

From: "The Critique of Capitalism and the Problem of Ideology" by Jeffrey Reiman from THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO MARX

Utilitarianism regards the satisfaction of people's desires as the best measure of goodness and thus it views arrangements that maximize the aggregate satisfaction of all people's desires as morally good and just. There are several ways in which this doctrine reflects aspects of capitalist exchange. First, as Marx's reference to Bentham (quoted earlier) indicates, utilitarianism has been characteristically formulated in tandem with a view of human motivation in which each person is thought to pursue simply what makes him or her - understood as a separate individual - happy. This, we have already seen, is the view that follows from seeing human beings as they function in exchange as one's model of human nature. It expresses a fundamentally asocial conception of the self in which interests of human beings are thought to be naturally in conflict (see Brenkert, 1981). Second, utilitarianism assumes that all human behaviors - no matter how unusual or particular - can be translated into a common measure: utility or satisfaction. And this is precisely what occurs in exchange, in which unique and particular human productive endeavors are literally resolved into a common currency: money. In The German Ideology, Marx and Engels wrote:

The apparent stupidity of merging all the manifold relations of people in the one relation of usefulness, this apparently metaphysical abstraction, arises from the fact that, in modern bourgeois society, all relations are subordinated in practice to the one abstract monetary-commercial relation. . . .

Now these relations are supposed not to have the meaning peculiar to them but to be the expression and manifestation of some third relation introduced in their place, the relation of utility.

(Marx and Engels, 5/1976: 409; italics in original)

One effect of this abstraction is that when capitalist relations are evaluated in the light of utility, all peculiarities of relations - bossworker, rich-poor, master-(wage)slave - are dissolved. The social relations in which people stand are covered over with the abstract measure of quantities of utility or satisfaction, with the same blurring effect as would result from reducing relations between slave owners and slaves to a relation between two quanta of satisfaction. In two additional ways, utilitarianism reflects and thus supports capitalism. When exchanges are free, we can assume that each party to the transaction agrees to it only if he or she believes that his or her situation will be improved by it. Although we cannot peer into people's minds or hearts, we naturally assume that all free exchanges increase satisfaction for both parties. And from this, it is an easy step to conclude that to maximize satisfaction, we need only let people keep on trading voluntarily until no one thinks that he or she can improve on this by a further exchange. Suppose that we counter that exchanges improve people's situations only when compared with their starting points and that we might thus produce even more satisfaction by altering people's starting points (that is, by redistributing the initial assets that they bring to exchanges). The response will be that such redistributing will improve some people's situations and worsen those of others, and we cannot know for certain that the result will be a net improvement. But what we can know for certain is that everyone will be improved (or think themselves improved) by free exchanges. Thus, utilitarianism naturally favors the continuation of exchange and noninterference with the initial distribution of wealth that forms the setting for that exchange.

Further, one thing that capitalism does do - as Marx recognized -

is increase the amount of goods produced in a society. All such goods are produced with an eye to selling them, that is, to getting them into a successful exchange. Because such goods will be freely bought, we can assume that they will increase satisfaction for their purchasers, which is to say, that they will contribute to increasing the aggregate satisfaction of the whole society. That the goods produced may serve false needs (induced by advertising or competitive pressures), that there may be an alternative set of goods that are more socially useful (good schools, good hospitals, good public transportation) and that might increase the aggregate satisfaction even more is, again, compared with the actual goods that are produced and voluntarily purchased, mere speculation. Because the transactions that lead to these actual goods being produced and sold are free, everyone seems to think that they will be made better off by them. By contrast, to alter things so that a different set of more socially useful goods is produced is to force some transactions on some people (force some to pay by taxing, etc.), and this will make some unhappy in an amount that we cannot be sure will not wipe out the (already speculative) gains from the supposedly more socially useful goods. Again, utilitarianism supports capitalism because it is poured from the mold of capitalism.