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Why Marxism Still Does Not Need Normative Theory*

Abstract: Marx did not have a normative theory, that is, a theory that purported to justify, discursively and systematically, his normative opinions, to show them to be rationally obligatory or objectively valid. In this regard, Marx was obviously not alone: almost everyone, including those who lead what are widely regarded as exemplary ‘moral’ lives, decide and act on the basis of normative intuitions and inclinations that fall far short of a theory. Yet self-proclaimed Marxists like G. A. Cohen and Jürgen Habermas have reintroduced a kind of normative theory into the Marxian tradition that Marx himself would have ridiculed. This essay defends Marx’s position and tries to explain the collapse of Western Marxism into bourgeois practical philosophy, i.e., philosophizing about what ought to be done that is unthreatening to capitalist relations of production.

1. Introduction

Marx, early and late, had normative opinions, opinions about what was good and bad, right and wrong, valuable and disvaluable. What he did not have, except inchoately in the *1844 Manuscripts*, was a *normative theory*, that is a theory that purported to justify, discursively and systematically, his normative opinions, to show them to be rationally obligatory and objectively valid. In this regard, Marx was obviously not alone: almost everyone, including those who lead what are widely regarded as exemplary ‘moral’ lives, decide and act on the basis of normative intuitions and inclinations that fall far short of a theory. The one candidate for a normative theory in Marx, in the *1844 Manuscripts* (Marx 1959[1932]), is not a very promising one, involving as it does dubious speculation about the essential nature of human beings and normative claims that run counter to the mature Marx’s views about morality and value, in particular, the view he shared with Engels that because moral opinions are determined by the existing relations of production, we can not know what morality would be characteristic of a society that did not have capitalist relations of production.

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Later Marx's insight should temper enthusiasm for the speculations of the early Marx.¹

Putting the early Marx to one side, what is clear is that in almost all his mature work, even when he expresses normative opinions in passing, his primary concern is to offer a sound causal-explanatory theory of socio-economic change. Marx takes for granted that, *at the right historical moment*, circumstances will be such that large numbers of people will be motivated to undertake revolutionary change: they do not require a normative theory to help them. What they will find useful is a correct understanding of their historical situation and the causal mechanisms at work that explain its potential, precisely the theory Marx purports to offer.² Thus, I shall argue that a familiar complaint about Marx—that he lacked an adequate individual psychology that would explain why people act as his theory predicts—is sound, but that we have every reason to supplement the Marxian causal-explanatory theory of historical change with a psychology that shows why normative theory is completely irrelevant. This is the subject of *section 2* of the article.

Events in the 21st-century continue to confirm the basic correctness of Marx's causal-explanatory theory (e.g., developed capitalist societies tend toward widening inequality; capitalism continues to conquer the globe, and where it does so, it erases local cultures and customs in favor of homogeneity and capitalist values; the dominant moral and political ideas are those of the ruling classes, those with control over the main forces of production), as do the major currents of historical explanation in the scholarly literature, even if we no longer have reason to accept

¹ The early Marx held that under capitalism, individuals suffered from alienation (*Entfremdung*) from their essential nature. While alienation might have distinctive phenomenological markers, these have only evidential significance: alienation is fundamentally an objective failure to realize one's essential nature. But does man really have an essential nature and if so, what is it? The core idea in the *1844 Manuscripts*, is that humans only flourish when they freely engage in productive activity (rather than engaging in it to meet basic human needs), recognize their own dependence on cooperative productive activity, and, in particular, recognize that it is essential to the very nature of the species to which they belong that they engage in such self-aware productivity activity. Marx's characterization of the 'species-being' of humans is, to put it gently, a claim of dubious epistemic status. It is certainly no part of serious biology, either then or since, and it is not clear it does any explanatory work in making sense of historical transformation. It has attracted, to be sure, the attention of the worst kind of bourgeois armchair moral theorists, Neo-Aristotelians like Philippa Foot and Michael Thompson who, like Aristotle (but less forgivably), simply make up the facts about human beings to suit their moral prejudices. But is it not equally plausible that human beings are 'essentially' locked in a struggle between their erotic and aggressive impulses (as Freud had it), such that no stable, flourishing compromise will be possible? And perhaps it is possible, as Nietzsche believes, that the essential nature of humans is not uniform, such that the conditions of flourishing for most humans has little to do with the conditions of flourishing for the exceptional cases? Even if Marx is wrong, as he seems to be, about the essential nature of humans, his *1844 Manuscripts* remain deeply evocative of the phenomenology of alienation of labor under capitalism.

² All the professed Marxist revolutionaries of the 20th-century—Lenin, Mao, Castro, others—clearly had no understanding of the explanatory theory, or every one of them would have instituted a free market economy in their agrarian and preindustrial societies. Why they were such incompetent readers of Marx is a topic for a different day.

the teleological view of history Marx inherited from Hegel.³ Yet in the last half-century, many self-identified Marxists in the West have increasingly taken up the sort of normative theory Marx eschewed. That such theory arose is hardly surprising from a Marxian point of view which understands that intellectual labor, even intellectual labor by people of good intentions, is structured by the economic and political circumstances in which such labor takes place. The two key figures in this regard are G. A. Cohen and Jürgen Habermas. Their betrayal of Marx deserves to be understood, since in neither case can it be explained by ulterior reactionary motivations. In both cases, the structure of the post-War academic labor system, and prevailing ideological currents, may help make sense of the wrong turn their work took. That is the subject of *sections 3* and *4*.

2. Why Do People Revolt?

Why do people revolt? Why do they undertake any actions, drastic or otherwise? Is it because they are moved by reason, or is it, rather, that they are moved by the non-rational parts of the soul, their desires and passions? The Humean view, that agents are only moved to act, by the non-rational parts of the mind—desires, drives, wishes, and so on—has won such a decisive victory in the empirical psychology of the past century that the persistence of the Kantian alternatives (in which reason alone might be the source of motivation) seems only an artifact of Christianity ('Platonism for the people' as Nietzsche says in the Preface to *Beyond Good and Evil*) and the division of labor in the university system in which some people are paid to tell edifying but incredible stories about human motivation. In a recent review of empirical literature on so-called 'moral' action, for example, Timothy Schroeder, Adina Roskies and Shaun Nichols found that the view they dub 'sentimentalism'—namely, the view that "the emotions typically play a key causal role in motivating moral behavior" (2010, 77)—is well-supported by the "evidence from psychology and neuroscience" (98) and that while "motivation derived [exclusively] from higher cognitive centers independently of desire is possible [...] the only known model of it is pathological" involving Tourette syndrome (94).

Was Marx a Humean about motivation? He plainly should have been, given what he tells us, quite explicitly, about the conditions under which revolutionary transformation takes place. In a famous passage from *The Germany Ideology*, for example, Marx claims that capitalism will collapse only under certain rather extreme circumstances:

"[I]t [capitalism] must necessarily have rendered the great mass of humanity 'propertyless,' and produced, at the same time, the contradiction of an existing world of wealth and culture, both of which conditions presuppose a great increase in productive power, a high degree of development [...]. [T]his development of productive forces

³ See, e.g., Hobsbawm 1994; Harris 1974; Brenner 2005; Morris 2015 and, in his fashion, Piketty 2014. And see generally, Leiter 2004, esp. 79–89.

[...] is an absolutely necessary practical premise because without it *want* is merely made general, and with *destitution* the struggle for necessities and all the old filthy business would necessarily be reproduced; and furthermore, because only with this universal development of productive forces is a *universal* intercourse between men established, which produces in all nations simultaneously the phenomenon of the ‘propertyless’ mass [...]. Empirically, communism is only possible as the act of the dominant peoples ‘all at once’ and simultaneously, which presupposes the universal development of productive forces and the world intercourse bound up with communism.” (Marx 1978[1846], 161–2)

On this account, there are three necessary conditions for communist revolution: first, *mass*, i.e., wide-scale, immiseration; second, truly *global* capitalism (which is precisely what produces mass immiseration: “the mass of *propertyless* workers [...] presupposes the *world market* through competition” (1978[1864], 162)); and third, an enormous increase in productive power. As G. A. Cohen aptly puts it, the transition from capitalism to communism is brought about by “the problem [...] of massive power to produce, alongside massive poverty. As that problem deepens, its solution looms, as and because the problem deepens.” (2000, 63) It is not a condition for revolution that people have the correct normative theory of justice or fairness; as even Cohen’s gloss acknowledges, misery, privation, need are quite sufficient to motivate behavior. Marxists, in the grips of the extravagant metaphysician Hegel,⁴ speak about a ‘contradiction’, in which capitalist relations of production ‘fetter’ the development of the forces of production. But what Marx has in mind is far more prosaic, and plausible. As Marx writes at the end of the *German Ideology*:

“The contradiction between the individuality of each separate proletarian and labor, the condition of life forced upon him, becomes evident to him, himself, for he is sacrificed from youth upwards and, within his own class, has no chance of arriving at the conditions which would place him in the other class.” (Marx/Engels 1978[1846], 200)

In other words, at a certain point capitalist relations of production evolve in such a way that those who labor for survival wages realize there is no hope of a better future. Such people, unsurprisingly, will agitate for change, especially if they have a correct understanding of the causes of their situation and the alternative possibilities.

It is important to emphasize that the agent of revolutionary transformation in the official Marxian view is largely indistinguishable from the agent of bourgeois economics in the 20th-century neoclassical tradition: he has certain basic

⁴ A large literature has arisen devoted to trying to obscure the fact that Hegel was a purveyor of the worst-kind of theologically-motivated metaphysical nonsense that the best tendencies in philosophy of the last two hundred years have tried to eradicate. Marx is to be included in that effort, though his proximity to the virus no doubt limited his ability to do it. On the *real* Hegel, Beiser 2005 is admirably candid and clear.

desires, and he is instrumentally rational in pursuit of their satisfaction. The genius of Neoclassical economics was to diagnose the only kind of ‘thinking’ that could count as rational under capitalism, namely, figuring out what means would satisfy one’s ends, the latter immune to rational adjudication. It is precisely that fact on which the most plausible Marxian theory of revolutionary motivation depends.⁵ In a communist revolution, Marx says, “individuals must appropriate the existing totality of productive forces, not only to achieve self-activity, but, also, merely to safeguard their very existence” (1978[1846], 191). The phrasing is telling: Marx gives a nod to the Hegelian idea that one might be motivated to ‘achieve self-activity’, but quickly, and correctly, adds that the desire to ‘safeguard’ one’s ‘very existence’ is a key motivator.

When writing for a more popular audience, in the 1848 *Communist Manifesto*, Marx is quite clear on the relevant psychological story:

“The modern laborer [...] instead of rising with the progress of industry, sinks deeper and deeper below the conditions of existence of his own class. He becomes a pauper, and pauperism develops more rapidly than population and wealth. And here it becomes evidence, that the bourgeoisie is unfit any longer to be the ruling class in society [...]. It is unfit to rule because it is incompetent to assure an existence to its slave within his slavery [...]. Society can no longer live under this bourgeoisie [...] its existence is no longer compatible with society. (1978[1848], 483)

The laborer’s motivation to revolt under these circumstances is not some quasi-Hegelian interest in his species-being; it is that he works and works, and his life gets worse and worse. It not only gets worse and worse, but it does so under circumstances in which the productive capacity of humanity is so great that, *if things were otherwise*, his life would be better in its material respects.⁶ Marx, again reflecting the baneful influence of Hegel, thought he had to explain how capitalism eventually becomes a ‘fetter’ on the development of the productive forces, for which he offered the famous theory of the falling rate of profit, which depended, alas, on the false labor theory of value. In the orthodox view, since surplus labor is the source of profit, as mechanization displaces the need for

⁵ This also marks one of the dramatic breaks from Marx in the writings of the Frankfurt School theorists. As Anton Leist aptly observes: “Horkheimer early on (and in contrast to Marx) favored a Kantian rationality that was to be held as an ideal over and above the instrumental rationality present in existing society.” (2008, 335) This break is then exacerbated by Habermas, as I discuss below.

⁶ Jaime Edwards has pointed out to me, correctly, that much Marxist theory after Marx, including importantly the Frankfurt School theorists, has been devoted to trying to understand why communism has not overtaken capitalism in a ‘more timely’ fashion, as it were: the worry, of course, has been that the immiserated, due to false consciousness, are quite tolerant of their misery. Ideological delusion is real, to be sure, and it is part of the task of Marxist political advocacy to shatter it. But the basic mistake of much Marxism after Marx was failure to realize that capitalism has yet to run its course: there is both more productive power and more misery in the offing. And the misery must be sufficient to motivate the counterfactual thought *that if things were otherwise*, everything would be better. In the United States, for example, we are probably a century or more away.

labor, profits will necessarily fall—a view that also entails that the more labor used, the more profitable the industry, which is obviously false. Here Marx made an analytical blunder, but in fact he was completely correct that increased mechanization leads to falling profits, but not because of the labor theory of value. Once again, the explanation is prosaic, as various mainstream, capitalist economists have noticed: as human labor power is eliminated from the productive system, the pool of those able to consume is reduced accordingly, meaning, in the end, production produces very little that can generate profit.⁷

In short, people revolt when they are miserable, see no alternative, and understand that radical action holds out the promise of an alternative given the level of development of the productive forces. What constitutes misery is set by actual biological and psychological facts about creatures like us: that we need food, clothing, shelter; but also that we typically want and perhaps even need community, play, and hope.⁸ Capitalism, as Marx understood, unleashes the productive power and ingenuity of humanity like no other economic system; but unlike the apologists for capitalism, Marx saw that the structure of the entire system guaranteed the misery of the vast majority. If agents' basic needs and desires are frustrated, and you can explain to them both why and what the alternatives are, you can be confident that those agents will be motivated to change things. Instrumental rationality and some assumptions about human desires are all one needs by way of a psychology of revolution. Agents do not need to know what justice is, or fairness, or morally right action.

To be sure, they may express their desires in normative language (we all use normative language, all the time), but that is not the same as saying they need a discursive justification or theory of those concepts to be motivated to act. They do not, in short, need a normative theory to explain why they should revolt if Marx's descriptive claims about the tendencies of capitalist development are correct.⁹ Even if Marx's qualitative predictions about the tendencies of development in capitalist societies are incorrect, there is, alas, no evidence that philosophical arguments meant to induce purportedly true beliefs about 'justice' or 'fairness' are effective in motivating behavior.¹⁰ Marx had the right psychology for creatures like us under the conditions in which we live. If it turns out that the empirical claims central to his theory are wrong, then Marxism truly

⁷ See, e.g., Ford 2015. Perhaps other capitalists can pick up the slack in consumption by the immiserated majority, but then we are back in the dystopian scenario of the *Manifesto*, in which productive power is immense, but those who manage it, the bourgeoisie, use none of it to meet the needs of the vast majority of humanity. This seems an inherently unstable scenario, as the experience in despotic capitalist and nominally communist regimes from Nicaragua to Romania suggests. Ford, *supra*, argues against the sustainability of such a future, even from a non-Marxist perspective.

⁸ The *1844 Manuscripts* are naturally read as an evocative account of the other things humans might want and need to live well. Even then, the claims therein are debatable, but they are at least inspiring.

⁹ Would individuals who lived under conditions in which competition for economic survival was not the central fact of existence have need of a normative *theory*? Perhaps so, but as with the shape of morality under such circumstances, we can only speculate about what it might be. What is clear is that according to Marx, under capitalist relations of production, a normative *theory* is otiose with respect to revolutionary action.

¹⁰ See the discussion of G. A. Cohen and Thomas Nagel, below.

is dead, and no one should pretend otherwise. But so far we have no reason to think that.

3. Bourgeois Practical Philosophy and the Marxian Tradition

Bourgeois practical philosophy—broadly speaking, philosophizing about ‘what ought to be done’ that poses no threat to capitalist relations of production or to the prerequisites of the capitalist class—is now almost the only practical philosophy we have in the Western capitalist democracies, apart from the often unintelligible and juvenile posturing of products of the ‘intellectual entertainment industry’ like Žižek or, a generation ago, Derrida.¹¹ The genealogy of how we arrived at such a state of affairs in the Anglophone context is worth brief notice, though its trajectory is different in the two main centers of Anglophone philosophy, Britain and America—which were also, of course, the two main Anglophone imperial powers of the last century.

3.1 Normative Theory and Intuitions in the Anglophone World

In Britain, normative theorizing by philosophers had a lively history going back to Bentham, Mill, and Sidgwick in the 19th-century, and continuing through to figures like G. E. Moore and W. D. Ross in the early decades of the 20th-century.¹² Bentham and Mill were methodologically unselfconscious, content with armchair empirical psychology about human motivation to lay the putative foundation for their normative utilitarian conclusions. Sidgwick marks the shift to the preferred form of 20th-century armchair sociology in Anglophone philosophy, namely, to claims about what ‘ordinary’ or ‘common people’ believe, though Sidgwick had the intellectual decency to allow that even if ordinary practical thought is ‘unconsciously utilitarian,’ it is equally egoistic, thus leaving individual ‘practical reason’ in an irresolvable deadlock. In so arguing, Sidgwick had acutely diagnosed the ideological peculiarity of conjoining Christianity and capitalism, that is, of trying to reconcile a Christian ‘morality’—one demanding altruistic concern for the welfare of others—with the economic system of capitalism, in which the only imperative of economic life is to promote one’s own

¹¹ The ‘intellectual entertainment industry’ is an offshoot of the ‘culture industry’ diagnosed by Horkheimer and Adorno in the 1940s, though the former is not quite as profitable as the latter. But like the latter, its themes are repetition and superficial amusement, with originality or genuine demandingness of thought forbidden. The gradual collapse of the *wissenschaftlich* ideal that animated the modern research university two hundred years ago has created considerable room for the intellectual entertainment industry to operate in the more obviously feeble parts of the humanities and social sciences. Although much Anglophone philosophy is, in my view, worthless, it is not because of its betrayal of the *wissenschaftlich* ideal that justifies the university and animated, for example, Marx’s *Das Kapital*.

¹² On the latter, see esp. the sympathetic accounting by Hurka 2004. Earlier British figures, like David Hume and Adam Smith (and excluding the Christian preachers masquerading as philosophers), were more concerned with explaining how proto-bourgeois morality arose or could arise.

interests, others be damned. In describing this as a ‘duality of practical reason’, Sidgwick was, in effect, diagnosing the fundamental tension in moral ideologies under capitalism.

By the early 20th-century in Britain—with the country now the preeminent Western imperial capitalist power—its leading academics could put aside worries about the duality of practical reason in favor of utter confidence that members of their class would simply ‘intuit’ all the morally significant features of states of affairs, none of which involved, for example, the wrongness of exploitation or the injustice of plundering the resources of non-white populations. But the British intuitionists also set the stage for the paradigm of bourgeois moral philosophy over the last century by limiting its domain to allegedly obvious ‘intuitions’ shared by members of the same socio-economic class about matters that never had systemic import.

The extreme to which British moral philosophy went in the first half of the twentieth-century—in which, essentially, the etiquette manuals of the ‘Bloomsbury Group’ constituted ‘ethics’—was put in check by a variety of developments. At the material level, the collapse of global capitalism in the 1930s and the rise of fascists, who did not intuit the ‘good’ as G. E. Moore did, surely highlighted the ridiculousness of intuitionism as an explanation of putative moral knowledge.¹³ But the rise of logical positivism—itsself enabled by the triumph of capitalism that the modern sciences made possible and that, in return, rationalized its hegemony—resulted in a collapse of practical philosophy in the Anglophone countries, especially America. Practical philosophy was now consigned to the realm of emoting about what ought to be done, its criteria for cognitive adequacy so clearly lacking by comparison to the standards of confirmation in the various natural sciences. Logical positivists were, to be sure, not shy about emoting, as their opposition to Nazism makes clear. But they did not think that a normative philosophy was required, or even possible, to explain why they did not want complicity with Hitler’s thugs and murderers.

The complete irrelevance of Anglophone bourgeois practical philosophy in the first half of the 20th-century—its irrelevance to the horrific crimes and atrocities of two world wars, as well as the horrific crimes and atrocities perpetrated by imperialist capitalist powers between and during those wars—might have been thought an indictment of its *bona fides*, quite apart from the epistemic worries of logical positivists. But bourgeois practical philosophy has returned with a vengeance, precisely during the time when the university system expanded dramatically—in enrollments and funding—after the Second World War. The massive expansion of university faculties after World War II, especially in America, created a demand for people to fill positions. The political purge of anti-capitalists in American Universities in the 1950s ensured that *if* anyone were

¹³ After the war, P. F. Strawson (1949) delivered the dialectical deathblow to intuitionism. Intuitionism has returned more recently, under similar economic circumstances brought about by the ‘neoliberal’ revolution from the right in the 1980s led by Margaret Thatcher in Britain and Ronald Reagan in America; as economic inequality in these capitalist democracies reached 1920s levels, it should hardly be surprising that ‘elite’ academics once again became confident in their own moral opinions to such an extent that they view their confidence as having epistemic status. See the critical discussion in Leiter 2013.

interested in questions about *what ought to be done* it would be strictly in terms that did not challenge the prerogatives of the now dominant capitalist systems (a point to which I return, below).

John Rawls, the most important manifestation of this transformation, applied essentially the same ‘method’ as G.E. Moore, but with a small modification:¹⁴ on the Rawlsian view, we should seek an equilibrium between our intuitions about particular cases and the theory that seems to explain those intuitions, once we consider that theory’s other implications. The ‘method’, appropriately enough, was dubbed ‘reflective equilibrium’, which a contemporary of Rawls, the Oxford philosopher R. M. Hare, correctly dismissed on the grounds that,

“It is certainly possible, as some thinkers even of our times [i.e., Rawls] have done, to collect all the moral opinions of which they and their contemporaries feel most sure, find some relatively simple method or apparatus which can be represented, with a bit of give and take, and making plausible assumptions about the circumstances of life, as generating all these opinions; and then pronounce that that is the moral system which, having reflected, we must acknowledge as the correct one. But they have absolutely no authority for this claim beyond the original convictions, for which no ground or argument was given. The ‘equilibrium’ they have reached is one between forces which might have been generated by prejudice, and no amount of reflection can make that a solid basis for morality.” (Hare 1981, 12)

Hare was no Marxist, to be sure, and he thought there were other more epistemically sound methods available—though his views on that score enjoyed little influence even in Anglophone practical philosophy—but his basic criticism of Rawlsian intuitionism was sound, and never received a serious rejoinder since the sociology of the academic profession guaranteed that the major universities were now populated with Harvard graduates and often Rawls students.

3.2 The Characteristics of Bourgeois Practical Philosophy

So far I have used the epithet ‘bourgeois’ practical philosophy to refer to normative theory that does not challenge capitalist relations of production and does not directly threaten the perquisites of the capitalist class. Thus while Rawls, unlike Moore or Ross, endorsed intuitions that had implications for basic social and economic policy in capitalist societies, his theory was neither presented nor understood as threatening capitalist relations of production, a fact surely central to any explanation of how it could become so influential in capitalist democracies, at least in the universities. But Rawls appears as a paragon of moral seriousness by comparison to most bourgeois practical philosophy in the

¹⁴ Rawls loyalists insist that the official method is more demanding, requiring consideration of all ‘reasonable’ intuitions across history, usually meaning the history of Western philosophy. Of course, Rawls himself did not practice this approach, nor does the huge literature inspired by the ‘method’ of ‘reflective equilibrium’. To be sure, if we raise the evidential bar as the loyal Rawlsians propose, no conclusions at all can be drawn.

Anglophone world, which has three further attributes that ensure its irrelevance to the economic system and the priorities of the ruling class. First, such theory primarily addresses questions of correct action in terms of what individuals ought to do, taking the systemic features of capitalism as fixed.¹⁵ Second, its primary focus is on what bourgeois academics (academics whose class position is such that they are either members of the capitalist class or largely dependent on the needs of the capitalist class for their livelihood)¹⁶ ought to believe, not on what ought to be done—once again, guaranteeing the irrelevance of its conclusions to the perquisites of the capitalist class. Third, it increasingly and disproportionately focuses on moral trivialities, a feature related to the first point. I take these up in turn.¹⁷

(i) The focus on individuals

In this expanded sense, Peter Singer is quite clearly the preeminent bourgeois moral philosopher of our time, with his relentless focus on individual action and its individual impact, holding constant (indeed ignoring) the systemic status quo. Thus, Singer argues that people have an obligation to give to charity (akin to their obligation to rescue someone in immediate distress), as well as obligations to refrain from eating non-human animals and to sometimes kill (or at least to permit the killing of) disabled human beings—all following from allegedly simple utilitarian premises. Singer nowhere argues, for example, that people have an obligation to overthrow the capitalist system or to pursue, first and foremost, systemic reform, even though systemic harms to human well-being are the most significant. Marx is, arguably, a kind of consequentialist welfarist in the normative opinions he expresses: that is, he objects to capitalism because, at a certain point in its development, it fails to maximize the well-being of the vast majority. Marx's conception of well-being is obviously not an hedonic or desire-based one, but that is orthogonal to the main point: from a consequentialist, welfarist point of view—of which Singer's is putatively an instance—Singer's kind of moral reasoning should be suspect. This should be obvious, but seems to have elided bourgeois moral philosophers in recent years.¹⁸

¹⁵ Rawls, in focusing on the 'basic structure' of society, is a slight departure from this tendency, but only slight: the basic structure does not include capitalist relations of production.

¹⁶ I am such an academic, so the point of the characterization is not that there is a crude determination relation between class position and thought, though there often is. In my own case I suppose it helps that I come from a labor union family, so have a more vivid sense of the competing class interests, even though I now occupy a position close to that of the dominant economic class.

¹⁷ Cf. Leist 2008, 331, where he observes that in moral and political philosophy "[t]oday statements about how to improve society are typically suggestions for small-scale improvements to special institutions within society, backed up by reference to 'our' moral intuitions, a common moral knowledge taken as given among a representative part of the citizens, or, even more abstractly, among humans". Or similarly: "Moral philosophers frequently get bogged down in details of moral theory that have no clear connection to the trends that dominate social life; and those working in applied ethics are often unaware of the larger institutional framework necessary to put their normative contributions in perspective." (2008, 332).

¹⁸ Singer's own engagement with Marx is replete with misreading and dismissive commentary. See for example, Singer 1979, where, in reviewing Cohen's 1978 book, Singer concludes that "Marx's theory, like Hegel's cannot be classed as science", something Cohen 'fails to realize'

If harm to human well-being is primarily a product of systemic problems, as Marxists (correctly) believe, then focus on individual decision against a fixed systemic background will have pernicious consequences in both the long-term and even the medium short-term. Insofar as bourgeois moral philosophers like Singer are concerned with consequences (whether short- or long-term) they would have to acknowledge these possibilities. First, individual acts of charity encourage moral complacency about systemic harms to well-being among charitable givers, in large part because it obscures from serious consideration systemic causes of human misery.¹⁹ Second, those pernicious consequences are only enhanced when the capitalist media seize, as they predictably do, on instances of bourgeois morality as ideals to which others should aspire—for example, in the celebration of a young man who works in the ‘financial’ industry and, influenced by Singer, gives half his income (US \$100,000) to charities helping people in impoverished nations (Kristof 2015). Yet we know with certainty that a Wall Street youngster giving US \$100,000 per year to various charities will not actually eliminate (or even significantly reduce) poverty, human misery, or suffering—in either the

because his analogy between functional explanation in Darwinian theory and historical materialism falls into a popular misconception of Darwin’s theory of evolution. Singer elucidates: “That long necks help giraffes survive was not new with Darwin. Darwin’s distinctive insight was into the mechanism by which the forces of evolution operate, namely natural selection of varying types [...], but Darwin did not explain long necks by saying that the neck has the function of enabling giraffes to survive.” (Of course, Cohen’s book indicates no need for this lesson, cf. Cohen’s reply to Singer (1980).) See also the endearingly titled, Singer (1980): ‘Dictator Marx?’ There Singer tells us that “[f]or readers interested in a general discussion of Marxism, none of the books so far reviewed is really suitable: McLellan’s is too superficial, Gouldner’s too long-winded, and Moore’s and Thomas’s too specialized.” Then Singer proceeds to praise a book invulnerable to such criticism, at least to the extent that its author (Robert Heilbroner), “admits that people like himself might well decide to be content with Swedish-style democratic socialism, thus avoiding the dangers of ridding themselves completely of capitalism”. However, Singer’s praise cannot extend itself to Heilbroner’s challenge of “our preference [sic] for individual liberty”: “To the extent that Heilbroner endorses the idea that our preference for individual liberty is a result of our bourgeois perspective, he owes us an account of the ethical basis on which one might accept socialism despite its antipathy to individual liberty. And he owes us a demonstration that this decision is somehow deducible from objective or universal moral considerations in a way that the decision to support individual liberty is not. *Without this, it is nonsense, or worse, to talk of socialism as ‘a new social order’*” (emphasis added). A number of philosophers have critiqued the logic of Singer’s moral argument, from both the Marxist left (see Gomberg 2002) and the libertarian right (see Schmidtz 2000). (Thanks to Chris Morris for guidance on this literature.)

¹⁹ For an intelligent expression of this point, by an ‘insider’, see Buffett (2013): “Inside any important philanthropy meeting, you witness heads of state meeting with investment managers and corporate leaders. All are searching for answers with their right hand to problems that others in the room have created with their left [...]—As more lives and communities are destroyed by the system that creates vast amounts of wealth for the few, the more heroic it sounds to ‘give back’. It’s what I would call ‘conscience laundering’—feeling better about accumulating more than any one person could possibly need to live on by sprinkling a little around as an act of charity.—But this just keeps the existing structure of inequality in place. The rich sleep better at night, while others get just enough to keep the pot from boiling over. Nearly every time someone feels better by doing good, on the other side of the world (or street), someone else is further locked into a system that will not allow the true flourishing of his or her nature or the opportunity to live a joyful and fulfilled life [...]. People will rise above making \$2 a day to enter our world of goods and services so they can buy more. But doesn’t all this just feed the beast?”

third world or in the first world. The actual effects on well-being of charitable giving are hotly contested by economists;²⁰ but even when they make small short-term contributions to alleviating particular diseases or disabilities, we have little or no evidence that they actually contribute to flourishing human lives—primarily because those to whom aid is so often directed for discreet problems live under systemic conditions that thwart human flourishing along many other dimensions, to which charity is never responsive.²¹

What if instead of picking worthy charities in accordance with Singer’s bourgeois moral philosophy, those with resources committed all of it to supporting radical political and economic reforms in powerful capitalist democracies like the U.S.; perhaps even committing their time and resources to helping other well-intentioned individuals with resources organize themselves collectively to do the same? Is it implausible that if all those in the thrall of Peter Singer gave all their money, and time, and effort, to challenging, through political activism or otherwise, the idea that human well-being should be hostage to acts of charity, then the well-being of human beings would be more likely to be maximized even from a utilitarian point of view? Do Singerites deny that systemic changes to the global capitalist system, including massive forced redistribution of resources from the idle rich to those in need, would not dwarf all the modest improvements in human well-being achieved by the kind of charitable acts Singer’s bourgeois moral philosophy commends?²² The question is not even seriously considered in the bourgeois moral philosophy of Singer. Although purporting to be concerned

²⁰ See, e.g., the contributions by the economists Acemoglu and Deaton (2015) on Singer’s so-called ‘effective altruism’. Acemoglu observes: “[W]e cannot measure accurately which organizations use resources most effectively. More evidence is always preferred, but precise measurement of the social value of a donated dollar may be impossible. What is the social value of a dollar given to Amnesty International as opposed to Oxfam or an NGO providing vaccines or textbooks? Every measurement involves value judgments. How much more valuable is it to save the life of a one-year-old than to send a six-year-old to school?” And Deaton, even more damningly, writes: “It is an illusion that lives can be bought like cars. For a start, the evidence is nearly always in dispute. The alleged effectiveness of the Deworm the World Initiative—which, at the time of this writing, ranked fourth in GiveWell’s list of top charities—runs contrary to the latest extensive review of the evidence by the Cochrane Collaboration, an organization that compiles medical research data. Maybe Cochrane is wrong, but it is more likely that the effectiveness of deworming varies from place to place depending, among many other things, on climate and on local arrangements for disposing of human waste. [...] [T]he evidence for development effectiveness, for ‘what works’, mostly comes from the recent wave of randomized experiments, usually done by rich people from the rich world on poor people in the poor world, from which the price lists for children’s lives are constructed. How can those experiments be wrong? Because they consider only the immediate effects of the interventions, not the contexts in which they are set. Nor, most importantly, can they say anything about the wide-ranging unintended consequences. However counterintuitive it may seem, children are not dying for the lack of a few thousand dollars to keep them alive. If it were so simple, the world would already be a much better place. Development is neither a financial nor a technical problem but a political problem, and the aid industry often makes the politics worse [...].”

²¹ I am even bracketing here the costs to human well-being of someone working in a socially parasitic industry like finance, costs which are borne both by the worker and others.

²² In fact, in conversing with Singerties, it seems many would deny this for classic rational choice reasons: namely, the marginal contribution of any individual to the transformation of unjust systems is negligible, by comparison to the ‘clear’ impact of buying mosquito nets for people in Africa. This way of ‘calculating’ what is worth doing of course guarantees that the existing socio-economic system will remain untouched. The irony is that the ‘calculations’ of

with consequences, like most utilitarians they set the evidential bar so high, and the temporal horizon so short, that the *actual* consequences of particular courses of action, including the valorization of charity over systemic change, are never really considered.

(ii) What to believe, not what ought to be done

Contemporary moral and political philosophy is bourgeois in a second, and different, sense, namely, that its main aim is only to revise belief, not practice.²³ G. A. Cohen, the leading bourgeois Marxist of our time, put it clearly: “The question for political philosophy is not what we should do but what we should think, even when what we should think makes no practical difference.” (2003, 243) The contrast with Marx’s conception of intellectual inquiry is striking: as Marx wrote, in the *2nd Thesis on Feuerbach*, any “dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking that is isolated from practice is a purely *scholastic* question”. He was here dismissing the preoccupation of post-Kantian idealists with the question of whether or not there is a world that exists independent of our conceptualization of it, but that is surely because it never would have occurred to Marx that philosophers would engage questions of practical import simply to figure out ‘what we should think’ even though it makes no ‘practical difference’.²⁴

The ability to engage in intellectual inquiry simply to figure out what to believe is itself a luxury possible only in very particular economic circumstances, namely, ones in which all basic needs are met so effectively that some individuals can withdraw entirely into the realm of reflection without regard for its import. The value of such a possibility is a premise of the modern university, where insulation of inquiry from ‘practical value’ is essential to research, including research that ultimately has practical import. But in the domain of practical reflection it seems perverse, given that its subject is *practical*, but most of its methods are without any epistemic standing—the intuitions or feelings of middle-class and often wealthier professors should be of no interest to anyone other than sociologists and anthropologists, perhaps—and its conclusions influence only, as Cohen puts it, ‘what to think’.²⁵

Singerites, while purporting to be evidence-based and rational, are neither. See the critical discussion of the use of ‘evidence’ in Clough 2015.

²³ Singer, to be sure, would revise discretionary spending by individuals who take him seriously, but that’s about it.

²⁴ Cf. Leist 2008, 332: “[M]oral philosophers are eager to develop a technical vocabulary to capture their arguments—even though the distance that separates philosophical analysis and the practice it takes as its object is even greater in moral philosophy than elsewhere.”

²⁵ It is often said by bourgeois practical philosophers that we need greater ‘clarity’ about our practical thinking in order to lead our lives. But the evidence of those who led morally admirable lives—Martin Luther King, Jr., for example, or those who resisted Nazi terror—provides no support for the claim that ‘clear’ practical reasoning was essential to what they did. This should hardly be surprising, since with respect to most ethically momentous decisions—should you cooperate in sending the Jews to their death? Should you treat other human beings like garbage because of their skin color?—the answers are either obvious or, to the extent they are not obvious, further moral philosophy is not what is needed. When I say the answers are ‘obvious’, I am not endorsing intuitionism: I am only claiming that the problem with someone who thinks killing the Jews or the Blacks is reasonable is not that they lack moral knowledge or the right normative theory, it is that they are my enemies. Historically, communists, unlike

(iii) Moral trivialities

This leads to the third problem, namely, the tendency of bourgeois moral philosophers to focus on moral trivialities and, to make matters worse, to do so with a ‘method’, as we have already noted, that could hardly sustain serious scrutiny. Let us use as a case study the work of a prominent young Anglophone moral philosopher, Hallie Liberto, whose ‘research’ (Liberto 2015) concerns promises and sex:

“Consider a promise made by a college student, Jane, to another college student, John, that she will have sex with him tonight after the homecoming game. Call this case ‘Homecoming’. We do not tend to take promises of this kind very seriously. We remind young people that they may change their minds about having sex at any time, no matter what they have said or done in the past, no matter what sort of expectations they have raised in their partners. We say they may change their minds at will, and without reasons. If we are correct when we issue these reminders, then that must mean that promises to have sex are very different from most other types of promises. After all, permissibly breaking a promise ordinarily requires a reason, at the very least—typically a very powerful one. But note that promises to engage in sexual activities are not the only sexual promises we make, nor are they the most common. We often make promises to refrain from having sex with other people. We take these promises *not* to have sex very seriously.”

Put aside the triviality of the topic (promises by college students about whether to have sex),²⁶ though, admittedly, it observes the first requirement of bourgeois normative theory, namely, that it can treat capitalism as a fixed background, and no possible conclusion of the ‘inquiry’ could affect the perquisites of the capitalist class! Even so, a natural question to ask about this analysis, if one is not already fully indoctrinated in the ‘method’ of bourgeois normative theory, is, “Who is this ‘we’?” Who is it that believes that promises to have sex can simply be broken, and who is it that believes promises to refrain from sex are more important? (Who is it that even believes breaking promises is of great ethical significance?) Much Anglophone ‘moral’ philosophy has this ‘Emily Post’ or ‘Dear Abby’ quality, that is, armchair reports of what some suitably sensitive member of the relevant cultural and economic group feels ought to be done. (‘Emily Post’ and ‘Dear Abby’ were influential American purveyors of popular advice in newspapers about ‘manners and morals’, recording, often quite well,

others, understood these issues more clearly: sometimes the problem with your opponents is not that they do not think clearly, but that they need to be stopped by force. Historically, of course, some self-described ‘communists’ also misjudged both the historical situation and who the enemies were: but that, again, was not a failure of moral theory.

²⁶ Trivial, by comparison, say, to the fact of billions of humans living in poverty, or to wars of criminal aggression launched by countries that sponsor this kind of ‘moral philosophy’, or to the billions of people who have little or no opportunity for human development due to the economic circumstances in which they find themselves.

the prevailing informal norms of the American bourgeoisie in the mid- and later-20th-century. Their counterparts now populate university faculties of so-called ‘ethics’, though they generally write less well.) That there are no actual cognitive criteria for assessing the bits of moral etiquette advice proffered is obvious: the whole charade is sustained only by a system of ‘peer review’ in which other Dear Abbys and Emily Posts participate.

Professor Liberto, correctly, situates her etiquette manual about sexual promises in the context of claims by other bourgeois normative philosophers:

“Tim Scanlon [a professor at Harvard] grounds promissory obligation in generated expectation. Promises promote a social practice that advances a human interest in knowing and planning for the future. Judith Thomson [a professor at MIT] grounds promissory obligation in reliance. For Thomson, a promise is an invitation to rely on the promisor (the person who makes the promise). A broken promise is wrong because it frustrates the expectations and/or reliance held by the promisee. A promise gives a promisee a map of some part of his or her future—a map to be used in planning. A broken promise renders that map inaccurate.” (Liberto 2015)

Scanlon and Thomson take the moral etiquette manual to a higher level: they ‘explain’ why members of the relevant class should deem promise-breaking wrong by appeal to other general normative considerations that some members of the class might think important, conjoined with the tendency of Kantians to engage in the psychological phenomenon known as ‘catastrophizing’,²⁷ that is, exaggerating the implications of particular events, in this case, inferring that breaches of a local etiquette norm might have far-reaching consequences (e.g., undermining ‘knowing and planning for the future’). The sheer silliness of such catastrophizing is obscured by a combination of the moral earnestness of their purveyors and the sociological effects of academic hierarchy in which nonsense must be treated seriously in order to advance professionally.

²⁷ Catastrophizing is the “tendency to continuously think about how terrible a situation is and emphasize the negative implications for the future. Catastrophizing appears to be an extreme form of worry; this is important because evidence suggests that rumination and worry share a similar process, with rumination being a process of focusing attention primarily on current and past emotional stimuli, and worry being a process of focusing attention on the future implications of a current situation. [...] Both catastrophizing and worrying have been shown to magnify negative affect in a similar manner as rumination, especially distress and anxiety related to future consequences of a situation [...]” (Selby/Joiner 2009, 221) The irrationality of catastrophizing is especially displayed by evidence that, “[d]espite attributing the same likelihood as nonworriers to their initial catastrophic events, worriers rated subsequent events in their catastrophizing sequences as much more likely to occur than nonworriers” (Vasey/Borkovec 1992, 516). As Vasey and Borkovec note, this may be an effect the catastrophizer’s being “able to imagine such threatening events more readily or vividly”, though it is worth emphasizing—lest we make the ‘catastrophizer’ too much of an aberrant—that there is strong evidence that we are generally more likely to come to believe a proposition in virtue of entertaining it. See Gilbert/Krull/Malone 1990 and Gilbert/Tafarodi/Malone 1993.

3.3 Anglophone Marxism and Bourgeois Practical Philosophy: The Case of G. A. Cohen

G. A. Cohen did not descend into the preceding kind of ‘etiquette’ triviality. He was, as anyone who knew him²⁸ or has read his autobiography knows, animated by the normative opinions characteristic of Marxists: he wanted more human beings to flourish, and he believed that non-capitalist relations of production would bring that about. His famous 1978 book on Marx’s historical materialism (Cohen 1978) offered the most impressive articulation of the *functionalist* version of historical materialism, according to which growth in the productive forces was the motor of history and in which historical change was explicable. This, unfortunately, was the least historically relevant and plausible form of historical materialism, obscuring the crucial causal role of class struggle (see Railton 1986).

But Cohen came to doubt the relevance of historical materialism.²⁹ As he wrote in later work, “Classical Marxism distinguished itself from what it condemned as the socialism of dreams by declaring a commitment to hard-headed historical and economic analysis: it was proud of what it considered to be the stoutly factual character of its central claims.” (2000, 102) Classical Marxism—including, clearly, Marx himself—had, in other words, a scientific self-conception. The goal of theorizing was never to *justify* communism as morally desirable or just, but rather to construct an adequate descriptive and explanatory account of socio-economic change that would have practical payoffs in political organizing and revolutionary activity. As a result, as Cohen also notes, “Marxists were not preoccupied with, and therefore never examined, principles of equality, or indeed any other values or principles” (2000, 103). Because Cohen believed that Marxism had now “lost much or most of its carapace, its hard shell of supposed fact”, he concluded that, “[t]o the extent that Marxism is still alive [...] it presents itself as a set of values and a set of designs for realizing those values” (2000, 103).³⁰ Of course, if Marx is right about human motivation under

²⁸ I should add that none of the preceding criticisms are meant to suggest that any of these individuals are blameworthy. I also know T. M. Scanlon, an admirably kind, decent and intellectually acute man for whom I have great affection and admiration; he is also, obviously, a product of the upper class in America, which has undoubtedly influenced his moral sensibility. I do not know Thomson, except by her work, though her published thoughts on philosophy make clear her deeply conservative conception of philosophical inquiry, one appropriate for bourgeois practical philosophy (from Cahn 2013, 54): “I came to think that the main, central problems [in philosophy] consist in efforts to explain what makes certain pre-philosophical, or non-philosophical, beliefs true.” That one sentence tells us quite a lot about analytic philosophy in the twentieth century, the logical positivists excepted.

²⁹ The discussion that follows borrows some material from Leiter 2002.

³⁰ There is an interesting question of Marx interpretation, however, regarding whether ‘equality’ is really one of those values. Cohen assumes it is throughout the book (Cohen 2000), without ever specifying what is meant by Marxian equality. At one point, he equates ‘Marxist equality’ with the famous slogan from *The Communist Manifesto*: “From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs.” But the latter seems a slogan that contemplates vast amounts of inequality, making the exact content of the Marxist commitment to equality even more puzzling.—Now, in fact, it seems to me that Marx is committed to equality only in what is now the banal sense accepted by all post-Enlightenment thinkers: namely, that in moral deliberations, everyone’s interests (well-being, dignity, autonomy, etc.) counts equally. I am not entitled to more or less moral consideration because I am an American, or a male, or

capitalism—this is where Marx and the Neoclassical economists agree—then it is a non-sequitur to say the falsity of Marxian factual claims means we should focus on ‘values’.

Cohen’s argument for the ‘falsity’ of Marx’s explanatory claims warrants some attention. Cohen claims, *contra* Marx, that,

“Capitalism does not produce its own gravediggers. The old (partly real, partly imagined) agency of socialist transformation is gone, and there is not, *and never will be*, another one like it. Socialists have to settle for a less dramatic scenario, and they must engage in more moral advocacy than used to be fashionable.” (2000, 112)

That ‘capitalism does not produce its own gravediggers’ is, to be sure, not an *a priori* truth; the only relevant question is what *a posteriori* requires us to reject it? That capitalism is presently flourishing is hardly evidence, unless one believes that history is over. Cohen has a somewhat unfortunate tendency to assume precisely this. He writes, correctly, that on the traditional Marxian view,

“[t]wo supposedly irrepressible historical trends, working together, guaranteed the future material equality [under communism]. One was the rise of an organized working class, whose social emplacement, at the short end of *inequality*, directed it in favor of equality. The workers’ movement would grow in numbers and in strength, until it had the power to abolish the unequal society which had nurtured its growth. And the other trend helping to ensure an eventual equality was the development of the productive forces, the continual increase in the human power to transform nature for human benefit. That growth would issue in a material abundance so great that anything anyone needed for a richly fulfilling life could be taken from the common store at no cost to anyone.” (2000, 104)

Cohen, writing once again as though he stands at the end of history, asserts that, “History has shredded each of the predictions that I have just sketched” (2000, 104). We will turn, in a moment, to the surprisingly non-existent empirical basis for these claims. But let us certainly grant Cohen this: Marx was spectacularly wrong about questions of timing. He thought, like many a giddy optimist of the nineteenth-century, that the period of limitless abundance was almost at hand,

white. At this level, however, equality as a doctrine does not do much to discriminate among possible positions. After all, Kant is an egalitarian in this sense, as is the arch-utilitarian, Bentham. As a matter of Marxology, it seems to me that, in fact, equality is not a Marxian value at all—except in the banal sense just noted—whereas well-being (human flourishing) is the central Marxian evaluative concept. Marx is a kind of utilitarian not a deontological thinker, as Cohen’s employment of the equality rhetoric often suggests. Of course, Marx’s view of well-being is a very particular (and, at times, Hegelian) one, and has nothing to do with desire-satisfaction, actual or idealized. But it is this implicit utilitarianism that would explain the famous slogan from the *Manifesto*, “from each according to his ability, to each according to his need”. Productive labor is part of the good life, according to Marx, and thus everyone is made better off by producing what they are able to produce; yet no one can flourish unless their needs are met, independent of their ability to produce.

and thus the end of capitalism near. No doubt his Eurocentric focus encouraged this way of thinking, since the industrial and technological progress there was striking. Yet Marx's qualitative predictions about the tendencies of capitalism have proven to be highly accurate in the 150 years since, *except with respect to the issue of timing* (that is, Marx thought, wrongly, that capitalism was going to realize the productive powers of humanity in the 19th-century).

So how has history 'shredded' the Marxian predictions noted above? Cohen is plainly correct that the proletariat did not become the "immense majority" (2000, 104) and that, increasingly, the immiserated of the world are not producers like the classic working class; they are just miserable (2000, 107–8). But Cohen thinks that a group, to be an effective agent of revolution, has to have the four features that the classic nineteenth-century proletariat were supposed to have: they were the majority, they produced the wealth of society, they were exploited by the capitalist class, and they were needy (2000, 107). It is true, as Cohen notes, that the second and third features made the cause of the proletariat particularly appealing: They *produced* society's wealth, yet it was taken from them. But what he never explains is why it would not suffice for revolution if the majority of humanity was needy *in conjunction with* there being enough productive power to meet their needs? Indeed, Cohen's whole discussion proceeds, somewhat oddly, without citation of any empirical evidence one way or the other!

My reformulation of the conditions for revolutionary change requires, to be sure, that Marx's abundance prediction be made good as well. And Cohen disputes this prediction also—though, once again, without citing empirical support. He says "our environment is already severely degraded" such that "if there is a way out of the crisis, then it must include much less aggregate material consumption than what now prevails", meaning "unwanted changes of lifestyle" for those in the affluent West (2000, 113). Thus, he concludes:

"It is certain that we can not achieve Western-style goods and services for humanity as a whole, nor even sustain them for as large a minority as has enjoyed them, by drawing on the fuels and materials that we have hitherto used to provide them. [...] We can no longer sustain Marx's extravagant, pre-Green, materialist optimism. At least for the foreseeable future, we have to abandon the vision of abundance."
(2000, 113-4)

Cohen affirms these empirical propositions without support, and apparently in indifference to, or ignorance of, the empirical literature that disputes them.³¹

³¹ See e.g., Joel E. Cohen (1995, 266), who wryly notes that: "The Princeton demographer Ansley J. Coale observed that, in 1890 (when the U.S. population was 63 million), most reasonable people would have considered it impossible for the United States to support 250 million people, its approximate population in 1990; how would 250 million people find pasture for all their horses and dispose of all their manure?"—See also, *The Nation* (1997, 7): "From the annual U.N. Human Development Report: [D]elivering basic social services in all developing nations would cost \$40 billion a year for ten years—less than 0.2 percent of total world income; the net worth of ten billionaires is 1.5 times the combined national income of the forty-eight poorest countries."

It does seem inadvisable for Marxists to abandon the empirical claims of their theory without any actual empirical evidence to the contrary.

Armchair political economy, of the kind Cohen practices, is an even less reputable discipline than armchair philosophy.³² But bourgeois Marxists like Cohen should be given particular pause by the evidence that the “normative political philosophy” they embrace is motivationally inert (2000, 117). In his later work, Cohen famously rejected the idea that the Rawlsian principles of justice apply only to ‘the basic structure’ of society, arguing instead that,

“[J]ustice cannot be a matter only of the state-legislated structure in which people act but is also a matter of the acts they choose within that structure, the personal choices of their daily lives. I have come to think, in the words of a recently familiar slogan, that *the personal is political*.” (2000, 122)

This turn to very Protestant moralizing was, surprisingly, the distinguishing feature of Cohen’s late work. Cohen became worried that on the Rawlsian Difference Principle, “inequalities are just if and only if they are necessary to make the worst off people in society better off than they otherwise would be” (2000, 124). Yet this principle takes for granted that some people—those who can command more income for their work—are “acquisitive maximizers in daily life” (2000, 140), i.e., they want to get as much as possible for themselves, and thus the difference principle is necessary to insure that some “of the extra which they will then produce can be recruited on behalf of the worst off” (2000, 124). Rawls here is closer to Marx than Cohen, ironically enough, for Cohen’s objection is that the ‘talented’ high earners have unjust motivations. Cohen writes:

“Why should we *care* so disproportionately about the coercive basic structure [of society], when the major reason for caring about it, its impact on people’s lives, is *also* a reason for caring about informal structure and patterns of personal choice? To the extent that we care about coercive structure because it is fateful with regard to [the distribution of] benefits and burdens, we must care equally about the [informal social] ethic that sustains gender inequality, and inegalitarian incentives.” (2000, 140)

But a quasi-Marxian Rawls might reply (quite plausibly) that informal social ethics and personal choices are beyond the reach of institutional distributive reforms: they are hostage to causal determinants which a theory of distributive justice can not touch. That philosophical arguments might affect the informal social ethos is ludicrous, as evidenced, among other things, by the fact that it

³² Anton Leist, noting that much philosophy is armchair, asked me, “would you turn all [philosophy] into science”? The short answer is ‘yes’, as long as we realize with serious historians and philosophers of science, like Larry Laudan (1977), that conceptual clarity and logical entailments (the kind of discursive contributions philosophers make), have always been part of scientific progress. I take this to be Marx’s own conception of philosophy, i.e., as continuous with the empirical sciences. Even if all serious philosophy should aspire to *wissenschaftlich* status, rhetoric and advocacy should still loom large in human affairs.

can not even affect the personal choices of those who purport to be egalitarian philosophers.

Thus, rather infamously, Thomas Nagel, a decidedly egalitarian liberal philosopher and highly remunerated professor,³³ responded to Cohen's argument as follows:

“I have to admit that, although I am an adherent of the liberal conception of [justice and equality], I don't have an answer to Cohen's charge of moral incoherence. It is hard to render consistent the exemption of private choice from the motives that support redistributive public policies. I could sign a standing banker's order giving away everything I earn above the national average, for example, and it wouldn't kill me. I could even try to increase my income at the same time, knowing the excess would go to people who needed it more than I did. I'm not about to do anything of the kind, but the equality-friendly justifications I can think of for not doing so all strike me as rationalizations.” (Nagel 2000, 6)

Nagel, one of the preeminent bourgeois liberal philosophers of the day, understands and appreciates the force of Cohen's arguments and has no response to them, yet admits it will have no effect whatsoever on his behavior. One might think this rather dramatic evidence in favor of Marxian skepticism about normative theory. If high quality bourgeois moral philosophy does not change the behavior of high quality bourgeois moral philosophers, why think it is going to affect anyone else?

3.4 German Marxism and the Turn to Bourgeois Practical Philosophy: The Case of Jürgen Habermas

The descent into bourgeois moralizing in Continental European Marxism has a different intellectual genealogy than in the Anglophone case, since Western Marxism proceeded largely independent of logical positivism and other important philosophical movements of the 20th-century. The seed of the collapse into bourgeois moralizing is evident in Horkheimer and Adorno's famous *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which—its memorable critical cultural commentary to one side—locates a mistake in modern thought in its valorization of instrumental rationality, a theme it takes over from Horkheimer's 1937 essay on 'Traditional and Critical Theory' (Horkheimer 2002[1937]).³⁴ As we have noted already, Marx's critique of capitalism, and the communist effort to mobilize the proletariat, takes no issue with instrumental rationality, indeed presupposes it: an instrumentally rational proletariat that understands how capitalism works, and

³³ Just to make this concrete, I would guess that Nagel, by the end of his tenure as a professor of philosophy and law at New York University was making in the vicinity of U.S. \$400,000 per year, perhaps quite a bit more if we factor in housing subsidies. He was, in short, in the same economic class as the wealthiest 1% of Americans.

³⁴ If the seed was planted by Horkheimer, it was certainly not nurtured by him or Adorno—it was left to Habermas to make explicit the implicit moralizing critique of Kantian rationality in the early Frankfurt School.

what the alternatives are, will be motivated to undertake revolutionary acts.³⁵ The early Frankfurt School, wrongly in my view, sets out to challenge instrumental rationality in purely ‘ideal’ or philosophical terms, and thus sets the stage for Habermas’s complete transformation of the Marxian tradition into bourgeois practical philosophy.

‘Traditional theory’ for Horkheimer is roughly a 1930s-style positivist conception of science, in which scientific methods of explanation and confirmation are uniform across all scientific domains, and in which science is marked by its somewhat austere empiricism and its commitment to mathematical formalizability.³⁶ (Almost all serious work in philosophy of science since has repudiated both the *unity* and the *uniformity* of methods of scientific inquiry and explanation characteristic of Horkheimer’s conception of ‘traditional theory’ and of logical positivism’s conception of science (see, e.g., Miller 1987; Kitcher 1993).) Critical Theory, in Horkheimer’s rendering, eschews these characteristics,³⁷ instead aiming at ‘the rational state of society’ and embracing “the idea of a future society as a community of free men” (2002[1937], 217). Marx, of course, had such an end in mind as well, though there is no indication he thought his was anything but a ‘traditional theory’, i.e., an empirically sound explanatory account of socio-historical change, minus the pretense of mathematical formulae. So why think the practical consequence of a good explanatory theory should be imported into the conception of the theoretical practice itself? That is the puzzle the Frankfurt School presents.

Here, I suspect, it is crucial to recognize the impact of György Lukács’s re-introduction of Left Young Hegelianism into 20th-century Marxism in *History and Class Consciousness* in 1923, especially in the chapter on ‘The Antinomies of Bourgeois Thought’ (1967[1923]). Marx, himself, had railed against the tendencies of Left Young Hegelians to equate the critique of ideas with revolutionary critique, as though the theoretical incoherence of a position would change the world. Lukács, alas, revived, precisely that tradition in left-wing thought that Marx (and Engels) had so viciously lampooned 150 years earlier:³⁸

³⁵ Accepting the importance of instrumental rationality to human motivation under capitalism does not commit one to thinking that ‘collective action’ problems pose a special problem for the Marxian theory of revolution, as Jon Elster claimed. Cf. the apt comments in Wolff (1990, 473): “A little reflection will remind us that all of the productive activities of human beings are collective in character, even those of the fabled Robinson Crusoe. All kinship interactions, sexual liaisons, all our activities of eating and warring, almost all religious activities and activities of artistic creation, reproduction, and appreciation, are collective in character. Voting, strikes, military campaigns, riots, cocktail parties, family vacations—all of these, on Elster’s view, are so improbable that we can barely understand how they might, on rare occasions, actually happen. Clearly, there is something badly wrong with a theory of society that concludes that the norm is so abnormal that it is almost never likely to occur!”

³⁶ The powerful impact of this essay on the Frankfurt School theorists is quite visible nearly forty years later, in Marcuse’s polemic against ‘positivism’ (essentially Horkheimer’s ‘traditional theory’) in his 1964, esp. 177 ff.

³⁷ Horkheimer allows that, “[e]ven the critical theory [...] derives its statements about real relationships from basic universal concepts. [...] [B]oth kinds of theoretical structures [critical and traditional] are alike when it comes to logical necessity.” (2002[1937], 228).

³⁸ See especially the attack on Left Hegelians like ‘Saint Bruno’ Bauer in *German Ideology*, 164–75.

“Since the Young Hegelians consider conceptions, thoughts, ideas, in fact all the products of consciousness [...] as the real chains of men [...] it is evident that the Young Hegelians have to fight only against these illusions of the consciousness. Since, according to their fantasy, the relationships of men, all their doings, their chains and their limitations are products of their consciousness, the Young Hegelians logically put to men the moral postulate of exchanging their present consciousness for human, critical or egoistic consciousness, and thus of removing their limitations. This demand to change consciousness amounts to a demand to interpret reality in another way, i.e., to recognize it by means of another interpretation [...]. They forget, however, that to these phrases [constituting the old interpretation] they are only opposing other phrases, and that they are in no way combating the real existing world when they are merely combating the phrases of this world.” (Marx/Engels, 1978[1846], 149)

Although Horkheimer and Lukács had internecine disputes, Horkheimer followed Lukács, not Marx, on this fundamental theoretical issue.³⁹ Horkheimer explains that Critical Theory does not “consist in formulations of the feelings and ideas of one class at any given moment” (2002[1937], 214), though that is, of course, *precisely* what Marx claimed the communist movement would do for the proletariat class at the moment of capitalism’s impending collapse. In Horkheimer’s conception, here echoing Lukács, what Critical Theory does is “take seriously the ideas by which the bourgeoisie explains its own order—free exchange, free competition, harmony of interests, and so on—and [...] follow[s] them to their logical conclusion” in which “they manifest their inner contradiction and therewith their real opposition to the bourgeois order” (2002[1937], 215). But this is precisely the practically irrelevant exercise that Marx and Engels lampooned in the *Manifesto*.⁴⁰

The return of ‘internal’ critique of philosophical ideas to Marxism, especially the critique of instrumental rationality central to ‘reason’ in capitalist societies, led naturally to Habermas’s re-introduction (1968, and esp. 1981) of an essentially Kantian critique of instrumental reason into so-called Marxist theory. Hegel was certainly right about the dialectical structure of history to this extent: professors of philosophy do tend to excavate the contradictions in the most recently dominant philosophical ideas and subject them to dialectical critique. But as the un-Marxian Nietzsche famously quipped (regarding Socrates), “Nothing

³⁹ As did Marcuse, among others, and once again due to the pernicious influence of Hegel; cf. Marcuse’s lamenting that in the wake of positivism the “metaphysical dimension [of reality], formerly a genuine field of rational thought, becomes irrational and unscientific” (1964, 177–8). Marx would never have expressed such a lamentation, even if he would agree that instrumental rationality is a kind of rationality whose dominance is explained by capitalist relations of production.

⁴⁰ Ironically, Lukács was forced by Stalinists to repudiate this aspect of *History and Class Consciousness*, as being insufficiently ‘scientific.’ In framing the criticism in terms of *Wissenschaft*, the Stalinist henchmen were just mouthing platitudes, but they were not wrong that this aspect of the book was a betrayal of Marx’s theory. (Thanks to Brian O’Connor for calling this issue to my attention.)

is easier to wipe out [*wegzuwischen*] than a dialectical effect”,⁴¹ and though his reasons for doubt were different than Marx’s,⁴² it comes to the same thing: any dialectical critique of ideas, especially abstract theoretical ideas, which leaves the rest of reality intact, is only so much flotsam on the surface of the ocean. Habermas, over the last half-century, has increased the amount of flotsam by several orders of magnitude.

From his early work on an ‘ideal speech situation’ to the later ‘communicative theory of action’, Habermas has been relentless in his efforts to revive the Kantian project of providing an alternative to instrumental reason, in which ultimate ends (or desires) are to be subject to a putatively ‘rational’ adjudication. Because of the proceduralism of his account, what ends are rational is never revealed by Habermas, but, once again, the appearance of a ‘method’, and one utterly unthreatening to the bourgeois stability of post-WWII German economic prosperity, generated a whole ‘Habermas industry’ to match the ‘Rawls industry’ in academic disciples, Talmudic discipline, and practical irrelevance.⁴³ The withering criticisms of Habermas’s arguments⁴⁴ have done little to dampen the enthusiasm of the workers in the industry. Why would it given the current socio-economic conditions of academic labor?

4. Explaining the Collapse of Western Marxism into Bourgeois Practical Philosophy

It was central to Horkheimer’s conception of Critical Theory that it had a reflexive dimension, that it aimed to understand “the functional role knowledge plays within the larger society” (2002[1937], 334). In that spirit, we really must ask why and how Western Marxism in the academy, as exemplified by both G. A. Cohen in the Anglophone context and Jürgen Habermas in the German and, more broadly, European context, left Marx so far behind that it ended up generating an academic industry of normative theorizing that Marx would have regarded, correctly, as pointless and perhaps even pernicious.

Here it seems there are two crucial factors at work. First, in both the United States and in West Germany in the 1950s, there was political repression of communism. In the U.S., this took the form of formal and informal sanctions applied against anyone, including academics, with ties to, or even sympathies with, communist political groups, including the imprisonment of communists, repeatedly

⁴¹ Nietzsche 1980[1888], ‘The Problem of Socrates’, section 6.

⁴² Nietzsche recognized that affective, non-rational aspects of the psyche dominate belief-fixation, and so overwhelm merely logical demonstrations.

⁴³ See, e.g., Forst 2002; Hartmann 2011; Honneth 1991; Jaeggi 2014. If there were any doubt about how far Habermas travelled from Marxism, his recent embrace of religious mysticism (2010) should eliminate it.

⁴⁴See, most potently, Geuss 1981. Anton Leist, a friendlier critic, observes that Habermas’s claim that communication “has built into it [...] a *telos* of reciprocal agreement” was supported by two main arguments: “the ‘universal-pragmatics’ conception of ethical presuppositions for every speech act, and the argument concerning a close link between truth and consensus. Both arguments have drawn an extensive amount of scrutiny, and it may be a fair summary of the debate that hardly anybody is convinced by either argument.” (2008, 343)

upheld by the courts during that period.⁴⁵ In West Germany, it culminated with the 1956 decision of the Constitutional Court declaring the German communist party, and any successor party, to be ‘unconstitutional’.⁴⁶ With legal strictures and professional sanctions in place, it is hardly surprising that the primary Marxist intellectual movement in Germany, the Frankfurt School, should devolve into an academic Kantian exercise. Whatever criticisms one might make of Habermas, his work could not fall within the scope of the 1956 decision declaring communism unconstitutional.⁴⁷

The second crucial factor involved both the massive expansion of the higher education sectors in both Europe and the Anglophone world after World War II (Stewart 1989; Trow 1973), and the concurrent rise of the “new rigorism in the human sciences” as the historian Carl Schorske aptly dubbed it (1997, 309). The huge increase in faculty positions, especially in America (Trow 1972, 62), but also in Britain and Germany (Kehm 2010, 731; Greenaway/Haynes 2003, 150), coincided not only with state repression of anti-capitalist views, but also with the rise of Schorske’s ‘new rigorism’, a demand for well-defined methods of inquiry that would secure the epistemic validity of its results. This was simply a continuation of the phenomenon Max Weber diagnosed a century ago in ‘Science as Vocation’, with the *wissenschaftlich* ideal firmly in command of the universities:

“[S]cience [i.e., *Wissenschaft*, meaning scholarly or method-based disciplines] has entered a phase of specialization previously unknown and [...] this will forever remain the case. Not only externally, but inwardly, matters stand at a point where the individual can acquire the sure consciousness of achieving something truly perfect in the field of science only in case he is a strict specialist. All work that overlaps neighboring fields, such as we occasionally undertake and which the sociologists must necessarily undertake again and again, is burdened with the resigned realization that at best one provides the specialist with useful questions upon which he would not so easily hit from his own specialized point of view. One’s own work must inevitably remain highly imperfect. Only by strict specialization can the scientific worker become fully conscious, for once and perhaps

⁴⁵ Things were not as draconian in Canada and Britain, though the Canadian communist party was outlawed during World War II, initially because of its anti-interventionist stance.

⁴⁶ Aug. 17, 1956, 5 Entscheidungen des Bundesverfassungsgerichts [BVerfGE] 85. An English translation of the decision, can be found in Pfeiffer/Strickert 1957 (eds.), 225–7.

⁴⁷ Anton Leist presses on me that the situation in Germany was more complicated because of the background of East Germany, which was committed to the *wissenschaftlichen* Marx in contrast to the Western Marxists, including Habermas, who took seriously the ‘early humanistic’ and ‘life world’ Marx. Leist also thinks that the Nazi background, against which Habermas responded as a robust defender of democracy, is important. In terms of the individual and social psychology, I suspect Leist is right: the East German fascists had little understanding of Marxism, and thus failed to realize that their country could not possibly be a successful communist society. But Habermas, instead of pressing the objection that the material conditions for Marxism were not possible, resorted to bourgeois moralizing about democracy and ‘free and equal’ discourse. But ‘free and equal’ discourse is impossible under capitalism, for reasons Marx diagnosed.

never again in his lifetime, that he has achieved something that will endure. A really definitive and good accomplishment is today always a specialized accomplishment.” (1946[1917], 134)

Initially, the demand for ‘rigorous method’ completely displaced ‘practical philosophy’—witness the rise of logical positivism and the demotion of practical philosophy to emoting—since practical philosophy was so clearly a feeble undertaking in a world that admitted of descriptive-explanatory treatment by the sciences. But here again external events intervened. The student revolts of 1968, and the allied liberation movements for women, racial minorities, and gay people, created a demand for universities to be ‘relevant’ to matters of practical concern, but within the constraints, of course, imposed by capitalist hegemony. The resulting bourgeois practical philosophy—as represented by Rawls and Habermas, and more recently Singer and Cohen—was an ideal response: it sometimes professed (no doubt earnest) sympathy with genuinely oppressed groups, it expressed moral concern with harms to well-being, it had its own ‘methods’ and those who policed their application,⁴⁸ and it was utterly ineffectual with regard to and, indeed, almost entirely silent on, capitalist relations of production.⁴⁹ A Hollywood version of capitalist ideological domination of the universities would have hardly looked different than what happened.

What are the mechanisms of capitalist ideological coercion in the academy? This is, I fear, less well understood than it should be. There is, of course, outright repression by force, as in the purge of anti-capitalists in America and West Germany in the 1950s. But there are also the more subtle forms of intellectual coercion: who gets grants, what one’s colleagues think is reasonable or acceptable, and so on. That elite Western academics, those who have the most influence on intellectual currents, are highly remunerated, sometimes members of the ruling class, but often on its cusp socially and economically, must surely have some impact on how they think about ‘what ought to be done’.

Academic opinion is also influenced by popular culture, even more so in an era in which the lines between the two are blurred, in which academics compete for recognition in the popular sphere, whether *The New York Times* or the *Huffington Post*. I have the good fortune to work in one of the great academic centers of capitalist ideology, the University of Chicago, with colleagues who are admirable for their discipline, their hard work, and their commitment to ideas and argument. When, several years ago, I taught a kind of seminar with a colleague on ‘Capitalism: For and Against?’ one colleague, a dialectically acute economist, wondered, sincerely, what could be said on the ‘against’ side.

⁴⁸ The post-WWII academic labor system, with its emphasis on specialization, resulted in a whole series of academic industries, of which ‘the Rawls industry’ was but one: the appearance of a ‘method’, the presence of a canonical text, the enormous *A Theory of Justice*, and the stature of its author as a professor at what was then America’s premier philosophy department at Harvard all fit perfectly the demands of the academy in this epoch.

⁴⁹ The German situation is more complicated, because of the Nazi experience and Habermas’s role as a proponent of democratic ideals. There can be no doubt that Habermas has been a powerful public voice for democracy and decency after the Nazi horror. The appearance of being an ‘important philosopher’ has no doubt lent credibility, as a sociological matter, to these interventions.

The historian Schorske observed that “none of the 1960s movements—minority, feminist, or sexual—challenged the economic system” (1997, 305). Like the economists themselves, the protest movements recognized, however tacitly, the capitalist free market as part of “the factual order of things” (Schorske 1997, 305). A debate of the form ‘The Factual Order of Things: For and Against?’ is bound to seem incredible, and it is central to a kind of unconscious intellectual coercion that there are boundaries of what is ‘reasonable’ and thus even discussable that have nothing, in the end, to do with reason or evidence.

Hume and Nietzsche, the two philosophical giants of modernity, both diagnosed the ways in which reason underdetermines belief, and both appealed to speculative psychological hypotheses to explain belief fixation even in the absence of rational evidence. Marx’s important contribution to the sociology of knowledge was to identify, if not fully explain, how features of the economic system also supply the bridge between evidence that underdetermines belief and the phenomenon of rigid belief fixation among scholars and lay people. One important task for a genuinely Marxist psychology and epistemology is still to understand the mechanisms by which this works (which entails, in part, better understanding the Marxian theory of ideology). One thing Marxists should not do, however, is waste time on normative theory for consumption by bourgeois academics.

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