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Notes on Suffering and Freedom: A Marxian and Dostoevskian Encounter

Andy Merrifield

In April 1844, when the twenty-six-year-old Karl Marx began drafting his enigmatic *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* in Paris, a twenty-two-year-old Russian novelist, Fyodor Dostoevsky, was busy working on his first novel, *Poor Folk*. The latter's realist portrayal of the dreadful poverty and suffering endured by St. Petersburg's poor, published the following year, immediately ushered in a new Russian Dickens. That Marx later came to admire the great English novelist suggests that had he read Dostoevsky's immature efforts, he'd have doubtless approved. That Dostoevsky's novel was likewise peppered by Fourierian socialist principles, which quickly gained the acclaim of Herzen and Berlinsky alike, further supports the kindred connection between Marx and Dostoevsky during this period.

Marx himself was well acquainted with Fourier's utopian thinking: his youthful writings blended, *inter alia*, Fourierism with Hegelian idealism. At the same time, Proudhon, Diderot, Feuerbach, Rousseau, George Sand, and Saint-Simon, were all staples for Marx, the renegade Young Hegelian, and for Dostoevsky, the fledgling Petrashevskyite. Thus, ideals of human emancipation, freedom, and social justice became leitmotifs for these two socialist twenty-somethings. The 1840s were perhaps the only period in which Marx and Dostoevsky could become political bedfellows.

Twenty years later, things looked rather different. By then both were famous, but their political persuasions had drifted: slightly perhaps for Marx, markedly indeed for Dostoevsky. What happened in the meantime—between Marx's Paris *Manuscripts* and the subsequent publication of volume 1 of *Capital* in 1867, and between Dostoevsky's

Poor Folk and *Notes From Underground*, first serialized in the magazine *Epoch* in 1864—is a long and intricate tale.¹ An in-depth intellectual biography of each thinker is a major undertaking, one clearly beyond the scope of the present essay. What I propose to do here, instead, is to home in on something much more specific. There is one theme that I particularly want to explore: the relationship between suffering and freedom in the early “existential” Marx and in the mature fiction of the “spiritual” Dostoevsky.

Although it’s true that there are profound metaphysical and political differences between Marx and Dostoevsky, they nevertheless share an interest in suffering. And through that common interest, I want to argue that each held a desire to overcome mechanical and closed-society models of the good life. Marx and Dostoevsky radically emphasize the value of human freedom: freedom through suffering. In what follows, I will try to bring their work together in some sort of creative tension. I shall suggest that Dostoevsky deepened, extended, and problematized what Marx dabbled with in the 1840s but seemingly jettisoned later in life. Marx may have had valid political reasons for turning away from his youthful concern with suffering, but as Dostoevsky demonstrates from 1864 onward, Marx may have underplayed the logical implications of that earlier thesis. It is with this youthful thesis that I propose to begin.

Humans as Suffering Beings

When Marx’s *Manuscripts* first saw the public light of day in the early 1930s, they caused considerable furor within the Marxist fold. For they revealed a Marx palpably engaging with his Hegelian legacy, a Marx who was defining communism as a revolutionary *humanism*. The discovery of an existential and subjectivist Marx immediately threatened the prevailing Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy where positivism and scientism ruled the roost. And this hitherto unknown Marx with a humanist bent rapidly captured the imagination of a whole generation of eminent left intellectuals, particularly in continental Europe—intellectuals struggling to free Marxism from a rigid determinism: Raya Dunayevskaya, Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Henri Lefebvre, Alexandre Kojève, Karl Korsch, Herbert Marcuse, and Georg Lukács.

1. For Marxists this has sparked intense debate over the years. Louis Althusser, of course, has been most prominent in accentuating the rift between the “early” humanist Marx and his “mature” political-economic writings (culminating in *Capital* and *Theories of Surplus Value*). Althusser rejected the former, which he saw as “ideological,” in favor of the latter “scientific” analysis. He thereby helped pioneer the twentieth-century critique of Marxism as *socialist humanism*. As for Dostoevsky, however, numerous biographical accounts stress his last-minute “pardon” from a mock execution in 1849 and a four-year penal servitude in Siberia as somehow crucial in his political transition from youthful progressive to aging conservative. One of the most comprehensive and accessible accounts of Dostoevsky’s life and work is Leonid Grossman’s *Dostoevsky: A Biography* (1974). See also Joseph Frank’s colossally impressive biography of Dostoevsky, which currently consists of four volumes. The third volume, *Dostoevsky: The Stir of Liberation* (1985), specifically deals with the *Notes From Underground* period (1860–5). Frank’s lifelong labor of love is set to conclude with the eagerly awaited fifth volume.

Nowadays the *Manuscripts* still make compelling reading for socialists everywhere, if only for their utopianism. But the passion, sensitivity, and tenderness that the older, more sober Marx was destined to restrain, also hit the contemporary reader. Perhaps more intriguing, though, is the way the young Marx leaves several crucial questions dangling. To begin with, why did he posit human beings as insuperably *suffering beings*?

Karl Marx in 1844

In the *Manuscripts*, Marx (1974, 389) reasons that humans are endowed with what he calls “vital powers.” Vital powers, he says, exist in all of us as “dispositions” and “capacities” and “drives.” On the other hand, “as a natural, corporeal, sensuous, objective being,” Marx adds, humans “are *suffering*, conditioned and limited beings” (390). He suggests that to be sensuous is to be *real*, and to be real means one is a *passionate* being. And yet, he is unequivocal: to be passionate it is first necessary to *suffer*, to feel pain (390). (In the original, *suffering* [*leiden*] is always italicized.)

For those who came to know Marx through *Capital*, this reasoning might sound rather vague and woolly. At first glance, too, it appears rather strange given that communism is expected to put an end to the intolerable capitalist “prehistory” of suffering, exploitation, and oppression. Isn’t communism designed to release the masses from toil and suffering? Yet, if suffering is somehow innate—“an integral human essence,” Marx says—then what would happen if this integral essence were taken away?

Marx’s most detailed account of suffering occurs in his “Critique of Hegel’s Dialectic,” an unfinished essay at the end of the final “Third Manuscript.” In it he attacks the “mystifying” speculative philosophy of Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*. While Marx recognizes the positive elements of Hegel, he cannot advocate the priority that Hegel conferred on pure, abstract, contemplative thought. For Marx, Hegel grasped human *estrangement* as existing in people’s heads: to work through their alienation—to overcome “unhappy consciousness”—individuals had to delve into themselves. They could only know themselves *for themselves* through a reflective *self-consciousness*. Consequently, Hegel knew only one kind of labor: Marx calls it “abstract mental labor.” He views this as heady, “one-sided” stuff and argues that it gives too much credit to thought per se. Hegel implies that consciousness comprises merely one component, that of knowing as knowing; perceiving, feeling, suffering, hearing, and so on are all duly downplayed. (It’s no coincidence that Feuerbach had earlier accused Hegel of “overreaching himself in thought.”)

The young Marx instead holds that humans are “directly natural beings” with their “feet firmly planted on the solid earth and breathing all the powers of nature” (1974, 389). They are certainly “spiritual beings,” too, but it is a naturalist humanism that Marx views as “capable of comprehending the process of world history” (389). From this dialectical rendering, human beings know themselves not by turning inward contemplatively but by reaching out and feeling and seeing and comprehending the

external world around them, a world which is simultaneously their own and which incorporates other people. Marx considers the question to be both ontological and epistemological. As natural beings, he writes, humans “must confirm and realize themselves both in their being and their knowing” (391). Yet, to have being, one must be sensuous. Sensuality, moreover, is “to be an object of sense, a *sensuous* object, and thus to have sensuous objects outside oneself, objects of one’s sense perception. To be sensuous is to *suffer* (to be subjected to the actions of another)” (390).

Marx’s parentheses here shouldn’t be taken lightly, for he suggests that to suffer is to feel the pain of another’s actions. Suffering, he says, is something that is imposed from *without*: it is a movement from an object to a thinking and feeling subject, at least *in the first instance*. It is this external action and object that makes the human subject a suffering “objective sensuous being.” But Marx goes a step further. He says that it is our experience of suffering that makes us *passionate* beings and passion, for him, is our “essential power vigorously striving to attain its object” (390).

Henceforward we would expect some qualifications to follow. We’d expect Marx to grapple with the political implications of this thesis. Inexplicably, the manuscript trails off. Alas, Marx never returns to the topic again. But how, we might inquire, are humans to unleash their “essential powers,” especially if suffering is so vital?

In addressing this question in his “First Manuscript,” Marx points to the overcoming of alienation.² He takes the supersession of private property as somehow crucial for unleashing people’s essential powers and for “restoring” the self as a social being. On the other hand, Marx suggests that human suffering is, “humanly conceived,” an “*enjoyment of the self for man*” (1974, 351; my emphasis). This last declaration is very important. But it raises several questions: First of all, would disalienation erase human suffering? Second, if suffering is “enjoyment of the self for man,” what would become of human beings should suffering cease? Third, how can sensuous being be upheld through a capacity to suffer in a way that isn’t unjust or in flagrant violation of human rights? Surely Marx isn’t giving license to the imposition of somebody else’s will over the self? After all, isn’t that what he was desperately trying to negate?³

2. Alienation comes in various guises in bourgeois society: the particular estranging activities of workers, the estranged products they produce, estrangement between fellow workers when working and, most significantly of all, estranged and suppressed human potentiality and undeveloped creative power—which is stunted, deformed, and held in check by the “objectifying” wage relation.

3. This isn’t to say that there aren’t other kinds of suffering. Take, for instance, “unrequited love,” which is a classic form of suffering. The young Marx actually acknowledges it in some of his 1840s writings. It seems likely that here Marx, along with others of his generation, was heavily influenced by Goethe. The smattering of quotations in both *Capital* and the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* confirms that Marx was familiar with the towering German maestro. In his youthful essays, Marx was doubtless mindful of Goethe’s *Sturm und Drang* period, particularly his *Sorrows of the Young Werther* (1774). The bond between the Young Hegelians and melancholic young men, wearing blue frocks and yellow breeches and suffering from unrequited love affairs, is, perhaps, close. “The question,” Goethe made Werther ask, “is not whether a man is strong or weak, but whether he is able to endure the measure of his sufferings?” Later, Werther says: “Must it ever be thus—that the source of our happiness must also be the fountain of our misery?” (Goethe 1988, 51–2).

When Marx was writing, socialists everywhere had in mind the alleviation of suffering and want. Otherwise, why would they organize and collectively take to the streets? Here reason and logical knowledge—linked with action—were invoked to resolve the dilemmas of human suffering, pain, and grief, which are understood to be socially induced, not intrinsically given. For Marx and other socialists, it is capital and assorted ruling classes that wreak havoc for ordinary working people. They are the major source of the afflictions in modern society: avarice, inequality, and bigotry are historical and systematic, hence curable and preventable. Or so it was believed. How, then, does this tally with Marx's own disquisitions on suffering?

Numerous other socialists were adamant about the prospective solution to this dilemma. Consider one influential example. Several years before the appearance of *Capital*, the Russian socialist Nikolai Chernyshevsky wrote a tendentious novel called *What Is To Be Done?* and subtitled *Tales about New People*. This was Chernyshevsky's vision of a new socialist Jerusalem; it was a vision of Russia's Great Leap toward modernization. It expressed what Rufus Mathewson once termed "the roseate vision of heroism" (1958, 19). The first installment of the novel, drafted in prison, appeared in 1863. One of the key scenes is Vera Pavlovna's fourth dream where she dreams of human perfectibility. Her utopia is symbolized

by a building, an enormous building, such as are now in but a few capitals . . . no, there is not a single one like that now! It stands amid fields and meadows, gardens and woods . . . There is nothing like it now; no, but there is one that points towards it—the palace which stands on Siddenham Hill [*sic*]. Glass and steel, steel and glass, and that is all. No, that is not all, that is only the shell of the building . . . But there, inside, there is a real house, an enormous house. It is covered by this crystal and steel building as by a sheath . . . Life is healthy and quiet here. It preserves freshness. (Chernyshevsky 1982, 319–22)

Here, of course, Chernyshevsky is invoking London's Crystal Palace as an icon for a rational, virtuous, and conflict-free society, a new dawn that banishes suffering and want and toil and where human reason reigns supreme. Through Vera, Chernyshevsky outlines a radical version of Jeremy Bentham's utilitarianism. He effectively voices a proto-Bolshevik literary position that later influenced both Lenin and Trotsky. Indeed, Lenin penned a book bearing the same title and suggested that Chernyshevsky was "the greatest and most talented representative of socialism before Marx" (Mathewson 1958, 309).

Chernyshevsky, by all accounts, had visited Joseph Paxton's famous structure in 1851 at Sydenham Hill when it formed the pinnacle of the World's Fair in London. Dostoevsky had himself seen the impressive building in 1862 and had recoiled in horror at this soulless definition of European materialism. Two years later, he launched his own sally against Chernyshevsky's future socialist society based on "mathematical exactitude," where all material want had vanished and where there was "nothing left to do." The book bore the strange title, *Notes From Underground*. Ironically, Dostoevsky's critique, and his passionate defense of suffering, appear to proceed

directly from where the youthful Marx left off. Yet could Marx and Dostoevsky really find common ground and unite contra Chernyshevsky? Let us explore this apparent paradox more closely.

Fyodor Dostoevsky in 1864

Dostoevsky refuses to accept a society that seemingly satisfies every need and inclination without hindrance or *inner conflict*. If we earlier heard the young Marx claim that suffering is “enjoyment of the self for man,” Dostoevsky couldn’t have agreed more! In his view, humans are “sometimes fearfully, passionately in love with suffering.” Suffering, he declares, is “the sole origin of consciousness.” On the other hand, it is also “the greatest misfortune to man.” It is in this sense that suffering forms the pivot upon which Dostoevsky’s philosophy of humanity turns, and in *Notes* (1961) this vision manifests itself as a truly modern tragedy, laid bare with a bleak and gloomy frankness.

Dostoevsky’s “notes” are narrated in the first person by a nameless “paradoxalist” popularly known as the Underground Man. Part 1 introduces us to his tormented and tormenting philosophical monologue. Forlorn, and at times frenzied, he tries to reveal the psyche of the modern person, a psyche he believes intellect alone cannot hope to grasp fully. He thus embarks upon his spiteful “confession.”⁴ He reminds us that humans are deeply sensuous and spiritual creatures. We are, he says, endowed with consciousness and have the capacity to suffer, feel pain, love, lie, and hate. And we inevitably struggle with our innermost selves and with our external world in that pain. Nevertheless some of us, the Underground Man asserts, have the capacity to feel enormously. These people have more than their normal share of consciousness.

In fact, such people—such underground people—possess what Dostoevsky calls “hyper-consciousness” and are capable of recognizing “every refinement of ‘all the sublime and the beautiful’” (1961, 6–7). They are acutely perceptive not only about themselves, but also about the society in which they live. Their highly developed consciousness, however, comes about through withdrawal and isolation, producing an “intensively developed individuality” (1961, 26). The Underground Man looks upon himself as a “mouse” and brags about how he has “buried himself alive” in a wretched “mousehole for forty years” (11). It almost goes without saying that these furtives pay an intolerably high price: intense emotional and physical suffering. But, according to Dostoevsky, they revel in it.

After all, it is only through this suffering—“delight in one’s own degradation” (7)—that the hyperconscious individuals are able to grasp in any depth their own whims, caprices, doubts, and inner torment. Moreover, these “hysterical cravings for contradictions and contrasts” (42), Dostoevsky’s Underground Man believes, are

4. It ought to be mentioned that Dostoevsky followed Heine in believing that “true” autobiographical writing was impossible since out of sheer vanity authors lied willy-nilly. Rousseau was the specific target of abuse here (see Dostoevsky 1961, 35).

facets not of one particular individual in a particular time and place, but of everybody and in all times and places: it's just, as he says, that a few, like the Underground Man, perhaps like Dostoevsky himself, have "carried to an extreme what others haven't dared to carry halfway" (115). The resultant despair and acutely developed consciousness mean that such individuals are able "to understand the intricacies of sensuality" (14). These people, bizarrely, eventually come to "enjoy" their suffering. For them, there is even enjoyment in toothache (13). Meanwhile, the beautiful and sublime can be sought in the "nastiest, most unquestionable trash."

For Dostoevsky, suffering is positively advantageous. Yet it ensures that humans can never be merely logical, coolly intellectual, thinking beings. Quite the reverse: Dostoevsky believes that humans are complex "compound personalities" who lacerate themselves even when—especially when?—they know it is harmful to do so. From this standpoint, humans are taken to be weak by nature, inclined to outbursts of irrational tantrums and petty acts of rebellion. No amount of common sense or reason and science can determine the desirable, nor can they condition what are to become people's "normal interests." And thank heavens, too, the Underground Man says in his fiendish assault on Chernyshevskian socialism. Look around, he implores, chaos and darkness prevail. What does it betoken? Maybe it suggests that "man will devise destruction and chaos, will devise sufferings of all sorts, and will thereby have his own way." But why do people have such a passionate love for destruction and chaos? "Perhaps," Dostoevsky rejoins, "because [they] like suffering" (31). In the Crystal Palace, "suffering would be unthinkable; suffering means doubt, means negation, and what would be the good of a Crystal Palace if there could be any doubt about it?" (31).

Chernyshevsky's utopia is mercilessly indicted here. Evidently, Dostoevsky sees it as a facile attempt to apply reason to solve existential dilemmas. Dostoevsky believes that such a utopia would only bind people steadfastly to the material world. That sort of society—one purporting to offer total freedom—would, for Dostoevsky, really be a society of total slavery. It would be total slavery because the capacity to *feel inner freedom*, in the knowledge of good and evil, would be dramatically forsaken.

Dostoevsky, however, never rejects reason outright; he rejects nothing outright. It is never that simple. Rather, he has his Underground Man concede, in typically flamboyant fashion, "You see, gentlemen, reason is an excellent thing, there's no disputing that." The problem, though, is that "reason is only reason and can only satisfy man's rational faculty, while will is a manifestation of all life, that is, of all human life including reason as well as all impulses" (25). And impulse, he quips, sometimes "desires the very stupid." Hence desire may oppose reason and who, the Underground Man queries, "can claim the right to reform what humans are to desire?"

This affirmation of humanity radically challenges ideals that equate reason with progress and happiness with the satisfaction of material needs. After revealing the somber sufferings of a *particular* solitary stalwart, Dostoevsky proceeds to assert that suffering is part and parcel of the *universal* human condition. He now enters into the vicinity where Marx's early manuscripts broke off. But can we really accept Dostoevsky's argument as a plausible one?

Dostoevsky, much like Marx, is a great rhetorician. In *Notes*, he is at his rhetorical best. And yet, if we pause to scrutinize his argument, problems emerge. To begin with, he gets both himself and his Underground Man into difficulty by uncritically accepting the utilitarian concept of rationality that Chernyshevsky adopts. For Jeremy Bentham, the archpioneer of utilitarianism, good and evil are defined rationally—defined, that is, in terms of utility. People, it is believed, strive to avoid anything painful and pursue what gives them maximum pleasure. In other words, everybody will try to satisfy their own self-interest. Dostoevsky terms this philosophy “rational egoism” (Frank 1985, 32). Oddly, its major adherents in Russia weren’t so much the conservatives as those radical “men of the sixties” typified by Chernyshevsky himself. But utilitarianism provides only one version of rationality. There are other versions and none are quite as simplistic and narrow as Dostoevsky makes them out to be.⁵

Moreover, Dostoevsky appears implicitly to advocate the status quo. His Underground Man says he prefers an unhappy, “inert” condition to any prospective solution. For him, it’s not so much whether social change is possible—whether society has the wherewithal and knowledge to be perfectible—but whether, indeed, perfectibility is *desirable*. “One’s own free will,” he suggests, “one’s own fancy, however wild it may be, one’s own fancy worked up at times to frenzy—why that is that very most advantageous advantage” (1961, 23). Under such circumstances, human beings are “eccentric” by nature and are riddled with contradictions, doubt, uncertainty, and vacillation; conscious inaction is, correspondingly, preferable to any form of rational praxis. “To begin to act,” the Underground Man pleads, “you know, you must first have your mind completely at ease and without a trace of doubt left in it” (16).

And yet, is Dostoevsky’s antihero really true to his word? For he, too, is prompted to take action of sorts. He, too, is aware that even those with hyperconsciousness—especially those with hyperconsciousness?—cannot survive a life that “is solitary to the point of savagery” (37). Even he recognizes that “human nature *acts as a whole*, with everything that is in it, consciously and unconsciously” (25; emphasis added). If people really are to feel and do the desiring that Dostoevsky holds so precious, surely they can’t remain inert characters? Soon the Underground Man himself is compelled to realize that even his suffering could only be actualized *socially*; he cannot resist “feeling an irresistible desire to plunge into society” (51). Even he has to enter into the world. Even his freedom meant nothing *in itself*. Even his “free will” had to be expressed by interacting with other people. Otherwise, he would have had no being, no free will, no sensual life, no capacity to feel anything at all. And that would be a standpoint terribly antithetical to Dostoevsky’s own.

To emphasize this predicament, let us remember Marx’s thoughts on the issue: “a being which does not have its nature outside itself,” he says, “is not a natural being

5. Still, Dostoevsky was an apt prophet in pinpointing the limitations of reason and spelling out the potential hazards of “rational man” at the helm of civilization. “His critical vision,” Marshall Berman remarks, “suggests how even the most heroic expression of modernity as an adventure may be transformed into a dismal emblem of modernity as routine” (1982, 248).

and plays no part in the system of nature.” Marx reinforces the argument by asking us to “[i]magine a being which is neither an object itself nor has an object.” “In the first place,” he suggests,

such a being would be the *only* being; no other being would exist outside it, it would exist in a condition of solitude. For as soon as there are objects outside me, as soon as I am not *alone*, I am *another*, a reality *other* than it, i.e. its object. A being which is not the object of another being therefore presupposes that *no* objective being exists. As soon as I have an object, this object has me for its subject. But a non-objective being is an unreal, non-sensuous, merely thought, i.e. merely conceived being, a being of abstraction. (1974, 390; emphasis in original)

This complex dialectical proposition sets the tone of Marx’s humanism and of his pregnant conception of species-being. What I shall do in the next section is flesh out how this conception underlies both Marx’s and Dostoevsky’s thoughts on suffering and freedom. This will allow us to begin to see how their respective theses aren’t so much blown apart as they are surprisingly drawn together, forced to join hands—if only momentarily—across a veritable existential abyss.

The Road to Freedom: Humans as Suffering “Species-Beings”

At this point, I want to turn to part 2 of *Notes*. Early on, Dostoevsky’s protagonist says he “tried to stifle all that was continually seething within me by means of external sensations” (1961, 42). This sensibility marks an important shift from part 1, both philosophically and politically, for Dostoevsky now seems to insist that although introspection is vital for self-discovery, it isn’t merely an *internal*, psychological dialectic at play. Now his Underground Man starts to grapple with a practical, *external* dialectic: that which is involved in an individual venturing out into the world and acting politically as a social being. Dostoevsky’s antihero admits that he has “longed for movement” (42). So, one night, he ventures out into the practical world of St. Petersburg in search of “external sensation.” He admits that he “could never stand more than three months of dreaming without feeling an irresistible desire to plunge into society” (51). After three months of isolation, the Underground Man holds a “passionate desire to embrace humanity.” He has a frantic craving for the company of other people and feels a need to “embrace my fellows and all of mankind immediately.” Perhaps Marx would say that he has come face to face with the need to realize himself as a sensuous being, and for this purpose, he needs an object *external to him*. This is crucial; otherwise he would be, in Marx’s words, an “unreal, non-sensuous, merely thought, i.e. merely conceived being, a being of abstraction.” Existing in a condition of solitude, he wouldn’t exist as a human being at all.

Hence his obligatory perambulations around the “obscure places” buried deep within St. Petersburg. At one point, he recalls that he witnessed a brawl at a tavern where a man was thrown out of a window by a powerfully built army officer (Dostoevsky 1961,

42–9). In his striving for recognition as a sensuous object—a sensuous species-being—the Underground Man so envied the person thrown out the window that he “even went into the tavern and into the billiard-room” hoping that he would “have a fight, too, and they’ll throw me out of the window” (43). But when the fighting, six-foot, aristocratic officer fails to notice him—fails to recognize him as a worthy opponent, fails to acknowledge his *presence*—the Underground Man beats a hasty, yet unforgiving retreat. The officer’s action (or nonaction) rendered the Underground Man a nonsensuous being, a being without an object, a being of abstraction. Plainly, this is too much to endure.

Thereafter his suffering ferments as a tormenting resentment, an obsessional hatred of the officer. Implicit therein is a desire to maintain his dignity, and this desire, in turn, requires a right to *mutual respect*, a right to equal footing. Individuality is realized socially, Dostoevsky seems to be saying, and at this point, the emphasis on an “intensely developed individuality” takes a surprising dialectical twist. Humans have a right to free will and a right to suffer, but they also have the right to do so with a sense of justice and dignity. Dignity is required to uphold one’s individuality. The Underground Man’s struggle for his own dignity occurs out in the public arena, along the Nevsky Prospect, the major St. Petersburg thoroughfare where the lower ranks usually give way to their social superiors. But one day the Underground Man doesn’t give way. At last he has his revenge. After spotting his old adversary approaching along the Prospect, haughtily striding through everybody, heeding only his own superiors, the Underground Man marches toward him full tilt. He’s done this several times before, we’re told, but has always lost his nerve and moved aside at the last moment. Now, however, he refuses to give ground. He doesn’t budge an inch and attempts to pass the officer on an equal footing. They collide on the Prospect, and naturally the frailer Underground Man comes off worse and is sent sprawling across the pavement. But, as he says, the “point was that I had attained my goal, I had kept up my dignity” (49).

By taking his stand, the Underground Man supplants the inertia he had extolled in part 1 with action, with political action. In this action, too, reason and feeling, individuality and sociality, thought and practice, become inextricably linked for Dostoevsky. Now the Underground Man had realized his status as a “sensuous-being” which, in Marx’s words, provides the “means for . . . individual life.” Moreover, this act of defiance reveals someone who curses authority and who confronts the structures of power and social superiors at the same time as they confront, with apocalyptic fervor, their own inner anguish. Perhaps Dostoevsky’s viewpoint isn’t so far removed from Marx’s after all.

Consider, in this vein, Nikolai Dobrolyubov’s well-known judgment of Dostoevsky. The point to bear in mind here is that Dobrolyubov was himself a socialist radical of the 1860s generation and a good friend of Chernyshevsky’s. Nevertheless, he spotted in Dostoevsky something very useful for socialists. Indeed, he sympathetically characterized Dostoevsky as a great humanist writer: “the main tenor [in Dostoevsky] at least is compassion for the humiliated man and a careful search into his soul for

glimmerings of human dignity and protest" (Seduro 1957, 30). Dobrolyubov stressed Dostoevsky's concern with "downtrodden people," those injured and insulted who, like the Underground Man, when put to the test, proved more than capable of fighting for their rights and taking to the streets.

It might be argued that Marx's conception of species-being has distinctive Dostoevskian overtones. In the *Manuscripts*, he affirms the primacy of "free conscious activity" in the "species-character" of human beings. He, like Dostoevsky, is keen to emphasize the necessity of free will. He, too, emphasizes the importance of individuality. That is why he indicts capitalism so ardently. It restricts the parameters for free individual development. It is bourgeois society that frequently treats human beings as machines and forces people to behave like "piano keys" and "organ stops," to adopt Dostoevsky's terminology. To that extent, Marx is equally concerned with letting people fully express their individualities and unrealized desires.

Marx believes that private property relations have "made us so stupid and one-sided that an object is only ours when we have it, when it exists for us as capital" (1974, 351). The "supersession of private property," he hopes, will lead to "the complete emancipation of all senses and attributes" (1974, 352). For Marx, communism is a prerequisite for the complete "restoration" of human beings as human beings. For Marx, communism is "the *genuine* resolution of the conflict between man and nature . . . between man and man, [and] the true resolution of the conflict between existence and being . . . between individual and species" (348; emphasis in original). In such a state, the "object, which is the direct activity of their individuality, is at the same time their existence for other people" (349). Then, Marx believes that human beings will be able to feel "real life" and to have "more life" in them (again I am using Dostoevsky's terms). Then, and only then, will all the human senses—seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling, thinking, contemplating, sensing, wanting, acting, loving (this time the words are Marx's)—blossom as "organs of individuality."

Marx seems to suggest that our capacity to feel would intensify under communism. And that intensification, in turn, may accentuate positive as well as negative emotions. Indeed, Marx hints that in postcapitalist society, emotional suffering may even increase. Here Marx is probably trying to visualize suffering in a much more positive light. That's probably why he also says, so intriguingly, that suffering is "enjoyment of the self for man." Marx is probably telling us that feeling and hurting and suffering—both physical and emotional—are kinds of knowledge. When we feel and suffer, we're able to learn things about ourselves that intellect alone can't discern. And this learning process happens to everybody, everywhere, and at all times. We all suffer. Nobody is immune. It is what is *universal* to us as a species. It follows, then, that Marx's future citizens would not be strictly intellectual and utilitarian beings: they, we, wouldn't experience "one-sided individuality"; they, we, would experience life fully.

So both Marx and Dostoevsky defend the right to feel and to suffer, and both locate this capacity in consciousness itself. Neither visionary takes the sensuous as

merely empirical or neurological: for both it is at once emotional and spiritual. For Marx, human beings have "spiritual means of life" (1974, 328); consciousness, in the "totality of its determinations," makes us "intrinsically spiritual beings" (388). Yet he firmly locates the origins of this spirituality in the here and now: its foundations are terrestrial, rooted in our world, in our relations with each other, and in the totality of our interactions with nature.

For Dostoevsky, spirituality in the last analysis becomes synonymous with *faith*. That is why he rejected reason so vehemently. He took all "modern" thought as unanimously denying faith and belief in Christ and God. Apparently, in the final part of *Notes* Dostoevsky originally included a passage that invoked the necessity of faith and belief in Christ. But the censors, he said, eventually deleted it.⁶ What Dostoevsky conceived, if we can believe him, was a tormented individual, a perpetual victim, who was morally pure and whose sufferings were based upon a free will and self-assertion in "the knowledge of good and evil."⁷ Human suffering, in a nutshell, represents the freedom that Christ embodies.⁸

Notes from Underground presaged Dostoevsky's later concern with suffering and faith. In *Crime and Punishment*, published two years later, he deepened and strengthened his views, while redoubling his assault on radical nihilism. There he sets up his protagonist, Raskolnikov, as a new man of the sixties, but later tears him down and exposes the absurdity of his radical views. Raskolnikov dabbles with European-oriented rationalism and flouts accepted codes of morality. For Raskolnikov, "all was permitted" and Dostoevsky has him commit double murder. But afterward he has him stew with guilt and intense emotional and psychological anguish. Eventually

6. He wrote his brother Mikhail on 26 March 1864: "Those swinish censors left in the passages where I railed at everything and pretended to blaspheme; but they deleted the passages where I deduced from all this the necessity of faith and Christ" (Dostoevsky 1962, emphasis in original).

7. I say "if we can believe him" because it is strange that all the reprintings of *Notes* never put the supposed excluded passage back in. Joseph Frank suggests that at "no period of his life would Dostoevsky have relished the dangerous and time-consuming prospect of attempting to persuade the censors to reverse an earlier ruling. To have tried to do so would only have imperilled and delayed the publication of the reprints and collected editions of his work on which he counted for badly needed income" (1985, 328).

8. Dostoevsky drew much sustenance for his views on suffering, particularly on senseless suffering, from the Old Testament Book of Job. Take, for instance, the incidence of the suffering of innocent children that Ivan chronicles in *The Brothers Karamazov*. This bears an uncanny resemblance to the senseless destruction of Job's own sons and daughters, even though Job himself was "blameless and upright . . . feared God and turned away from evil." The grief-stricken and boil-strewn Job laments (much like Ivan and the Underground Man himself), "let the night be solitary, let no joyful cry be heard in it."

We shouldn't forget to mention Nietzsche here. Nietzsche sees suffering and joyous life as synonymous, yet in a radically different manner from Dostoevsky. He attacked the sort of suffering that is linked with pity and self-contempt, like Christian suffering. Sufferers who cave in to their sufferings and who cultivate an affinity with the lowly were also savagely upbraided by Nietzsche. This kind of suffering represents another debilitating herd morality which precludes true independent greatness. Sufferers, for Nietzsche, should grasp the nettle of their ordeals and strengthen their own will. Thus, Nietzsche appropriates Dostoevsky's insight on suffering, but makes it work for him in his assault on Christianity and Christian values. Yet, as many agree, without Dostoevsky there would probably have been no Nietzsche. And Nietzsche forever acknowledged Dostoevsky as a true kindred soul and as a psychologist after his own heart.

Raskolnikov confesses, turns himself in, and undergoes a dramatic redemption in Siberia where he atones for his sins. Sonya, the major female character, instills in him an ethic of “submissive and limitless love for mankind,” and Raskolnikov’s “journey from evil to good, from a rebellious individualism . . . to a pious acquiescence in the way things are” is thereby completed (Mathewson 1958, 20).

Dostoevsky’s conception of suffering here is fundamentally different from Marx’s. Yet it is worth noting that Marx never actually urged the wholesale destruction and suppression of religion. After all, it was he who “*knew* religion as alienated human self-consciousness” (1974, 393; emphasis in original). Thus religion, according to Marx, absorbs and reveals human sorrows and desires and would probably wither away in a society that could fulfill these desires. “Religion,” he says in “On the Jewish Question,” “overcomes the narrowness of the profane world” (1978, 34). One could perhaps ask, then, as Berlinsky had in the 1870s: if Dostoevsky’s Christ should ever appear, would he join the socialist movement and become its head? Dostoevsky’s last novel, *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880), sheds some light on this question. There, he suggests that atheist socialists are the most religious people of our time. And just prior to his own death in 1881, he spoke of the sequel to *Karamazov*. Now Alyosha, the young contemplative monk, is a mature man who has left the monastery to “search for the truth.” “In his quest,” Dostoevsky admits, he “would naturally have become a revolutionary.” Alyosha’s activism would culminate with the attempted assassination of Czar Alexander II and later he would, like Dostoevsky himself, ascend the gallows. But Alyosha, unlike Dostoevsky, would be executed for his subversion.

We can speculate that had Dostoevsky lived to write the sequel to *Karamazov*, Raskolnikov’s “pious acquiescence” would have been overshadowed by Alyosha’s militant radicalism. In any event, it seems clear that Dostoevsky’s and Marx’s concepts of suffering aren’t necessarily politically antithetical. Perhaps, in the end, we could argue that Marx’s suffering is political with existential and philosophical overtones whereas Dostoevsky’s is religious and existential with political overtones. Either way, it seems, suffering is a necessary phase for both writers in the quest for human emancipation and freedom.

“Future Man” as “Paradoxalist”?

Marx, in 1844, and Dostoevsky, in 1864, each assert the centrality of consciousness and suffering in their writings on present and future human conditions. As I have argued, there are surprising points of convergence in their work. It is only in their ultimate implications that they go separate paths, and maybe even then those aren’t irredeemably inseparable. Given Marx’s notes on suffering, it’s hard to see him positing socialism as a Crystal Palace. Marx never imagined a society organized around icy logic, in which the satisfaction of physical needs is paramount. This clearly isn’t what he advocates in 1844. His “total person” would be an intensely spiritual, passionate, and sensuous human being. Consequently, Marx’s total person would act

and think very differently from the “future man” envisaged by Chernyshevsky, that supposedly enlightened and heroic person whom Dostoevsky pilloried so scathingly in *Notes*. Marx’s socialist citizen would probably resemble Dostoevsky’s “paradoxalist”: total human beings and paradoxicalists alike would be free individuals, equipped with vital powers and passions, and their lives would not be reducible to “mathematical exactitude.”

But there is a difference between Marx’s and Dostoevsky’s views on suffering. It is here that Marx’s analysis is particularly instructive. For Marx, it is *precisely because* we suffer and feel pain that it behooves us to seek ways of reducing and abolishing *certain kinds of pain and suffering*. He demands that we bear in mind that some people suffer directly from the actions of others and, often, those actions receive implicit institutional and legal endorsement.⁹ Marx reminds us that suffering is *highly uneven*: some people suffer more than others. Indeed, some suffer minimally, suffer little pain through want, suffer no persecution and prejudice, aren’t exploited in the work place or in the home. Thus Marx’s concept of suffering takes the point of view of those who *do* suffer and who, under an alternative social system, might suffer and feel differently, perhaps as “universal free beings” and not as estranged and one-sided ones. This vision is the central philosophical tenet upon which Marx’s mature critique of political economy is founded, and it remains implicit in his later writings. As for Dostoevsky, on the other hand, while his notion of suffering has implicit Christian connotations, it, too, as we’ve observed, has a deep empathy with the lowly and the oppressed and defeated. Dostoevsky’s underground furtive announced early on that “people who have never received a slap in the face will not understand [his plight and torment]” (1961, 11).

True, Marx is ambiguous about how desire and thought may be transformed with the abolition of private property relations, with the smashing of the state, and with the establishment of a new society based upon need rather than want. Moreover, Dostoevsky has warned us that want and desire don’t proceed along logical grounds; sometimes, he says, people may desire the very stupid. It is here, perhaps, that Dostoevsky extends Marx’s thesis on suffering, making it an integral component in his conception of humanity. Dostoevsky insists that the world is full of capricious and contradictory characters who may be in “opposition to reason, honour, peace and prosperity” (1961, 20). Furthermore, these “eccentric” individuals may be unwilling to sacrifice their own personal freedom for any practical or material benefit.

There is, in closing, perhaps enough empirical validation in the world today—in our own everyday lives and in those events we witness through the mass media—where rocket fire, bomb blasts, screams, grief, and suffering are ever present—to

9. Curiously, some of Marx’s graphic portrayals of the sufferings of children resemble Ivan’s harrowing descriptions in *Karamazov* (see Marx 1967, chap. 10, sect. 3). Dostoevsky has Ivan ask whether the unmitigated suffering of human beings is “due to men’s bad qualities or whether it’s inherent in their nature” (1945, 242). Ivan (Dostoevsky?) believes the latter to be true; he cites numerous newspaper reports of barbarity toward children as evidence. Marx, of course, parts company with Ivan because he views these pathologies as largely societal and not essential.

suggest that we can't dismiss Dostoevsky's view out of hand. Indeed, as he admonishes, we seem to be able to appreciate the sublime and the beautiful at the same time as we devise horrific systems of destruction and engage in abominable bloodshed. Marxists may need to take heed of Dostoevsky's wisdom, and venture down into the abyss that his Underground Man opened up. A Marxism informed by Dostoevsky will, of course, be a more problematic Marxism. But it may also be a Marxism that is better equipped for comprehending the complexities and traumas of the next millennium. That Marxism looms over the debris of the period Eric Hobsbawm describes as the "short twentieth century" suggests that there isn't great cause to be overly optimistic about a rosy future. But this doesn't have to be as gloomy as it sounds. For, as Marx and Dostoevsky both illustrate, a radiant "thirst for life," in Ivan Karamazov's words, *and* apocalyptic doom and suffering have always been locked together in a complex dialectical tussle. Throughout human history the divide has sometimes been so thin that there is hardly any divide at all. Marxists everywhere can learn much from Marx's and Dostoevsky's respective visions of the strengths and weaknesses of humanity. Both compel us to take suffering seriously and to consider it in both its existential and historical guises. We cannot hope to construct a Crystal Palace, but Marx and Dostoevsky challenge us to imagine more free and more open-ended societies.

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