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## Rethinking the Alternative to Capitalism

This essay is a polemic with Peter Hudis's paper *Yes, There Is An Alternative – And It Can Be Found in Marx* in the context of his broader conception (*Marx's Concept of the Alternative to Capitalism* (Brill 2013)). The author analyses the mentioned proposition and its ability to answer to the following questions – the “classical” one (Did Marx develop an alternative to capitalism?) and the “contemporary” one (Did Marx develop an alternative to capitalism, which matters for us?). According to the author orders constituted by both of these questions are disturbingly melted in Hudis work.

**Keywords:** alternative to capitalism, Marx, Hudis, communism

On the face of it, Peter Hudis asks a very straightforward question in his recent book and the related article in this volume: Does Marx present an account of the alternative to capitalism? (Answering in the affirmative, the question follows: What is it?)<sup>1</sup> However, this question is arguably conflated with another – to my mind, quite distinct – question: Does Marx present an account of the alternative to capitalism *that speaks to us*? (Again answering in the affirmative, the question follows: In what way?)<sup>2</sup> This conflation of what we might call the Classical Question and the Contemporary Question is suggested by the following passage:

[...] is it conceivable that Marx could remain the philosopher of the era without being able to teach us anything about what should replace capitalism? Is it really plausible that the foremost critic of capital had nothing to say to the effort to envision its transcendence?<sup>3</sup>

We need to assume a number of things here: (1) that Marx was (or is) *the* philosopher of some era; (2) that the era in question can be defined in terms of capitalism; (3) that this era includes our time as well as Marx's; (4) that this era (or capitalism) is a suitable subject for philosophical inquiry; and (5) that Marx was in the business of philosophizing about this subject (*throughout* his intellectual career). Assumptions (2) and (3) are *relatively* uncontroversial. Assumptions (1), (4), and (5) are highly controversial. Nevertheless, I accept these assumptions for present purposes (with certain reservations about assumption (5) that will become apparent in what follows). I also claim, in response to Hudis, that (a) it is quite plausible that Marx (understood as Philosopher of the Era) had nothing – or, at least, nothing of significance – to say about the transcendence of capitalism and (b) it is perfectly conceivable that Marx has nothing – or, at least, nothing of significance – to teach us about the

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1 Hudis states that he intends „to survey Marx's work with one aim: to see what implicit or explicit indications it contains about a future, non-alienating society.” See Peter Hudis, *Marx's Concept of the Alternative to Capitalism* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 5.

2 The conflation is evident when, at the close of his introductory chapter, Hudis reframes his project in terms of an attempt „to discern whether [Marx] has a distinctive concept of a new society *that addresses the realities of the twenty-first century.*” See *Ibid.*, 35.

3 „Yes, There Is An Alternative – And It Can Be Found in Marx”, 7. Arguably, the very title of this article reflects the conflation in question. See Peter Hudis, “Yes, There Is An Alternative – And It Can Be Found in Marx”, *Praktyka Teoretyczna* 9 (2014): XXX.

alternative to capitalism. At any rate, many – if not the majority – of scholars have found these things plausible and conceivable. One might reasonably argue, for instance, that Marx was simply a critic – albeit “the foremost critic” – of capitalism, who offered a (more or less) scientific diagnosis of the contradictions of capitalism (or even a moral critique of its ills), but had nothing of significance to say about its alternatives to us or even to his contemporaries.

Hudis presents some arguments in his book (though not his article) for the “implausibility” of Marx not having anything to say about the transcendence of capitalism. These arguments are rather difficult to disentangle, but three may be identified.<sup>4</sup> The first argument concerns the inevitable normative content of descriptive claims (in this case, about the future). Hudis writes: “That (Marx) said relatively *little* about the future (...) has been wrongly interpreted to mean that he said *nothing* about the future.” Granted, if Marx said a little about the future, he did not say nothing about it (though saying a little does not necessarily equate to saying anything of significance). But, worse than this, “it has been wrongly interpreted to mean that one *ought* not to say anything about the future – presumably because normative considerations and ‘oughts’ are out of place for ‘socialists’ and ‘historical materialists.’” This particular line of interpretation is, however, “self-refuting” because every descriptive claim contains normative content; in fact, “Normative considerations are as inescapable as language itself, precisely because what *ought* to be is inscribed within what *is*.” This argument is difficult to sustain. Are we to maintain that, say, the descriptive claims of a meteorologist about the future (strictly speaking, predictive claims like – it might be argued – those of Marx) necessarily have normative content? What of the following proposition: “Owing to our analysis of today’s (largely wet) climatic conditions, we declare that tomorrow’s conditions will be very different (not-wet)”?

The second argument for the implausibility of Marx not having anything to say about the transcendence of capitalism, which is seemingly run together in the text with the first, concerns the inevitable futuristic dimension of criticism of the present. Hudis writes: “Much as (Marx) may have wanted to avoid speaking about the future, he often found it necessary to do so *precisely because the elements of the future are contained within the very structure of the present* that he subjected to such careful and painstaking critical examination.” However, even if this is so – necessarily so – it does not follow (as we have already indicated)

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4 Hudis, *Marx’s Concept of the Alternative to Capitalism*, 211–212.

that the futuristic dimension in Marx's work is of a normative or prescriptive type. We might regard Marx like the reluctant meteorologist who is forced to make limited descriptive or predictive claims about the future: claims to the effect that, if the present is unsustainably *x*, *y*, and *z* (a critical judgement about the present), the future – an alternative future worthy of the name – will be not-*x*, *y*, and *z* (a predictive judgement about the future). It is difficult, in any event, to see why this must be so: why a critical judgement (in the relevant “scientific” sense that may be taken to apply to Marx) about the present necessarily commits one to saying anything (even of a descriptive nature) about the future. The reluctant meteorologist might pluck up some courage and refuse to make even limited descriptive or predictive claims about the future – when all he really wants to do is to make sense of present conditions (interestingly unstable conditions, for example). In any case, even if Marx was in the business of philosophizing about capitalism, and his criticism of the capitalist present was of a normative variety (though it need not be so, as I will argue below), it is difficult to see why this should entail a futuristic dimension to his work. If the moral philosopher says that features *x*, *y*, and *z* of capitalism are wrong, he or she is hardly required as a matter of necessity to say anything – or anything of significance – about an alternative world in which, in principle, features *x*, *y*, and *z* are absent; beyond saying, at most, that such a world would be desirable (to that extent).

The third argument for the implausibility of Marx not having anything to say about the transcendence of capitalism concerns the inevitable normative dimension of criticism of the present. Hudis writes: “Marx definitely understood his role as delineating the ‘law of motion’ of capitalism towards its collapse, but the very fact that he analysed it with this aim in mind suggests that he approached his subject matter with the conception of the necessity for its transcendence.” This is fine: Marx predicted the “collapse” of capitalism; he thought this collapse had to happen (for specific reasons). But Hudis continues:

If he did not have a specific kind of *future* in mind, why would he have adopted the specific argumentative approach found in his greatest theoretical work, *Capital*, which centres upon tracing out the processes towards *dissolution* of a given social phenomenon? Marx's entire vantage point hinges on not just *having*, but also being *committed* to, a specific vision of the future.

It is not clear why a judgement – one that may in itself be descriptive or predictive – of “collapse” or “dissolution”, or a delineation or

tracing of an anticipated process towards the same, necessarily requires a “vision” – let alone a normative or prescriptive vision – of “a *specific* kind of future”. I predicted the collapse of the Irish economy – for fairly unsophisticated reasons, in comparison with Marx – without (I think it is fair to say) having any vision of the alternative to that economy, let alone one to which I was committed or that I prescribed to others.

Overall, Hudis seems to believe that Marx *had* to talk about the future (from the second argument) and *had* to do so in normative terms (from the first and third arguments). His general case for the necessity of all of this is, I think, unconvincing. But this does not mean that Marx did not have anything to say about the transcendence of capitalism *as a matter of fact*. Whether he did so is a matter that the Classical Question addresses, not one that can be resolved *a priori*.

In any case, to return to the issue of Classical and Contemporary questions, even if Marx did have something of significance to say about the transcendence of capitalism (as a matter of fact), it does not follow that he has something of significance to *teach us* about the alternative to capitalism. (We assume here that transcendence-talk and alternative-talk amount to the same thing; that, say, the former is not process-talk while the latter is outcome-talk.) The reason for this is very simple. Even if we live in the same era as Marx, it does not follow that the perceived alternatives to capitalism are (or ought to be) fixed within this era. The fact is that we know more (or at least are in a position to know more) about the capitalist era and its possible alternatives than Marx. It is highly doubtful that Marx himself would now view capitalism and its possible alternatives in the same light. Marx was highly sensitive to historical developments, including those that were not – and perhaps could not have been – anticipated.

Of course, Hudis is not blind to this issue. At the conclusion of his article, he writes:

This does not suggest that Marx has the “answer” all worked out. We are the ones who have to work it out, on the basis of the realities of *our* time. But we can’t build the roof without the foundation—which is supplied by the creative Mind of Marx.<sup>5</sup>

Therefore, we need to adapt Marx’s (alleged) view of the alternative to capitalism to our circumstances; but we do not need to radically

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5 Hudis, “Yes, There Is An Alternative”, XX.

revise it. In principle, this is a defensible position. But it is a *dual* position: a position about Marx's (alleged) "foundations" *and* the manner in which we might make use of them or build on them. These two aspects should be carefully distinguished, such that Marx is not presented as if he were speaking *directly* to us. And one way to distinguish these aspects is to distinguish carefully (more carefully than Hudis does, I feel) between the associated questions. The Classical Question, "Does Marx present an account of the alternative to capitalism?", is not the same as the Contemporary Question, "Does Marx present an account of the alternative to capitalism *that speaks to us?*" Of course, it makes no sense to attempt to answer the second question unless the answer to the first question is affirmative. For that reason, it is not surprising that Hudis has more to say about the history of ideas than contemporary politics. Nevertheless, it is clear that contemporary politics motivate his historical investigation. His interest in the Contemporary Question motivates his pursuit of the Classical Question,<sup>6</sup> such that – in this context – we might term the former the Motivating Question and the latter the Substantive Question. Again, these questions are non-identical and cannot be answered simultaneously. I shall look briefly at the Motivating Question before turning to the Substantive Question in an attempt to clarify it.

What motivates Hudis's project is the need for an account of the alternative to capitalism in a period of increased "anti-capitalist sentiment and agitation" brought about by "the realization that 'actually existing capitalism' has little to offer humanity except decades of economic austerity, declining living standards, and massive environmental destruction."<sup>7</sup> As yet, no adequate alternative has been proposed. Consequently, we are drawn back to the greatest theorist of capitalism,

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6 Continuing on from the passage quoted in footnote 1, Hudis writes: „Why, one might ask, begin here at all? The reason is that Marx is not simply one of a number of important thinkers but the founder of a distinctive approach to the understanding of capitalism that retains its historical relevance so long as capitalism remains in existence [...]. His work delineates the parameter of possibility for the study of capital – as well as of the alternative to it.” (Hudis, *Marx's Concept of the Alternative to Capitalism*, 5–6.) Any interest in capitalism and its alternative today (the Contemporary Question) necessarily leads to the consideration of Marx (the Classical Question).

7 Hudis, "Yes, There Is An Alternative", XX.... Hudis opens his book with a similar contextual statement concerning „the phenomenon of globalisation”, „the emergence of a global-justice movement”, and „the worldwide financial and economic crisis that began in 2008”. See Hudis, *Marx's Concept of the Alternative to Capitalism*, 1.

Marx: *surely* he has something to teach us, the best part of a century and a half later! Hence, the Contemporary or Motivating Question. Hudis acknowledges that many scholars deny (perhaps absurdly, given the three arguments discussed above) that Marx had anything of significance to say about the alternative to capitalism (from which we might learn). Above all, they point to an anti-speculative or “anti-utopian” strain in Marx’s writings: a stated resistance to “inventing ‘blueprints about the future.’”<sup>8</sup> However, with the increased availability of his writings in a post-communist context, there is, Hudis claims, an opportunity to reappraise Marx’s understanding (if such he had) of the alternative to capitalism. In other words, we are now presented with an opportunity to revisit the Classical Question.

Having arrived at Hudis’s basic *problem* (the Classical Question) and discussed his *motivation* for dealing with it (the Contemporary Question), we should consider his *method*. As the previous comment about the increased availability of Marx’s writings indicates, Hudis’s method is broadly textual. That is to say, Hudis does not attempt, for example, to identify a “concept of the alternative to capitalism” in Marx’s political activity, as the explicit or implicit objective of that activity. He might have done so, perhaps quite fruitfully. Instead, he seeks to re-examine the full body of Marx’s published and unpublished writings in order to identify this concept. There are obvious difficulties with this approach, however.<sup>9</sup> For one thing, “Marx never wrote a book devoted to the alternative, and he was extremely wary about indulging in speculation about the future.” Nevertheless, Hudis argues, “numerous comments and suggestions are found throughout his works about the transcendence of value-production and the contours of a postcapitalist future.” The second difficulty is that these mere comments and suggestions do not (typically) amount to explicit claims about the alternative to capitalism. Hudis contends, however, that Marx’s writings do “speak implicitly or indirectly to the matter in important ways”; specifically, his explicit critique of capitalism “rests upon an implicit understanding on his part of what human existence would consist of” in its absence. The third difficulty, closely related to the second, is that Marx’s writings on capitalism seem entirely critical, so that positive claims concerning the alternative to capitalism are not *immediately* apparent. However, an appreciation of Marx’s relationship to Hegel requires a subtler reading of his critique: an attempt to apprehend the positive content that it

8 Ibid., 3.

9 See Ibid., 4–5, where the following quotes in this paragraph can be found.

The Classical Question, „Does Marx present an account of the alternative to capitalism?“, is not the same as the Contemporary Question, „Does Marx present an account of the alternative to capitalism that speaks to us?“

*necessarily* yields. Hudis’s textual approach can be characterized more precisely, therefore, as a process of dialectical reconstruction and comprehension of diffuse remarks from Marx’s entire body of work.<sup>10</sup>

So, to turn to matters Substantive, how does Hudis answer the Classical Question? To put it bluntly, I am not sure that he really does answer it. Or, at any rate, I am not sure that he answers it by his own standards. There are two reasons for this. First, all that Hudis reveals about Marx’s alternative to capitalism is *negative*. “Marx’s concept of socialism or communism is, his article tells us, ‘based on the *abolition* of wage labour, capital and value production.’” The alternative to capitalism represents a “*break* from value production altogether.” Marx therefore “reached for a totally new kind of society, one that would *annul* the prevailing concept of time in a capitalist society.”<sup>11</sup> In the Conclusion to his book, he claims to have shown that “a coherent and vital concept of a new society is contained in the works of Marx.” He then summarizes this concept – or the findings of the four chronologically arranged chapters in which he investigates it – in terms of: “strong *opposition* to any formation or situation in which individuals become dominated by social relations and products of their own making”; “*criticism* of the inversion of subject and predicate, which is evident from his early writings on the state and civil society [and] carries over into his *critique* of the economic formations of capitalism, in which the self-development of individuals becomes thwarted by the products of their productive activity”; “*criticism* (of) the domination of things over individuals, of dead labour over living labour, of the object over the subject”; and “(*opposition* to) capitalist commodity-production (and) also the system of value production upon which it is based”. Hudis closes his summary paragraph on Marx’s ‘coherent and vital concept’ of the alternative to capitalism in the following fashion:

Marx’s *critique* of capital is part of a complex argument directed *against* all social phenomena that take on a life of their own and dictate the behaviour and actions of the social agents that are responsible for creating them.<sup>12</sup>

Thus, it appears that the alternative consists in the critique. The answer to the Classical Question – Does Marx present an account of the al-

10 He is therefore bound to acknowledge at the end of his book that “This is not to say that Marx provides anything in the way of a detailed answer as to what is a viable alternative to capitalism.” What he does provide are “crucial conceptual markers and suggestions” and (conflating Classical and Contemporary issues once again) these “can help a new generation chart its way towards the future”. *Ibid.*, 215.

11 Hudis, “Yes, There Is An Alternative”, XXX.

12 Hudis, *Marx’s Concept of the Alternative to Capitalism*, 207.





The second reason why I believe Hudis does not actually answer the Classical Question is that – in his moralized reading of Marx’s social theory – he confuses ethics and politics, or seems to believe that his quest for a socio-political alternative is satisfied by the identification of an ethical outlook. The latter, it appears, necessarily yields the former. Having outlined Marx’s “coherent and vital concept of a new society” in the negative manner discussed above, Hudis continues:

Marx’s philosophical approach, both to the critique of capitalism and to the delineation of its alternative, is rooted in a particular conception of *freedom*. Free development, for Marx, is not possible if human activity and its products take on the form of an autonomous power and proscribe the parameters in which individuals can express their natural and acquired talents and abilities.<sup>15</sup>

Hudis reiterates that Marx’s ethic of freedom underpins his critique of capitalism for being x, y, and z. He adds (after a leap in reasoning) that Marx’s “conception of a postcapitalist society is *therefore* radically different from what has characterised most approaches to ‘socialism’ and ‘communism’” and that this conception is “*therefore* both expansive and visionary, in that it *excludes* any social formation that takes on an autonomous power at the expense of its creators.”<sup>16</sup> Hence, on the basis of a particular ethic, Marx develops a critique – that is, a moral rather than a scientific critique, according to Hudis – of capitalism for being x, y, and z, and an alternative to capitalism framed in negative terms, that is, in terms of the *exclusion* of x, y, and z. (We may note that Hudis makes much of the fact that this *negative* alternative is envisioned as occurring *in stages*.<sup>17</sup> Thus, the *complete exclusion* of x, y, and z will be *non-immediate*, according to Marx.) Marx’s negative alternative may be defensible and adequate for certain theoretical or practical purposes (though Hudis appears to deny this), but it is hardly “expansive and visionary.” That a negative socio-political vision is based on a positive ethic does not render the alternative itself “positive.” Nor does supplementing the positive ethic of freedom with additional ethical principles, such as an imprecisely formulated principle of distributive justice, namely, the principle of distribution according to need that can be found in Marx’s “most sustained, detailed, and explicit discussion of a postcapitalist society”, his *Critique of the Gotha Programme*.<sup>18</sup> Put

15 Hudis, *Marx’s Concept of the Alternative to Capitalism*, 207–208.

16 *Ibid.*, 208–209.

17 See *Ibid.*, 190 and Hudis, “Yes, There Is An Alternative”, XXX.

18 Hudis, *Marx’s Concept of the Alternative to Capitalism*, 187.

simply, even if one (which is positively characterized) underpins the other (which is negatively characterized), *an ethic is not a politic*, nor does it entail such a thing.

I speculate that Hudis's failure to answer the Classical Question (by his own standards) may result from his omission to clarify this question at the outset. The attempt to answer the Classical Question, which was motivated by an interest in the Contemporary Question, should have been preceded by an attempt to answer the Clarificatory Question: What would it *mean* for Marx (or anybody else) to present an account of the "alternative" to capitalism (or any other social order)? This is the question that I will take up in the remainder of this article.

Without answering the Clarificatory Question, Hudis fails to establish success conditions for an answer to his question (i.e., the Classical Question). Therefore, it is unclear what would allow him to answer the question in the affirmative: a mere mention of a future society; a detailed account of a future society; or something else entirely. What constitutes an "alternative", at least in the context of (critical and revolutionary) social theory? In this context, we know that it is some kind of society or social order. Hudis flip-flops between the notion that Marx proposed an "expansive" and indeed "coherent" conception of an alternative social order and the notion that "he said relatively *little* about the future", that he does not provide "anything in the way of a detailed answer as to what is a viable alternative to capitalism."<sup>19</sup> Regardless of the level of detail, we might wonder initially whether Hudis conceives of an "alternative" in normative and moral terms or in descriptive and predictive terms. It becomes apparent that the answer – a controversial answer in the case of Marx – is the former. An "alternative" is apparently a good social order, or at least one that (if imperfect) is meaningfully better than the present social order. It is one that does not exist in the present, but might (or perhaps must) do so in the future. Thus, we are concerned with the idea of *future social progress*: of future change for the better in the socio-political domain. At issue is the standard of betterment: the measure of such social progress. This is to be understood as a social vision or, more precisely, a social ideal – *not*, it should be emphasized, a moral ideal or conception of the good, which would be the standard of moral progress. Hudis arguably mistakes Marx's (supposed) moral ideal of freedom for a substantive social vision. The former may underpin the latter, but it is not the same thing.

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19 Ibid., 209, 207, 211, 215.

We may now reformulate the Classical Question as follows: Does Marx have a social vision? Does he “envision” a desirable future social order?<sup>20</sup> If the answer is affirmative, the question follows: What is it, or how detailed is it? Incidentally, the singularity of the relevant social vision – the singularity of the standard of betterment – is indicated by continual references to “*the* alternative to capitalism”. Whether this means that Marx is seen to operate with a single standard (for theoretical purposes, say) or that there *is* only a single standard (a single direction in which future social progress can occur, at least according to Marx) is unstated.

Hudis’s investigation of Marx’s concept of the alternative to capitalism therefore points to two dimensions of his thought: a futuristic dimension; and a normative dimension. Hudis argues, as we saw above, that these are inevitable dimensions of a critical theory of the social present. We deny this. However, they *are* inevitable dimensions of a theory of future social progress: of *future* change *for the better* in the socio-political domain. Taking these dimensions in isolation, and examining the futuristic dimension first, we can distinguish three relevant issues: the *descriptive*, the *prescriptive*, and the *pragmatic* issues. The descriptive issue concerns the *predictability* of a given socio-political future. The prescriptive issue concerns the *desirability* of a given socio-political future. And the pragmatic issue concerns the *possibility* of a given socio-political future. The futuristic dimension in Marx’s thought arguably covers all three of these issues. Marx might be seen – as theorist of history, politics, and revolution – to predict a postcapitalist future that is both possible and desirable. In this case, there would be a certain tension between the descriptive and pragmatic claims. Why, one might ask, worry about the possibility of that which is predicted to come about anyway? Why supplement philosophy of history with revolutionary theory? However, we need not worry about this problem here, since Hudis concentrates exclusively on the prescriptive issue: on the desirability of a given (postcapitalist) future. This brings us to the normative dimension of Marx’s thought. What is the measure of that which is desirable, according to Marx? What is his social vision?

Generalizing somewhat about the normative dimension, one might ask three questions. The first, *logical* question is: *Must* a social theorist have a social vision? The second, *moral* question is: *Should* a social theorist have a social vision? And the third, *historical* question is:

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20 This would appear to be an appropriate verb, since Hudis uses it eleven times in his article.

*Does* a particular social theorist (in this case, Marx) have a social vision? Hudis appears to believe that the answer to the logical question is affirmative. I think otherwise, but acknowledge that a theorist of future social progress must have a social vision. Whether Marx actually is such a theorist is debatable. The answer to the moral question is similarly debatable. One might have independent reasons for believing that a social theorist should have a social vision, but, once again, this is not required by the very nature of social theory. The answer to the third question is precisely what is at issue. The third question is the reformulated version of the Classical Question. But the Clarificatory Question has still not been answered, beyond our replacement of “alternative” with “social vision” or “envisioned desirable future social order”.

What, then, would it *mean* to have a “social vision”? Perhaps we have been too quick to identify it with “envisioned desirable future social order.” After all, a social vision may be constituted by a social non-ideal as well as a social ideal. One might envision an apocalyptic or otherwise undesirable future social order. Thus, we can divide social visions (non-existent future social orders or *utopias*<sup>21</sup>) into desirable and undesirable categories. The former – social ideals or *eutopias* – may be aesthetic, absolute, or regulative.<sup>22</sup> An aesthetic social ideal, in my sense, is presented as a wholly non-practical ideal: one which serves a purpose other than urging certain prospective social practice, but which nevertheless constitutes something desirable in itself. Examples may be found in science fiction and other literary forms.

An absolute social ideal, in my sense, is presented as a wholly realizable social ideal: one that captures – *in toto* – a possible (or even necessary) desirable future social order. We may be said to achieve *true* social progress when we realize this ideal fully. Absolute social ideals can be negative, positive, or combined. A negative absolute social ideal is one consisting in the negation of x, y, and z (that is, undesirable characteristics of a social order). With such an ideal, true social progress occurs when x, y, and z are completely negated. A positive absolute social ideal

21 On the distinction – employed in the text below – between utopias, eutopias, and dystopias, see “Introduction”, in *The Utopia Reader*, ed. Gregory Claeys and Lyman Tower Sargent, (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 1-5.

22 For a discussion of the distinction between regulative and (what I am calling) absolute social ideals, see Dorothy Emmet, “The Perfect Society: Utopia or Regulative Ideal?” in *The Role of the Unrealisable: A Study in Regulative Ideals* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1994), 47–60. Emmet refers to absolute social ideals as “utopias” (in a pejorative sense of the term, as opposed to my own neutral sense of “utopia” as any kind of social vision).

is one consisting in the realization of a, b, and c (that is, desirable characteristics of a social order). With such an ideal, true progress occurs when a, b, and c are completely realized. A combined absolute social ideal is one consisting in *both* the negation of x, y, and z *and* the realization of a, b, and c. With such an ideal, true progress occurs when both x, y, and z are completely negated and a, b, and c are completely realized.

A regulative social ideal, in my sense, is presented as (what is in all probability) an unrealizable social ideal that nevertheless serves to guide prospective social practice. We may be said to achieve social progress to the degree that social reality approximates to this ideal (without entirely corresponding to it). Regulative social ideals can be negative, positive, or combined. A negative regulative social ideal is one consisting in the (unrealizable) absence of x, y, and z. With such an ideal, social progress occurs to the degree that x, y, and z are reduced and ultimately minimized (not negated). A positive regulative social ideal is one consisting in the (unrealizable) presence of a, b, and c. With such an ideal, social progress occurs to the degree that a, b, and c are increased and ultimately maximized (not realized). A combined regulative social ideal is one consisting in *both* the (unrealizable) absence of x, y, and z *and* the (unrealizable) presence of a, b, and c. With such an ideal, social progress occurs to the degree that both x, y, and z are reduced and ultimately minimized and a, b, and c are increased and ultimately maximized.

Undesirable social visions (of non-existent future social orders or utopias) can be termed social non-ideals or *dystopias* and may also be aesthetic, absolute, and regulative. An aesthetic social non-ideal, in my sense, is presented as a wholly non-practical social non-ideal: one which serves a purpose other than cautioning against certain prospective social action, but which nevertheless constitutes something undesirable in itself. Again, examples may be found in science fiction and other literary forms.

An absolute social non-ideal, in my sense, is presented as a wholly realizable non-ideal: one that captures – *in toto* – a possible (or even necessary) undesirable future social order. We may be said to achieve *true* social regress (or change for the worse in the socio-political domain) when we realize this non-ideal fully. Absolute social non-ideals can be negative, positive, and combined. A negative absolute social non-ideal is one consisting in the negation of a, b, and c (that is, once again, desirable characteristics of a social order). With such a non-ideal, true social regress occurs when a, b, and c are completely negated. A positive absolute social non-ideal is one consisting in the realization of x, y, and

Undesirable social visions (of non-existent future social orders or utopias) can be termed social non-ideals or *dystopias* and may also be aesthetic, absolute, and regulative. An aesthetic social non-ideal, in my sense, is presented as a wholly non-practical social non-ideal: one which serves a purpose other than cautioning against certain prospective social action, but which nevertheless constitutes something undesirable in itself

z (that is, once again, undesirable characteristics of a social order). With such a non-ideal, true social regress occurs when x, y, and z are completely realized. A combined absolute social non-ideal is one consisting in *both* the negation of a, b, and c *and* the realization of x, y, and z. With such a non-ideal, true social regress occurs when both a, b, and c are completely negated and x, y, and z are completely realized.

A regulative social non-ideal, in my sense, is presented as (what is in all probability) an unrealizable social non-ideal that nevertheless serves to caution against prospective social practice. We may be said to achieve social regress to the degree that social reality approximates to this non-ideal (without entirely corresponding to it). Regulative social non-ideals can be negative, positive, and combined. A negative regulative social non-ideal is one consisting in the (unrealizable) absence of a, b, and c. With such a non-ideal, social regress occurs to the degree that a, b, and c are reduced and ultimately minimized (not negated). A positive regulative social non-ideal is one consisting in the (unrealizable) presence of x, y, and z. With such a non-ideal, social regress occurs to the degree that x, y, and z are increased and ultimately maximized (not realized). A combined regulative social non-ideal is one consisting in *both* the (unrealizable) absence of a, b, and c *and* the (unrealizable) presence of x, y, and z. With such a non-ideal, social regress occurs to the degree that both a, b, and c are reduced and ultimately minimized and x, y, and z are increased and ultimately maximized.

The typology of social visions outlined above does not include detailed and non-detailed social visions of every type. It might do so, of course, but this distinction is a matter of some confusion in Hudis's account of Marx's social vision. It seems that, whatever type of social vision Marx (supposedly) offers, it is both detailed *and* non-detailed. However, the weight of evidence presented by Hudis supports a social vision of the non-detailed type (if any). It also supports – quite overwhelmingly – a social vision of the desirable type (again, if any). In other words, Marx (supposedly) offers a non-detailed social ideal. But of which type: aesthetic, absolute, or regulative? Given that his (supposed) social ideal is practical (indeed, revolutionary), it is clearly not aesthetic. Is it absolute or regulative, then? And is it negative, positive, or combined?

These are difficult questions, and Hudis provides no clear answers. This is not surprising, since he never raises the Clarificatory Question. But it appears that, whether Marx's (alleged) social ideal is absolute or regulative, Hudis denies that it is negative: it does not consist in the mere (realizable or unrealizable) absence of x, y, and z. This despite the fact that much of what he says about Marx's (alleged) social ideal



is consistent with this formulation, as we saw above. Indeed, much of what he says about the stages of desirable future social development (or social progress) is consistent with the view that Marx offered a shorter-term negative regulative social ideal and a longer-term negative absolute social ideal. Why two stages, one might ask? Because, in general, “the process of creating a society is a long and laborious one,” and a society can never “emerge *sui generis*, without (in the first, imperfect stage) bearing the birthmarks of the society from which it emerges”; subsequently, developing “on its own foundations” in the second stage, the new society can seemingly be completely realized.<sup>23</sup> In the shorter-term, in “the *lower* phase of socialism or communism” after its emergence from capitalism – in this, as yet, non-perfected or “*defective* stage” – there is, for example, “no value production [and] ‘the producers do not exchange their products’”; but this only approximates (in terms of the absence of undesirable characteristics of capitalism) to communism-proper, which is unrealizable at this stage. In the longer-term, in “a higher phase of socialism or communism”, “‘from each according to their ability, (to) each according to their needs’ prevails”; thus, communism-proper (here confusingly identified with a positive *ethical* principle rather than a negative *social* ideal) is ultimately realizable.<sup>24</sup>

Even if we reinterpret the two ideals in the two stages of social progress in a consistently regulative fashion, instead of interpreting the second ideal as absolute, it is difficult to conceive of them in a positive or even combined fashion. Thus, we may conclude that Hudis manages – at best – to find a negative regulative (if not absolute) social ideal in the works of Marx, but not the positive or at least combined regulative (if not absolute) social ideal that he apparently seeks. Whatever success we can attribute to Hudis in this regard is therefore a qualified success: success by a standard other than Hudis’s own. However, this standard is obscure. I believe that Hudis should have answered the Clarificatory Question at the outset.

Notwithstanding my criticism of aspects of Hudis’s recent work in this article, I should say that I am appreciative of and even sympathetic towards this work in a number of quite fundamental respects. With regard to his treatment of the Classical Question (his problem), I appreciate his sustained engagement with Marx, the ambition of his project, and his bravery in setting forth an unconventional and provocative position on the constructive side of Marx’s thought. With regard to his

23 Hudis, *Marx’s Concept of the Alternative to Capitalism*, 193.

24 Hudis, “Yes, There Is An Alternative”, XXX.



treatment of the Contemporary Question (his motivation), I sympathize with his basic diagnosis of socio-economic and indeed ecological crisis, as well as his rejection of state-socialist strategies in the following passage:

[...] there is no mystery about the proper transitional form for creating a new society. That question was answered long ago. The struggles of the past 100 years have made it abundantly clear that decentralized, spontaneous forms of non-statist organizations are best suited for making an exit from the old society.<sup>25</sup>

I also sympathize with his view that criticism and agitation are ultimately insufficient for achieving fundamental social change. Some vision of an “alternative” social order – to my mind, *however negative* – is necessary, too. Whether Marx – for all his critical acumen and latent humanism – is going to provide this social vision for us, even in its fundamentals, I very much doubt. For one thing, it remains doubtful (in spite of Hudis’s work) that he provided – or wanted to provide – such a vision for his contemporaries. For another thing, it is even more doubtful that he could provide – or would have wanted to provide – a social vision for his descendants. But these are two separate claims, developed in response to two separate questions, Classical and Contemporary. Both of these questions are important, but they need to be handled with due care.

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25 Ibid., XXX.

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**Tytuł:** Przemysłiwując alternatywę dla kapitalizmu.

**Abstrakt:** Polemika z artykułem Petera Hudisa, „Yes, There Is An Alternative – And It Can Be Found in Marx” w kontekście jego całej koncepcji zawartej w książce *Marx's Concept of the Alternative to Capitalism* (Brill 2013). Autor analizuje propozycję Hudisa w odniesieniu do jej zdolności do udzielanie odpowiedzi na dwa pytania, które określa z jednej strony mianem „klasycznego” (Czy Marks przedstawia wizję alternatywy dla kapitalizmu?), z drugiej zaś „współczesnego” (Czy Marks przedstawia wizję alternatywy dla kapitalizmu, która do nas przemawia?). Według autora te dwa porządki w pracy Hudisa ulegają niepokojącemu przemieszaniu. Słowa kluczowe: alternatywa dla kapitalizmu, Marks, Hudis, komunizm.