Philosophy, Liberation, Social Justice, and Marx: A Conversation with Vanessa Wills

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GABE: Well, thank you for doing this interview. It's always really fun. For my senior thesis, I tried to connect some of the more abstract components of philosophy, like McDowell's meta-ethics, to lived experience. I know that practical application is important in your work. How do you go about doing that?

VANESSA: I try as much as possible to use a philosophical method that reflects what Marx and Engels emphasized—that theory should start with actual human beings, attempting to satisfy their needs, interacting with the world, and with one another.

I'm always looking at what's happening in terms of liberation struggles. I assume that those who are oppressed and fighting for their freedom are likely at the forefront of human understanding about morality. They don't have the luxury of abstract speculation—they are actively shaping the meaning of justice through their struggles.

So, my question is- What are people struggling for? How are they struggling? What would need to happen for them to be liberated? That's what drives my philosophical inquiry. More moral philosophers should start there, with lived experience, rather than imposing abstract moral principles onto movements. Philosophy must take its lead from real struggles, not the other way around.

GABE: So, religion in a capitalistic society largely serves as a provisional measure until real salvation comes in the form of communism. When religion is understood in this way, what then is the relationship between communism and religion?

VANESSA: Great question. I would push back on the idea that religion is just a temporary measure until communism arrives. Yes, it's true that religion often takes our aspirations for a better world and

projects them onto a miraculous future—a future that isn't on Earth. In that sense, it can play a reactionary role, sustaining passivity rather than action.

But the relationship isn't that simple. Some of the most important liberation struggles today, like that of Palestinians fighting for survival, show that faith plays a critical role in sustaining movements. Many people in Gaza are simply trying to live, not necessarily shaping revolutionary theory. Their faith sustains them. So, it would be a mistake to say that religion is always reactionary.

Take liberation theology in Latin America—Catholic activists who say, "My faith leads me to social justice." Or Jewish Voices for Peace, who argue that their Judaism compels them to fight for human rights. These perspectives show that religion and social justice can intersect rather than oppose each other.

Now, can you fully adhere to Marx's materialist perspective and still be religious? No, I don't think so. Marx's materialism requires rejecting supernatural explanations. But can religious people still participate in struggles for freedom and equality? Absolutely. That's where solidarity exists between Marxists and religious communities fighting for justice.

Anna steps in, intrigued.

ANNA: I'm going off-script a little bit. But to follow up: Is there an argument for a fully realized communism that could coexist with religion? Is that something Marx could argue for or would argue for?

VANESSA: No, he wouldn't have argued for that. But there's a distinction between what Marx personally believed and what his theory actually commits him to. Marx was in conversation with atheist thinkers like Feuerbach and Bauer, who were obsessed with proving that God wasn't real.

Marx thought that was a waste of time. Instead, he argued that religion is a reflection of suffering—as long as we have inhumane conditions, we'll have theories that mirror those conditions.

Marx believed that changing material conditions—uplifting human dignity—was the only way to disrupt religious worldviews. He also argued that even atheists could be religious without realizing it. Liberalism, for example, projects ideas of freedom into abstract ideals rather than real material conditions. You might believe you're free as a citizen, but in reality, your actual lived conditions are constrained by capitalism. That's a kind of religious thinking—an illusion about freedom.

ANNA: Thank you.

BROOKE: As a philosopher deeply involved with both race and class, what do you see as some of the philosophical benefits of intersectionality?

VANESSA: One benefit is that intersectionality forces us to center lived experiences of oppression rather than assuming a detached, so-called "objective" view. Another benefit is recognizing that oppression functions differently across identities—race impacts someone's experience differently if they're a woman, queer, or poor. We need to ask those questions.

That said, I don't fully align with intersectionality theory because it often denies that any one category plays a larger role than another. Many Marxists, including myself, argue that economic class is structurally more foundational than identity categories.

This doesn't mean gender, race, or sexuality aren't crucial—it means that class structures shape and sustain oppression in a way that must be analyzed deeply.

CELENA: Do you have any questions for us? Anything you'd like to hear from our perspective?

VANESSA: I'd love to hear what led you all to be interested in Marx, intersectionality, or philosophy related to social justice.

CELENA: I hadn't read any Marx until this week, but now I feel like I need to. You've convinced me—it's worth exploring.

VANESSA: That's amazing. Many philosophers across the country have never actually read Marx.

GABE: Wow.

VANESSA: The most common response I hear from philosophers is either that they never read Marx, or they read him in a dismissive way, taught that labor was an outdated concept, replaced entirely by supply and demand.

It wasn't until I met activists and socialists that I understood how radical and necessary Marx's ideas are. I remember thinking: "Are you kidding me? This is brilliant!" So, my advice? Don't brush Marx off. There's something valuable here."

Celena glances at her phone, informing every one of their schedules. The conversation isn't truly ending—only pausing, leaving room for new questions to emerge in the days to come.

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