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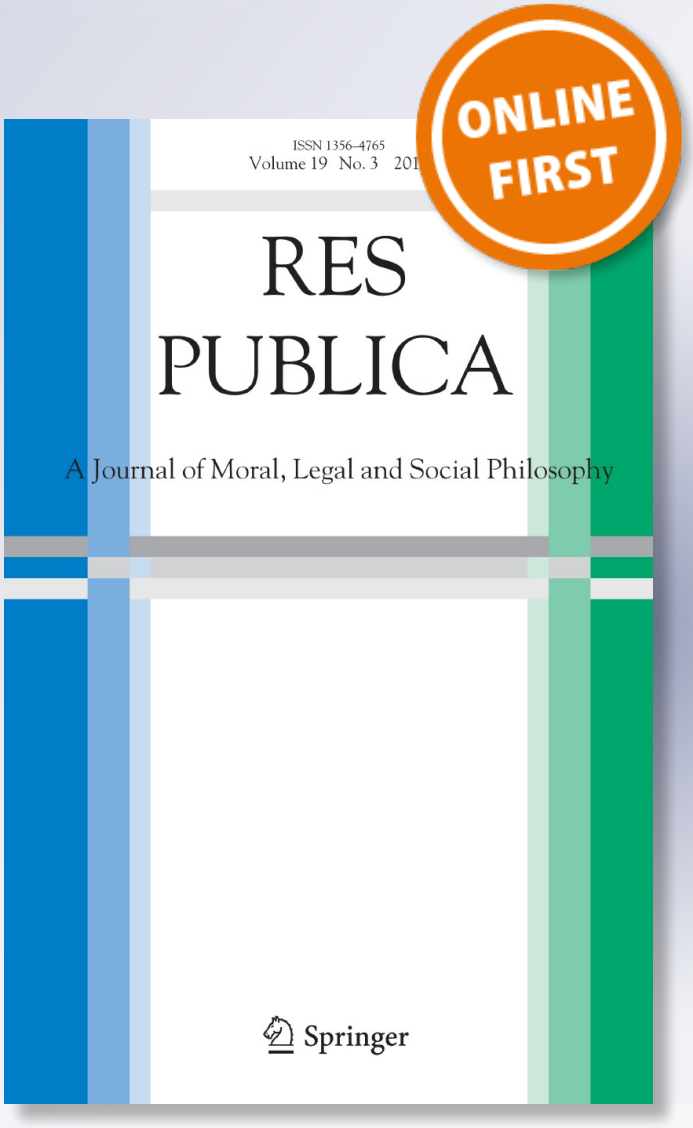

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Jeffrey Reiman. 2012. As Free and As Just as Possible: The Theory of Marxian Liberalism. Wiley-Blackwell, Chichester. 256 pp

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The idea of combining liberal and socialist beliefs is not new. The most important liberal philosopher of the nineteenth century, John Stuart Mill, is best known for his impassioned defence of individual liberty, yet he also argued for workers' co-operatives and a radical redistribution of (especially inherited) wealth. Likewise, the most important liberal philosopher of the twentieth century, John Rawls, developed a form of liberalism that was sympathetic to traditional socialist criticisms of classical liberalism. Similar attempts at combining liberalism and socialism have also been made on the left, for example, the market socialists of the 1980s tried to combine the equality of socialism with the efficiency of the market.

While the idea of combining liberal and socialist beliefs has something of a history, however, it is not common today. For reasons both historical and philosophical, interest in socialism in political philosophy has waned since the 1980s, and with it attempts to fuse it with liberalism. It is therefore very refreshing to receive a book entitled *As Free and as Just as Possible: The Theory of Marxian Liberalism*, which promises a new synthesis of liberal and socialist beliefs. According to its author, Jeffrey Reiman, *Marxian Liberalism* is 'a theory of social justice that results from combining certain liberal beliefs, most importantly, that people have a natural right to liberty…with some Marxian beliefs, most importantly, that private property is coercive' (1). By providing a synthesis of Marxian and liberal ideas, it aims to provide a theory of social justice that is acceptable to both sides. As its title suggests, however, the book is a defence of *Marxian Liberalism* rather than *Liberal Marxism*: the adjective 'Marxian' qualifies liberalism, not vice versa. What Reiman provides, essentially, is a form of primarily Rawlsian liberalism that is modified by certain Marxian beliefs about private property and the pre-conditions for freedom.

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Why, though, '*As Free and as Just as Possible'*? With regards to freedom, this is simple enough: because *Marxian Liberalism*—unlike its liberal ancestors—aims to address both overt coercion and the more subtle form of *structural coercion* that results from private ownership of the means of production (land, factories, machines, etc.) it calls for a society which is 'as free as possible'. With regards to justice, however, this has to do with Reiman's understanding of the value itself. For Reiman, justice is a special moral ideal. It is a historical notion whose requirements change throughout history. This is not a form of historical relativism, however. Justice has a 'timeless meaning', specifically, '*it calls for the maximum provision for the interests of others that can be required of people given human nature'* (3). But Reiman thinks that what can be required of people given human nature changes historically (for example, with greater material abundance). Hence, *Marxian Liberalism* calls for a society that is as just as historical circumstances permit. Intriguingly, as we shall see, Reiman believes this means that while justice presently calls for a form of capitalism subject to Rawls's difference principle, eventually it could require full communism and adherence to the principle popularised by Marx, 'from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs' (65).

After providing a helpful overview of the argument of the book in Chapter 1, and a succinct discussion of the aspects of Rawls and Marx's theories that are integral to his theory of justice in Chapter 2, Reiman begins to set out the main tenets of *Marxian Liberalism*. Reiman starts in Chapter 3 by arguing for a natural right to liberty. For Reiman, the natural right to liberty is simply a negative right 'not to be subjected to unwanted coercion' which, following Locke, is grounded in the fact that human beings are 'equal and independent' (75). What are the implications of this right? Most importantly, the right to liberty entails that coercive social institutions and social relations can only be justified by the consent of those subject to them. The right to liberty therefore establishes the need for a social contract (88).

In this way, Reiman's contractarianism is Lockean rather than Rawlsian, because the right to liberty is not (as in Rawls) the outcome of the social contract but is (as in Locke) antecedent to the social contract itself. However, Reiman departs from Locke, and contemporary right libertarians like Robert Nozick, in denying that the right to liberty entails a right to property. Rather, Reiman argues that a right to property can only be justified if it is consented to by parties in the original position. In other words, the right of property is not antecedent to the social contract; it emerges from it.

That the right to property requires contractual agreement is due to the ambivalent nature of property. As Reiman argues in Chapter 4, property is both an expression of liberty and a threat to liberty. On the one hand, it enhances its owner's ability to act on their purposes. On the other hand, it limits the freedom of the non-owner (most obviously, by prohibiting A from using something that B owns). Liberals have noticed and emphasised the first aspect of this equation, but Reiman claims that they have typically overlooked the second. For a proper understanding of the relation between property and freedom we need to turn to Marx. According to Reiman, Marx's great insight is that private property is not only a limitation of the freedom of the non-owner; it is also *structurally coercive* (111). The coercion is structural because it does not rely on overt force but is built into the very fabric of a social

system where capitalists own the means of production and workers own nothing but their own labour-power. Thus, under capitalism workers are not forced to enter into a wage-contract with any particular capitalist. But, owning nothing but their labour-power, workers have no reasonable choice but to enter into a wage-contract with some capitalist or other. Hence, the worker is, as Marx puts it, 'compelled to sell himself of his own free will' (112).

Since property is both an expression of liberty and a form of coercion, Reiman argues that we need a metric to test the justice of different property regimes. Reiman argues that when 'nothing presupposes the validity of the property system…all that remains that the workers give in production is their time and energy, in a word, their labour' (124). Labour is different from anything else that the individual puts into the social product, because it is literally used up (unlike talents, for example, which are augmented rather than depleted through use). Thus, Reiman proposes that we measure what is given and received in an economy in terms of the amount of labour-time that different people put into social product. This he terms 'the moral version of the labour-theory of value' (123), and he contends that focusing on the distribution of labour-time over the distribution of money or goods has the value of elucidating the real consequences of economic distributions—that is, it allows us to see that 'inequalities in labour time are signs of *social subjugation*, the way the economic system forces some people to work more for others than those others work for them' (127).

Having laid out the main tenets of his theory, Reiman is now in a position to answer the key question of the book—namely, what type of right to private property would receive the theoretical consent of people who are subject to it? To answer this question, Reiman deploys an imaginary contract situation modelled on Rawls's original position—where, as is well-known, parties choose the principles of justice that will regulate their shared existence behind 'a veil of ignorance'—but with one crucial difference: parties in Reiman's variant of the original position have access to the Marxian-liberal beliefs which have been discussed in the foregoing chapters. Thus, parties in Reiman's original position have the liberal beliefs that everyone has the natural negative right to liberty, that everyone has an interest in maximising their ability to act freely, and that private property enhances its owner's ability to act on their choices; and they have the Marxian beliefs that private property is structurally coercive, and that a moral version of the labour theory of value is necessary to test the justice of different property regimes (173). On top of this, they also have a number of historical beliefs as part of their general knowledge. These include the belief that capitalism has tended to increase material productivity and ameliorate the conditions of human labour, and the belief that states that have experimented with socialism have tended to have stagnant economies (175).

Furthermore, parties in the Marxian-liberal original position have a belief in the 'fungibility of social and material subjugation' (169). This has two aspects. The first is that increasing material productivity leads to increases in human freedom. This is because heightened material productivity means that human beings can satisfy more and more of their needs with less and less labour. Reiman terms this the 'material conditions of freedom' and its lack 'material subjugation' (170). The second aspect is Marx's view that history as progressive. According to Reiman, Marx's view about

the progressivity of history implies that 'social subjugation is a price worth paying for the reduction in material subjugation…and thus that social and material subjugation are comparable, and fungible: one can be rationally traded for the other' (171).

Reiman claims that parties in his version of the original position would agree to a state in which liberty is protected against unwanted coercion, and, crucially, to an egalitarian form of capitalism in which the right to private property is subject to Rawls's lexical difference principle, which calls for maximizing the standard of living for the whole of society starting from the worst off and working up (182). In this way, Reiman contends that the Marxian-liberal variant of the original position provides the deduction of the difference principle that Rawls desired but never provided. The deduction is complex, but briefly: the key thought is that parties in the Marxian-liberal original position will find it rational to agree to some social subjugation if there are counterbalancing increases in their material standard of living. Thus, it will be rational for workers to consent to some social subjugation if doing so provides society's more talented members with the incentive to increase material productivity overall. It is this thought that opens the door for the deduction of Rawls's lexical difference principle.

As will be clear, Reiman's deduction of the difference principle hinges on the plausibility of the beliefs (Marxian, liberal and historical) parties have in the original position. Whilst none of these beliefs are implausible, some are quite contentious. Consider the historical beliefs. One reason why parties in the original position will opt for a form of capitalism subject to the difference principle is that they know from history that capitalism has ameliorated human labour, and that socialist states have had stagnant economies. Now, putting aside the issue of whether the failure of actual socialist economies undermines confidence in other, untried models of socialism (and it is a vexed issue whether it does), the claim that Marx's critique of alienation no longer applies to advanced capitalism is questionable. For, even if one is persuaded by Reiman's claim that Marx's charge of alienation no longer applies to working conditions in the world's developed economies, it seems very difficult to argue that capitalism has overcome alienated labour in all corners of the globe. Arguably, advanced capitalist economies have only overcome the worst aspects of alienated labour by exporting it. And, unfortunately, Reiman has nothing to say about how capitalism operates globally.

Secondly, Reiman's deduction of the difference principle relies on the claim that parties in the original position will find it rational to agree to some social subjugation to increase their overall material standard of living. But that is not obvious. Both material subjugation and social subjugation are forms of unfreedom, and it is not clear that one is more fundamental than the other. Why would it not be equally rational for parties in the original position to choose not to raise their material standard of living (for example, by choosing to consume less), in order to minimise social subjugation and live in greater equality with their fellows? In fact, Reiman allows for this possibility, since his second principle of justice includes the proviso that 'workers can trade increases in their standard of living in exchange for reduced labor-time compatible with efficient production' (182). But, if parties did prioritize the reduction of social subjugation over material subjugation, they would

then be opting for a more egalitarian theory of justice than that which is provided by the difference principle. As a consequence, the deduction of the difference principle that Reiman aims to provide would be cast into doubt.

In addition, there are also a number of more general problems one may have with a project of this kind, which aims to provide a synthesis of Rawlsian liberalism and Marxism in a way that is acceptable to both sides. Inevitably, some will not find the synthesis acceptable. For instance, Rawlsians may feel that a reformed capitalism subject to the difference principle is not only the ideal form of justice for the current historical era, but the ideal form of justice for all times and places. They may, therefore, be dismayed by Reiman's claim that Rawls's formulation of the difference principle is merely historically just, to be superseded—if historical circumstances permit it—by Marx's principle, 'from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs' (65). Marxists, on the other hand, will have more to take issue with, since *As Free and As Just as Possible* is a work of liberalism (a political philosophy which Marx criticised), which proffers a theory of justice (a value that Marx which was not, on the face of it, attracted to), which calls for a form of capitalism (a form of society that Marx devoted his life to overthrowing). To be sure, Reiman has a number of interesting arguments as to why Marxists should find his brand of liberal capitalism acceptable (many of which he supports with quotations from Marx himself); but it is a big ask.

Despite inviting these worries, *As Free and As Just as Possible* is a fine book. In the preface, Reiman says he hopes the book will be of interest to both the educated layperson and the professional philosopher; in this respect it succeeds admirably. Written in clear and lucid prose, the book will be a valuable resource for students looking for an introduction to Marx and Rawls's thought on freedom, justice and capitalism. But specialists will also find much of interest here, too, since as we have seen the book is not just an overview of Marx and Rawls's thought on these issues, but an imaginative attempt to fuse their insights to create a new theory of social justice. Whether or not one is fully convinced by that final synthesis, Reiman deserves credit for attempting to show that, while the idea of combining liberal and socialist has a history, it may still have a future.