

# Does a Marxian Critical Theory of Society Need a Moral Theory?

*Kai Nielsen*

To show Marx is not a *moral philosopher* is not to show that he is not a moralist, i.e., one having or propounding moral judgements and views .

R. G. Peffer

As the image of actually existing socialism becomes more and more desperate, more and more mournful, we all become 'Communists' in so far as we are unable finally to get rid of our concern about public affairs and our horror at the possibility of catastrophic developments in global society.

Claus Offe

R. G. Peffer's *Marxism, Morality and Social Justice* is a massive volume.\* Of the spate of recent books on Marxism and morality, it is the most comprehensive and should become a reference point for discussions of this topic. It is grounded in a thorough grasp of Marx's writings as well as the key writers in the Marxist tradition. It is thoroughly conversant with recent discussions and rational reconstructions of Marx and Marxist theory, including those of the analytical Marxists. It is also informed by an extensive knowledge of contemporary ethical theory. All this places Peffer in a good position to carry out his project and he has indeed carried it out well.

Peffer first sets out Marx's moral perspective, while defending the claim that he has one. That completed, he critiques consequentialist and perfectionist readings of Marx, and discusses in great detail various forms of Marxist anti-moralism and historicist readings of Marx which (if justified) would (or so Peffer believes) render moral critique nugatory. Peffer also discusses Marxist conceptions of ideology and their relevance to morality, Marxist conceptions of exploitation and freedom, morality and self-interest, revolutionary motivation, relativism and moral objectivity and moral methodology. He concludes *Marxism, Morality and Social Justice* with an extended discussion of social justice. He argues that Marx has an implicit ethical theory, including an account of justice. His ethical theory, according to Peffer, is a form of mixed deontology. That deontology notwithstanding, Marx (*pace* Allen Wood) is also an egalitarian and has an egalitarian theory of social justice.<sup>1</sup> Peffer reconstructs Marx's

account of justice but thinks that with the development of moral theory in the twentieth century, including theories of justice, Marx's account of morality is in various ways inadequate. To fill the gap in moral theory he constructs and argues in some detail for a more comprehensive Marxist theory of social justice. It is a theory that is heavily indebted to, but still distinct from, the work of John Rawls, whose work he extensively examines. Peffer's own account is also a form of mixed deontology, which, surprisingly for a Marxist theory, takes rights seriously. (This is one of the places where he thinks Marx went badly wrong.)

In his attempt to construct a Marxist theory of social justice, Peffer first argues that Marxists should not abjure rights, taking them to be mere ideological constructs supporting the *status quo*. Instead, Marxists should determine which rights we have (working on the assumption that rights are somehow a social reality) by reference to a theory of social justice. Rights on his conception are crucially important but they are still derivative concepts. Our account of social justice determines what rights we are deemed to have. We cannot rely on intuition to determine what rights we have.

Taking, not unreasonably, John Rawls's theory to be the leading account of justice in our time and, like Allen Buchanan, finding large areas of compatibility between Marx and Rawls, Peffer articulates core elements of Rawls's theory and argues against Rawls's communitarian critics, on the one hand, and his Marxian and other left-leaning critics, on the other, pointing out against the latter that many of their criticisms of Rawls, where not resting on misinterpretations, are not critiques of his core moral theory but challenge his empirical claims. What we find are empirical differences with Rawls over political sociology. It isn't that Peffer thinks these differences are unimportant but that they are not differences in core moral theory. On his view, and for that matter mine, one could have a Marxian political sociology and continue to accept Rawls's core moral theory.<sup>2</sup>

Arguing, I think correctly, that Marxist and liberal egalitarian social democratic theory share much in common and that, in this respect at least, Marxist theory should build on, extend and make more realistic such liberal theory, he constructs his own Marxian theory of social justice from an extension of Rawls's theory; an extension accounting for lacunae in Rawls's moral theory and rooted in what Peffer takes to be a more adequate political sociology. He also contrasts his theory of justice not only with Rawls's but with other rival egalitarian theories (Marx's, Ronald Dworkin's and my own) as well, and he concludes that if some

\* R. G. Peffer, *Marxism, Morality and Social Justice*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990. Page references to Peffer's book will be given in the text.

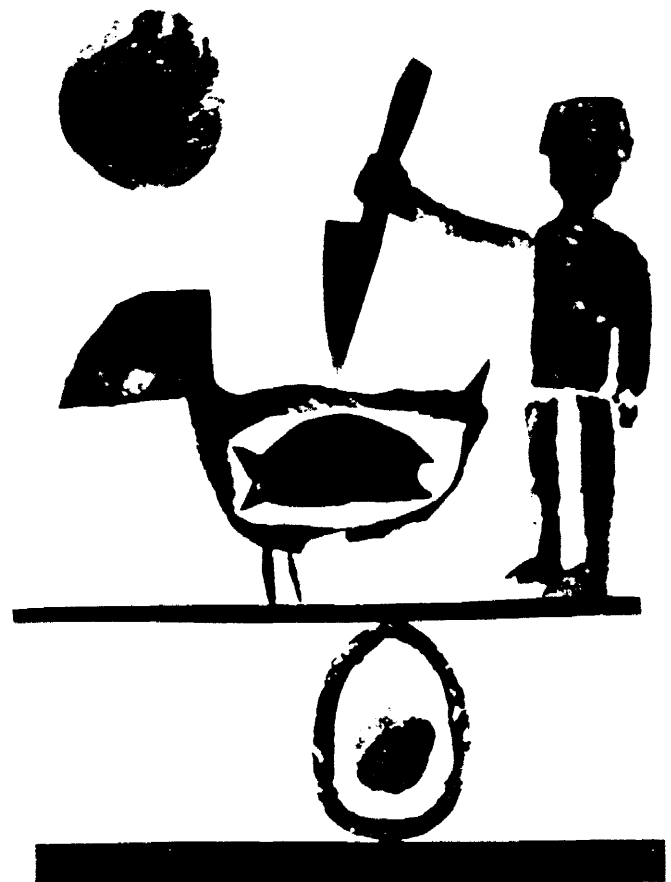
canonical and relatively untendentious Marxian empirical claims are true or approximately true then he is justified in claiming that his Marxist theory of justice is superior to its best rivals. If that is so, he further claims that he can give us a sound basis for concluding that social justice favours appropriate forms of democratic socialism over even the most progressive forms of capitalism. He ends his book by arguing that we have good grounds for believing that there is a cluster of theoretically unencumbered Marxian empirical claims which can plausibly be taken to be true and that, given their truth, we should conclude that justice requires a commitment to democratic socialism.

## I

I am puzzled about how I should proceed in an examination of Peffer's book. I am deeply in sympathy with it as a reading of Marx, in its rejection of Marxist anti-moralism, in its substantive egalitarian account of social justice, and its use of wide reflective equilibrium as a basic moral methodology (including its appeal to considered judgements), in its rather extensive sorting out of what is canonical in Marxian empirical theory, and in the way Peffer uses that account in the construction of a moral and social theory – of what I would rather call a critical theory of society. I have tried to do rather similar things myself in *Equality and Liberty* and *Marxism and the Moral Point of View*.<sup>3</sup> Peffer both generously acknowledges his indebtedness to me and trenchantly criticizes me, though he makes it clear that our accounts of social justice are fundamentally similar. As I make plain in my article 'Liberal and Socialist Egalitarianism', I recognize the soundness of some of Peffer's criticisms and have altered my account accordingly, though, not unsurprisingly, not quite enough to Peffer's taste.<sup>4</sup> Still, our views are so close that in this context at least it would be a boring scholastic exercise for me to try to sort out who (if either) is more nearly right and why. For me this is particularly pointless for I am just beginning to systematically reexamine what I think about social justice, about what a just society would look like and about what to think concerning the scope and place of philosophical theory in such an endeavour.

What I want to argue here, though not without ambivalence and misgivings, is that Peffer, and for that matter the Kai Nielsen of *Equality and Liberty* and the essays surrounding it, think they can get more out of a moral theory, including most theories of justice, than it is reasonable to expect and, even more importantly, though less controversially, than what is needed for sound social critique. Constructing and examining such theories can be good fun, for those who like that sort of thing, but as instruments for the examining and assessing of issues of social policy or for evaluating institutions or for use in deciding such humanly vital issues as the choice between socialism and capitalism or for the justification of socialist revolution and the like, such moral theories, even when intricately and soundly argued and carefully nuanced, do very little indeed to provide guidance or justification. They do little in the way of providing us with such a critical skyhook. They may perhaps provide us with a perspicuous way of talking about what we have justified on other grounds – that is, of articulating our beliefs – but they will not justify such momentous hard moral choices or yield critical assessments of institutions or whole social structures. But if that is so, then the construction of both substantive ethical theories and metaethical theories becomes a rather pointless affair, or at least its importance is much reduced. It can hardly meet anything like the traditional expectations of moral and social philosophy. Instead all we need in trying to resolve the normative political problems Peffer concerns himself with are (a) firm considered moral judgments rooted in functioning social practices; (b) a good

empirical political sociology with the power not only to describe but to predict and explain; and (c) the methodology of wide reflective equilibrium. Philosophical theories of ethics at best might give us a perspicuous vocabulary in which to talk about morality and normative political problems. However, in point of fact, they are more likely to get in the way of effective critique. What we need instead is an empirically informed critical social theory with normative commitments but *without philosophical foundations*, including foundations in moral theory. This account is *philosophically* sceptical about the scope of reason (though not about the fact that we can sometimes be reasonable) but it is not relativist, morally sceptical or more generally sceptical. As a sceptic about religion need not, and typically will not, be more globally sceptical, so a sceptic about the normative import of philosophical theories of ethics need not, and typically will not, be more generally sceptical. She will not, that is, be sceptical



about the very possibility of knowing anything. Think here of Bertrand Russell or Noam Chomsky.

Let me put what I am trying to say somewhat differently. Peffer argues, as I do as well, for a feasible socialism, by which we mean not only a socialism that is on the historical agenda as a plausible possibility, but also a socialism concerning which it would be a good thing were it to come into existence; a socialism which, in terms of the quality of human life and the fairness of the relations between people, would afford a better life for people generally than the life available in the best of capitalisms. Here there are at least three crucial considerations. (1) It is likely that a socialism of the requisite sort, i.e. a democratic, rights-respecting socialism, can be brought about within the lifetime of at least some individuals living now, and that it would be sufficiently widespread and strong to not fall prey to capitalist undermining?

In fine, is democratic socialism a genuine historical possibility? (2) Can we have a socialism which is sufficiently efficient and otherwise economically viable that it can sustain people at a level of economic well-being that is at least equal to that of the best of capitalisms (say, Sweden)? Here arguments about market socialism are crucially relevant such as those between Alec Nove and his capitalist critics, on the one hand, and between him and rather traditional Marxists such as Ernest Mandel on the other.<sup>5</sup> (3) Morally speaking, are the best of feasibly possible socialist social orders superior to the best of feasibly possible capitalist orders?

Peffer, reasonably accepting an intellectual division of labour, as I have and G. A. Cohen has, concerns himself principally with the third question. That is fair enough, but it should also be recognized – and Peffer is keenly aware of this – that the answer to the third question is not independent of the answers to the first two questions.

The following considerations should make this evident, if it is not just intuitively evident. Ought implies can. If socialism is not a feasible possibility, it is not something which could be morally superior to capitalism. And if socialism is so inescapably economically inefficient that it, even more than capitalism, is incapable of providing the material conditions for human well-being, then it could not be a morally superior social system to capitalism. The hard empirical issues embedded in the first two questions are crucially relevant to how we answer the third.

So far there is common ground between Peffer and myself. But, reflecting on these three questions and their relations, I will make a stronger claim, a claim with which Peffer will not concur. My claim is that for people who accept a cluster of moral truisms or moral commonplaces, as do almost all people in modernizing societies, truisms or commonplaces we can be more confident of than any abstract substantive moral principle, the answer they will give to the third question is effectively settled by the answers they give to the first two. If they concluded that socialism is not on the historical agenda for any foreseeable future, they will, even with their egalitarianism (in some rather indeterminate sense of 'egalitarianism'), seek to forge conceptions and practices of justice that are in accord with certain capitalists possibilities, i.e. social democratic capitalist possibilities. Anything else would be a bad utopianism. Furthermore, if they conclude that any possible socialism will be economically very inefficient and in being so make for extensive poverty, considerable resultant corruption, and in reaction to that corruption and poverty, authoritarian domination, they will conclude that morally speaking a socialist order is inferior to at least Welfare State capitalism, say a Swedenized capitalism. On the contrary, if they think democratic socialism is on the agenda and will be either more economically efficient, or at least as efficient, or not so much more inefficient as to more than marginally lower the productivity of the society in question, then they will judge socialism to be morally speaking superior.

My argument should not be misconstrued here. It is not that I am claiming that without reference to values we can make such choices on purely factual grounds: that we can derive in any significant sense an ought from an is.<sup>6</sup> We need in making such political assessments to presuppose certain unproblematic moral beliefs, widely assented to in modernizing societies. With them in place as at least provisional fixed points in our moral firmament, we can, depending on the facts of the case (both facts about what is the case and about empirical possibilities), determine in such domains what is to be done. The only thing that we need to add is reflective equilibrium, for we need the moral truisms to be in a consistent set and to be consistent with the empirical actualities and probable possibilities.<sup>7</sup> That is why I said all we need is moral truisms, a good political sociology and reflective equilib-

rium. Moral theory – including the articulation of philosophical principles of justice – simply drops out or becomes at best a rather ancillary activity. Theories of the type that Peffer provides, that I have provided, that Rawls, Dworkin, G. A. Cohen, Amartya Sen and Brian Barry provide, however interesting in themselves, are of little practical normative relevance. They will hardly furnish secure guidance on how we are to react to our social practices and institutions. What we need is not a Marxian moral and social theory – a philosophically grounded critical morality – but, if Marx's theoretical empirical canon is sound or can be made so by some judicious fiddling, a Marxian critical social theory, *non-wertfrei* but without foundations in moral theory.

## II

I shall now consider this issue with more specific reference to Peffer's text. Peffer clearly states the aims of his work in the first two paragraphs of his introduction. It also shows where he would collide with what I have argued above.

The ultimate goal of this work is to develop at least the outlines of an adequate Marxist moral and social theory. By a 'moral and social theory' I mean one that provides a set of moral principles or standards by which to judge social arrangements and, by so doing, provides criteria to decide between competing sets of historically possible social arrangements. Such a theory must contain enough of an empirical, social-scientific theory to determine which sets of social arrangements are real historical possibilities and – of those that are possible – which best conform to the moral principles or standards propounded by an adequate moral theory.

By an 'adequate' moral and social theory I mean one that is based on a correct set of empirical, social-scientific theories and on an adequate (i.e. correct) moral theory. By an 'adequate' or 'correct' moral theory I mean one that is most in wide reflective equilibrium with our considered moral judgments (p.3).

My reservations about this passage, and they are also reservations about an important strand of his book, concern his claim to have provided 'a set of moral principles or standards by which to judge social arrangements and by so doing provide criteria to decide between competing sets of historically possible social arrangements' (p. 3). I think we should be very sceptical about our ability to establish the correctness of such grand philosophical principles. We should be sceptical, that is, of our ability to show that any principles here are principles that all rational agents, on pain of a falling off from rationality, must accept. But in saying this I am not taking a nihilist or sceptical turn about morality, for I also think that we can articulate criteria – though not very general criteria – that will help us to decide between competing sets of historically possible social arrangements and that we have good grounds for Marx's basic normative political positions: to wit (1) that a democratic, self-managing socialism is 'morally preferable to any form of capitalism as well as to any other form of society possible under the conditions of modern scarcity and moderate egoism and with something like our present development of the productive forces,' and (2) 'that social and/or political revolution, if necessary (and sufficient) to effect the appropriate transformations, is *prima facie* morally justified.' We are agreed on that. But I think a cluster of consistent moral truisms, widely held in our societies, together with the canonical empirical claims of Marxist social theory and social description, if generally true, where these two features together are forged

into a reflective equilibrium, are sufficient for that task of social critique. We need not, and indeed should not, complicate matters by adding the complex *consensus-elusive* constructions of moral theories. We do need wide reflective equilibrium and moral convictions (considered judgements), but what we do not need is moral theory to *philosophically* back up our normative political beliefs. In obtaining wide reflective equilibrium, we do not need to bring in moral theories or philosophical moral principles of high abstraction.

Peffer could well respond that my own use of wide reflective equilibrium involves the appeal to moral theories and moral principles. Some of them, in my own theory, as much as in Rawls's, are part of a package that wide reflective equilibrium tries to forge with its coherentist method of justification. Using the method of wide reflective equilibrium, we consider various moral theories and accept those that are compatible with each other (if we accept more than one) and which cohere best with the other considerations we are trying to forge into the coherent pattern that wide reflective equilibrium seeks to achieve. Such a response is in place, for in my own account I was trying to forge a moral and social theory with the same scope and generality as Peffer's and with the same methods as Peffer uses. But here I am raising sceptical considerations that apply to *both* of our accounts and I am suggesting a way that wide reflective equilibrium can be usefully construed with somewhat different, less contentious elements to be forged into an equilibrium (elements free of philosophical theories and principles).

Historically speaking, including our own rather local history, there has not been much consensus about grand moral and social theories. I am trying to see whether we can carry out the justificatory job with something less tendentious, at least for the rational resolution of the basic normative political claims of Marxism that Peffer considers. Instead of seeking to place considered convictions, moral principles, moral theories, empirical claims and social theories into reflective equilibrium, I am trying to see if we can get along just with commonly held considered judgements of an uncontentious sort and with empirical judgements and theories. This, if it works, would have the advantage of simplicity and of sticking on the moral side with what, at least arguably, we in Western societies have an overlapping consensus about. Where philosophical moral principles must be invoked and compared there is a very reduced chance of gaining consensus, by which I mean not just any *de facto* consensus but a reflective and informed consensus, rooted in (among other things) the concern for consistency that goes with the method of wide reflective equilibrium. Without all that philosophical baggage of moral principles and moral theories, we just might succeed in Westernized, industrially developed societies, living under what Max Weber called the conditions of modernity, in attaining such a reasonable consensus. If we haul into consideration philosophical claims our chances are very much diminished. Indeed I would say in pluralistic societies such as ours they are nil.

### III

In the second part of his tenth chapter, Peffer attempts, as he puts it, 'to delimit the minimal set of Marxist empirical theses that must be true, if its basic normative political positions are to be justified...' (p. 14). I end his sentence there. Peffer does not. He ends it by adding: 'on the basis of the theory of social justice put forward' (p. 14). I think this addition is unnecessary and undesirable. Unnecessary because if a goodly number of these empirical theses are true and people (at least in our society) rather generally have a standard cluster of considered judgements (what I call moral truisms) that are common and unproblematic, that will,

along with wide reflective equilibrium, probably be sufficient to justify these normative political positions. The likelihood of these normative political positions being justified is further enhanced if some more theoretical Marxist empirical theses are also at least approximately true, to wit: Marx's claims about classes, class struggle and perhaps historical materialism.

I say Peffer's addition is undesirable as well as unnecessary because of the contestability of theories of social justice and morality. If it is thought that the Marxist normative political positions rest on them, then the scepticism about them is very likely to be transferred to the normative political positions themselves. Here, as it is not infrequently the case in philosophy, less is better than more.

Given these moral truisms, let us see what can be concluded from some of the key Marxist empirical theses specified by Peffer. One Marxist claim Peffer considers is that a democratic, self-managing socialist society is a real historical possibility. Socialists believe that it is. But it is an empirical claim and it may indeed be false. We do not yet have any clear examples. Some will claim, prematurely I believe, that history has already falsified that claim. Of course, state socialism or at least post-capitalist forms of Statism have existed and some continue to exist.<sup>8</sup> But it is not evident that they are morally preferable to at least the best forms of capitalism. However, it is arguable that a democratic self-managing socialist society, starting with a similar productive capacity to developed capitalism, is morally preferable to any form of capitalism. The grounds for the claim – empirical grounds – are that such a socialist society would be more extensively democratic and would be a freer society: freedom, and particularly freedom as self-determination, would be both greater and more widely and evenly distributed in such a society than in capitalism. This presupposes that freedom is a good thing, that more equal freedom is a good thing and that democracy is a good thing. It also rests on the belief that such a socialist society would not be less efficient at meeting the needs of people than progressive forms of capitalism, and that assumes that the satisfaction of needs is a good thing. But the value judgements appealed to here are all plain moral truisms and moral principles which were not in reflective equilibrium with them could not be justified, on Peffer's own grounds. That is, if we are appealing to considered judgements in wide reflective equilibrium, we would revise a moral theory until it was in accordance with these truisms. A moral theory which failed here would be rejected, and correctly so.<sup>9</sup> The moral truisms do all the normative work here. Where there is serious argument it is over whether such a socialism is possible and, if possible, would more fully realize freedom and would better meet the needs of more people. Again, these are empirical questions.

Marxists also believe that 'capitalism is the chief cause of the world's social and economic problems and ... that capitalism must be eliminated on a world-wide scale to solve these problems...' (p. 440). This is a rather theoretically ramified empirical claim, but if it can be shown to be true it would give us at least *prima facie* good grounds for seeking the demise of capitalism. The key question is whether that empirical claim is true. The only value judgement *directly* involved is that it is a bad thing for the world – that is, great masses of people – to suffer unnecessarily from social and economic problems. What this comes to is readily translatable into the concrete. The general moral claim is another moral truism (an abstract moral platitude) and requires no appeal to moral theory. It plainly is utterly unproblematic. The serious questions here are to specify more particularly, again in empirical terms, what is being claimed, to determine whether the general claim is true and to determine whether there are historically feasible alternatives to socialism which would not be the

source of as great or greater social and economic problems. Again, these issues, with a few moral truisms as background beliefs, need to be argued on empirical grounds. Moral theory, though not morality, drops out.

Thirdly, there is the Marxist thesis that capitalist societies are divided into antagonistic classes, that over time class struggle will break out in capitalist societies and that when this happens the capitalist class will, to protect its interests against rising worker militancy, abandon democracy and develop an authoritarian, essentially Fascist, state apparatus in which human freedom will be crushed and mass killings, torture and imprisonment will obtain. This will be resorted to only if the use of various ideological devices will not dampen things down. But sometimes ideology will not work that well. In such circumstances there is a need to resort to the Fascist state. But with a Fascist state human degradation will be very widespread; there will be a massive increase in suffering in the society whereas there would be much less if a democratic socialist society could be forged. Similar things would obtain about freedom. Again, if these rather contentious Marxist empirical theses are true and a revolution is possible that would not generate even more suffering and loss of freedom over a foreseeable length of time than with sticking with the Fascist state, then socialism would be the morally preferable outcome. We will, that is, opt for socialism, if we accept a few moral truisms, such as suffering is bad and freedom is good. Again, moral theory is at best redundant.



Finally, there is the Marxist empirical thesis that capitalist societies are imperialist and that they are the source of the 'starvation, malnutrition and abject poverty and misery of hundreds of millions of people'. It is claimed that with the creation of a democratic socialist alternative this would be brought to an end. If these things are true then we have a good reason – a good moral reason – for opting for socialism. Again in so arguing, we would on the moral side of things only be invoking a few evident moral truisms. Moral theory, once more, is a free spinning wheel that turns no machinery. All we need is truisms such as it is a bad thing to suffer unnecessarily, to be malnourished, to live in abject poverty, to be starving and the like. A society which causes or even allows such misery where it can be prevented without bringing in its train still greater misery is quite plainly an evil society. We do not need to back up such moral judgements with a fancy moral theory or even an unfancy moral theory. We only need a rather rudimentary moral sensibility or what Engels once called a sense of human decency. Any moral theory which was incompatible with these moral truisms would be rejected by

anyone who used the method of reflective equilibrium. If capitalism causes such things and a socialist society would not, and would not create still greater ills or ills of the same magnitude, then such a socialist society is preferable to capitalist society. Given the plainness of these evils, and their extent, they would, if the Marxian empirical claims are true, justify the belief that socialism, at least of a certain type, was morally speaking preferable. Again we need morality but not moral theory.

In an extensive and well documented discussion (pp. 435-52, summarized on page 452), Peffer sets forth a number of further Marxist or more generally left-wing empirical claims which, if true, would give us good moral grounds for favouring democratic socialist societies and not a few – though by no means all – post-capitalist Third World societies over capitalist societies, First World, Second World or Third. (See also pp. 458-59.) He talks about this, sometimes usefully, in terms of his distinctive theory of social justice, but it is plain for those cases as well that rather more mundane moral beliefs, such as the ones I have invoked in the previous cases, are sufficient to morally support those claims if these empirical claims are true or approximately true. The main issue is their truth.

I do not want to give to understand that such Marxist empirical claims would not be important elements in justifying an egalitarian *theory* of social justice such as Peffer's or perhaps even my own. I am only saying that such philosophical creatures are chancy conceptions and in the above contexts are not needed. A better way of justifying the Marxian normative political positions will be by noting and relying on the relevant moral truisms in tandem with certain empirical beliefs, with care being taken for the justification of the latter. (It would, of course, be important that the moral truisms form a consistent set.) The Marxist normative political positions will be justified if these truisms and moral beliefs we believe we should stick with, and if most of the Marxist empirical theses Peffer appeals to, are at least approximately true. Moreover, we should keep in mind that we can be more confident of the acceptability – the normative force – of these moral truisms, and thus of the rightness of our sticking with them, than we can of any philosophical moral principle or theory which might direct us to be sceptical about them or, alternatively, that is being appealed to in an attempt to justify them, to back them up. We should also add, as Peffer remarks himself, that if these sets of empirical claims are not tenable then 'in all probability neither are the Marxist basic normative claims'. The truisms by themselves, of course, will not even begin to take up the slack. But it seems to me that most of these Marxist empirical theses *are* tenable and with them, given the moral truisms, the Marxist's basic normative political positions are tenable as well. The importance of this is that we can justify these normative political positions directly without entangling ourselves in the complexities, ambiguities and extensive contestedness of moral theory.

#### IV

Finally, I want to consider an objection not to my lines of argument about not needing moral theory, or to the distinct argument that such theory may even be a hindrance to arguing for these Marxian normative political positions, but to the far stronger claims I made initially about moral theory, namely, that moral theory will afford us little in the way of a critical hook for social critique or social commitment. That we don't need moral theory in the cases where Peffer thinks we do does not, of course, establish that we will never need it for the normative critique of our basic institutions. One swallow doesn't make a spring or one fine day. Moreover, that it is not necessary even in Peffer's case does not mean it could not function as a supplementary justifica-

tion. However, such a supplementary justification, if that is all that is, is of minor significance and is likely to distract us from the hard job of doing the necessary empirical work needed to justify critical but not normatively neutral theories of society. What we really need to know is what our societies are like, what changes we can reasonably expect in them, and, among those possibilities, which to struggle to achieve.<sup>10</sup> The last question is, of course, in part a normative one but the *norms* we need for answering it are just a few moral truisms.

As to my wider, if you will iconoclastic, remarks about the normative pointlessness of moral theories, including substantive theories of social justice, that was thrown out as a suggestion here and is only weakly (if at all) confirmed by my subsequent argument. Like many grand and shocking metaphilosophical theses, it may very well turn out to be at best false. Not unsurprisingly, since I propounded it, I think not and I think the way philosophy is developing, principally from the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein and later from Donald Davidson and Richard Rorty, will confirm that.<sup>11</sup> But surely not everyone will see it that way. I merely commend this grand metaphilosophical claim to you for your reflective consideration, through I hope to argue it elsewhere.<sup>12</sup> I think pushing through these issues will lead us to a very deep scepticism not only about the point of ethical theories, at least as standardly conceived, but even about the very point of philosophy itself.<sup>13</sup> Being in such perplexities, standing where we stand now, seems to me a very good thing and not something to be lamented. That I mentioned Richard Rorty in this connection should not have the knee-jerk reaction that it often gets from many of us on the Left. We should not let his love affair with America and his relative complacency about American social life and American institutions blind us to the probing things he says about the philosophical enterprise itself and the role of social and political theory, or to his specific criticisms of the Cultural Left as over against the Old Left in his own attempt to defend a social democratic vision of society.<sup>14</sup> If he had substituted the Scandinavian countries or Holland for America, things would have been less disturbing and we could face what really needs to be faced, namely, the head-on theoretical, practical and political collision between more social democratic conceptions of society (progressive bourgeois democracies if you will) and more radically socialist conceptions of society such as some feminist ones or Marxian ones, such as Peffer and I (among many others) in the Marxian tradition seek to articulate and justify. That is a replay in a very new context of an old battle. It is a bit like setting Marx against Dewey or Luxemburg against Bernstein, but it is not *déjà vu*, for the issues need to be rethought and, as far as possible, thought through in light of the way the world has turned. Complacency or intellectual arrogance on either side is through and through wrongheaded. Nobody is in a position to be *parti pris* or self-congratulatory now or, for that matter, either particularly hopeful or full of despair.<sup>15</sup>

## Notes

- 1 Allen Wood, 'Marx and Equality' in John Mepham and David Hillel Ruben, eds., *Issues in Marxist Philosophy*, Vol. 4, Brighton, England: Harvester Press, 1982, pp. 195-221. I also criticise Wood on this in my *Marxism and the Moral Point of View*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1989, Chapter 9.
- 2 Allen Buchanan, *Marx and Justice*, Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1982. See also Jeffrey H. Reiman, *Justice and Modern Moral Philosophy*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990.
- 3 Kai Nielsen, *Equality and Liberty: A Defense of Radical Egalitarianism*, Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Allenheld, 1985 and Kai Nielsen, *Marxism and the Moral Point of View*.
- 4 Kai Nielsen, 'Liberal and Socialist Egalitarianism', *Journal of Social Philosophy* XX, Nos. 1 and 2 (Spring/Fall 1989), pp. 137-54.
- 5 Alec Nove, *The Economics of Feasible Socialism*, London: Allen and Unwin, 1983; Nove, 'The Role of Central Planning under Capitalism and Market Socialism' in Jon Elster and Karl Ove Moene, eds., *Alternatives to Capitalism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, pp. 98-112; Ernest Mandel, 'In Defence of Socialist Planning', *New Left Review* 159 (Sept/Oct 1986), pp. 5-36; Alec Nove, 'Markets and Socialism', *New Left Review* 161 (Jan-Feb 1987), pp. 98-104; and Ernest Mandel, 'The Myth of Market Socialism', *New Left Review* 169 (1988), pp. 108-20.
- 6 I clarify what is involved here and argue that in no significant sense can an ought be derived from an is in my *Why Be Moral?*, Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1989, pp. 13-38.
- 7 See also my 'Coming to Grips with Marxist Anti-Moralism', *The Philosophical Forum* 19, no. 1 (Fall 1987), pp. 1-22.
- 8 Ferenc Fehér, Agnes Heller and Gyorgy Markus, *Dictatorship over Needs*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983 and Andrew Levine, *Arguing for Socialism*, Boston, MA: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984.
- 9 Kai Nielsen, *After the Demise of the Tradition*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991, last three chapters.
- 10 Levine, *Arguing for Socialism* and Nielsen, *Marxism and the Moral Point of View*.
- 11 Richard Rorty gives the right history here in his *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.
- 12 Some of it is gestured at in my *After the Demise of the Tradition*. See also my 'On Needing a Moral Theory: Rationality, Considered Judgments and the Grounding of Morality', *Metaphilosophy* No. 12 (1982), pp. 97-116.
- 13 See the exchange between Thomas McCarthy and Richard Rorty. Thomas McCarthy, 'Private Irony and Public Decency: Richard Rorty's New Pragmatism', *Critical Inquiry* 16 (Winter 1990), pp. 355-70; Richard Rorty, 'Truth and Freedom: A Reply to Thomas McCarthy', *Critical Inquiry* 16 (Spring 1990), pp. 633-43 and Thomas McCarthy, 'Ironist Theory as a Vocation: A Response to Rorty's Reply', *Critical Inquiry* 16 (Spring 1990), pp. 644-55.
- 14 Richard Rorty, 'Two Cheers for the Cultural Left', *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 89, No. 1 (Winter 1990), pp. 227-34 and Richard Rorty, 'Thugs and Theorists', *Political Theory* 15, No. 4 (November 1987), pp. 564-80.
- 15 See here Jürgen Habermas, 'What does Socialism Mean Today? The Rectifying Revolution and the Need for New Thinking on the Left', *The New Left Review*, no. 183 (Sept/Oct 1990), pp. 3-21.

