

What Makes Communism Possible? The Self-Realisation Interpretation

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Abstract: In the *Critique of Gotha Programme*, Karl Marx famously argues that a communist society will be characterised by the principle, ‘From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs!’ In this essay, I take up a question about this principle that was originally posed by G.A. Cohen, namely: what makes communism (so conceived) possible for Marx? In reply to this question, Cohen interprets Marx as saying that communism is possible because of limitless abundance, a view that Cohen takes to be implausible for ecological reasons. In this paper, I develop a new interpretation of Marx’s position. On this interpretation, people in communist society achieve self-realisation through providing others with the goods and services required for their self-realisation. Coupled with a reasonably high (but not immense) development of productive power, self-realisation generates conditions in which people can produce according to their abilities and receive according to their needs. I defend this view as an interpretation of Marx and I argue that it represents a more plausible account of what makes communism possible than Cohen’s interpretation in which technological advance and limitless abundance play the predominant role.

Keywords: Karl Marx; G.A. Cohen; Communism; Self-Realisation; Abundance.

Introduction

In the ‘Critique of the Gotha Programme’ (hereafter CGP), Karl Marx argues that the transition from capitalism to communism will involve two phases. In the ‘lower phase of communism’ workers collectively own the means of production and distribution is calibrated to duration and intensity of labour contribution. In Marx’s view, the lower phase is a necessary means to the higher phase. As is well known, Marx suggests that the higher phase will be characterised by the principle, ‘From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs!’ (CGP: 87).

This fascinating text raises many questions. In this paper, I take up a question that was originally posed by G.A. Cohen (Cohen 1995: 127-143). Suppose that communism is a society in which people produce according to their abilities and resources are distributed on the basis of human need. The question is, what makes communism (so conceived) possible for Marx? How

is it possible that there may exist a society in which people can produce according to their abilities? And how is it possible that there may exist a society in which people can receive according to their needs? In reply to these questions, Cohen considers two answers. It could be that the first part of the principle, ‘from each according to his abilities’, is a legally enforced duty, that is, a coercively enforced norm governing the organisation of labour to which individuals have to conform. Since people must produce in this way, we can suppose that sufficient resources are generated to ensure that distribution according to needs is possible. Cohen doubts that this is Marx’s view. Alternatively, it could be that communism is brought about by a ‘technological fix’. On this view, technological advance issues in limitless abundance that ensures that people can produce as they please and take whatever they may want from the common stock of resources. Cohen argues in favour of this interpretation. However, he argues that it represents an untenable view because it is inconsistent with ecological constraints. Consequently, Cohen concludes that Marx lacks a plausible account of what makes communism possible. Faced with our loss of faith in limitless abundance, Cohen urges Marxists to adopt an egalitarian account of what makes communism possible, according to which communism is possible when and because people freely serve each other out of egalitarian duty (Cohen 1995: Ch. 5; Cohen 2000: Ch. 6; Cohen 2008: Ch. 5).¹

In this paper, I return to the question of what makes communism possible for Marx. I agree with Cohen that what makes communism possible for Marx is not the coercive enforcement of a legal duty, and that unlimited abundance is untenable. However, I argue that Cohen ex-

¹ To be clear, Cohen puts this egalitarian account forward as a view of what socialists should believe, not as an interpretation of Marx. As such, I put this view aside for most of this paper, briefly returning to it in the Conclusion.

cludes a third possibility: what I call the self-realisation interpretation.² According to this interpretation, people in a communist society achieve self-realisation through providing others with the goods and services they need for their self-realisation. Coupled with a reasonably high (but not immense) development of productive power, the nature of human self-realisation, and individuals' motivation to achieve it, generates the conditions under which people can produce according to their abilities and receive according to their needs. The 'fix'³ is thus primarily motivational not technological. I argue that this interpretation accords with the texts and presents a more plausible account of what makes communism possible than Cohen's interpretation in which limitless abundance plays the predominant role. Since the question of what would make communism possible remains a live one, not least because of Cohen's subsequent work, my discussion of the self-realisation interpretation is not merely an exercise in Marx interpretation. It also sets out for political philosophy an overlooked account of the basis of a communist society.

Before I develop this interpretation, let me clarify my question by distinguishing it from two others in its vicinity. First, in asking, 'what makes communism possible?', I am not asking about Marx's views about the *accessibility* of communism, that is, of how we will get to communism from capitalism. In reply to the question of accessibility, Marx would talk about things like the development of class consciousness, revolution, and the dictatorship of the proletariat. But my question is not, 'how, in Marx's view, do we get there from here?', but rather:

² On self-realisation in Marx, see Wood 1981: 22-6; Elster 1985: 53-119; 1989; Brudney 1998: Ch.4-5; Leopold 2007: Ch.4. Sometimes Marxian self-realisation is construed as being *solely* concerned with the development of the individual. See, for instance, Elster's definition of it as 'the full and free actualization and externalization of the powers and abilities of the individual' (Elster 1989, 131). For an alternative view, which emphasises the social character of self-realisation, see Brudney 1998: Ch. 4-5, and Kandiyali 2020: 563-8. This essay builds on these social accounts of self-realisation to provide an alternative view of communism's possibility.

³ Cohen's use of 'fix' is tendentious. It suggests that the appeal to technological advance is an *ad hoc* manoeuvre that enables Marx to avoid difficult questions of justice and economic coordination. I use the language of a fix here to clarify my disagreement with Cohen; I do not endorse its negative connotations. I thank Meade McCloughan for discussion on this point.

‘how is it possible that we may have a society in which each can produce according to their abilities and receive according to their needs?’ Second, notice that the question, ‘what makes communism possible?’ is distinct from the question: ‘is communism possible?’ The former question looks for a property (or set of properties) that, if achieved, would make communism possible. It is a Marxist variant on the question Rawls asks at the outset of *Political Liberalism*.⁴ The latter question, by contrast, asks whether that property (or set of properties) is desirable and feasible. My focus is in the former question. However, the answer we give to the former has implications for the latter. For example, if what makes communism possible is limitless abundance or a huge change in human psychology—say involving an elimination of self-interest—then we may reasonably doubt whether communism is desirable or feasible. As we shall see, my interpretation of Marx makes neither claim.

The paper proceeds as follows. I begin (1) with a brief discussion of communism in the CGP. I then (2) discuss Cohen’s limitless abundance interpretation, explaining why it fails to provide a tenable account of communism’s possibility. Having shown the problems with the Cohen’s interpretation, I develop (3-5) the self-realisation interpretation. Finally (6), I consider objections to the self-realisation interpretation.

1. The Critique of the Gotha Programme

To prepare the ground for discussion of what makes communism possible, I begin with a brief discussion of communism in the CGP.

⁴ ‘How is it possible that there may exist over time a stable and just society of free and equal individual citizens profoundly divided by reasonable though incompatible religious, philosophical, and moral theories. Put another way: How is it possible that deeply opposed and thought reasonable comprehensive doctrines may live together and all affirm the political conception of a constitutional regime? (Rawls 1993, xviii). I thank Christian Schemmel for encouraging me to see the parallel between Cohen’s and Rawls’s question here.

The CGP is Marx's response to the Gotha Programme, a document written by German socialists following the Gotha Unity Conference of 1875. Marx is critical of the programme. However, his criticism of the document leads him to providing some important insights into his own views on a future society.

A key claim of the Gotha Programme is that 'the proceeds of labour belong undiminished with equal right to all members of society' (CGP: 81). After highlighting unclarities in this formulation, Marx points out that the undiminished proceeds of labour cannot be paid to all members of society, for deductions must be made for economic necessities and the meeting common needs, such as education, healthcare, and provision for those unable to work.

Having identified this oversight, Marx proceeds to consider how the remainder of the social product should be distributed. It is here that he introduces the idea of a lower phase of communism that immediately follows the revolution. In the lower phase, resources are distributed 'proportional to the labour they [i.e. future individuals] supply' (CGP: 86). The guiding principle is thus, 'to each according to their work'. Call this the *contribution principle*.

In Marx's view, the lower phase offers a considerable improvement on capitalism, for exploitation is abolished: workers receive, after the various deductions mentioned above, the remaining value of their labour contribution. However, the contribution principle is still 'encumbered with a bourgeois limitation' (CGP: 86). Marx makes two criticisms. First, the contribution principle unfairly rewards people's innate natural abilities. Unlike capitalism, the contribution principle no longer discriminates on the basis of class position. But by calibrating pay to labour contribution, 'it tacitly recognises the unequal individual endowment and thus productive capacity of the workers as natural privileges' (CGP: 86).

Second, the contribution principle ignores the fact that people have different needs and circumstances: ‘one worker is married, another not; one has more children than another, and so on’ (CGP: 86). So, equal treatment in one respect will not yield equality in another more relevant sense: ‘given an equal amount of work done...one will in fact receive more than another, one will be richer than another’ (CGP: 86).

Marx claims that these shortcomings are inevitable in the lower phase of communist society, which has only just emerged from a prolonged struggle with capitalism, and is ‘thus in every respect, economically, morally and intellectually, still stamped with the birth-marks of the old society from whose womb it emerges’ (CGP: 86). Given that motivations have been shaped by capitalism, it would be unreasonable to expect a more thoroughgoing form of communism at this stage.⁵

In time, however, Marx thinks that the lower phase will move towards higher phase, which he describes as follows.

In a higher phase of communist society, after the enslaving subordination of the individual to the division of labour, and thereby also the antithesis between mental and physical labour, has vanished; after labour has become not only a means of life but life's prime need; after the productive forces have also increased with the all-round development of the individual, and all the springs of cooperative wealth flow more abundantly—only then can the narrow horizon of bourgeois right be crossed in its entirety and society inscribe on its banners: From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs! (CGP: 87)

⁵ For good criticism of Marx's endorsement of the contribution principle, see Gomberg 2016.

Before I consider what makes communism possible, two comments. First, the principle articulated in the final sentence of this paragraph—call this the *needs principle*—was not original to Marx. To his audience, it would most likely have been associated with Louis Blanc. However, versions of the principle were widespread in the socialist movement. Its roots may lie in the New Testament (Bovens and Lutz 2019).

Second, the CGP the text is not the only place that one finds Marx affirming a version of the needs principle. In *The German Ideology*, written in 1845-6, Marx and Engels criticise the distributive principle ‘to each according to his abilities’ on the ground that differential labour contribution ‘does not justify inequality, confers no privileges in respect of possession and enjoyment’ (GI: 537). As such, they argue that the principle ‘must be changed...into the tenet “to each according to his need”’ (GI: 537). Thus, a version of the needs principle can be traced back to Marx’s earlier writings.

2. The Limitless Abundance Interpretation

Let us now turn to our core question. Suppose that communism is a society in which people can produce according to their abilities and receive according to their needs. What makes that possible?

In reply to this question, Cohen begins by considering what may initially seem like a plausible interpretation. According to this interpretation, the first part of the needs principle, ‘from each according to his abilities’ is a legally enforced duty governing the organisation of labour to which individuals have to conform.⁶ Since people *must* produce in this fashion, it is reason-

⁶ For a defence of the principle along these lines, see Gilibert 2015 (slightly revised in Gilibert 2023: Chapter 3). Gilibert sees the first part of the needs principle, ‘from each according to his abilities’, as a legally enforced duty. On Gilibert’s view, those who fail to produce according to their abilities don’t receive according to their needs (although basic needs are met unconditionally). Carens 2003 likewise sees the first part of the needs principle as a duty, but thinks of it as purely moral, not legally enforced.

able to assume that sufficient resources would be generated to ensure that distribution according to needs is possible. Call this the *legal interpretation*.

Cohen admits that what communist society inscribes on its banners may initially appear to support the legal interpretation. Does ‘from each according to their abilities’ not suggest that people *must* develop their abilities for the good of the community? The difficulty for this view as an interpretation of Marx is that it involves compulsion to work. However, in Marx’s account of a communist society, people develop themselves ‘freely...without any such constraint’ (Cohen 1995, 126). Cohen thus rules out the legally enforced duty interpretation on the grounds that it is inconsistent with Marx’s commitment to freedom.⁷

So, how should we understand the first part of the needs principle? In Cohen’s view, we should understand it, not as legally enforced duty that specifies what individuals ought to do, but as a prediction of how people under communism will behave. On this view, ‘from each according to his abilities’ is:

simply part of communism’s self description: given that labour is life’s prime want, that is how things go here. People fulfil themselves in work which they undertake as a matter of unconditional preference rather than in obedience to an imperative rule (Cohen 1995: 126-7).

⁷ Two further points about the legal interpretation. First, although this is not clear in the ‘Self-Ownership, Communism and Equality’ essay, Cohen would reject the legal interpretation on the same grounds as (he thinks) Marx would, namely that it is inconsistent with freedom. That Cohen would reject this view of what makes communism possible is made clear in Chapter 5 of *Rescuing Justice and Equality*, where he rejects what he calls the ‘old-style Stalinist’ idea of forcing people to work in their most productive occupation.

Second, Cohen is surely right that Marxian communism contains a commitment to freedom. Plausibly, this commitment precludes *forcing* people to develop their abilities for the good of the community. However, it does not preclude people utilising their freedom to satisfy a non-coercively imposed duty. This would be consistent with the self-realisation interpretation. On this view, work is a duty and a good. I thank Paul Gomberg for discussion on this topic.

What makes it possible for people to produce this way? And what ensures that people can receive according to their needs? It is here that Cohen famously argues that Marx resorts to a ‘technological fix’.

In what I understand to be Marx’s account of how voluntary equality is possible, a plenary abundance ensures extensive compatibility among the material interests of differently endowed people: that abundance eliminates the problem of justice, the need to get what at whose expense, and *a fortiori*, the need to implement any such decisions by force (Cohen 1995: 127).

So, in Cohen’s view, a technological fix makes communism possible. On the productive side, limitless abundance ensures people can produce as they please without considering whether anyone wants or needs their service. And on the distributive side, the transcendence of material scarcity ensures that people can simply take what they want from the common stock of resources, without depriving others of what they need. In this society, each can produce and consume just as they have a mind; and what they are minded to do is to produce according to their abilities and consume according to their needs.

However, Cohen argues that technological fix is an untenable position. For the idea of limitless abundance is inconsistent with ecological constraints.

While it may have been excusable, a hundred years ago and more, to ground the possibility of voluntary equality on an expectation of limitless productive power, it is no longer realistic to think about the material situation of humanity in that pre-green fashion. What Marx calls the “springs of cooperative wealth” will never “flow” so

“abundantly” that no one will be under the necessity of abandoning or revising what he wants, because of the wants of other people (Cohen 1995, 127-8).

Cohen takes this to be a sufficient reason to reject Marx’s view of communism’s possibility. However, it is worth nothing that Cohen’s interpretation ladders Marx with two additional problems.

First, Cohen’s interpretation of Marx involves a transcendence of other-regarding concern that is undesirable as such. In Cohen’s interpretation of Marx, individuals produce without considering whether anyone wants or needs their service. There is something unattractive in this radically unconstrained view of labour. As Rawls writes, ‘[t]o act always as we have a mind to act without worrying about or being aware of others’ claims, would be a life lived without an awareness of the essential conditions of a decent human society’ (Rawls 2000, 372). Rawls’s point is not that a society of limitless abundance is implausible, but that such a society, insofar as it involves a transcendence of concern for others, is undesirable.

Second, Cohen’s interpretation of Marx relies on a sexist view of labour. Cohen presents limitless abundance as *sufficient* for communism. However, limitless abundance can only count as sufficient for communism if one excludes the whole swathe of work that has overwhelmingly been performed by women.⁸ For even with unlimited abundance, there would still be an enormous amount of work to do, caring for the young, the elderly, and the ill. For this type of work a technological fix is not a serious prospect.

⁸ Bubeck 1995, Chapter 1. For a broader feminist critique of Cohen’s interpretation of Marx, see Casal 2020.

These are serious problems. However, I believe that they are not problems for Marx but for Cohen's interpretation of him. In the next section, I develop an alternative interpretation of what makes communism possible that accords with the texts and avoids these problems.

3. The Self-Realisation Interpretation

My interpretation begins with some themes of Marx's 1844 writings. In those writings, Marx provides an account of alienated labour under capitalism. Alongside that account of alienated labour, he also provides an account of what it would be like to produce in a unalienated manner under communism. If I had produced in a human way:

- 1) In my *production* I would have objectified my *individuality*, its *specific character*, and therefore enjoyed not only an *individual manifestation of my life* during the activity, but also when looking at the object I would have the individual pleasure of knowing my personality to be *objective, visible to the senses* and hence a power *beyond all doubt*. 2) In your enjoyment or use of my product I would have the *direct* enjoyment both of being conscious of having satisfied a *human* need by my work, that is, of having objectified *man's* essential nature [*Wesen*], and of having thus created an object corresponding to the needs of another *man's* essential nature. 3) I would have been for you the *mediator* [*der Mittler*] between you and the species, and therefore would become recognised and felt by you yourself as a completion [*Ergänzung*] of your own essential nature and as a necessary part of yourself, and consequently would know myself to be confirmed both in your thought and your love. 4) In the individual expression of my life I would have directly created your expression of your life, and

therefore in my individual activity I would have directly *confirmed* and *realised* my true nature, my *human* nature, my *communal* nature (CJM: 227-8).⁹

In this passage, Marx associates three goods with unalienated labour.¹⁰ The first is straightforward. If I had produced in an unalienated fashion, I would enjoy both the act of labour itself and looking upon my completed product or service. As Marx puts it, I would enjoy an ‘individual manifestation of my life during the activity’ but ‘also when looking at the object I would have the individual pleasure of knowing my personality to be objective’. This is in marked contrast to alienated labour under capitalism, in which work is experienced as a torment and the worker’s objectification in the product of their labour ‘appears as *loss of realisation* for the workers...as *loss of the object and bondage to it*...as *estrangement*, as *alienation*’ (EPM: 272).

The second good is the satisfaction of another’s need. For Marx, unalienated labour not only involves making a product or service that one enjoys and sees as a manifestation of one’s individuality; it also involves doing so through providing others with goods or services they need.

Now, this second good might be thought to obtain under capitalism, for in a capitalist society people also produce goods and services for others’ consumption. However, Marx argues that in capitalist society people do not produce goods and services *in order* to satisfy others’ needs.

Each labours to satisfy their own ‘dire needs’ (CJM: 220).¹¹ By this Marx does not mean that

⁹ In what follows, I leave aside Marx’s contention that, by producing for each other, human beings express their species-essence. For discussion of this aspect of Marx’s view, see Brudney 1998, 176-183 and Chitty 1997.

¹⁰ For further discussion of this passage, see Brudney 1998: Chapters 4 and 5 and Kandiyali 2020, especially 563-8.

¹¹ Here Marx anticipates Cohen’s view that ‘the immediate motive to productive activity in market society is (not always but) typically some mixture of greed and fear’ (Cohen 2009: 39). This is a contentious claim. Defenders of the market have argued that the motivations of market participants are more varied than the Marxist account suggests. See, for example, Steiner 2014. For a clever response to this ‘mixed-motives’ defence of markets, see Maguire 2022.

workers create products for their own consumption. He rather means that, although we aim to satisfy each other's need, each is ultimately motivated by their own needs. 'I have produced for myself and not for you, just as you have produced for yourself and not for me' (CJM: 225). In a communist society, by contrast, our production is motivated by the satisfaction of another's needs.¹² Thus, in making something that you use, I would have the '*direct* enjoyment' of knowing that I have satisfied a human need by my work.

The third good is the appreciation of one's labour contribution by the recipients of one's labour. Suppose that I had produced a product or service for you in the way just described: my labour is an exercise and objectification of my individual powers, and it is undertaken with the motivation of satisfying your needs. Suppose also that this is common knowledge: you know (and I know that you know) that the goods and services you use are the product of human labour, and that other human beings had made those products with the motivation of satisfying your needs. In these circumstances, it would be natural for you to feel grateful to me. Moreover, knowing that you feel grateful to me would provide me qua producer with an additional form of fulfilment: I 'would know myself to be confirmed both in your thought and your love.'

How does this description of unalienated labour in the 1844 writings relate to the description of communism in the 1875 CGP? My claim is that we should see Marx's 1844 account of unalienated labour as explaining a significant part of what makes communism possible. The 1844 writings provide an account of self-realisation in work. According to this account, people realise themselves through providing others with the goods and services they need for their (i.e., others') self-realisation. This makes communism possible. That is, the reason why I can produce according to my abilities is because your self-realisation has provided me with the

¹² For sophisticated discussion of the relationship between alienation and motivation, see Brixel forthcoming.

goods and services I need to produce in that fashion. And the reason why I receive according to my needs is because you have deliberately provided me the goods and services that I need. Hence my claim that the fix is primarily motivational not technological: the reason why I can produce according to my abilities and receive according to my needs is not only or even primarily because advances in technology have resulted in limitless abundance but because others' self-realisation has deliberately made that society—a *communist* society—possible.

It follows that our ends under communism would be interlinked (Brudney 1998: Ch. 5). As a producer I have a need to develop and express my individuality, and I have a need to satisfy another's need. Since satisfying your needs is one of my needs, your use of my good or service not only satisfies your need (for X) it also satisfies one of my needs (to provide you with X). But by satisfying your need for X , I also enable you to produce Y , thereby also helping you to satisfy your need for unalienated labour. And since your unalienated labour involves satisfying others' needs, the satisfaction of your need to produce Y not only satisfies another's particular need (for Z), it also helps that other satisfy their need for unalienated labour (producing Z). Under communism, we would be mutual enablers of each other's flourishing; moreover, our flourishing would partly consist in that mutual enablement.

Before we continue, let me first forestall two objections that one may have with this account of communism's possibility. First, some may doubt that satisfying others' needs is a necessary condition of unalienated labour. They may say that it is morally virtuous to produce for others, but deny that it necessarily makes someone's life go better. But consider a carpenter who produces a table. She finds fulfilment both in the construction of the table itself and at looking at her completed product, at the way it embodies her talents and abilities, her thoughts and ideas, her personality. Now suppose that, as a result of a miscommunication at a shipping company, her tables are used for firewood. Although her activity had provided her with impor-

tant forms of fulfilment, the activity will now surely strike her as less worthwhile, maybe even pointless. Even though she would have never met the recipients of her labour, the knowledge that she was providing something useful for others gave her activity a meaning that it now lacks.¹³

Second, it might be objected that there is a tension within the conception of self-realisation that I have attributed to Marx.¹⁴ We can see self-realisation as having individual and communal aspects.¹⁵ The individual aspect consists in the exercise and development of my powers, and the objectification of those powers in my product or service. The communal aspect consists in the production of goods and services that satisfy and are motivated to satisfy the needs of others, as well as in the recognition from those others for having satisfied their needs. Self-realisation in work consists in both aspects: in realising oneself *through* providing others with the goods and services they need to pursue their self-realisation.

Simply put, the problem is that it is highly unlikely that the work that best serves the individual aspect of self-realisation is simultaneously the work that best serves the communal aspect of self-realisation—or to put it another way, highly unlikely that the work that best fulfils me qua individual is the work that concurrently provides others with the goods and services they need. In response, it has been argued that Marx is imagining that there is a fortuitous congruence

¹³ Samuel Scheffler has recently made a similar point about what would happen if we were to discover that the human species would soon become extinct. In this scenario, Scheffler surmises that ‘many of the activities that we had recently regarded as worthwhile would no longer seem to us as appealing. We should see less reason to engage in them’ (Scheffler 2018: 43).

¹⁴ I thank a referee for pressing this objection.

¹⁵ For further discussion of the individual and communal aspects of self-realisation, see Chitty and Kandiyali 2023.

between what is best for me and what is required for social reproduction.¹⁶ But if this is the case, then the possibility of communism would appear to rely on an enormous stroke of luck.

However, Marx is not imagining a fortuitous congruence between the individual and communal aspects of self-realisation. The idea is not that everyone chooses what most fulfils them qua individual and this *just happens* to provide others' with what they need. The idea is rather that people pursue forms of self-realisation *in light* of what others' need. Consider a simplified example. Suppose that what is best for the individual aspect of my self-realisation is being an architect. But suppose that there is a glut of architects in my community. So if I practice architecture no one will want or need my service. By contrast, suppose that there is a dearth of doctors, social workers, and teachers. So if I choose one of these occupations, I will be doing much-needed work. That being the case, I choose to practice as a doctor, for this is my preferred option from the required occupations.

At issue here in this simple example is not whether the choice to be a doctor is one that people would plausibly make, though I believe it is.¹⁷ The issue is whether that choice represents an enormous stroke of luck. It does not. For the fact that I choose to develop certain abilities that my community needs (those required to practice medicine) rather than others that they do not (those required to practice architecture) is not a matter of happenstance. For being motivated

¹⁶ See Brudney 174-5 and Schmidt am Busch 2013. Schmidt am Busch argues that Marx inherits this unrealistic view from Fourier.

¹⁷ To add some support for this view, notice that the choice to be a doctor need not be self-denying. On the contrary: supposing that contributing to others' needs contributes to my wellbeing, then the choice to be a doctor could be the occupational choice that makes the highest contribution to my wellbeing. For even though it is less individually fulfilling than architecture, practicing medicine enables me to contribute to others' needs, and this may counterbalance the lower level of individual fulfilment.

to satisfy others' needs, the occupational choice is itself informed by a consideration of what my community needs.¹⁸

4. Self-Realisation and Abundance¹⁹

I have been arguing that the nature of self-realisation, which involves realising oneself through producing for others, and which becomes widespread under communism, creates the conditions under which people may produce according to their abilities and receive according to their needs. Does this mean that abundance plays no role in my account of what makes communism possible? If so, this would make my view problematic as Marx interpretation, for Marx is unequivocal that abundance is an 'absolutely necessary practical premise' for com-

¹⁸ It might be objected that this is still too optimistic. For there are not only occupations (like that of the doctor) that satisfies one's individual self-realisation slightly less; there are also forms of drudgery that, though important, indeed necessary, do not contribute to one's individual self-realisation at all.

No doubt, such drudgery exists. However, its existence does not present an overwhelming obstacle to the self-realisation interpretation. First, even if the work is intrinsically unsatisfying, people might still value the fact that they are contributing a useful product or service that satisfies the needs of others (See Tysedal 2023 and Althorpe 2023 for recent statement of this aspect of meaningful work). Second, the drudgery could be shared between everyone who is able to perform it. If that is the case, then although everyone would have to perform some drudgery, no one would be consigned to its exclusive performance. Consequently, everyone would have the opportunity to engage in other types of work, types that are more interesting, complex, and conducive to their individual self-realisation. For defence of the sharing view, see Gomberg 2007, Ch. 7; Gourevitch 2022, and Kandiyali 2023. For a sceptical response, see Parr 2022.

¹⁹ In this section, I discuss purported counter-examples in which Marx appears to commit himself to a greater abundance than the self-realisation interpretation allows. However, it might be objected that the discussion overlooks a different counter-example, namely the view Marx expresses in the third volume of *Capital* in which work is described as belonging to a 'realm of necessity' and is contrasted with the 'realm of freedom' that exists outside it (*CIII* 807). This view presents a prima facie counter-example to the self-realisation interpretation because it appears to commit Marx to a more sober view of work under communism, as activity that, though not alienated to the same degree as work under capitalism, is not a vehicle for self-realisation either.

Two points in reply. First, notice that the passage presents a more serious counter-example to the limitless abundance interpretation. For in the realm of freedom passage, Marx is unequivocal that there can never be a profusion of goods so great that the need for work is eliminated: 'Just as the savage must wrestle with Nature to satisfy his wants, to maintain and reproduce life, so must civilized man, and he must do so in all social formations and under all possible modes of production?'. Second, the passage is only inconsistent with the self-realisation interpretation if it is taken to suggest that activity in the realm of freedom comprises work that is *solely* an end in itself. If activity in the realm of freedom instead comprises activity that is *both* an end in itself and a means to further ends, such as the satisfaction of others' needs, then the passage is not inconsistent with the self-realisation interpretation. For further discussion of the relevant passage, see Kandiyali 2014, and Kandiyali and Gomberg forthcoming. I thank a referee for pressing this objection.

munism (GI, 49). However, my interpretation does have material prerequisites. These prerequisites plausibly constitute ‘abundance’.

To begin with, we should note that the idea of abundance is ambiguous. Cohen takes Marx to be predicting a ‘material abundance so great that...everyone could have everything they might want to have’ (Cohen 1996: 104). He describes this abundance as ‘limitless’, ‘plenary’, ‘super’, ‘fluent’, ‘overflowing’, ‘Utopian’, and ‘conflict-dissolving’. However, Marx’s texts do not licence Cohen’s extravagant interpretation (Geras 1984: 74-7). In the CGP, Marx says that it is only after ‘the springs of common wealth flow more abundantly’ that society can inscribe the needs principle on its banners. This clearly signals that Marx considers abundance to be necessary for communism. However, it provides no evidence that he conceived of abundance as limitless. The claim that the springs of wealth will flow ‘more abundantly’ is relative to the status-quo. The springs of common wealth could flow ‘more abundantly’ than nineteenth century capitalism and yet still fall well short of a ‘material abundance so great that...everyone could have everything they might want to have’.

In support of his interpretation of Marxian abundance, Cohen also cites textual evidence from *The German Ideology*, written thirty years before the CGP in 1845-6.²⁰ There, Marx and Engels argue that a ‘great increase in productive power’ is ‘an absolutely necessary practical premise because without it want is merely made general, and with destitution the struggle for necessities and all the old filthy business would necessarily be reproduced’ (GI 49). This passage reiterates Marx’s view that abundance is a necessary condition for communism, and that there will be greater productive power under communism than capitalism. However, it provides scant support for Cohen’s interpretation. In fact, Marx’s reference to ‘want’,

²⁰ William Clare Roberts argues that while Marx has ‘a proclivity for certain techno-utopian lines of thought these are confined to draft works (like *The German Ideology*) and absent in *Capital*’ (Roberts 2017:171, n.9). I agree with Roberts about *Capital*, but, as the discussion makes clear, do not support his view that this line of thought is present in draft work.

‘destitution’, and ‘necessities’ suggests an altogether more modest conception of abundance: a state of affairs in which people no longer lead a hand-to-mouth existence and in which the anxiety of whether they will be able to heat their homes, pay the bills, and feed their children is overcome.

To be clear, I am not denying that Marx was committed to abundance. The issue is what that commitment entails. Cohen argues that Marx was committed to limitless abundance. Such abundance enables Marx to sidestep difficult questions of justice and coordination. This sidestepping is illegitimate because it is based on a material plenty that we now know can never be a serious prospect. Cohen’s interpretation coheres with a certain reading of Marx’s theory of history, according to which history is, fundamentally, the development of human productive power;²¹ and it fits a historical context in which ecological constraints were less salient. However, the textual evidence for the limitless abundance interpretation is weak. In this regard, I find it telling that Cohen concedes that he gets the interpretation ‘not just from poring over texts but from remembering how bourgeois objections to communism were handled in my childhood and youth’ (Cohen 1995: 133).²²

Having rejected limitless abundance, I now sketch an alternative view of abundance that accords with the texts and is more independently defensible. On this view, abundance is not a matter of everyone having whatever they may want but of everyone having access to what they need in order to pursue their self-realisation. What people need to achieve self-realisation is expansive: Marx talks of how, in place of the wealth and poverty of capitalism, will come the ‘*rich human being*’ and ‘*rich human need*’ (EPM: 304). His examples make it clear that he has

²¹ The classic statement of this theory is, of course, Cohen’s 1978. Although Cohen’s account is brilliant, I have doubts about it as an interpretation of Marx. For effective criticism of Cohen’s reading, and a plausible less technologically-minded interpretation, see Miller 1984.

²² I thank Bruno Leipold for alerting me to the importance of this statement of Cohen’s.

in mind not merely physical necessities but non-basic social and cultural needs, including the need for unalienated labour.²³ We also know that what is needed to pursue one's self-realisation is individually specific, depending on one's needs, circumstances, and self-realisation activity. On this view, people who need more in order to pursue their self-realisation, for example as a consequence of a disability, get more. Finally, we also know that what is required to pursue one's self-realisation is likely to expand over time, along with changes in social, cultural, and economic conditions. Yet even with these qualifications, what people need to pursue their self-realisation is far from limitless.

Still, we may ask: why do we need even this more modest level of abundance? Why is communism not possible under less favourable conditions? We stipulated that communism is a society in which people can produce according to their abilities and receive according to their needs. I have been arguing that what makes communism possible is that people realise their nature through providing others with the goods and services required to realise their nature. However, individuals' motivation to achieve self-realisation is not sufficient for communism. To see why, imagine an economically primitive society in which the productive forces are underdeveloped. Suppose that people in this society want to satisfy others' needs.²⁴ Communism is not possible under these conditions. In this scenario, people will not be able to focus on anything beyond physical subsistence. They will have to work flat out in ways that they are unlikely to choose to satisfy their basic needs. Hence they will not be able to produce according to their abilities. Likewise, needs will go unmet. In such a society people may produce enough to satisfy basic physical needs, but satisfying the rich set of (social, cultural, intellectual, etc.) needs that Marx takes to be characteristic of human beings will be impossible.

²³ For detailed discussion of the early Marx's view of needs, see Leopold 2007: 223-234.

²⁴ I think Marx would be sceptical about this example, for he thought that poverty tended to generate an overwhelming focus on oneself (one's own wellbeing and those of one's loved ones). I put his scepticism to one side here.

So it is only when the motivation to produce for others is conjoined with advanced technology that communism is possible. That conjoining means that people can focus on something beyond subsistence, enabling them to contribute in ways that befit their individual nature. And it ensures that needs can be met: where ‘needs’ refers not only to physical subsistence but to the ‘rich human need’ of communism.

However, it might be objected that the requirement of abundance generates a problem for the self-realisation interpretation. For it might be argued that the only way in which abundance can be achieved is via the use of productive technologies and division of labour that thwart self-realisation in work.

Two points in reply. First, recall that my view requires modest rather than limitless abundance. It might be true that creating the conditions for *limitless* abundance requires endless toil. But this is less obviously true of *modest* abundance in which we are only providing people with the goods and services they need for their self-realisation. Second, we should be wary of the idea that the use of productive technologies and division of labour *necessarily* thwarts self-realisation in work.²⁵ No doubt they can. But productive technologies can also ameliorate human labour (think of how domestic labour has been improved by dishwashers, washing machines, electric ovens, etc), and some highly specialised jobs can be very fulfilling (think of medicine). The

²⁵ For Marx, this critically depends on the society in which they are utilised. Responding to J.S. Mill’s remark that ‘it is questionable if all the mechanical inventions yet made have lightened the day’s toil of any human being’, Marx replies that:

‘this is by no means the aim of the capitalistic application of machinery. Like every other increase in the productiveness of labour, machinery is intended to cheapen commodities, and, by shortening that portion of the working day, in which the labourer works for himself, to lengthen the other portion that he gives, without an equivalent, to the capitalist. In short, it is a means for producing surplus value’. (Marx, *CI*, 374).

This leaves open the possibility that machinery could serve humane ends in a future society in which production is geared towards meeting needs rather than maximising profit.

problem is not with productive technologies/division of labour *per se*, but how they are utilised.²⁶

5. The Distinctiveness of the Self-Realisation Interpretation

To get a handle on my interpretation of what makes communism possible, I now contrast it with Cohen's interpretation.

For Cohen, communism is made possible by limitless abundance. With limitless material abundance, people enjoy great freedom to produce as they please and take what they want from the common stock. In either the productive or distributive side of life, the transcendence of scarcity ensures that individuals need not take others' needs into account.

Now, in my view, as in Cohen's, communism promotes self-realisation: my interpretation thus concurs with Cohen's in interpreting Marxian communism as Aristotelian in the sense that it 'places emphasis on individual self-realization' and not 'self-realization-independent moral obligation' (Vrousalis 2015: 147 n.6).²⁷ However, in my view, people achieve self-realisation through providing others with the goods and services they need for their self-realisation. And this explains why communism is possible. People can produce according to their abilities and receive according to their needs, not because limitless abundance ensures that they can produce and consume in whatever way they please, but because others have provided them with the goods and services required for their self-realisation.

²⁶ For the claim that Marx's account of the good society is consistent with, and indeed requires, a division of labour, see Chapter 3 of my manuscript *Karl Marx's Account of the Good Society*, which is available from me on request.

²⁷ Vrousalis continues: 'To the extent that the Aristotelian reading of communism is too optimistic about material possibility, and therefore about the feasibility of the form of society it envisages, it must either be significantly revised, or wholly abandoned.' The account that I am providing shows how an Aristotelian account of communism—emphasising individual self-realisation—could be developed in a way that avoids overly optimistic claims about material possibility.

This basic difference between our views on what makes communism possible generates a further difference on the nature of a future communist society. Consider *The Communist Manifesto's* famous description of communism as a society in which 'the free development of each is a condition for the free development of all' (CM: 506). In an interesting gloss on this passage, Cohen writes:

One way of picturing life under communism, as Marx conceived it, is to imagine a jazz band in which each player seeks his own fulfilment as a musician. Though basically interested in his own fulfilment, and not in that of the band as a whole, or of his fellow musicians taken severally, he nevertheless fulfils himself only to the extent that each of the others also does so, and the same holds for each of them (Cohen 1995, 122).

In my interpretation of communism, as in Cohen's, people provide one another with the conditions for their self-realisation. There is an interdependence of self-realisation that means that I cannot realise my nature unless you do the same, and vice-versa. However, in Cohen's interpretation, individuals do not value promoting the self-realisation of others: 'If a saxophonist, a bass player, a drummer and one or two others form a jazz band, because it is the heart's desire of each to develop his own talent by playing in one, they are not actuated by altruism, and no one joins the band in order to promote another's self-realization' (Cohen 1995: 137). On this view, it is just a fact about human beings, given the kind of dependent creatures we are, that we need others to flourish in order to flourish ourselves. By contrast, in my interpretation, people realise themselves through providing others with the goods and services required to realise their nature. So if communism is a jazz band it is not only one in which 'each player in which seeks his own fulfilment as a musician' but one in which each player's fulfilment partly consists in providing his fellow musicians with the conditions for their self-realisation, and in

contributing, alongside one's fellow musicians, to the creation of music that satisfies the needs of their audience.

It is a corollary of Cohen's interpretation of Marx's view of the good society that nothing would be lost if our dependence on others was transcended. Suppose artificial intelligence rendered the need to form jazz bands superfluous; each could seek his 'own fulfilment as a musician' without cooperating with others. Cohen's Marx would be neutral on that score. For my Marx, by contrast, the replacement of human beings with AI would represent a loss, for we would no longer be providing the conditions for others' self-realisation (Brudney 1998: 187).

6. Objections

I have been distinguishing the self-realisation interpretation from the limitless abundance interpretation. It is now time to consider the merits of the former as an account of what makes communism possible.

To begin with, note that the self-realisation interpretation avoids the three problems that beset the limitless abundance interpretation. First, consider limitless abundance. Cohen argues that limitless abundance is untenable because it is inconsistent with ecological constraints. However, the self-realisation interpretation does not require limitless abundance. It requires a more modest profusion of goods and services.

Second, the self-realisation interpretation avoids the problem identified by Rawls: that a society in which we produce as we please without considering others is unattractive. Rawls's criticism is a powerful objection to Cohen's Marx. However, it has no force against the self-realisa-

tion interpretation, for an awareness and appreciation of others' needs is central to it. Indeed, it is through the satisfaction of others' needs that people realise their nature.

Third, the self-realisation interpretation does not rely on a sexist view of labour. Recall that limitless abundance is only sufficient for communism if one excludes the work that has overwhelmingly been performed by women. That exclusion is unjustifiable. However, the self-realisation interpretation makes no such exclusion. In fact, given that care work centrally involves the satisfaction of another's need, it would appear to be a good candidate for self-realisation.

And yet, while the self-realisation interpretation avoids these objections, it faces other objections—objections that are bypassed when Marx's vision of a future society is read in Cohenite fashion. In what follows, I consider three: that the self-realisation interpretation i) involves an undesirable transcendence of individualist motivation; ii) runs up against the problem of expensive tastes; and iii) faces coordination problems.

i) The Transcendence of Individualist Motivation:

Unlike the limitless abundance interpretation, the self-realisation interpretation appears to involve a big transformation of human psychology. For on the account I have been developing, people realise themselves through the satisfaction of others' needs. One might question whether this transformation is possible. However, one may also question whether it is desirable. Indeed, describing what may initially appear to be a similar view to the one I have been developing, Cohen argues that the transcendence of individualist motivation 'denotes a pretty hair-raising prospect' (Cohen 1995 135).²⁸

²⁸ Cohen is here objecting to Lukes 1987. Insofar as Lukes's view involves an 'erasure of individual interests' it involves a far more socialised view than mine.

Two points in reply. First, the change in human psychology should not be overstated. For it does not involve the development of motivation that is unknown to us, but the strengthening of a motivation—to satisfy others' needs—that is familiar to many of us. Second, it is false that the self-realisation interpretation requires a 'transcendence of *individualist* motivation' (Cohen 1995 134-5; my italics). After all, people in the higher phase of communism are concerned with *self*-realisation. The point is that their self-realisation is consistent with, indeed promotes, the self-realisation of others. I agree that the complete transcendence of individualist motivation denotes a 'hair-raising prospect'. The self-realisation interpretation does not require it.

ii) Expensive Tastes:

Since the self-realisation interpretation disavows limitless abundance, it might be thought to run up against the problem of expensive tastes (Dworkin 1981). According to the self-realisation interpretation, people under communism will provide others with the goods and services they need in order to pursue their self-realisation. However, as Jon Elster writes:

Some ways of self-actualization are inherently more expensive than others. To write poems requires little by way of material resources, to direct epic films a great deal more. If free rein was given to the development of the need for self-actualization...expensive preferences might emerge in a quantity that would make it only possible to satisfy them very partially (Elster 1985: 232).

Elster is right that some forms of self-realisation are more expensive than others. However, this does not present a problem for the self-realisation interpretation. First, remember that on my interpretation of self-realisation, people do not realise themselves by engaging in purely personal projects, but by providing others with the goods and services required for their self-realisation.

sation. That being so, self-realisation is not purely a drain on valuable resources but the process through which valuable resources are created. Second, we should also remember that, while we are not imagining limitless abundance, we are imagining favourable material conditions. These conditions enable us to take a somewhat relaxed attitude towards ‘expensive’ forms of self-realisation. Third, expensive tastes would only ‘emerge in a quantity that would make it only possible to satisfy them very partially’ if people deliberately cultivated such tastes (as in Dworkin’s original example), or choose to develop them without consideration of the cost they impose on others. However, either scenario is at odds with the motivation Marx attributes to individuals in a future communist society, a motivation which sees people as having a concern with the self-realisation of others. In such a society, people do not choose which of their abilities to develop in a purely individual way. They choose which of their abilities to develop in light of the costs those decisions place on others.

iii) Coordination Problems

By stipulating material plenty, the limitless abundance interpretation sidesteps questions of economic coordination. The self-realisation interpretation does not. One such problem is the *matching problem*. Marx emphasises that work in a future communist society will be freely chosen. Yet if we produce freely according to our abilities, how can we ensure that we collectively generate the right mix of necessary outputs?

I agree that it is unrealistic to imagine that our individually chosen activities will generate the right mix of goods and services that society requires. However, I have argued (§3) that this is not Marx’s view. In Marx’s view, people are motivated to provide others with the goods and services needed to realise their nature. So the fact that our productive activities satisfy the needs of others is not a stroke of luck. It is the direct outcome of the motivation that Marx takes to be widespread under communism.

However, critics might point out that a different coordination problem remains.²⁹ This is the *information problem*: how can people know what to produce, at any given time, in order to satisfy needs? My answer to the matching problem does not answer the information problem, for even if people are motivated to provide others with the goods and services they need, they cannot do so if they lack access to information about what others' need.

Now, in capitalist society, the information problem is solved through the market and the price mechanism: people produce on the basis of where they stand to gain, but this also provide others with what they need. Or so its defenders claim.³⁰ The problem is that Marx argues that producing for the market encourages us to view our fellow human beings as a mere means for the achievement of our 'selfish aims' (CJM: 224), that is, as generating alienation. So the question is: can the information problem can be solved in a way that does not rely on the market?

Now, the failure of central planning has led many to conclude that the information problem presents an insurmountable obstacle to the possibility of (non-market) communism.³¹ In the face of that pessimism it is worth reminding ourselves that significant areas of our economic life have been, and continue to be, organised outside the market. Examples include healthcare, education, and caring for the young, elderly, and ill. So it is not as if there is no successful precedent for non-market provision. In fact, capitalist societies themselves rely on—maybe could not function without—a non-market sector in which vital goods and services are supplied without monetary gain. Moreover, we should also not conclude that the failure of central

²⁹ I thank Ryan Pevnick and Fair Kurtulmus for helpful discussion of the information problem.

³⁰ See Hayek 1945 for the classic statement of this view.

³¹ See e.g. Nove 1983 and Roemer 1994. This pessimism provides the impetus for non-socialist alternatives to capitalism, such as universal basic income. For the classic claim that the provision of UBI would provide a capitalist road to communism, see Van der Veen and Van Parijs 1986. I reply to that argument in Kandiyali 2022.

planning necessitates an embrace of markets, for central planning is not the only alternative to the market.³² Such non-market proposals deserve careful consideration.

Let us suppose, however, that the information problem does represent an insurmountable obstacle: there is no alternative to the market as a means of providing people with the information they require to satisfy others' needs. What then for the possibility of communism?³³ Assuming that we must have some (not necessarily overriding) concern with economic efficiency, it follows that the possibility of communism—a society in which each produces according to their ability and receives according to their needs—depends on a reconciliation with the market.³⁴ More specifically, the possibility of communism depends on preserving the information function of the market but eliminating, or at least mitigating, its alienating consequences. The trick here would presumably rely on citizens' taking a dual perspective on their work and their relations to the others: on the one hand, each would act on market signals; on the other hand, each would recognise that their acting on such signals ultimately represents a mediated contribution to others' needs.³⁵ Whether that dual perspective would be stable requires further examination.

7. Conclusion

What might make communism possible? In this essay, I have identified four possible answers:

³² For a non-market socialist proposal, see Albert 2003. For criticism of that proposal, see Schweickart 2006.

³³ It also bears mentioning that, even if communism is impossible, it might still be desirable and hence something that we ought to bring about or approximate as much as we reasonably can. See Cohen 2009: 52-53; and, for helpful discussion of the distinction between feasibility and desirability in Cohen, Gilibert 2011.

³⁴ It might be objected that communism with a market is not communism. But recall the definition of communism on p. 2: 'a society in which people produce according to their abilities and resources are distributed on the basis of human need'. That definition says nothing about economic institutions.

³⁵ See Carens 1981 for a proposal along these lines. For scepticism about its stability, see Cohen 2009: 66-70.

- 1) *The Legal Interpretation.* Communism is possible because people have a legally enforced duty to produce according to their abilities.
- 2) *The Limitless Abundance Interpretation.* Communism is possible because limitless abundance ensures that people can produce according to their abilities and receive according to their needs.
- 3) *Cohenite Egalitarianism.* Communism is possible because people freely serve each other out of egalitarian duty.
- 4) *The Self-Realisation interpretation.* Communism is possible because, under conditions of modest abundance, people realise themselves through providing others with the goods and services they need for their (i.e., the others') self-realisation.

Cohen rejects the legal interpretation on the grounds that it is inconsistent with Marx's (and his own) commitment to freedom. He argues that Marx was committed to limitless abundance. However, for ecological reasons, limitless abundance is untenable. Consequently, Cohen argues that the only hope for communism is if people freely serve each other out of egalitarian duty. This was not Marx's view of what makes communism possible, but it is the view Marxists ought to adopt, Cohen says, because the loss of faith in limitless abundance means it is the only game in town.

However, Cohen's conclusion is too quick, for as I have shown in this paper, there is an alternative answer to the question. According to this answer, people in communist society achieve self-realisation through providing others with the goods and services required for their self-realisation. On this view, the nature of self-realisation, coupled with a reasonably high development of productive power, creates a society in which it is possible for people to produce according to their abilities and receive according to their needs. This answer puts self-realisation and concern for others—not limitless abundance or egalitarian duty—front and centre. I have

argued that this view accords with the texts and represents a more plausible position than Cohen's interpretation of Marx in which technological advance and limitless abundance play the predominant role. Future work must examine whether the self-realisation interpretation represents a preferable alternative to Cohen's egalitarian account of what makes communism possible.³⁶

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Abbreviations

Works by Marx have been identified by the following abbreviations:

CJM: "Comments on James Mill" *MECW*. Vol.3. London: Lawrence and Wishart.

EPM: "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844," *MECW* Vol. 3. London: Lawrence and Wishart.

³⁶ For an attempt to 'rescue' socialism from Cohen's overemphasis on equality, see Maguire 'unpublished manuscript'.

CGP: “Critique of the Gotha Programme,” *MECW* Vol. 24. London: Lawrence and Wishart.

C I: *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy: Volume I. MECW* Vol. 35. London: Lawrence and Wishart.

C III: *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy: Volume III. MECW* Vol. 37. London: Lawrence and Wishart.

GI: *The German Ideology. MECW* Vol. 5. London: Lawrence and Wishart.

CM: *The Communist Manifesto. MECW* Vol. 6. London: Lawrence and Wishart.

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Biography

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