In January 1990, as I write this piece, it is probably still too early to have an adequate understanding of the significance of last year’s momentous events in China, the Soviet Union, and Eastern Europe. It is, however, already clear that the basic tenets of Kremlinology stand in need of revision. Almost daily, transformations occur that academic orthodoxy had previously declared systemically impossible. The theory of revolutionary change needs drastic attention in the face of the democratic revolutions of Eastern Europe: revolutions that occurred without war between states or within them (apart from Rumania), without fanaticism or vanguards, undertaken in a self-limiting manner for goals that were limited and procedural rather than global and visionary. In general, the social scientists studying communist regimes should perhaps reflect on their collective failure to foresee even the possibility of most of what occurred. Perhaps that failure has something to do with their virtually total neglect of the moral dimension of political life. For it is a striking fact that morally motivated actions and reactions played a central role in all these events, from the Polish Round Table, at which the authorities and the Solidarity Opposition negotiated a partially free election between February and April of 1989, through the demonstrations and massacre in Tiananmen Square to the fall of Ceausescu. All these events took the form both of a rejection of a prevailing type of political morality and of a common popular impulse to establish an alternative.

One way of interpreting the significance of these events, now prevalent among journalistic and political commentators, is to see them simply as the collapse of one political ideology and the triumph of its rival. Thus, for Newsweek (January 1, 1990), “1989 was the year the communist god finally failed.” Others would extend the failure to the
socialist project as a whole, and still others to the very identity of the left itself. Conversely, according to the International Herald Tribune (January 15, 1990), “the revolutions of 1989 [were] dominated by the ideals of pluralistic democracy and civil rights, a region-wide triumph for Western liberalism.” Others, who take such liberalism to be inseparable from a more or less unbridled capitalism, see the revolutions as marking the definitive failure of a century-long experiment in social, economic, and political progress and a return to the market-based system it was intended to transform and supersede.

There is, doubtless, much to be said for these interpretations. Certainly, there is no shortage of voices in Eastern Europe, nor indeed in the Soviet Union, speaking enthusiastically in favor of such interpretations, particularly for their more stringent and strident versions. Nevertheless, I propose to take a different, less ideological tack, by asking two connected questions about political morality. First, what were the distinctive features of the prevailing political morality of communist regimes that was so massively rejected? And second, in the name of what was the system rejected? What distinguished the alternative political morality to which the revolutionary movements of 1989 in turn appealed?

By “political morality” I mean a set of principles that can be characterized at a fairly high level of abstraction, that underlie different, particular political positions that may be taken up by those who share them at any given time, or across time. They are, as Ronald Dworkin says, “constitutive”: “political positions that are valued for their own sake,” such that “every failure fully to secure that position, or any decline in the degree to which it is secured, is pro tanto a loss in the value of the overall political arrangement.” Derivative positions, by contrast, are “valued as strategies or means of achieving the constitutive positions.”¹ Thus, different derivative views on policies—about taxation, say, or education or, more generally, about the nature and scope of state intervention in the economy—may appeal to or be justified by the same set of constitutive principles; and likewise, clusters of such derivative views will replace one another over time, as, for example, New Deal liberalism replaced Old Deal liberalism (the example is Dworkin’s). Of course, constitutive political positions may conflict with one another, for political moralities will almost inevitably embody conflicting values. But by a “political morality” I mean the underlying structure within which and by virtue of which political value judgments

are made and justified by those who share it, and which sets limits to the kinds of judgments that can be made.

I

What, by 1989, was the political morality of “Official Communism”? This may seem like an odd question to those who are impressed by the corruption and cynicism of the elites ruling these regimes. (Certainly 1989 was not lacking in lurid evidence of the former, notably from China, East Germany, Rumania, and Bulgaria.) Nor, by asking this question do I wish to imply that these regimes enjoyed a moral legitimacy among their populations. This is a complex question, and there have clearly been variations across the communist world in this respect: compare the German Democratic Republic with Poland or Czechoslovakia, or indeed Czechoslovakia before and after 1968. It is, furthermore, true, as Leszek Kolakowski has said, that in Poland at least by the mid–1980s, “Marxism both as an ideology and as a philosophy” had “become completely irrelevant. . . . Even the rulers [had] largely abandoned this notion and even its phrases.” What is, however, indisputable, is that Marxism, of however deformed or debased a sort, has dominated, indeed monopolized, the public sphere of these societies for decades (seven in the case of the Soviet Union) and has provided the sole framework and discourse within which the governing elites could seek to justify their policies to their subjects, to themselves, and to the outside world. It is, therefore, worth trying to identify the constitutive features of that framework and discourse.

Marxism has always been a peculiarly bibliocentric creed. There were times of faith when the massive ideological apparatuses achieved success in inspiring hearts and shaping minds within the party and far beyond. In the subsequent times of demoralization, the propaganda machine remained intact, its wheels went on turning, and the flow of words in workplaces and offices, schools and universities, newspapers, radio, and television continued unabated, only now as “noise” blocking out alternative forms of thought and expression. Nevertheless, the words always related, directly or indirectly, to texts, and ultimately to the founding texts of the Marxist canon. And this was not just a question of the time-honored practice of quoting the founding fathers, but went deeper and wider. The old books and pamphlets set their mark on vocabulary and syntax, on conceptual apparatus, polemical

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3 Tismaneanu’s book, cited above, is a good recent study of all this.
style and forms of argumentation, indeed even furnished the criteria of what was to count as a valid argument.

This helps to explain the remarkable coherence and continuity of Marxism as a political morality across the entire continuum that ranges from its historically significant incarnations as a political ideology, propagated by political elites, to the most refined and intellectually sophisticated theories favored by intellectuals, orthodox or “critical.” For different reasons the same corpus of texts served as meat and drink to both. My claim is that, viewed as a text-based structure of thought, the political morality of Marxism is more or less firmly imprinted on all the significant varieties of Marxism, official and deviant, vulgar and refined, deformed and revised.

What distinguishes Marxism as a political morality is that it is a morality of emancipation. It promises communism as universal freedom from the peculiar modern slavery of capitalism, through revolutionary struggle. The promise is (usually) long-term: the prospect of a world of abundance, cooperation, and social rationality—the free association of producers whose communal relations have overcome egoism, in full collective control of both the natural and social worlds which have become transparent to them. The world from which they are to be emancipated is one of scarcity, private property, the dull compulsion, anarchy, and irrationality of market relations, exploitation, class domination, human degradation, reification, and alienation. The access to the promised realm of freedom is through struggle: hence the consistent appeal throughout the Marxist tradition of the metaphors of war, of strategy and alliances, of forward marches and glorious victories, and its ingrained suspicion of compromise. In short, as a political morality, Marxism is future-oriented: it is, indeed, a perfectionist form of long-range consequentialism. The practical question, “What is to be done?”—How to act? What policy to pursue?—is always to be answered only by calculating what course is likely to bring nearer the long-term goal, the leap into the realm of freedom. The anxiety generated by that question is, however, traditionally diminished by two further assumptions: that capitalism is doomed and has nowhere to go but to its death; and that history is on the side of the working-class struggle, that long-term objective processes are at work that favor, and perhaps eventually guarantee, the leap into freedom.

There is, of course, as the history of Marxism superabundantly shows, enormous scope for dispute about all the elements in this

* For an explanation of this claim, see Steven Lukes, *Marxism and Morality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), Conclusion.
picture: about how exactly to characterize socialism and/or communism, and in particular how economic planning and political decision making are to proceed and relate to one another (on which the canon is notably unforthcoming); about what the essential evils of capitalism are, which ones have explanatory priority, and through what kind of crisis they will issue in death; and about the famous problem of the “transition”—how warlike will it be, and through what kind of war? How parliamentary? How reformist? All these sources of indeterminacy become all the more confusing, of course, as the two anxiety-diminishing assumptions referred to above lose their power to persuade.

But, even in the present confusion, it is clear that Marxism has always held, as a constitutive triad of positions: (1) that capitalism belongs to the realm of necessity; (2) that communism signifies the promised realm of a higher kind of social freedom; and (3) that emancipation into the latter from the former is a discontinuous change, a qualitative transformation of economy, polity, and culture. In this respect, Ernst Fischer was right to say that for Marxism:

Only the future is interesting, the fullness of what is possible, not the straitjacket of what has already been, with its attempt to impose on us the illusion that, because things were thus and not otherwise, they belong to the realm of necessity.\(^5\)

From the perspective of Marxism, in short, certain necessary facts are, rather, historically contingent: falsely to suppose them to be necessary facts is to cling to an ideological fiction blocking human progress. Four such “facts” strike me as of central importance. I shall call them the facts of scarcity, particularity, pluralism, and limited rationality.

By “scarcity” I mean limits to desired goods. It may take at least the following four forms: (1) insufficiency of production inputs (e.g., raw materials) relative to production requirements; (2) insufficiency of produced goods relative to consumption requirements; (3) limits upon the joint achievability of different goals, resulting from external conditions (e.g., limitations of space or time); and (4) limits upon the joint achievability of different goals, resulting from the intrinsic nature of those goals (e.g., “positional goods”—we cannot all enjoy high status or the solitude of a neighborhood park). Marxism, in promising abundance, considers only (1) and (2), which it promises to overcome through the mastery of nature and through a superior form of economic and social organization, combined with appropriate changes.

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in preferences brought about by higher communal relations. It has nothing to say about (3) and (4), nor does it address contemporary ecological concerns about the feasibility or costs of seeking to eliminate the obstacles that lead to insufficient production.

By “particularity” I mean that we are not all Kantians, or utilitarians: that human beings have their separate lives to live and are properly motivated by a whole range of distinct interests, from the purely personal through a whole gamut of more or less local or particular concerns, to the most abstract and universal. In deciding how to act, we rightly give weight, at different times, to demands or claims that have different sources, but include our commitments and loyalties to relationships and activities that are special and exclusive to us. Marxism as a political morality belongs with those monistic moralities that require individuals to adopt a single privileged standpoint that abstracts from this motivational complexity and range, in its particular case requiring individuals to act solely in the postulated universal interests of future generations—or to adopt the social identity and thus the perspective of the imminently victorious class, which, together with its particular perspective, will wither away into the universal perspective indicated. Without that extravagant assumption, Marxism has always had the greatest difficulty in linking its monistic motivational requirement with the likely motivations of actual people.

By “pluralism” I mean the coexistence of different views about what is of central importance and value in human life, of what John Rawls has called divergent “conceptions of the good,” where the differences or divergences are not simply alternative ways of spelling out a set of common principles that the adherents of each could recognize as shared in common among them. Alternative moralities, religions, world views, value standpoints, etc., are in this way “pluralistic,” implying alternative conceptual structures, priorities of value, and forms of life—all of which are unassimilable to one another without destroying what is constitutive of each. Marxism does not address the possibility of pluralism, thus understood, in a general form, nor, therefore, the question of how to respond to it. It simply assumes, in the manner of the Enlightenment, that humanity is progressing, along however dialectical a path, toward moral convergence. That is why it has always typically treated actual instances of pluralist divergencies—particular forms of religion or nationalism or indeed secular moralities such as utilitarianism—as deviations, if occasionally useful shortcuts (as Lenin saw nationalism), along that path.

Finally, by “limited rationality” I mean limits upon the capacity of human beings in real time to solve certain problems, theoretical and practical, or to do so without creating other problems that undermine
their solution. These limits may be of various kinds—of access or ability to process information, of theoretical knowledge or the means to apply it—and they may result from human incapacities, or from the nature of the problem itself, from social complexity, for example, or from unavoidable risk or uncertainty. To such contemporary concerns, Marxism answers once more with the voice of the Enlightenment, this time with a Hegelian, teleological accent: mankind only sets itself such problems as it can solve. The future is not only radiant but transparent; the social and natural worlds are alike in being in principle amenable to full prediction and control.

Marxism denies that these four facts are necessary, but in doing so, what does it deny? Not merely that they are present in all actual societies that have reached a certain level of economic development and social complexity. Not merely that, on the best estimates, they will be so present in all empirically feasible societies. (Marxism, after all, proposes a discontinuous leap into the realm of freedom, which our best estimates could not therefore predict since they are based on present knowledge, and therefore draw the bounds of feasibility in the wrong place). To say that these facts are necessary is to say that we cannot conceive of developed and complex societies that do not exhibit them—or that we could only do so at an unacceptable cost, by abandoning too much of all the rest of what we know and believe. They are facts at the very center, rather than the periphery, of our cognitive universe. To imagine them otherwise, as Ernst Fischer says, is, for us, literally to imagine utopia.

I have argued that Marxism as a political morality takes scarcity, particularity, pluralism, and limited rationality to be false necessities, as historically surmountable (and, in its confidently optimistic phase, imminently so). What, then, follows from taking them to be real necessities? The most general answer to this question is, I suggest, the recognition of the need for principles of justice for the regulation of social life. For, taken together, these “necessary facts” can be seen as constituting what Rawls calls the “circumstance of justice.” They are conditions that must, in the appropriate sense, face the citizens of every conceivable society of a certain complexity and level of development. Within any such society (I here leave aside the question of intersocietal relations), they imply the inevitability of various kinds of conflicts of interest that, given these facts, are structurally determined. One such conflict of interest takes the form of a distributive struggle, involving conflicting claims upon limited resources of various kinds. Second, there are the conflicts facing both individuals and decision-making bodies at all levels of society, standing in the overlap of multiple intersecting circles of interest—individual, familial, local, regional,
national, international, ethnic, religious, occupational, recreational, commercial, political, and so on—and having to draw different lines between what is public and what is private, and allocate priorities. Third, there are cultural conflicts between different ways of life, expressing divergent value standpoints that cannot be flattened into "shared understandings" or "common meanings." Finally, there are policy conflicts over problems for which the "correct" solution is neither on offer, nor in the offing. To acknowledge all this is to accept that such a society can only have a chance of being both stable and democratically legitimate if its citizens are able, as citizens, to step back from all these conflicting interests and acknowledge, as binding upon them, a set of principles for the distribution of benefits and burdens, and for the assigning of rights to protect interests and corresponding obligations.

My argument has been that Marxism, official and unofficial, is constitutively inhospitable to this conclusion, essentially because it views all these conflicts as the pathologies of pre-history, and in particular as stemming from the anachronic production relations and class conflicts of capitalism. And it believes this in part just because it takes the facts of scarcity, particularity, pluralism, and limited rationality to be contingent, not necessary.

As supporting evidence, I would cite the consistent polemics that have characterized the Marxist canon, from Marx's On the Jewish Question onwards, against all talk of morality and, in particular, against the vocabulary of "justice" and "rights"—or, to be more precise, against the idea of believing in such notions, rather than adopting and propagating them, where appropriate, in the course of the struggle. So, in the Critique of the Gotha Programme, Marx writes of the notions of "equal right" and "fair distribution" as "ideological nonsense . . . ideas which in a certain period had some meaning but have now become obsolete verbal rubbish." In 1864, he apologized to Engels in the following terms: "I was obliged," he wrote, "to insert two phrases about 'duty' and 'right' into the Preamble to the Rules [of the International Working Men's Association], ditto 'truth, morality and justice' but these are placed in such a way that they can do no harm." "Justice," Engels once observed, is "but the ideologized, glorified expression of the existing economic relations, now from their conservative, and at other times from their revolutionary angle." But it was Lenin who

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7 Marx, Selected Correspondence (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, no date), p. 182.
put the whole matter most clearly. Speaking to a Komsomol Congress in 1920 he said:

We say that our morality is entirely subordinated to the interests of the proletariat’s class struggle. . . . Morality is what serves to destroy the old exploiting society and to unite all the working people around the proletariat, which is building up a new, a communist society. . . . To a communist all morality lies in this united discipline and conscious mass struggle against the exploiters. We do not believe in an eternal morality, and we expose the falseness of all the fables about morality.9

But, surely, it will be said, Marxism has a powerful moral message. In particular, socialism portrays itself as being concerned primarily with issues of justice; Marxists have indeed had an honorable place in countless struggles against injustice and the violations of rights. Czechoslovakian President Havel himself recently, and eloquently, observed:

There was a time when . . . for whole generations of the downtrodden and oppressed, the word socialism was a mesmerizing synonym for a just world, a time when for the ideal expressed in that word, people were capable of sacrificing years and years of their lives, and their very lives even.10

But this objection misses the point. Of course Marxism has offered victims of injustice and oppression and those who sympathize with them an inspiring vision of a future free of both. This objection misses the inspirational core of that vision. What inspires those who grasp what Marxism promises is not the prospect of a complex, conflictual, pluralistic world regulated by principles of justice and the protections of rights, but rather the overcoming of the very conditions that require such principles and protections—the prospect of a world in which justice and rights, together with class conflict and the oppression of the state, will have withered away. Communists have promised an end to injustice and oppression. What they promise, however, is not justice and rights, but, rather, emancipation from the enslaving conditions that make them necessary.

II

I turn, finally, to the second question I asked at the outset: to what, and because of what political morality, did the revolutionary movements of 1989—those that succeeded and those that did not, or have not yet—appeal? A proper academic answer to this question would doubtless distinguish among the different kinds of evidence required to answer it properly—the writings of intellectuals, the speeches of leaders, the slogans and graffiti, the responses of the crowds, the oral evidence of different kinds of participants, the impressions of journalists, etc.—each of which would be given its proper weight among the different, though increasingly interdependent movements, and even among the different stages of these ever faster moving events. Nevertheless, even without the benefit of these indispensable distinctions, which future scholarship will not fail to furnish, it already seems clear at this short distance from them that the revolutionary movements of 1989 were similar, at least with regard to the following decisive points.

First, they were citizens' movements and actively invoked the idea of citizenship. In virtually every case, they were appeals by and to citizens that implied a retraction from more particular and immediate commitments, loyalties, and interests. Hence the rhetoric of "round tables" and "forums," one of which was, indeed, civic and the other new in, among other things, just this respect. The students of Tiananmen Square were seeking to transcend their generational and occupational identity and speak in the name of the "people"; and indeed from mid-May, the demonstration expanded to over a million people, and included workers, party bureaucrats, professionals, and even units of the military. One of the slogans shouted in demonstrations in East Germany was "We are the people!" The point is perhaps most dramatically made by the insignificance of ethnic and religious factors in the Timisoara uprising. It originated with the protests of Hungarian Protestants, but these, emphatically, were not what it was about. Only in the Caucasus and in Yugoslavia, especially Serbia, does this commitment to a pluralism-encompassing citizenship seem to be seriously in jeopardy.

Second, these were movements that appealed to a sense of distributive justice and fairness. For they were protests against the arbitrary allocation of advantage and opportunity, against the failed command economy that was itself a major source of scarcity as well as injustice, and in general against a system governed by no rationally defensible distributive principle, in which, from the ordinary citizen's point of view:
"they" can do everything they want [to the citizen]—take away his passport, have him fired from his job, order him to move, send him to collect signatures against the Pershings, bar him from higher education, take away his driver's licence, build a factory producing mostly acid fumes right under his windows, pollute his milk with chemicals to a degree beyond belief, arrest him simply because he attended a rock concert, raise prices arbitrarily, anytime and for any reason, turn down all his humble petitions without cause, prescribe what he must read before all else, what he must demonstrate for, what he must sign, how many square feet his apartment may have, whom he may meet and whom he must avoid.11

There was, of course, no unified agreement about what distributive principles would be just, only that they should prevail; though all, including the gracefully departing elites, were further united in the view that they could only prevail if markets—including capital and labor markets—play a key role in both the transition to and functioning of the future economy. The burning question for the future is, of course, just what kind and what degree of public intervention in markets justice will require. One real possibility is that, in full recoil from real socialism, the post-revolutionary elites will embrace the full package of the counter-ideology of free-market liberalism, which, like Marxism but on different grounds, also rejects the very notion of "social justice."12 Such an outcome, occurring under conditions of economic decline and crisis and at the periphery of the world capitalist system, would indeed be a novel, late-twentieth-century version of the revolution betrayed.

Third, the uprisings were defensive movements, aimed at revolution in the name of procedural justice, the rule of law, the protection of individuals' basic constitutional rights and liberties—the Principles of 1789, as distinct from the positive social and economic rights added to them in the Universal Declaration of 1948.13 In part, they were directed at abuses and corruption by individuals (Ceausescu, Honecker, Zhivkov) and by a whole political class, as in China. These were certainly important in mobilizing people over grievances that took visible and

12 For discussion of these grounds, see my "Equality and Liberty: Must They Conflict?" in D. Held, ed., Modern Political Theory (Cambridge: Polity Press, forthcoming).
outrageous forms. But at root the issue was the rejection of an entire institutional system that worked through command, restrained only through bargaining, and whose official rationale lay entirely in the future it promised rather than in its responsiveness to present, actual individuals' interests.

Moreover, there was one particular individual right that was of special significance in 1989: the right to free travel across frontiers. It was the mass effective exercise of this right and its subsequent recognition by the East German state that unleashed the East German events and all that followed from them. The right to leave one's country is, as Locke intimated, a right of particular significance, for only where it is effective can the according of consent to a regime or a system be a genuine choice. Clearly, Egon Krenz, in granting it, hoped thereby to establish the legitimacy of the German Democratic Republic; at the time of this writing, that hope looks indeed forlorn.

Fourth, the revolutions of 1989 were pluralist movements that demanded an end to the monopoly of power by the communists, an end to the nomenklatura, to the euphemistically described "leading role" of the party, to "ghost parties" in false "alliances" playing proportional roles based on frozen statistics from the past, to the suppression of local, regional, and national issues, and to suppression of the real history (as in the Baltics) of how nations were incorporated into the Soviet Empire, and an end to the denial of expression to and institutional embodiment of cultural, notably ethnic and religious, identities. In part, the revolutions embodied the expression of this pluralism or diversity, but, more significantly, they also expressed, often very clearly, a vivid sense, unavailable to the ruling structures, of the value of it.

Finally, they were skeptical movements—utterly skeptical not only of the content of what socialism had promised, both materially and morally, but of the very cognitive pretensions of the ruling parties who had in any case lost their way and abandoned any serious claim to knowledge-based, let alone science-based, authority (though Ceausescu went on claiming it to the end). This is, in part, obviously a result of the massive economic failure of the prevailing system, as well as justified doubts about all the various attempts to reform it from within, from the Hungarian economic reforms onwards. But it also exhibits a deeper and more universal trend: a new sense, arising out of "green" concerns, of the complexity and uncertainty of the interaction between Man and Nature, and, in consequence, an awareness of the ecological consequences of the old Promethean Marxist vision of ending human exploitation through the exploitation of nature.

These were, in short, revolutions, some attempted, some successful, against hubris—the hubris of individual leaders, political elites, and
indeed of an entire political class. They were also revolutions against
the hubris of an arbitrary and oppressive system—economic, social, and
political—whose claims to legitimacy were no longer, for the most part,
even proclaimed by its rulers. But, above all, they were revolutions
against the hubris of a political morality that for decades sustained that
system and its leaders. In this sense, they were revolutions of fallen
expectations, revolutions in the name of freedom—but of freedom, in
a sense Hegel never intended, as the recognition of necessity.*

* Author’s Note: I owe particular thanks to Maurice Glasman whose seminar paper on this
topic inspired me to write this.