



1979

The Dialectic of Decency

George Kateb

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.law.yale.edu/ylj>

Recommended Citation

George Kateb, *The Dialectic of Decency*, 88 Yale L.J. (1979).

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.law.yale.edu/ylj/vol88/iss5/8>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Yale Law School Legal Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Yale Law Journal by an authorized editor of Yale Law School Legal Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact julian.aiken@yale.edu.

Book Review

The Dialectic of Decency

Injustice: The Social Bases of Obedience and Revolt. By Barrington Moore, Jr. New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1978. Pp. xviii, 540. \$17.50.

Reviewed by George Kateb†

Barrington Moore has written many books, and each one repays the closest reading and rereading. The most impressive fact is that, while he never writes the same book over and over, his books comprise a unity. They are all animated by the passion to know why societies are never decent or at least as decent as they, without superhuman effort, could be. His passion is not exalted but rather one that is fine in its simplicity. Not utopia but a more humane life is his aspiration; indeed a more humane life is his utopia, as impossibly out of reach, perhaps, as grander visions of perpetual felicity. He stubbornly refuses consolation and persists in his inquiry. Why is so much of life now, why has so much of life in the past been, hell? Or, when not hell, so full of suffering of one kind and another?

Moore's first two books, *Soviet Politics—The Dilemma of Power*,¹ and *Terror and Progress USSR*,² explored the possibilities for reducing or eliminating totalitarian terrorism, secrecy, regimentation, and surveillance. From a variety of angles he asked the same question: could the governance of the Soviet Union become somewhat less degrading and stultifying to its people, could it become less odious, more decent? The bulk of his thinking and writing was done while Stalin was still alive. Yet though Moore thought that totalitarianism—in essence, a perverse preference for ends that require cruel means—could grow more and more odious, either some rational reforms or some return to traditionalist norms could come to dominate the process of evolution.

There was a grudging and therefore more effective hopefulness in the conclusion of Moore's second book. This hopefulness rested on a belief that history often works ironically. Greatly reduced, Moore's

† Professor of Political Science, Amherst College.

1. B. MOORE, *SOVIET POLITICS—THE DILEMMA OF POWER* (1950).
2. B. MOORE, *TERROR AND PROGRESS USSR* (1954).

Dialectic of Decency

thesis was that the forces that the totalitarian leadership created to secure their position could not, after a while, function efficiently under totalitarian control. The security of totalitarianism had required modernization, but the agencies of modernization—the various bureaucratic structures—have come to need a lessening of the irrationality and arbitrariness of totalitarianism. The agencies have tended to develop their own commitments to the work of modernization. Thus, the forces that totalitarianism needed and created may eventually prove to be the forces that change the nature of their creator. “If peace should continue for a decade or more, the rationalist or the traditionalist forces in Soviet society, or some unstable combination of the two, may do their work of erosion upon the Soviet totalitarian edifice.”³

I do not mean to suggest that Moore’s principal intellectual role in these early books is that of moralist. He is not eager to pass judgment; he possesses a remarkably uncynical detachment. Yet there is no doubt that the passion for decency is at the root of his inquiry; and it informs the analysis of both books.

No matter how reductionist one was, one still could not fashion a thesis that adequately covered Moore’s next four books, the last of which is *Injustice: The Social Bases of Obedience and Revolt*.⁴ There seems to be some unemphasized but nevertheless important shift in sentiment from *Political Power and Social Theory*⁵ and *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*⁶ to *Reflections on the Causes of Human Misery*⁷ and *Injustice*. The shift is from a severely qualified hopefulness concerning indefinite human amelioration to an altogether bleak outlook. In the last essay of *Political Power and Social Theory*, he said, “There are compelling grounds for the belief that humanity is subject to the fate of Sisyphus: forever creating the prerequisites of freedom and in this very way destroying the possibility of freedom.”⁸ This sentence reverses the irony found in his thesis concerning Soviet totalitarianism. The forces that human ingenuity restlessly engenders at the behest of the drive to improve the human condition exact a cost that seems to equal or outweigh their advantages. Yet when he wrote that sentence Moore was not willing to make it his last word. The essay ends on a questioning note, with the benefit of the doubt rhetorically

3. *Id.* at 231.

4. B. MOORE, *INJUSTICE: THE SOCIAL BASES OF OBEDIENCE AND REVOLT* (1978) [hereinafter cited by page number only].

5. B. MOORE, *POLITICAL POWER AND SOCIAL THEORY* (2d ed. 1962).

6. B. MOORE, *SOCIAL ORIGINS OF DICTATORSHIP AND DEMOCRACY* (1966).

7. B. MOORE, *REFLECTIONS ON THE CAUSES OF HUMAN MISERY* (1970).

8. B. MOORE, *supra* note 5, at 216.

given to hopefulness.⁹ Then too, the enormous intellectual effort that went into *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* must have been made emotionally possible for Moore by a conviction that survives all doubts, all the ravages of an exquisite sense of complexity. The conviction is that Anglo-American liberal constitutional democracy—the closest approximation to social decency and freedom—has been worth its cost in bloodshed, exploitation, and neglect. In this instance, history did not ironically cheat those who aspired to improve the human condition.

But liberal constitutional democracy is historically rare and is confined mostly to English-speaking societies. An unusual combination of circumstances prepared the way for it; in particular, the uprooting of much of the peasantry and the commercialization of part of the aristocracy. Where lords stayed lords and peasants stayed peasants nearly insuperable obstacles to liberal constitutional democracy presented themselves. The persistence of feudal relations damaged subsequent modernization by making it a coercive, state-managed imposition. The imposition, effected by either revolutionary radicalism or counter-revolutionary reaction, has suffocated the hope for liberal constitutional democracy, and so far at least, the foundations of a decent society.

Not only is this approximately decent and free social order historically rare, it is now imperiled from within: the massive concentrations of private economic and public state power have unbalanced the system and made equality a sham and freedom, in some respects, doubtful.¹⁰ Beyond that, Moore is certain that the social and economic preconditions for a decent and free society on a global scale are out of even the most determined and collective human reach. Given the numbers of people alive, scarcity must remain the majority condition.

Thus, with time, Moore's pessimism, never far below the surface, has tended to take him over. The longest exposition of it is *Reflections on the Causes of Human Misery*, one of the profoundest works of social theory in this century. Moore warns against "the defeatist illusion of impotence,"¹¹ but I do not see that he has escaped it himself. He is persuaded that both liberalism and communism have had their day, though some elements of both may endure. The motif of the book is

9. *Id.* at 221.

10. Let us not forget that Moore was one of the three contributors—Robert Paul Wolff and Herbert Marcuse were the others—to the seminal work of radical criticism, *A Critique of Pure Tolerance*. H. MARCUSE, B. MOORE & R. WOLFF, *A CRITIQUE OF PURE TOLERANCE* (1965).

11. B. MOORE, *supra* note 7, at 13.

that *all* current and regnant doctrines are inadequate either to analyze the present human condition or to provide remedies or even significant alleviations for it. They all systematically misunderstand the actuality, as well as the limits of possibility. The inadequacy is not internally correctable. Moore himself does not offer his own new, positive doctrine. He works destructively. By doing that, he may induce depression or a beneficial catharsis in the reader; in any case, he clears away muddles, illusions, and self-serving self-deceptions. Capitalism does not create, and no kind of socialism (whether centralized or participatory) can solve, the basic global problems of scarcity, war, cruelty, oppression, and “general human nastiness.” The imperatives of revolutionary violence and post-revolutionary consolidation are so strict that they are bound to cause as much evil as they are supposed to remove, or even more.¹²

The most that can be hoped for in America is “liberalism-with-a-difference,” “a somewhat radicalized liberalism.”¹³ The chances for the success of a movement with that spirit are, however, very slight. The most likely prospect is for some kind of economic-social breakdown, followed by a period of panic-stricken repression.

Reflections on the Causes of Human Misery would seem to be the author’s last word, his mind at the end of its tether. What has he left himself to say? As if to unsettle expectation, Moore has now published *Injustice*, a huge, dense, intricate book. As I have said, this latest work is bleak, as *Reflections* is bleak. But the pessimism of *Reflections* is global in scope and as futurist as it is retrospective in its orientation. In it, Moore emphasizes the resistance by elites to human betterment (on the one hand) and the brutal facts of scarcity (on the other hand). The pessimism of *Injustice* is, in some respects, different. In a word, Moore’s whole book is an effort to blame the victims, those who suffer, for their suffering. Quickly one must add that the accusation is soft, indeed ambiguous: Moore blames himself and all radicals for thinking or wishing that the situation could be otherwise. People are people; masses cannot be radical. There is a further complexity. On some occasions they have been more radical rather than much less radical than their leadership; and then, as in Germany in the first two years after the armistice ending the First World War, their leaders betray them. Reinforcing the ambiguity of the accusation is Moore’s frequently repeated contention that modern radical revolutions, unlike the great political revolutions of English and American history, are

12. *Id.* at 69-71.

13. *Id.* at 164.

bound to do morally unacceptable harm: to increase the sum of human suffering.

The best concentration of Moore's pessimism comes at the end of his speculations on the damage that the Social Democratic leadership did to humane ideals in the period of 1918-1920.¹⁴ They crippled liberalism and suppressed socialism. They made Nazism possible. But what of the other political alternatives? Moore is much more certain that Nazism is evil than that either liberalism or socialism is just. His pessimism is indicated, finally, by the nervous energy of his scepticism. He says:

Another victim of the constellation of circumstances and actions just mentioned was the socialist alternative. I have not explored it because the impulse behind it was much weaker and the forces arrayed against it much stronger at the particular juncture. There is also the reason that in practice the revolutionary socialist alternative has not turned out to be a humane one. Since the liberal one has scarcely turned out to have an attractive record on that score . . . the suppression of the socialist alternative too was one of the tragedies of the German revolution.¹⁵

If, then, the absence of popular revolutionary aspiration is the great source of the continuation of popular suffering, there may be much that could be said to vindicate such a dearth of spirit. Still, there is much to say—Moore finds much to say—to lament it.

In 1967, in between *Social Origins* and *Reflections*, Moore published an essay called *The Society Nobody Wants: A Look Beyond Marxism and Liberalism*.¹⁶ He here gives a clear expression of the view that a truly decent society will forever be out of reach because, as the title says, nobody wants it. What Moore maintains is not that those who benefit most from radical social change are manipulated into docility, or are so degraded as to be unable to feel that they deserve better than they get. Rather, in most circumstances, rationality seems to be on the side of an irrational social order. Moore says,

[I]f capitalism were the real obstacle to a decent society or if communism were the obstacle, the ordinary citizen would be obliged to accept the sacrifices involved in the struggle. Because of the stake he has in his society there is always substantial short-term rationality in being the good citizen. That short-term rationality leads to larger results that are totally absurd is obvious enough to require no elaboration.¹⁷

14. Pp. 376-97.

15. P. 396.

16. Moore, *The Society Nobody Wants: A Look Beyond Marxism and Liberalism*, in *THE CRITICAL SPIRIT* 401 (B. Moore & G. Wolff eds. 1967).

17. *Id.* at 410-11.

Dialectic of Decency

The old adage that the good is the enemy of the best appears to fit Moore's analysis. Yet that would be a complacent misunderstanding of his point. He is really saying that the short-term good is a false good because it both blocks a real good and generates a real and long-lived evil. Aware that this thought may be used by elitists of the left or the right to justify their contempt for the people, Moore attributes the short-sightedness of the masses to a defensible sense of risk, for at stake is not only their own immediate survival but also the survival of their society in a hostile world. Although Moore says his epigram is shallow, it is not: "the reason we have never had a decent world is because there have always been too many decent people in it."¹⁸ The only trouble is that the decent understand decency in too narrow a way: they care too much for its particularist and everyday manifestations, and think little about structures of decency. They settle for much less than they should.

Despite popular caution and acceptance throughout history, the world is constantly changing, and some of that motion results from the reformist or insurrectionary energies of the people. If decency helps to keep them down, it also helps to make them resist and rebel. The feeling for decency thus creates what it limits: the ability to say "No" to existing conditions of life. The thread that ties *Injustice* together, I think, is the dialectic (to use jargon) of decency: the ways in which concern for decency narrows and broadens human aspiration for decency itself. *Injustice* is a rich and immense amplification of *The Society Nobody Wants*. Precisely because Moore's book is so continuously active against itself—now lamenting popular docility, now supporting it; now rebuking the masses for the conservatism of their decency, now presenting it with both penetration and affection—bleak pessimism is not the sole impression one takes away from one's reading. *Injustice* is also a work of reconciliation: not with the horrors some inflict on others, but with humanity in that mottled state we call "all too human."

Moore undertakes a tremendous effort. He tries to put together a more formal conception of injustice as a way of disciplining, without superseding, his life-long concern with decency. And he tries to show, by special reference to the labor agitation and political activity of German workers from 1848 to the accession of Hitler, the double effect that the sense of injustice had on those who suffered—the effect of both encouraging and inhibiting struggle and resistance.

A large part of the book—the first three and last three chapters out of fifteen—is devoted to the concept of injustice. Moore is driven by

18. *Id.* at 409.

the desire not to appear subjective or idiosyncratic in his moral standard. He assumes that consensus is equivalent to correctness. If all sorts of cultures, past and present, agree on what is morally wrong then no room is left for moral disagreement. In reasoning in this manner, Moore shows that he is haunted by logical positivism and by anthropological relativism. To the positivist he is saying: I have derived my concept of injustice from the expressed or implied opinions of numerous and diverse societies: it is not my own arbitrary preference; we must defer to the world. To the extremists among the anthropological relativists he is saying: I have combed the historical literature and sampled the anthropological literature as well, and through all differences of style, code, environment, past experience, and level of learning and science, I find that certain relations and conditions are universally (or nearly universally) characterized as unjust or unfair or indecent.

In his contribution to *A Critique of Pure Tolerance* he had said quite simply, "warrants for judgment can be derived from certain factual aspects of human existence. If we are to live at all, we have to live in society. And if we are to live in society it may as well be with as little pain as possible."¹⁹ Apparently, he is no longer willing to hold these statements axiomatically.

It may seem odd that he feels the need to spend 200 pages attempting to explore the nature of injustice, as if he were in any doubt concerning it. At the same time, in attempting to placate positivists and anthropologists, to deal in earnest with the anxieties of relativism, he courts another danger. I refer to the fact that some could say that there is a theoretical distinction between consensus (what used to be called *ius gentium* or the law of nations) and objective right (*ius naturale*). This distinction is analogous to the one Rousseau made between the will of all and the general will. Widespread opinion is not likely to be wholly wrong; but the philosopher must keep his distance from the given and the common and try to attain an understanding of right that does not *derive* from consensus, even if it may coincide with consensus. I am not teaching Moore something he has to learn. In his contribution to *A Critique of Pure Tolerance*, he shows that he is aware of the distinction between the law of nations and the law of nature. He says:

If the argument up to this point is correct, there are no absolute barriers to objective knowledge and objective evaluation of human institutions. Objective here means simply that correct and unambiguous answers, independent of individual whims and prefer-

19. Moore, *Tolerance and the Scientific Outlook*, in H. MARCUSE, B. MOORE & R. WOLFF, *supra* note 10, at 67.

Dialectic of Decency

ences, are in principle possible. A real distinction exists, in other words, between scientific humility and the vagueness that comes from moral and intellectual cowardice.²⁰

Why has Moore changed?

I would guess that his anti-elitism has grown ever stronger. His search for popular consensus as a basis for his concept of injustice—he is greatly more interested in the absence of injustice than in a positive and fully worked-out vision of the just society—is, in effect, an act of dissociation. He refuses alliance with all those, including his close friend Herbert Marcuse, who claim to know what most do not know or do not know as well. Moore absolutely rejects the role of moral tutor, and strongly criticizes anyone who hungers for it. He is terrified not only of Stalinism, but also of Leninism. He has never had much sympathy for radical student movements. He pays little attention, and that attention is given only reluctantly, to the part intellectuals play in publicizing political and social grievances. He only incidentally considers the capacity of some to be shocked by the way in which others are treated even when they themselves are secure and prosperous: acting from conscience never appears in *Injustice* (and perhaps nowhere in all of Moore's work). He even distances himself, though not consistently, from the very phrase "moral outrage" because it connotes the condescension of those who do not suffer in their own flesh and psyche, but instead pity from a distance, and abstractly.²¹ In sum, the people with all their faults, inhibitions, and even cowardices, must be their own measure. They must not be given what they do not want. Indeed they should not be given anything: they should have only what they take. Moore is the American Orwell.

It therefore would not be especially to the point to engage Moore in discussions on the nature of moral argument and on the abstract sources of moral judgment. Whether or not he commits a form of the naturalistic fallacy, whether or not he gives away too much to the positivists or the relativists, whether or not he produces a cleanly shaped conception of justice or injustice—all these questions are legitimate, but do not reach the heart of Moore's purpose, which is to elevate the people and diminish all elites.

On the basis of his inquiry into popular expressions of complaint he arrives at the idea that certain moral judgments are recurrent and must be connected to innate human nature immersed in universal social necessities. These judgments tend to be negative, to refer to what

20. *Id.* at 70.

21. Pp. xiii-xiv.

is unjust or indecent—though Moore says there are no clear lines between the negative and the positive, between condemnation and aspiration. His emphasis is on the sufferings sorted out in *Reflections on the Causes of Human Misery*. Yet because the middle chapters of the book are on the condition of German workers from the middle of the nineteenth century to the first third of the twentieth, he deals not so much with deep, debasing, dehumanizing oppression and deprivation as with the struggle to hold on to some past thing that was good, or to acquire some new advantage not entirely discontinuous with the past and the present. Moore's stress on decency turns out to be a stress on the importance of *violations*—violations of strong but unsophisticated notions of what is fitting, what is proper, what the general and implicit social contract and the specific and explicit contextual rules traditionally require. Most of the time discontented people want to be treated as if they were people with feelings, not as objects; and they want to be admitted more fully and equally into the prevailing arrangements, rather than dreaming of some radical overturning. Moore even hints that almost all people in the poorer classes believe in inequality, provided it bears some relation to work done and needed, and provided also that no one—unless a slacker—is ignored and left to suffer and die, or suffer and be humiliated.

Moore's main theoretical work is done in arranging and connecting the specimens of popular grievance that he has studied. He says that the sense of injustice may arise when popular moral expectations are seriously defeated in any of three basic kinds of social relations.²² They are relations between political authority and the people, relations between social groups established by the division of labor, and relations between individuals and between social groups established by the allocation of material and other sorts of rewards. Corruption, cruelty, waste, incompetence, weakness, all may jeopardize popular acceptance. In the course of treating these relations and the many ways in which their impairment may activate an otherwise timid or acceptant mass, Moore creates a rich and continuously instructive model of social life. Besides that, he furnishes the substance of an overall theory of legitimacy—not only political legitimacy, but also the legitimacy of all human relations, major and minor, private and public, formal and informal. Through all his exposition, all his examples, all his subtleties and qualifications, the tendency of his mind is unmuffled. He is tenaciously pursuing the common sense of minimal decency, the bread

22. Pp. 3-48.

Dialectic of Decency

and water of the moral life. He gives that sense the first and last word. He is guided by it and defers to it.

Moore's moral posture does have its costs. Leave aside the disfavor in which he holds moral prophecy, moral regeneration, periodic "reevaluation of values." All of these are indispensable responses to the human condition, indispensable catalysts of human betterment, even though they are the work of one or a few. Let us attend, instead, to a simpler matter. Suppose the oppressed lack any universalist sense of decency and are thus unable to break through the walls of their conventions. They do not accept their situation: they do not even see that theirs is a situation to be judged at all, and then accepted or rejected. Rousseau said, "[s]laves lose everything in their chains, even the desire of escaping from them."²³ For Rousseau that was the worst part of slavery: the insensible loss of soul, so to speak. What is at stake here is not the weakness of response but the absence of reflection and self-reflection. Moore takes up the cases of the Untouchables and inmates in concentration camps, and tries to explain the acceptance of suffering he finds.²⁴ His analysis is resourceful. He is persuaded that in some extreme circumstances the spirit of revolt, fired by the sense of intolerable injustice, cannot arise, thanks to a system of beliefs that everyone accepts or to a systematic atomization of group life and a corresponding disintegration of elemental self-respect. But what should the analyst's attitude be? Moore lets the victims off.

Now, it is easy and cheap to feel sorry, of course. But it would be worse only to feel sorry. One would not feel sorry enough unless one blamed the victims—this time with an intensity that is altogether different from the "blame" I have already said Moore assigns to the oppressed. No, one must hate those who go on living a nonhuman life, either never having thought it nonhuman or having lost the ability to recognize it as such. Then, one must hate oneself for one's hatred; and pray not to be tested. But not to go through a sequence something like this is not to take the measure of the situation, but rather to fix victims in their victimage forever, to understand the situation only anthropologically.

The attitude I propose is made possible only by a tenacity equal to Moore's, but working contrarily. One must hold tenaciously to independence of moral judgment: one must remain independent of anthropology. At the least, one must cling to the core of the *ius gentium*; but, really, that will probably not turn out to offer enough incitement to

23. J. J. ROUSSEAU, *THE SOCIAL CONTRACT AND DISCOURSES* 6 (G. Cole trans. 1950).

24. Pp. 49-50, 55-80.

independence. The *ius gentium* used to allow slavery. One must hold to a conception of human dignity that is not within the reach of the common sense of minimal decency, that is beyond biology and propriety, so that the full horror of certain conditions not be attenuated. *Of course*, it is absurd to blame those who seem unable to imagine decency, let alone a higher dignity. But the absurdity must be lived with, not philosophized away. Else, the loss of human honor is too great.

Sustaining one in this seeming inhumanity is the hope that the anthropologists and the social psychologists are wrong; that despite appearances, Untouchables, inmates, and slaves know their life for what it is, resent it, and would change it if they could; they know that they not only suffer in their physical being but also in their humanity. Moore may not put up enough of a fight with his own anthropological tendencies, despite his firm attachment to the *ius gentium*. There may be significant commonalities even when there appear not to be any. If, however, Moore is right about Untouchables and camp inmates, and it is consequently delusive to believe that resentment will show itself under all circumstances in which we have a right to expect it, then the point remains. We must hate the victims, and punish ourselves for our hatred.

I do not mean to make too much of this quarrel. Let us say that I have tried to point to the area of Moore's greatest vulnerability. In any case, Moore's subject is not the depths of suffering. Using Germany's rich modern history as a central though not necessarily typical record of the experience of resistance to injustice, he patiently distills a general meaning. He studies German workers through their own self-observation when possible and thus allows us to hear the uncoached voices of people at or near the bottom of the social pyramid. A lot of Moore's account deals with miners and iron and steelworkers in the Ruhr from the 1880s to the brief revolutionary period, 1918-1920.²⁵ The account is dominated by Moore's conviction that proletarian class-consciousness, in the Marxist sense, was almost nonexistent.²⁶ Moore doubts whether it is proper even to think of German workers as a proletariat: dispossessed, miserable, and eager for a radical reconstruction of their society. He does not find anything resembling this state of being. Nor does he find very much envy or appetite for vengeance—little *ressentiment*. He finds what he must have been glad to find: a strong sense of injustice as violation of the implicit social con-

25. Pp. 227-353.

26. Pp. 227-28.

Dialectic of Decency

tract, as violation of mostly traditional minimal decencies.²⁷ He is not glad, however, that the workers were only episodically willing to overcome their inhibitions and take direct action in behalf of their own interest in securing or expanding or even acquiring the conditions of decency. He would have had them more constantly pugnacious.

The conquest of the feeling that suffering and deprivation are inevitable is, in Moore's view, the key to action.²⁸ The idea must get started that conditions are correctable because their source is human intention rather than nature or fate or God's will. Once it does get started, "iron in the soul" may form.²⁹ Public authority is no longer seen as parental: people grow up. But that maturity is hard to maintain; the human wish is to relax when the establishment relents and makes some concessions. Even when the German workers were more radical than their leadership, as under Ebert in the earliest days of the Republic, they were, for the most part, seeking to ward off reactionary repression and to defend the beginnings of decent political institutions. Moore accepts Lenin's insistence that workers left to themselves develop only a trade-union mentality, never a revolutionary one. Where Lenin takes this argument to an elitist conclusion, Moore sides with the workers. Lenin and Leninism frighten him much more than the workers' narrowness of horizon.

Reading Moore's lengthy story, one has the impression of intimate acquaintance with nameless individuals. That effect is one of the wonders of the book and constitutes its fundamental humanity. To be sure, some workers capitulated to the early charms of Nazism. Moore considers that issue because Hitler's movement found strength in popular notions of injustice. But Moore shows that in proportion to their numbers the workers bear a much smaller responsibility for Hitler's regime than other groups in German society.³⁰

If the book has villains, they are Ebert and his circle. In a remarkable chapter, "The Suppression of Historical Alternatives: Germany 1918-1920,"³¹ Moore works on the assumption that it is justifiable to hold political actors accountable for things they did not do but could have done. They need not have jumped outside their skins; that is, they did not have to make some enormously difficult leap of faith or perform some brilliant act of imagination of which only an intellectual vanguard is capable. Hoping for this sort of Leninist or Marcusean

27. See, e.g., pp. 233-57, 273-74, 326-27, 351-52.

28. Pp. 458-505.

29. Pp. 82-91.

30. Pp. 400-10.

31. Pp. 376-97.

self-emancipation is foreign to Moore's entire outlook. All that was needed was for Ebert to be the socialist he claimed to be, or, even, to be, more moderately, a republican and a constitutionalist. Instead he was half in love with the old regime, and more concerned with order than with decency. In contrast to him, the workers, though hardly possessed by a Marxist vision of transformation, saw through and beyond the social order Ebert and his circle were trying to preserve, and tried to stand up for basic freedom and decency. The workers' most extreme demands were the result of shock at the reactionary excesses of the Social Democratic government and of putschists who were even worse. For failing to be as advanced as their own following, the leadership preserved those forces that were to reassert themselves under Nazism. The upshot was inconceivable tragedy for the world.

It is fitting that Moore includes these conjectures in his book. Quite without sentimentality he labors to establish the salience of the notion of decency; and repelled by the powerful and the arrogant, yet distrustful of gentility and impatient with timidity, he has written an epic with the workers as the hero. Naturally, the heroism could not be grand: if one wanted it to be, one would still be enthralled by the old regime, as Ebert, in his somewhat different way, was. Though not grand, this heroism has all the majesty of ordinariness when ordinariness raises itself to its true stature. Moore's book makes this intermittent achievement poignant, and all the more so by insisting that it can be only intermittent. His scholarship is thus a complex act of justice.