure to consider the importance of the self’s relation to itself. See Cohen 1988: 346ff. I think that these criticisms are misplaced because they ignore not only the extent to which Marx explains the self’s relation to itself in terms of its relation to others in a situation in which exchange value has come to dominate society, but also how exchange value’s dominance of society in this way undermines the sources of identity available in earlier societies, which include religion and other senses of belonging to a greater whole. This invites the question as to whether modern forms of religion and modern nationalism represent attempts to counter the tendency towards abstraction and atomization without understanding the true basis of this tendency.

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<sup>5</sup> Much earlier Marx had written about how money possesses the property of being able to buy anything. This results in a type of abstraction, because individuals become that which they can buy rather than the actual possessors of distinctive properties and characteristics. In this way, the individual becomes the mere placeholder of extrinsic properties. Conversely, if an individual lacks money, he or she will, in effect, lack certain capabilities and needs that he or she does possess, in so far as the possession of them requires the proper exercise of these capabilities and the possibility of satisfying these needs (MEGA I/2: 436-438; EW, 377-79).

<sup>6</sup> This implication poses a potential problem for Marx's account of history, for it suggests that the historical period in which appeals to the idea of legal and political equality were most strident would be the period in which the dominance of exchange value was also at its height. In *On the Jewish Question*, Marx appears to associate appeals of this kind with the French Revolution and certain key political documents associated with it, but it is not plausible to maintain that at this historical juncture exchange value not only became more dominant in society than it had ever been before but also more dominant than it would ever subsequently be.

<sup>7</sup> Another example of where one might be tempted to see the idea of moral equality at work is provided by Marx's notion of 'species-being', which implies that all individuals are identical, and thus equal, in virtue of their possession of the essential features of the human species that he identifies. These features include the capacity to be reflectively aware of oneself as a member of this species as opposed to other ones, which involves the awareness of oneself as free in the sense of not subject to the same limitations as these other species, and thus as more 'universal' than they are, and the capacity to act in accordance with this consciousness of the species to which one belongs (MEGA I/2: 368; EW 327-28). On the one hand, one could avoid speaking of human beings as being equal in virtue of their species-being by saying that this being or essence is common to them or something similar. On the other hand, to speak of equality here would be misleading in so far as it suggests that human beings manifest their species-being in the same ways or to the same degree, whereas, as individuals, as opposed to mere instances of one and the same species, this is not the case.

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