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# social & political thought

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## Selected Papers

Forms of Domination and Emancipation- SSPT Conference  
*Chris Arthur, Nicholas Gray, Guido Schulz, Sami Khatib*

## Articles

Through the Eyes of Habermas: The Heritage of Liberalism  
and Deliberative Politics  
*Stephanie Morrow*

How to Understand Rawls's Law of Peoples  
*Veljko Dubljevic*

The Task of Dialectic Beyond Domination and Dogmatism  
*Richard Fitch*

On the Left-Wing Reading of Levinas: Derrida, Lingis, Dussel  
*Andrew Ryder*

## Books Reviewed

*The German Historicist Tradition* by Frederick Beiser  
*A Revolution of the Mind* by Jonathan Israel  
*Marx at the Margins* by Kevin Anderson

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## Design and Typesetting

Simon Mussell

*Studies in Social and Political Thought*  
Centre for Social and Political Thought  
School of History, Art History and Philosophy  
University of Sussex  
Falmer, Brighton BN1 9QN

Contact: [sspt@sussex.ac.uk](mailto:sspt@sussex.ac.uk)

[www.sussex.ac.uk/cspt/sspt](http://www.sussex.ac.uk/cspt/sspt)  
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# Dialectic of Domination and Liberation

by Chris Arthur

In this talk I explore a number of relevant topics without following a single argument from start to finish. I shall touch on Contradiction, Speculation, Critique, and Communism. But above all I want to elucidate what exactly it is that dominates us.

## Contradiction

To begin with: for dialectic, liberation is premised on contradiction. How so?

The capital relation is not a simple two place conflict (like a boxing match) in which Labour and Capital compete over the allocation of new value. This is because wage-labour is *internal* to the capital relation, subsumed by it on capital's terms. At first sight the capital-labour relation appears as a two-place one, but in truth each pole represents its relation to the other as a *difference within itself*. This is a *contradiction in essence* because both sides claim to constitute the *whole* of their relation; each reduces what is not identical with itself to its *own* other. Capital divides itself into constant and variable components; and it claims to absorb labour to itself in the shape of variable capital; for, through the wage, it now possesses labour-power. Hence it understands the relation as a relation to itself. On the other side, wage-labour claims that capital is nothing but accumulated surplus value, springing from surplus labour. It, too, understands the relation as a relation to itself.

On the one hand, since labour produces its own wages, any putative "original capital" is superseded (having been notionally consumed by the capitalist). So all capital is now accumulated surplus value, i.e., "dead labour". On the other hand, capital says that, since it used variable capital to purchase labour-power, it legitimately appropriates the fruits of labour because the latter is simply a moment of its own activity; for labour is useless without the provision of means of production by capital.

Here it is not a question of an easy choice between competing narratives. *Both* are correct. Thus there is a contradiction in the capital relation itself. However, it is significant that the relation is termed 'the *capital* relation', not 'the *wage-labour* relation'. Capital is, without doubt, the

*principal moment* of this contradiction, if only because through this relation it *realises* itself. Waged-labour, by contrast, *negates* itself in yielding value and surplus value. Capital continually accumulates; labour continually returns to its propertylessness.

A contradiction in essence becomes an immanent contradiction of each pole with itself; thus:

(1) on the side of labour, it alienates its substance, therewith generating its own oppressor,

(2) on the side of capital, it produces the proletariat *as* proletariat, i.e. its own gravedigger.

The contradiction in essence, then, involves self-contradiction insofar as each pole constitutes its opponent as its *own*. Capital can live with this, because as the principal aspect of the contradiction it *affirms* itself even in its other. Wage-labour *denies* itself in producing its other, because it has accepted the definition of itself by the other, hence it affirms its negation. To be *self-critical* requires that it grasp itself as other than what it is in this definition, and destroy itself along with the relationship that defines it. Marx says: 'When the proletariat is victorious, it by no means becomes the absolute side of society, for it is victorious only by abolishing itself and its opposite. Then the proletariat disappears as well as the opposite which determines it' (1975: 36) Thus I argue that Marx's standpoint is that of the *critically adopted* standpoint of labour.

What is the role of Marxist theory, and more generally class-consciousness in all this?

The practical object of Marx's dialectical social science is given by the intersubjective contradiction of class society. For capitalism, as we have just seen, the fundamental contradiction is that of capital and labour. The proletariat is compelled to rebel by the contradiction of its existence when it becomes aware of its own nature and the nature of its situation. Through the development of such insight, the subject class is to achieve a grasp of the true nature of its situation.

In one way this development may be seen as actualizing the contradiction between the preconceptions derived from the ruling ideology and reality as it is experienced and understood. More generally, the conflict between classes can be superseded in a transition to a new society only if the historical process becomes conscious for one of the participants, the proletariat. The process of transition is explicated in terms of the directly transformative power of the discovery of self-contradictions by a historical

subject. But to abolish the contradictions definitive of its existence the proletariat must abolish itself. This brings me to:

## Speculation

There are two sorts of dialectical movement:

1) the purely affirmative, perfecting itself through the sublation of all contradictions; here the poles are to be preserved but the contradiction is given 'room to move', so to speak, in a higher unity;

2) and the purely negative, the absencing of the emergent contradiction through its dissolution; here the emergent poles are to be superseded in a re-totalisation that "takes back", so to speak, a misstep.

But the "taking back" is not a *return* as such but incorporates a learning experience or else the mistake would be repeated. Within the property system there is to be no going back to a supposed Eden of equal exchange, but the abolition of private property in socialism. The injuries of class cannot be resolved through some class compromise between right and right; without a revolution against class itself there is only a fudge. The very *ground* of the contradiction has to be transformed.

But if the proletariat defines its task *negatively*, as its own abolition when it abolishes the relationship that defines it, what is the standpoint of the *positive* coming out of this determinate negation? Revolution occurs when the proletariat experiences its definition as a class to be an imposed constraint. But if revolution is not 'the affirmation of the proletariat' the question arises, *of what is it an affirmation?* If, negatively, it abolishes class, what, positively, is it about? It can only be about human liberation. In that sense the class struggle is a moment of a larger project, one in which non-proletarians have an interest since the very split into classes is an affront to human community.

Some may claim this view substitutes for class struggle some larger socio-historical contradiction, and that it prevents us seeing class struggle as what is "really productive of history". If an "efficient contradiction" refers to a causal impulse rather than a reason for action, in that sense it *is* class struggle that produces change. But the *project of change* is something else. In order to articulate it, I argue the *speculative* moment cannot be avoided. (I venture this with due trepidation!)

Philosophy in its role as interrogator of the regime of truth, and in uncovering what is repressed, is in effect a critical practice; but in projecting

a supersession of the objective contradictions, it becomes also speculative in Hegel's sense. In his *Encyclopaedia*, Hegel relates the speculative moment to the third phase of a dialectical movement, when contradictions are conceived, not as debilitating, but as productive. It is "the affirmative, which is involved in their disintegration and in their transition", he says (1975: 119). That is how he defines the speculative moment that follows the narrowly dialectical one of antithesis.

In what sense exactly speculative? How does speculative reason go beyond ordinary understanding? Because it is creative. Unlike the nomological laws of mechanics, or laws of tendency, extrapolating from the existent, it creates something new when it finds a way to surpass the contradiction. It requires "an upward spring of the mind" to generate a new category, says Hegel (1975: 82); likewise it requires revolution to reorder society.

Looking forward, however, requires a wager: that communism *will have been* produced from class struggle. In order to articulate the revolutionary project the existent must therefore be grasped from the standpoint of the "not yet". Is this a teleological problematic? Certainly not if this means there is some guarantee inscribed in the heavens that communism will redeem humanity. What it does imply is that the meaning of an historical situation cannot be properly understood in its own terms but only from the standpoint of what it has in it to become.

The speculative moment emerges when reason demands the realisation of this standpoint in a practical project, to act as if this "not yet" is actually on the agenda.

In his *Theses on Feuerbach* Marx says his "new materialism" takes the standpoint of social humanity, and of the social individual. But this standpoint is as yet *not* actual; although implicitly existent, and even deepening, it exists only in its denial in the egocentric practice of bourgeois society. This contradiction between community and egoism requires practical resolution; this is only possible if there is a real historical subject capable of acting universally as well as particularly. However, from the practical viewpoint, for the proletariat, the promise of classlessness is a *speculative* supersession of the contradictions of its existence as long as it lies in the future.

"Another world is possible" is a speculative proposition, not because we do not have good arguments but in its logical status. This creates a philosophical problem. The speculative moment cannot be eliminated precisely because we live in an alienated society in which the standpoint of socialised humanity is unactual, and hence available only in its displacement to philosophy which wagers on the proletariat to realise it. Scientific



socialism conceives itself as the theoretical expression of a revolutionary process. But philosophy remains an alienated science as long as revolutionary practice lacks immediate historical actuality. In sum, dialectic is not a science of efficient causation allowing prediction. The future that will become has to be produced by "us" out of the mire of contradictions, and in anticipating it the speculative moment is unavoidable.

## Critique

However, this demand to abolish class is rooted *immanently* in the dialectic of the real; it is not the product of a critique *opposing* itself to reality. So why does Marx talk of critique? This is an especially interesting question because Marx opposes all normative critique, especially appeals to equality and justice.

I take as my text the following comment by Marx on his critique of political economy. The work is "a *critique of economic categories* or, if you like, a critical exposition of the system of bourgeois economy. It is at once an *exposition [Darstellung]* and, by the same token, a *critique* of the system." (1983: 270) I do not think the political economists are the object of this critique. Such considerations are confined to footnotes of *Capital*. The main text aims to criticise the *reality* itself not so much the works of its apologists. After all, what are the "economic categories"? Marx says they express the forms of existence of this society. Even his own new categories I think are such. However, Marx's claim to give a scientific account of his object rules out a concept of *external* critique whereby reality is measured against some ideal and found wanting. Of course Marx does employ such loaded concepts as "exploitation". But surely he aimed to do something more fundamental with his "critique of economic categories".

At any rate I want to argue that the object of critique should be the *Idea* of capital. I do not mean by this "ideas *about* capital", but that the reality confronting us *is* itself *Idea* in the Hegelian sense of an identity of concept and reality. This is because a striking feature of capital is that it has a certain *conceptuality* to it. Adorno spoke of "a conceptuality which holds sway in reality itself", a conceptuality "independent both of the consciousness of the human beings subjected to it and of the consciousness of the scientists." (1976: 80) This is correct.

The reason why there is something conceptual about the object is that the *ontological* foundation of the capitalist system is the reality of that *practical abstraction* in exchange predicated on the identification as "values" of heterogeneous commodities. The reason why I term the commodity form of the product of labour "ideal" is that the mediation of social labours here is

of an abstract “logical” character. The value form springs from the abstraction implicit in the exchange process, a *practical* abstraction from the bodily features of a commodity that are the basis of its use value. But the value forms, although they have a “logical” character, are *out there*.

My view is that we have in the “Concept” of capital a self-moving system of abstract forms. This system of form determinations becomes “Idea” if it *subsumes* material production. There is a real sense in which the forms *apply themselves* to the material to be formed, rather than the form being the *expression* of the content. This ideal aspect of capital springs from the *inversion* of concrete and abstract characteristic of the system of production for exchange. The result is a peculiar interpenetration of “ideality” and “materiality”; capital as an *ideal totality* subsumes within its own form-determinations all otherness, including living labour and natural forces. In situating all otherness merely as a moment of its own absolute reality, capital proclaims itself a self-identical totality. All that is not itself “conceptual” is degraded to its bearer. But capital contracts an unacknowledged debt for this; in totalising labours only as abstractions of themselves, it cannot account for what is in excess of its concept of itself, the concrete richness of social labour. It is precisely because capital cannot fully incorporate its material foundation that there must be a limit to its ideality.

Nevertheless Capital is the totalising Subject of modernity. (by the way if there is such a thing as an immanent historical dialectic it pertains to *this* epoch, but not necessarily to the sequence of modes of production, as Engels, for one, thought.) Now “Post modernists” deny the validity of the category of “totality”, as if Hegel and Marx were at fault for using it, whereas they reflect (Hegel uncritically and Marx critically) the totalising logic of the value form which imposes itself in such a manner that all relationships become inscribed within it.

In revolt against such a “concept”, Adorno declared that “the whole is false” (1978: 50). But to think against capital’s regime of truth requires a peculiar insight: to grasp that in an inverted world “the true is a moment of the false”, as Guy Debord said (1977: §9).

Criticism of this topsy-turvy world has a certain validity, because theory can be in-and-against the totality. I believe that Marx’s claim that the *presentation* of the commodity-capitalist system is *at the same time a critique* of it makes sense when we observe that it is precisely the *applicability* of Hegel’s logic to its exposition which condemns the object as an inverted reality systematically alienated from its bearers, an object which virtually incarnates the Hegelian “Idea”.

But the fault is in reality; hence the needed critique is not critique of a false *view* of the world, but one that moves within the *object itself*, granting its objective validity, epochally speaking: the false is *out there*. A critique of

categories *is* a critique of the object because the ideal character of the object here allows for its *being* false.

### Capital as a 'Subject-Object' Identity

Now Marx's relation to Hegel is a complicated story. Initial distaste for Hegel gave way to an appreciation of him, but at the same time an acceptance of Feuerbach's materialist criticism. Yet Marx's Paris manuscripts are still informed by Hegel's *Phenomenology*, despite the assertion that Feuerbach has disposed of Hegel. In the *German Ideology* Marx's verdict on Hegel is very negative. Yet by the second edition of his *Capital* Marx affirmed himself "the pupil of that mighty thinker", and we know he was inspired by re-reading Hegel's *Logic*.

Here I take up one of Hegel's characteristic notions. According to Hegel, the Idea, as the unity of the ideal and the real is a "Subject-Object", predicated on the self-reflective movement of "absolute negativity". Such a unity of the ideal and the real I suggest is projected by the Idea of Capital. Marx, of course, criticized Hegel's Subject-Object identity as a closed metaphysic, notably in his *Poverty of Philosophy*. The problem with Hegel's notion of "absolute negativity" is that it reduces all real movement to a purely logical category, Marx complained; it cannot substitute for analysis of the concrete situation. Hence there is a problem about relating such abstract categories to reality. As Marx said in 1843, Hegel does not provide the logic of the body politic but merely bodily trappings for his logical categories.

He says the problem with this "mystical subject-object" is that it internalizes every relation and transition: "Hegel *replaces* the real connection between man and nature by an absolute Subject-Object which is at one and the same time the whole of nature and the whole of humanity, the *Absolute Spirit*." (Marx and Engels 1975: 167) Because this Spirit has no *objective* relations it is mere self-reflecting *thought*. Thus there is a deep connection between Hegel's monological ontology and his idealism.

Now the question arises whether and where there is a pure self-referring movement not requiring mediation in something outside itself? There are two cases:

1) the logic, in which thought deals with thoughts;

2) the form of value, generated through a practical abstraction from the bodily shape of wealth, and gaining self-movement through the circuit of capital. Here capital deals only with itself in its various shapes. But, although

having the inner drive to become absolute and absorb all otherness, capital cannot in fact *produce* its material “others”, labour-power and Nature. Hence a new beginning is possible if it is predicated on the liberation of productive activity, and Nature, from their subsumption under the totalizing logic of capital.

Of course if capital really is a Hegelian Idea then there is no escape from it. However, instead of rejecting outright such a notion I hold that the inversion of concrete and abstract practiced in capitalist production and circulation has indeed created something analogous to Hegel’s self-moving Idea, but its real basis remains the social relations of the human producers. Notionally therefore, they can overthrow the estranged realm their own practice brought into being. Nonetheless I stress that, given such estrangement, capital *acts* as a Hegelian Absolute and interpellates the material world as its own other to be appropriated by it.

Epochally the Idea of capital has *made itself* real. Whether that which is in excess of its concept *remains* forever marginal is for the future to determine.

### Capital as Individual

I want now to develop the notion that capital is an Idea, moreover the one totalising Idea dominating us. The founder of anarchism, Max Stirner, ended his fantastical theory of history with the claim that now Ideas rule the world: he meant this seriously for he followed up by saying ‘the State owes its existence solely to the contempt that I have for myself’, and ‘with the disappearance of this disdain it will totally die out.’ Of course Marx had great fun mocking this in *The German Ideology*. Although, if people lose their fear of the State great things are possible, the material power of the State is all too real. Nevertheless Stirner was on to something. But the Idea is not in our heads, it is out there. Capital as a *system* of self-moving abstraction has everyone caught in its toils.

If we set aside their material integument and concentrate attention on their value substance, capitals differ only in amount. In this way, capitals are not fully individuated beings but subsist only in their essential relation rather than bumping up against one another, as it were, in purely external relations. Their relation is that of “repulsion and attraction” (following here Hegel’s dialectic of one and many) – the moment of attraction is present in that two capitals become one once brought together, just as two amounts of money put into a certain account become one amount of money; – but a moment of repulsion, which maintains separation, is required to constitute them as

singular, i.e. there has to be some determination that prevents them collapsing together, e.g. differentiated ownership. Their dependence on this dialectic means the several capitals are not fully individuated beings and hence liable to coalesce again very easily. While it is essential to capital that it is many, these as pure value in process are qualitatively identical, differing only as quantities and thus capable of immediate comparison and merging.

This is why we can speak (without considering it merely a *figure* of speech) of Capital as the appropriate designation for the whole system that faces us. What faces us is not a *class* of capitals but a single *Subject* determining itself to ever-changing specific shapes.

Thus total social capital may *itself* be viewed as an Individual. Capital is “the enemy” in a different sense from that in which “Disease” is an enemy. The latter is a personified class name for empirically distinct diseases that have enough in common to group and personify. But Capital has a reality as an individual whole. It is not just a class name for Ford, Shell, ICI, etc. These are not so much members of a set as they are capital’s own concretisations in numerically separable shapes, which nonetheless are constituted as organic parts of a systematic totality and move within it. Capital is an Individual, determined in its unity of many capitals by its negative relation to these as merely its own determinate instances.

## Communism

Marx in 1844 says that Communism is not the end of history. It is to be understood as the movement that abolishes the present state of things. It is a case of the negation of the negation: it abolishes the private property system, which has subverted the human essence; the latter is to flourish under Socialism. It abolishes estrangement, and allows real history to commence on the ground of human aspirations. But what *is* the realization of the human essence? Is it a reworking of the scholastic *summum bonum*? Marx, in the *Grundrisse* recognizes explicitly that if the human is social and historical there is no end of history, because our notion of the good life is ever-changing. Change is certainly the only absolute Marx recognizes.

Moreover the material context is no standing condition of human existence, because production is ontologically constitutive of the human essence; hence the necessity of a dialectical interchange of metabolic and social moments.

The principle of an immanent development of sociality is given in estranged shape in capital’s dialectic of negativity. Never content with its sublation of its previous condition, it continually transforms those presuppositions and creates itself anew. Marx argues that the fact this is all

in the service of money seems at odds with the richness of the ancient classical notion of the good society. But this latter was essentially static. Throwing off the estranged form of the development of our powers leaves humanity as the subject of its “absolute process of becoming”.

**Chris Arthur ([www.chrisarthur.net](http://www.chrisarthur.net))** taught Social and Political Thought at the University of Sussex for many years. He is the author of *The New Dialectic and Marx's Capital*.

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# Against Perversion and Fetish: The Marxian Theory of Revolution as Practical Demystification

by Nicholas Gray

The simple premises of this paper are twofold: for Marx, reification and fetish are emphatically problems of social ontology, or of social practice, within capitalist society. Conversely, these problems cannot be solved or dispelled by any epistemological or ideological correction. Reification [*Verdinglichung*, *Versachlichung*], and perversion [*Verrückung*] are real, objective social processes operative in capitalist society; the fetish-character of commodities, money and capital is not falsely ascribed to them through cognitive error, rather they correspond to a distortion, a perversion, or a *real mystification* of social practice. It follows that these perverted forms of social practice, these real abstractions of the capitalist economy, cannot be dissolved through theoretical criticism alone; rather these forms can only be abolished in practice, through the revolutionary action of the proletariat which dissolves itself and the capitalist class relation. Such a revolution, in abolishing all the objective categories of the capitalist economy, dissolves what Marx calls the “mystification of capital”: it is a process of practical demystification and defetishisation.

## Marx’s Critique of Feuerbach

I want to underpin the distinction outlined above through a brief reading of Marx’s *Theses on Feuerbach*. Here Marx proclaims a new materialism which can overcome the dualisms of both “all hitherto existing materialism” and of idealism. “Sensuous human activity”, or “practice”, is the basis of this new materialism (1974a, p. 421). Such a *practical* materialism - one oriented to practice - arguably paves the way for Marx’s thoroughgoing development of “historical materialism” after 1845.<sup>1</sup> The dualism between subject and object has defined all previous philosophy, which, however, has failed to diagnose the material basis of such a schism in social practice. “Revolutionary practice”, as the “coincidence of changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-changing”, is the only way that the split between subject and object can be superseded (Marx, 1974a: p. 422).



Feuerbach, who, with his conception of religious self-alienation, could be likened to an early ideology critic, remains within the level of thought; his position (and that of all the philosophers) is merely contemplative. Marx, on the other hand, discloses the secular basis for religious self-alienation, and the “cleavages and self-contradictions within this secular basis” – i.e. within capitalist society. However, theoretical critique alone is not sufficient to dissolve these contradictions: the problems of philosophy cannot be resolved within philosophy alone. The only way to go beyond a merely contemplative position is through revolutionary theory *and practice*. As the secular basis for the religious world, capitalist society:

must, therefore, in itself be both understood in its contradiction and revolutionized in practice. Thus, for instance, after the earthly family is discovered to be the secret of the holy family, the former must then itself be destroyed in theory and practice (Marx, 1974a, p. 422).

Marx’s mature critique of political economy, or his critique of capital, arguably makes good on this promise to develop a practical materialism – a *materialism of social practice*. I would argue that it does so negatively, in diagnosing the processes in capitalist society by which social practice is reified, perverted, and assumes fetish-forms. The focus on practice, and alienated or perverted or reified or fetish forms of this practice – i.e. economic categories, the forms of value - is what defines the mature Marxian project: the critique of the social ontology of capital.

### **Marx’s Theory of Reification and Fetish-Forms**

We can now proceed to look at the related phenomena of reification and fetish-forms at the levels of the forms of value as they occur in Marx’s exposition of the dialectic of capital: i.e. in the commodity-, money- and capital-forms of value.

#### *a) Commodity*

In Marx’s treatment of “The Fetish-Character of the Commodity and its Secret” in the final section of the first chapter of *Capital*, vol.1, we see the way in which the social relation between producers is reified: “the definite social relation between men ... assumes here, for them the phantasmagorical form of a relation between things” (1976a, p. 165).

The reification intrinsic to the commodity-relation overlaps with what



Marx calls the fetishism [*Fetischismus*] of commodities:

I call this the fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labour as soon as they are produced as commodities, and is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities ... To the producers, therefore, the social relations between their private labours appear as what they are, i.e. they do not appear as direct social relations between persons in their work, but rather as thing-like relations between persons and social relations between things... (1976a, pp. 165-166).<sup>2</sup>

Notice that Marx uses here the figure of a chiasmus – thing-like relations between persons and social relations between things. Marx repeatedly employs the figure of the chiasmus throughout his work, as we shall see. I argue that in each case one branch of the chiasmus refers to reification (in the above example, “thing-like relations between persons”) and the other to fetish, or fetish character, or fetish action (again, in the above example, “social relations between things”). The twin processes of reification and fetish action are two sides of the same coin, two aspects or moments of the process of ontological inversion characteristic of capitalist social relations.

The chiasmus denoting these complementary processes is expressed even more succinctly by Marx in the following passage:

There is an antithesis, immanent in the commodity, between use-value and value, between private labour which must simultaneously manifest itself as directly social labour, and a particular concrete kind of labour which simultaneously counts as merely abstract universal labour, between the personification of things and the reification of persons; the antithetical phases of the metamorphosis of the commodity are the developed forms of motion of this immanent contradiction. (1976a, p. 209)

The category of reification clearly overlaps with that of (objective) fetish: the commodity is endowed with social powers. As Marx puts it, the exchangers’ “own movement within society has for them the form of a movement made by things [*Sachen*], and these things, far from being under their control, in fact control them” (1976a, pp. 167-168).

Value is a social relation of production (understanding production in the broad sense of the unity of the processes of production and circulation) in the society based on generalised commodity-production. In bourgeois society the relation between producers becomes separate from them, or

constitutes a process occurring “behind their backs” (Marx, 1976a: p. 135). That is to say that in the exchange of commodities a process of *substitution* occurs: the relation between producers figures as a social relation between their products; the relation between the private labours, socialised in exchange, of these producers now takes the form of a social relation between the products of their labour – the social character of their labour figures as an objective characteristic of the products of their labour. This substitution is what constitutes the mystery of the commodity-form:

The mysterious character of the commodity-form consists therefore in the fact that the commodity reflects the social characteristics of men’s own labour as objective characteristics of the products of labour themselves, as the socio-natural properties of these things. Hence it also reflects the social relation of the producers to the sum total of labour as a social relation between objects, a relation which exists apart from and outside the producers. (Marx, 1976a, pp. 164-165)

Thus we see already at the level of the commodity-form of value the fundamental inversion or perversion [*Verkehrung*], and displacement or derangement [*Verrückung*], which characterise capitalist social relations.

Is this merely an epistemic problem? It might appear at first sight that there is some ambiguity in Marx. For instance, on the one hand he talks both of social relations appearing “as what they really are, thing-like relations between persons and social relations between things”; but then on the other he describes how the money form conceals “the social character of private labour and the social relations between the individual workers, by making those relations appear as relations between material objects, instead of revealing them plainly.” (1976a, pp. 168-169) Can these appearance forms (*Erscheinungsformen*) be both real (objective) and false or illusory? This is perhaps possible in so far as they mystify or obscure the underlying relations upon which they are founded and by which they are sustained. Thus we can postulate that the relation between essence and appearance is one of both identity and non-identity in capitalist social relations: “all science would be superfluous if the form of appearance of things directly coincided with their essence.” (Marx, 1981: p. 956) The appearance forms of the underlying relations are real manifestations of them. However, these phenomenal forms are mediated, perverted or distorted forms, such that the underlying relations appear obscurely.

Thus reification and fetish-action occur, according to this reading of Marx, as a *structurally false praxis* which achieves practical truth in the

ontologically inverted world of capitalist society. The analogy of the optical illusion of the bent stick (due to the refraction of light-rays through water) does not work here. In capitalist social relations *the stick really is bent*, as it were. This means that the problem is one of objective (real) appearances, of perverted forms of practice, rather than one of the (subjective) epistemic constitution of social agents.

Marx, in casting around for a suitable analogy for this process, hits upon “the misty realm of religion”. But here we recall his earlier critique of Feuerbach, and the latter’s relegation of the problem of self-alienation to one of subjective belief, and his lack of a conception of material practice. The religious analogy proves unsatisfactory, for the problem of the fetish-character of the commodity is one of *objective social practice*, rather than one of faulty cognition or misplaced belief. Value is a *performative category*, we might say using today’s jargon. It is not epistemically constituted. It has a mind-independent social objectivity arising from the process of exchange (and from the subordination of the production process to the process of increasing exchange-value). Marx describes the process as follows:

Men do not therefore bring the products of their labour into relation with each other as values because they see these objects merely as the integuments of homogeneous human labour. The reverse is true: by equating their different products to each other in exchange as values, they equate their different kinds of labour as human labour. They do this without being aware of it. (1976a, p. 166)

“Fetishism”, or better, fetish-character or fetish-form, attaches itself to the products of labour as soon as they are produced as commodities (i.e. in capitalist commodity production). This attachment is no cognitive illusion (Marx’s dismissal of his own ill-chosen first example of light rays exciting the optic nerve demonstrates this). It is rather a social practice which endows the product of labour with its fetish-character *qua* commodity. Equally, religious ritual and devotion is a social practice, but one based on faulty belief – hence it has a cognitive or epistemological aspect. This is in contradistinction to the fetish-character of the commodity, which it has objectively (as a result of the real process of substitution which occurs in practice), irrespective of people’s beliefs about the matter. It is a mind-independent process occurring behind their backs. The products of labour are endowed with a fetish-character by virtue of the subordination of production to the self-expansion of exchange-value (i.e. by capitalist production).

If value is not epistemically constituted, the corollary is that neither can it be epistemically dissolved. Marx makes this point by insisting that the scientific discovery that value is an expression of human labour in no way diminishes the reality and finality of the value-form of the commodity, just as the atmosphere remains unaltered by the scientific discovery of the component gases of air (1976a, p. 167).

This is not to deny that there is an epistemological dimension here, rather it is present by its absence. Marx says that value does not bear its description stamped on its forehead; it converts every product of labour into a “social hieroglyphic” (1976a, p. 167). Marx also talks of “the veil” which obscures “the countenance of the social life-process” (1976a, p. 173). That social relations both appear as they are, and yet are veiled, obscured, concealed, can only be resolved by reference to the categories of ontological inversion, perversion, displacement, dislocation or derangement (*Verkehrung* and *Verrückung*). The forms of appearance of social relations in capitalist society, *qua* forms of value, conceal the underlying relations because they are *real, objective mystifications*.<sup>3</sup>

#### a) Money

We can now pursue these themes at the level of the money-form of value, where the perverted forms of social practice take on a lustrous appearance. As Marx says, “The riddle of the money fetish is the riddle of the commodity fetish, now become visible and dazzling to our eyes.” (1976a, p. 187) One place where Marx gives an extended treatment of the processes of reification and fetish-action in the form of money, is in the *Grundrisse* (1973, pp. 136-169).

Here we find that exchange-value of commodities is objectified in money over and against the commodities themselves – the exchange-value of commodities has autonomised itself vis-à-vis the commodities, their exchangers and their producers, in the form of money. Marx shows that “the existence of money presupposes the reification [*Versachlichung*] of the social bond” (1973, p. 163), and he describes the money-form of value as a

*“reified relation [versachlichtem Verhältnis] between persons; because it is reified exchange value [versachlichtem Tauschwert], and exchange value is nothing more than a mutual relation between people’s productive activities.”* (1973, p. 163)

Thus, in bourgeois society, although individuals hold their “social power in their pocket” or “in the shape of a thing” (Marx, 1973, p. 157), in fact it is they who are beholden to it, or under its sway: they are “ruled by

*abstractions*" (their own social relations which have become abstracted from them – i.e. alienated from them) (1973, p. 164). The alienation of social power goes hand in hand with an ontological inversion characteristic of the money-form of value: money is transformed from means of exchange to a relation of power which subjugates individuals; a social relation alienated such that it becomes autonomous, self-standing, and an end in itself.

Here we should note that once again the epistemic dimension is present by its absence. Marx also says of the money-relation that it is a "spontaneous interconnection, this material and mental metabolism which is independent of the knowing and willing of individuals, and which presupposes their reciprocal independence and indifference." (1973, p. 161) This means that the social power of money cannot be attributed to a cognitive error of mistaken beliefs on the part of individuals – it is a power objectively constituted as the perverted form of social relations. If there is an epistemological dimension to reification and the fetish-character of the forms of value, it is that these processes are beyond the ken and *a fortiori* beyond the control of the social individuals.

### b) Capital

We can turn now, in the dialectic of forms of value, to the capital-form of value, in which autonomised exchange-value, money, makes itself the subject of the process of its own valorisation – the well-known figure of  $M-C-M'$ , self-valorising value. The processes of reification and fetish-action operate at a higher level of complexity and concretion. As the capital-form of value, autonomised exchange-value, subjugates the production process, it subsumes it under itself and orients it to its own self-valorisation. The subsumption of labour under capital – the positing of the labour process as the valorisation process of capital – is itself a perversion, an ontological displacement. In the published volume 3 of *Capital*, Marx once again deploys the figure of the chiasmus to describe these processes:

What is already implied in the commodity, and still more in the commodity as the product of capital, is the reification [*Verdinglichung*] of the social determinations of production and the subjectification [*Versubjektivierung*] of the material foundations of production which characterise the entire capitalist mode of production. (1981, p. 1020)

As we have seen, the chiasmus represents the two-fold and complimentary processes of reification and fetish-action. Social relations between individuals appear in the shape of things, or forms, and things or forms are

really endowed with social powers.

Reification occurs when social relations become abstracted, separate from social individuals, no longer controlled by them, and hence thing-like. Fetish-action is when things (products of labour, dead labour, objectified labour) “rear themselves up on their hind legs” and dominate living labour (Marx, 1976b, p. 1054). Marx expresses this fundamental perversion, or ontological inversion, in countless ways throughout his mature writings. In the so-called ‘missing 6<sup>th</sup> chapter’ (“the Results of the Immediate Process of Production”), Marx makes the point thus:

Even if we consider just the *formal* relation — the *general* form of capitalist production (...) — the *means of production*, the *objective conditions of labour* (...) do not appear as subsumed under the worker; rather, he appears as subsumed under them. He does not employ them, they employ him. And they are thereby capital. *Capital employs labour.* (1976b, p. 1054)

Marx once again uses the now familiar chiasmus to summarise this perverse state of affairs as “the personification of things and the reification [*Versachlichung*] of persons.” (1976b, p. 1054)

Marx describes the process, through the formal subsumption of labour under capital, and even more so with the real subsumption of labour under capital, whereby the “productive powers of social labour present themselves as productive powers of capital, just as the general social form of labour appears in money as the quality of a thing” (1976b, p. 1052). The productive powers of social labour are *reified* in the form of capital, and *personified* in the capitalist (we might say *they act fetishistically in the person of the capitalist*). As such, capital confronts living labour - it dominates the workers. Marx comments, “here once again we have the inversion of the relation, the expression of which we have already characterised as *fetishism* in considering the nature of money.”<sup>4</sup> Marx thus emphasises the recurrent problematic of the fetish-character of the forms of value (i.e. of commodities, money and capital) at each level of the dialectical exposition of these forms; at each level fetish-character is more flagrant, more pronounced, and yet (or rather, and so) more objectively mystificatory. In the case of capital *qua* process of transubstantiation of the productive powers of social labour, Marx speaks of the “real mystification of capital” and concludes “[t]hus *capital* becomes a very mysterious being” (1976b, p. 1056).

But the story does not end here: worse is still to come! In the chapter on the Trinity Formula in the published volume 3 of *Capital*, we see that in the capitalist economy, there is layer upon layer of mystified forms – a

compounding of mystification. Marx expresses the point as follows:

Further, however, the actual production process, as the unity of the immediate production process, and the process of circulation, produces new configurations in which the threads of the inner connection get more and more lost, the relations of production becoming independent of one another and the components of value ossifying into independent forms. (1981, p. 967)

Marx goes on to theorise the distinction between profit of enterprise and interest, to each of which is allocated a portion of social surplus-value. The origin of the production of surplus-value is objectively concealed. Interest-bearing capital (represented by the figure  $M-M'$ ), where money generates more money as if by magic, is the fetish-form of capital *par excellence*:

If capital originally appeared on the surface of circulation as the capital fetish, value-creating value, so it now presents itself again in the figure of interest-bearing capital, as its most estranged and peculiar form. (1981, p. 968)

Marx summarises the mystification inherent in the division of the social value-product as quasi-naturally occurring revenues to the various factors of production (a division he tellingly dubs “The Trinity Formula”, alluding to the hypostases of the Holy Trinity) thus:

In capital — profit, or still better capital — interest, land — rent, labour — wages, in this economic trinity represented as the connection between the component parts of value and wealth in general and its sources, we have the complete mystification of the capitalist mode of production, the reification of social relations, the immediate coalescence of the material production relations with their historical and social determination. (1981, pp. 968-969)

## Revolution

The Marxian critique of capital reveals modernity itself to be an *enchanted* world, a “bewitched, distorted and upside-down world” (1981, p. 969), *haunted* by the *spectral* figure of capital. Marx’s critique penetrates beneath the surface level of appearances and lays bare the underlying relations.



However, this critique is not sufficient to dispel the mystification characteristic of capitalist social relations which, it is worth insisting, is not an epistemically constituted mystification, but rather a real, objective mystification, a mystification in practice. It follows that revolution must be a process of practical demystification or defetishisation. It is not in theory alone that the fetish is banished; the ghostly abstractions which dominate individuals and regulate social practice are not dissolved by their theoretical comprehension, but rather by the violent overthrow of the capitalist mode of production.

Marx's understanding of this revolution in practice as a process of demystification is given in the following passage from the section on the fetish-character of the commodity in the first chapter of *Volume 1* of *Capital*, where he once again indicates the relation between secular (i.e. economic) and religious forms of mystification, and their overcoming:

the religious reflections of the real world can, in any case, vanish only when the practical relations of everyday life between man and man, and man and nature, generally present themselves to him in a transparent and rational form. The veil is not removed from the countenance of the social life-process, i.e. the process of material production, until it becomes production by freely associated men, and stands under their conscious and planned control. (1976a, p. 173)

In summary, we have seen that in the mature Marx's critique of capitalist commodity relations, the social connection is between things, and is mediated by the autonomised value-form, which as money confronts individuals, and as capital, stands over and dominates them. The value-form is an *objective fetish*, a fetish of humans' social power and interconnection which is alienated and reified, and abstracted from them. We have also seen that, for Marx, the *practical* demystification of the real abstractions and perverted forms of bourgeois society can only occur through the real movement which abolishes capitalist social relations.

The revolutionary supersession of the capitalist mode of production is thus a process of demystification, but again this is *not* primarily a cognitive process – rather it is a practical one. This process of practical demystification is constituted by the *communist measures* that dissolve capitalist categories and forms. In practice, in abolishing the commodity-form, money and capital, the fetish-character which attaches itself to the products of labour is dissipated.

In contrast, however, to Marx's historically determined vision of a



managed transition to a communism of the free association of producers, which he outlines in his *Critique of the Gotha Programme* (1974b), the revolutionary horizon today is one of communisation.<sup>5</sup> This means revolutionary measures which directly abolish capitalist categories – the immediate dissolution of value (in all of its forms *qua* commodities, money, capital). In a revolutionary situation this means what the bourgeois media would call “mass looting”: the direct seizure of goods - consumption which is not mediated through money. In such a situation, consumption no longer has to be backed by “effective demand”, to use the euphemism of bourgeois economists. Or rather “demand” is effective through the assertion of need, with no other abstract social mediation. After this initial dissolution of the commodity-form and money-form (and hence the capital-form, and necessarily also the state-form), the communising revolution becomes a question of the reproduction of the social life-process of individuals free from the mediation of the deranged categories of the capitalist economy. Revolution as communisation is practical demystification: it is only then that the “whole mystery of commodities, all the magic and necromancy that surrounds the products of labour on the basis of commodity production... vanishes” (Marx, 1976a, p. 169).

**Nicholas Gray** is writing a DPhil thesis on Marx's theory of reification at the University of Sussex, and is currently retranslating Rosa Luxemburg's *The Accumulation of Capital* from the German for the Verso edition of her complete works.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> It should be acknowledged that the phrase “historical materialism” is not Marx's own. Arguably, however, it is a fair representation of his mature critical project.

<sup>2</sup> John Clegg (“The Secret of the Fetish” unpublished manuscript) points out that Marx primarily (although not consistently) refers to “fetishism” as a category error of political economists, who mistakenly eternalise and naturalise the forms of value, whereas he uses “fetish-character” to denote the social powers exerted by these forms in capitalist society. To be consistent, Marx should have referred to “fetish-character” rather than “fetishism” in this instance.

<sup>3</sup> The discussion here should not be confused with the critique of the

“fetishism” of the political economists. As we have seen above (endnote 2), there is a strong argument that Marx principally uses the category of “fetishism” (as opposed to “fetish-character”) as the misapprehension by political economists of the social (and hence historically determinate, transient) constitution of the forms of value – commodities, money and capital. The political economists see these forms as natural properties of the things themselves, hence they eternalise them. Thus the critique of political economy, which does indeed involve the critique of category errors on the part of political economists, is here something qualitatively different to the critique of capitalist forms themselves.

<sup>4</sup> Marx has “*Fetischismus*” in the German. See endnote 2.

<sup>5</sup> For extended treatments of the problem of communisation and the historical variance of the revolutionary horizon see “Bring Out Your Dead”, 2008, pp. 2-18; “Crisis In The Class Relation”, 2010, pp. 2-19; “Communisation and Value-Form Theory”, 2010, pp. 68-105.

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# Marx's Distinction between the Fetish Character of the Commodity and Fetishism

by Guido Schulz

## 1. Introduction

Already in his early writings such as the *Debates on the Law on Thefts of Wood* (1842), *Der leitende Artikel in Nr. 179 der »Kölnischen Zeitung«* (1842) and the *Economic Philosophic Manuscripts* (1844), Marx uses the expressions 'fetish' and 'fetishism' (MEW 1, p. 147, p. 91; MEW EB1, p. 532) but it is not until the *Grundrisse* (1857) that Marx embeds their use into his analysis of the commodity or his critique of political economy.

Analysing chapter one, section four of *Capital Vol.I*, Ehrbar (2010) points out that Marx draws a conceptual distinction between the 'fetish character' and 'fetishism'. However, Ehrbar does not explain their respective meaning in detail. This essay is an attempt to show that Marx uses the terms 'fetish character' and 'fetishism' in the following sense: the term 'fetish character' describes the regulating social power that objectified value relations gain under capitalism. It is a social power achieved by virtue of a process of autonomisation of reified social relations. Accordingly, the false belief that social properties ascribed to fetish-bearing things are natural and inherent represents a fetish-induced illusion. Marx designates this illusion as 'fetishism'. Furthermore, it will be demonstrated how the central features of the fetish character of the commodity and fetishism reappear in other forms of bourgeois production, namely money and capital. These features appear in even greater clarity in money and capital than they do in the simple commodity. Thereby, it will be shown that evidence for the distinction between the fetish character and fetishism can be found beyond chapter one, section four of *Capital Vol.I*.

The sections of this essay are ordered by increasing complexity of their fetish-bearing form: commodity, money and capital. For the most part, the discussion of the fetish character will precede that of fetishism. Thereby, I will follow the sequence by which Marx structured his own analysis (cf. CAP I, pp.46-58 [MEW 23, pp.85-98]), giving credit to the fact that fetishism is subsequent to the fetish character.

Before continuing with the subject, I would like to make some short remarks on the formalities of this essay. I will tacitly choose the citations from the English translation which in my opinion come closest to the

German original. In some cases, explicit remarks will be made on the different translations and slight modifications will be carried out where necessary. The correspondent German references to indirect citations will immediately be given in squared brackets. In the case of direct citations, footnotes quote the relevant passages from the German original. For the sake of simplicity, I intend to use the term 'fetish' as a synonym for 'fetish character'. This is a simplification that Marx himself applied at least in *Capital Vol. III* (cf. CAP III, pp. 255 [MEW 25, p. 404]). Although Marx never used the expression 'commodity fetishism' ['Warenfetischismus'], it is commonly used in the secondary literature (cf. Carver 1975, De Angelis 1996, Perlman 1982, Knafo 2002, Rubin 1982). I intend to follow these authors calling 'commodity fetishism' what Marx designates as 'fetishism'.

## 2. The fetish character of the commodity and commodity fetishism

### 2.1. The fetish character of the commodity

First of all, it should be made clear that the fetish character of the commodity is not an illusion, but a property of the commodity (Ehrbar 2010, pp. 425-426). It is not just the way Marx refers to the fetish character, but the very choice of the term itself which already indicates that the fetish character is a defining quality of the commodity. Ehrbar (2010, p. 430) draws attention to a quote in which Marx highlights the impossibility of a fetish free commodity. As Marx counts the "personification of things and the reification of persons"<sup>1</sup> (CAP I Ehrbar, p. 797) to the intrinsic contradictions of the commodity, he implicitly classifies the fetish character of the commodity as deeply engraved in the nature of the commodity itself. The reification of social relations that gives rise to the commodity fetish is implied in the commodity itself and is inevitable. It even characterises the capitalist mode of production as such (CAP III Penguin, p. 1020 [MEW 25, p. 887]).

The fetish character of the commodity, which Marx also calls the "mystic character"<sup>2</sup> (CAP I Ehrbar, p. 438), originates in the "peculiar social character of the labour"<sup>3</sup> (CAP I Ehrbar, p. 469) that gives products their commodity form. Therefore, the fetish originates in production. Although production is ultimately social under capitalism, it is privately organized and carried out by atomised producers. Capitalist production thus entails a conflict between sociality and asociality. An objective mediation between the two extremes of sociality and asociality is established through the process of commodity exchange. Only then can the producers enter into a social relation. Instead of consciously creating immediate links between the producers, in place of "rationally regulating [production], bringing it under [...] common control"<sup>4</sup> (Cap III, p. 571), the social link gets reified and

externalized in commodities:

To the producers, therefore, the social relations between their private labours appear as what they are, i.e. they do not appear as direct social relations between persons in their work, but rather as material relations between persons and social relations between things<sup>5</sup> (CAP I Penguin, pp. 165-166).

But value relations objectified in commodities do not only establish the socializing link between producers. From the viewpoint of the individual producer, these objectified value relations even gain autonomy and regulative social power. This non-imaginary regulative social power is twofold: “[R]elations based on the exchange-value of commodities (‘social relations of things’) come to control the distribution of labour-products *and* the distribution of the labourers themselves within the production process” (Carver 1975, p. 51). Thus, the commodity relation entails circularity (Ehrbar 2010, pp. 457-458). Capitalist social relations have become reified in commodities, which in turn come to act as a regulative force over society. The mystery or the fetish character of the commodity describes this external social force that commodities have gained by virtue of their autonomisation:

What is mysterious about the commodity form is therefore simply that the social characteristics of men’s own labour are reflected back to them as objective characteristics inherent in the products of their labour, as quasi-physical properties of these things, and that therefore also the social relation of the producers to the aggregate labour is reflected as a social relation of objects, a relation which exists apart from and outside the producers. Through this quid pro quo, the products of labour become commodities, sensuous things which are at the same time extrasensory or social<sup>6</sup> (CAP I Ehrbar, pp. 451-452).

The above quote might create the false impression that the autonomy of social relations gained in their reified commodity form is imaginary. However, Marx makes it clear that he thinks of this autonomy as real and *not* imaginary. Of course, it can only be real for the individual, but surely not for society as a whole (cf. Knafo 2002, p. 160). In *A Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy*, Marx asserts:

A social relation of production appears as something existing apart from individual human beings, and the distinctive relations into which they enter in the course of production in

society appear as the specific properties of a thing – it is this [inversion] and [...] prosaically real, and by no means imaginary, mystification that is characteristic of all social forms of labour positing exchange-value<sup>7</sup> (CoPE).

Summing up this section, the fetish character describes a real regulative social power, which reified social relations gain under capitalism by virtue of a preceding process of autonomisation. In this notion of the fetish character many philosophical concepts that Marx deployed in his earlier writings, particularly in his theory of alienation, reappear partly implicitly and partly explicitly. For example, there is a return of the Feuerbachian concept of the ‘subject-predicate inversion’ that Marx had applied to the bourgeois state and to money in his 1843/1844 writings. The ‘subject-predicate inversion’ describes the subordination of the primary, i.e. the human being, to the predicate, i.e. the man made product. Furthermore, there is a return of the ‘externalisation’ [‘Entäußerung’] theme that is omnipresent in the *Economic Philosophic Manuscripts (1844)*. Perlman (1982, p. XXIV) even claims that “through the theory of commodity fetishism, the concept of reified labour becomes the link between the theory of alienation in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* and the theory of value in *Capital*.” For the sake of precision, “theory of commodity fetishism” should be substituted with “theory of the fetish character of the commodity” in Perlman’s quote.

## 2.2. Fetishism - The naturalisation of social properties

In opposition to the fetish character, Marx does not use the term fetishism in reference to a *property* possessed by the commodity. Fetishism is *not* an inherent feature of the commodity. “Fetishism [...] *attaches* itself to the products of labour, so soon as they are produced as commodities, and [...] is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities”<sup>8</sup> (CAP I, p. 47; italics added).

Because fetishism is a misconception of the fetish (Ehrbar 2010, p. 465), the historical character of fetishism follows directly from the historical character of the commodity fetish. As long as there is commodity production, the fetish will cause the illusion of fetishism. But what exactly is this illusion comprised of?

Fetishism is a kind of mystification based on an inverse understanding of what is social and what is natural. In *Capital Vol.II*, Marx gives a straight forward explication of what he means by fetishism: “[F]etishism [...] metamorphoses the social, economic character impressed on things in the process of social production into a natural character stemming from the

material nature of those things”<sup>9</sup> (CAP II, p. 135).

Marx also specifies which subjects actually engage in fetishism. He states that fetishism is “*peculiar to bourgeois Political Economy*”<sup>10</sup> (CAP II, p. 135; italics added). Almost every time that he talks about fetishism, he alludes to Political Economy being deceived by it (cf. GRUNDRISSE, p. 369 [MEW 42, p. 588]; CAP I, p. 51 [MEW 23, p. 97]; CAP III, p. 256 [MEW 25, pp. 405-406]; CAP III, p. 261 [MEW 25, p. 412]; ToSV | 817 | [MEW 26/3, p. 126]). Marx blames Political Economy for its incapacity to grasp the historical character of the value substance, i.e. abstract labour, and for unreflectively presupposing value form without investigating its origin (Elbe 2005, p.7).

However, fetishism is certainly not a phenomenon peculiar only to the Political Economy of Marx’s time. Contemporary orthodox economic theory engages in very similar fetishism when it comes to, for example, their conception of capital. In what may be the most read textbook for Economics, Gregory Mankiw’s *Principles of Economics*, the former chairman of President George W. Bush’s Council of Economic Advisors defines capital as “the stock of equipment and structures used for production. That is, the economy’s capital represents the accumulation of goods produced in the past that are being used in the present to produce new goods and services” (Mankiw 2008, p. 406). Following this ahistorical logic, the stone used by caveman to open nuts was already capital (cf. ToSP | 921 | [MEW 26/3, p. 491]).

Returning to Marx and his idea of Political Economy’s fetishism, his philosophical specification of fetishism reads as follows:

The crude materialism of the economists who regard as the natural properties of things what are social relations of production among people, and qualities which things obtain because they are subsumed under these relations, is at the same time just as crude an idealism, even fetishism, since it imputes social relations to things as inherent characteristics, and thus mystifies them<sup>11</sup> (GRUNDRISSE, p. 369).

Marx claims that fetishism of Political Economy is both crude materialism and crude idealism. Concerning crude materialism, Marx accuses Political Economy of naturalising social properties; of annulling the distinction between physical and social qualities of products of labour in favour of their physical qualities. The naturalisation of social relations reflects what Engels (1999a) calls vulgar materialism’s “inability to comprehend the [world] as a process, as matter undergoing uninterrupted historical development”<sup>12</sup>.

Besides being crude materialism, Marx claims that fetishism is crude ontological idealism. This ontological idealism consists in the idea that “the social, economic character impressed on things in the process of social



production [stems] from the material nature of those things"<sup>13</sup> (CAP II, p. 135). The commodity form that products of labour assume under capitalism is hence misconceived as prior to the social relations of production that gave rise to it. In this sense, fetishism may actually be called a kind of epiphenomenal ideology - a set of beliefs which mirrors the inverted reality of capitalism (cf. Clegg 2008, p. 8).

However, it would be inaccurate to call fetishism a kind of functionalist ideology by which the 'false consciousness' of the proletariat perpetuates the prevailing social relations of exploitation. This follows immediately from Marx's rejection of the concept of functional ideology (Clegg 2008, p. 3-4). Despite this rejection, it may yet be possible that the proletariat, or society as a whole, is falling victim to fetishism. Rubin (1982, p. 59) for example holds that fetishism is a "phenomenon of social consciousness". Considering the fact that Marx never accuses the proletariat or ordinary people of engaging in fetishism, Rubin's interpretation of Marx's concept of fetishism seems out of place.

### **2.3. General remarks on the distinction between the fetish character and fetishism**

Ehrbar (2010) pointed out various imprecisions in the English translations that make it nearly impossible to detect the distinction that Marx makes between the fetish character of the commodity and fetishism. The crudest imprecision is perhaps the inaccurate translation of the title of chapter one passage four of *Capital Vol.I*. The German 'Fetischcharakter' has been falsely translated as 'Fetishism' in the Collected Works and Penguin version of *Capital Vol.I* (Ehrbar 2010, p. 427). In terms of the contents, the distinction was noted by various scholars before Ehrbar. Geras (1971) comes quite close to noticing a clear conceptual distinction between fetish and fetishism. He holds that the "phenomenon of fetishism" is twofold and entails the elements of "domination" and "mystification" (Geras 1971, p. 72). In using the distinction previously made in this essay between fetish and fetishism, Geras' notion of "domination" maps well onto the concept of the fetish, whereas "mystification" refers to fetishism. Knafo (2002, pp. 159-160), Carver (1975, p. 53; p. 55) and Rubin (1982, p. 59) also elaborate the contents of both sides, but do not keep them conceptually separated.

Yet, inconsistencies in the translations cannot be the sole reason for the conceptual distinction staying undetected for so long. Marx himself also contributed to the veiling of the difference. At the beginning of chapter one, section four of *Capital Vol.I* (CAP I, p. 47 [MEW 23, p. 87]), he uses an analogy of religion to describe "the social reality of religion by how individuals perceive it" (Ehrbar 2010, p. 462). Here Ehrbar (2010, p. 462)



attentively spotted that Marx “tacitly switches over [from a discussion on] the fetish-like character of the commodity [to a discussion on] fetishism“. The social reality of religion corresponds to the real fetish character of the commodity, whereas the illusive perception of it corresponds to fetishism.

### 3. Engels confusing the money fetish with money fetishism?

The commodity fetish is passed onto money simultaneously with the commodity assuming the value form of money. Under a new guise the general features of the fetish character of the commodity now express themselves in the particular money commodity, which managed to assume the monopolized position of the general equivalent form of value (cf. CAP I, pp. 62-65 [MEW 23, pp. 104-108]). Attention shall now be given to this money fetish and subsequent money fetishism.

In 1868, Engels wrote a condensed summary of *Capital Vol.I* called *Synopsis of Capital Volume I* (Engels 1999b). Based on a citation taken from this Synopsis, it will be shown that Engels either was not aware of the distinction between the two concepts of money fetish and fetishism, or misinterpreted the quote that he borrowed from chapter two of *Capital Vol.I* as an instance of fetishism. However, it would certainly be a stretch to claim that Engels was completely uninformed about the difference between fetishism and fetish character just on the basis of his confusion or misinterpretation in this particular case.

Instead of taking the citation from the English translation of the Synopsis, it is more sensible to directly quote from *Capital Vol.I*, where Engels originally copied his quote. The only addition that Engels made to the quote taken from *Capital Vol.I* is the word “fetishism“. The quote reads:

Fetishism: Although a particular commodity only becomes money because all other commodities express their values in it, it seems, on the contrary, that all other commodities universally express their values in a particular commodity because it is money<sup>14</sup> (CAP I Ehrbar, pp. 651-652).

The sentence cited does seem to describe the false belief that money would naturally possess the universal equivalent form of value. However, if the sentence is put back into the context of the paragraph (CAP I Ehrbar pp. 651-654 [MEW 23, pp. 107-108]), it becomes clear that it instead describes the money fetish rather than fetishism (c.f. Ehrbar 2010, p. 653).

In that particular paragraph, Marx explains how commodities encounter the finished shape of the form of their own value in the “body of a commodity existing outside and alongside them“<sup>15</sup> (CAP I Ehrbar, p. 653).

Of course, this particular commodity is money. It is no illusion that the money commodity, once it has adopted the specific value form of money, becomes quasi-autonomous and has the power to effectively force all other commodities to express their value in it. Money constitutes the “immediate incarnation of all human labour”<sup>16</sup> (CAP I Ehrbar, p. 653) and therefore a priori assumes the equivalent form in exchange relations of commodities. Money has thereby become a subject that has the actual power to regulate commodity exchange. However, money does not possess these features because it is money, but because social relations have been reified in it. This is essentially what constitutes the money fetish. Money could only gain this non-imaginary position of autonomy by the mediating process of innumerable exchanges expressing certain social relations. However, it should be kept in mind that the kind of autonomy gained by money cannot be autonomy from society, but autonomy from the individual private producers and individual acts of exchange. In the autonomisation of money “[t]he movement which mediated this process vanishes in its own result, leaving no trace behind”<sup>17</sup> (CAP I Ehrbar, p. 653). The last aspect may be called ‘result-prerequisite inversion’. Although money is the result of certain social and exchange relations, it now becomes the prerequisite of exchange. However, the process that spawned this result cannot be detected in money anymore.

Finally, in the last sentence of the paragraph, Marx makes it clear that he talks about the money fetish and not about fetishism. He also relates the money fetish to the commodity fetish: “The riddle of the money fetish is therefore merely the riddle of the commodity fetish, has become visible and blinding the eyes”<sup>18</sup> (CAP I Ehrbar, p. 654). The commodity fetish is explicit and more striking in the money fetish, but at the same time it becomes more difficult to demystify it (cf. CAP I Ehrbar, pp. 562-563 [MEW 23, p. 97]; CoPE [MEW 13, p. 35]).

Admittedly, Marx could have been clearer in explaining the money fetish and its difference from the false perception of it, which is fetishism. Nevertheless, the above made interpretation of the paragraph from which Engels’ citation was taken should suffice to indicate that Marx’s intention, most probably, was to highlight the kernel of truth in the sentence cited by Engels, i.e. the fetish character of money, and not the false belief of money naturally possessing the form of the universal equivalent, i.e. fetishism.

#### **4. The completion of the capital fetish and its fetishism in interest-bearing capital**

Commodity, money and capital are all forms of bourgeois production. Whereas “the commodity-form is the most general and the most

underdeveloped form of bourgeois production"<sup>19</sup> (CAP I Penguin, p. 176), capital constitutes the most concrete and complex form among the three mentioned. The previous sections have discussed the peculiar features of the commodity and the money fetish, as well as those of their subsequent fetishism. The following analysis, focussing on *Capital Vol.III's* chapter on "Externalization of the Relations of Capital in the Form of Interest-Bearing Capital"<sup>20</sup> (CAP III, p. 255), will now consider the fetish character of capital and its fetishism. The intention is to show that the features of the commodity fetish as well as those of its attached fetishism reappear in interest-bearing capital. The features already reappear in capital, but in interest-bearing capital the "fetish character of capital and the [conception] of this capital fetish [become] now complete"<sup>21</sup> (CAP III, Penguin, p. 516). This short quote already indicates that Marx actually distinguishes between the capital fetish as a property inherent to (interest-bearing) capital and the false conception of the fetish, i.e. fetishism. If capital fetish and capital fetishism were the same thing, why would he mention them separately?

Just like the title, the chapter's opening sentence makes the reappearance of the fetish's theme of externalisation of social relations explicit: "The relations of capital assume their most externalised and most fetish-like form in interest-bearing capital"<sup>22</sup> (CAP III, p. 255). David Fernbach's translation of the title and the opening sentence in Penguin's version of *Capital Vol.III* is significantly wrong. He falsely translates "Veräußerlichung" as "Superficial Form" and "fetischartig" as "fetishized" (CAP III Penguin, p. 515). By the first mistake, he misses that social relations have been externalized in interest-bearing capital, by the second, he turns the fetish-bearing subject into the fetishised object. Although it is certainly true that Political Economy treats interest-bearing capital as its fetishised object, the translation remains incorrect.

As it has already been the case for the commodity and money, inversion and reification of social relations of production form the base for the fetish character of interest-bearing capital. In fact, they climax in interest-bearing capital and give it "pure fetish form"<sup>23</sup> (CAP III Penguin, p. 517). The aforementioned 'result-prerequisite inversion' that occurred in the money fetish, also returns in a perverted way in the fetish of interest-bearing capital. This is because the prerequisite for, and result of interest-bearing capital's movement, suddenly coincide. Thus, Marx says that interest-bearing capital appears merely as a "form without content"<sup>24</sup> (CAP III, p. 255). The following quote will illustrate these aspects:

In M–M' we have the meaningless form of capital, the [inversion] and [reification] of production relations in their highest degree, the interest-bearing form, the simple form of

capital, in which it antecedes its own process of reproduction; [...] capacity of money, or of a commodity, to expand its own value independently of reproduction – which is a mystification of capital in its most flagrant form<sup>25</sup> (CAP III, p. 256).

Certainly, this is a confusing quote that needs to be deciphered. It seems that Marx starts with a description of the fetish character of interest-bearing capital referring to inversion and reification, and then tacitly switches over to the description of capital fetishism. A similar instance already occurred in *Capital Vol.I* (c.f. Ehbar 2010, p. 462). We can find strong support for this interpretation in a more elaborated version of the very same passage, which can be found in *Theories of Surplus-Value* (ToSV ||917| [MEW 26/3, pp. 484-485]). In contrast to *Capital Vol.III*, the division into a description of the fetish and a description of fetishism is done quite clearly in this extended version: The first part explicitly describes the completion of the “character and form of capital”<sup>26</sup> (ToSV ||917|) and involves the common themes of the fetish character. The second part, however, deals with the “[re]presentation”<sup>27</sup> (ToSV ||917|) of the character and form of capital. Marx closes the second part with the words: “The transubstantiation, the fetishism, is complete”<sup>28</sup> (ToSV ||917|). By transubstantiation, Marx means the imagined transformation of a ‘human being-human being’ relationship into a ‘human being-thing’ relationship.

Another central aspect of the fetish character that reappears in interest-bearing capital is the autonomisation of reified social relations. Autonomisation reaches its climax in interest-bearing capital consequent to the extreme “[inversion] and [reification] of production relations”<sup>29</sup> (CAP III, p. 256). It has gone so far that money in the form of interest-bearing capital does not need to bear reference to anything but itself. The following quote, which includes another reference to the ‘result-prerequisite inversion’, gives evidence for the vast scope of autonomy that money gained in the form of interest-bearing capital:

The *thing* (money, commodity, value) is now capital even as a mere thing, and capital appears as a mere thing. The result of the entire process of reproduction appears as a property inherent in the thing itself. [...] In interest-bearing capital, therefore, this automatic fetish, self-expanding value, money generating money, are brought out in their pure state and in this form it no longer bears the birth-marks of its origin. The social relation is consummated in the relation of a thing, of money, to itself<sup>30</sup> (CAP III, p. 255).

Although the quotes given above illustrated quite well how the themes of inversion, reification and autonomisation reappear in the fetish of interest-bearing capital, its result has not been mentioned yet. The result is that capital, i.e. dead labour, confronts society as an alien, objectified, social force reigning over living labour. Marx mentions this while highlighting the socio-historical and therefore surmountable character of dead labour's domination:

[In contrast, we] know [...] that the domination of the products of past labour over living surplus-labour lasts only as long as the relations of capital, which rest on those particular social relations in which past labour independently and overwhelmingly dominates over living labour<sup>31</sup> (CAP III, p. 261).

In chapter 15 of *Capital Vol.III*, Marx makes another even more explicit remark on the hostile social power that capital becomes (cf. CAP III, p. 179 [MEW 25, p. 274]). Although this particular remark is not directly linked to Marx's discussion on the fetish of interest-bearing capital, the relatedness to the concept of the fetish is quite obvious.

So far, the fetish character of interest-bearing capital has been considered the most. As it was in the case for the commodity and money, the false perception of the capital fetish, i.e. capital fetishism, is subsequent to the capital fetish: "The distorted form [of interest-bearing capital] in which the real inversion is expressed is naturally reproduced in the views of the agents of this mode of production"<sup>32</sup> (ToSV | XV-891 |). The false perception consists in naturalising its capacity to bear interest and to completely disconnect it from the process of value creation, which is the process of production:

Now, the [conception] of [the capital fetish] reaches its height in interest-bearing capital, being a [conception] which attributes to the accumulated product of labour, and at that in the fixed form of money, the inherent secret power, as an automaton, of creating surplus-value in geometrical progression, so that the accumulated product of labour, as [»The] Economist[«] thinks, has long discounted all the wealth of the world for all time as belonging to it and rightfully coming to it<sup>33</sup> (CAP III, p. 261).

There are three clear indications that Marx refers to fetishism and not to the fetish of interest-bearing capital in this passage. First, he uses the expression "conception of the capital fetish" instead of "capital fetish".

Second, he gives an example of Political Economy holding this conception by alluding to its mouthpiece, *The Economist*. And third, he passes some scathing criticism on Political Economy, making clear that in reality things are the exact opposite of Political Economy's conception. This is the reason why Marx starts his criticism of capital fetishism, that was cited above, with the words "*In contrast, we know*"<sup>34</sup> (own translation, italics added). Interestingly, Marx partly excludes Classical Political Economy from the deception caused by the capital fetish. He clearly acknowledges that classical political economy has shown that interest and rent both derive from surplus-value and thereby "dissolved [the] false appearance and deception, this autonomization and ossification of the different social elements of wealth vis-à-vis one another, this personification of things and reification of the relations of production"<sup>35</sup> (CAP III Penguin p. 969). By contrast, he particularly accuses Vulgar Political Economy of engaging in capital fetishism. As the fetish character of interest-bearing capital has completely veiled the process of value creation, Vulgar Political Economy "seeks to present capital as an independent source of wealth"<sup>36</sup> (CAP III Penguin, p. 517).

## 5. Conclusion

At first sight, there seems to be no distinction between Marx's concept of the fetish character of the commodity and fetishism. Although not easy to spot, especially in the English translations, a close reading of the original writings in German reveals that there is indeed a distinction. Ehrbar (2010) already pointed out that the central difference between the two consists in the objective social basis of the fetish character and the subjective illusion that constitutes fetishism. However, his analysis is rather incomplete. It fails to describe in detail what Marx exactly means by the fetish character and fetishism and it stays limited to the context of *Capital Vol.I*. This essay's task was to provide further evidence for the distinction between the fetish character and fetishism, as well as to clarify their respective meanings. The approach chosen to carry out this task included an analysis of the more developed forms of bourgeois production, namely money and capital. The analysis was conducted on the basis of various works Marx had written after 1857.

It was shown that the fetish character is constituted by the externalised social power that has been reified in different forms of bourgeois production. Under capitalism, value relations objectified in commodities come to take over regulative social functions by virtue of the autonomy they gained towards the atomised individual. Whereas the fetish character describes a non-illusory social force, fetishism is an illusion that is caused by the fetish.

Fetishism is hence a fetish induced epiphenomenal ideology. Marx denounces Political Economy for engaging in fetishism because it misconceives social traits objectified in the commodity, money or capital, as natural ones that are inherent to the thing. As the fetish character of the commodity gets passed on to more concrete forms like money and capital, it advances and appears under a modified guise. Each form's fetish then inevitably creates its respective fetishism in bourgeois economic thought.

It is unlikely that the long undetected insight of the fetish character-fetishism distinction would actually make a revision of the literature on Marx's theory of 'commodity fetishism' necessary. The novelty is merely the conceptual distinction, but its contents were well known to Marxian scholars before. However, there might be a valuable conclusion to draw from this essay: the identification of the fetish character concept as a very clear continuation and refined version of the philosophic themes that revolve around Marx's earlier theory of alienation and fetishism as an epiphenomenal ideology.

**Guido Schulz (schulzgu@student.hu-berlin.de)** is currently a postgraduate student at Humbolt University of Berlin, studying towards an MSc in Statistics. Previously, he completed an MA in Social and Political Thought at the University of Sussex.

### Abbreviations

- |               |   |
|---------------|---|
| CAP I         | <i>Capital. Volume I.</i> Karl Marx Frederick Engels Collected Works Volume 35.<br><a href="http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/Capital-Volume-I.pdf">http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/Capital-Volume-I.pdf</a> *    |
| CAP I Ehrbar  | <i>Capital. Volume I.</i> Translation project by Hans G.Ehrbar.<br><a href="http://www.econ.utah.edu/~ehrbar/akmc.pdf">http://www.econ.utah.edu/~ehrbar/akmc.pdf</a> *  |
| CAP I Penguin | <i>Capital. Volume I.</i> Penguin Classics.   |
| CAP II        | <i>Capital. Volume II.</i> Karl Marx Frederick Engels Collected Works Volume 36.<br><a href="http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/Capital-Volume-II.pdf">http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/Capital-Volume-II.pdf</a> * |
| CAP III       | <i>Capital. Volume III.</i> Karl Marx Frederick Engels Collected Works Volume 37.<br><a href="http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download">http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download</a>  |



[/pdf/Capital-Volume-III.pdf](#) \*

- CAP III Penguin *Capital. Volume III.* Penguin Classics.
- CoPE *Economic Manuscripts: A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy.*  
<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1859/critique-pol-economy/ch01.htm>
- GRUNDRISSE *Grundrisse. Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy.* Penguin Classics.  
[http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/Marx\\_Grundrisse.pdf](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/Marx_Grundrisse.pdf) \*
- MEW 1 *Marx Engels Werke Band 1. 1839 bis 1844.*
- MEW 13 *Marx Engels Werke Band 13. Januar 1859 bis Februar 1860.*
- MEW 16 *Marx Engels Werke Band 16. September 1864 bis Juli 1870.*
- MEW 21 *Marx Engels Werke Band 21. Mai 1883 bis Dezember 1889.*
- MEW 23 *Marx Engels Werke Band 23. Das Kapital. Erster Band.*
- MEW 24 *Marx Engels Werke Band 24. Das Kapital. Zweiter Band.*
- MEW 25 *Marx Engels Werke Band 25. Das Kapital. Dritter Band.*
- MEW 26/3 *Marx Engels Werke Band 26/3. Theorien über den Mehrwert. Teil 3.*
- MEW 42 *Marx Engels Werke Band 42. Ökonomische Manuskripte 1857-1858.*
- MEW EB1 *Marx Engels Werke Ergänzungsband 1. Teil. Schriften, Manuskripte, Briefe bis 1844 - Erster Teil.*
- ToSV *Theories of Surplus-Value.*  
<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1863/theories-surplus-value/index.htm>

\* the page numbers referenced refer to the respective PDF files



## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> "Personifizierung der Sache und Versachlichung der Personen" (MEW 23, p. 128)

<sup>2</sup> "rätselhafte Charakter" (MEW 23, p. 86)

<sup>3</sup> "eigentümlichen gesellschaftlichen Charakter der Arbeit" (MEW 23, p. 87)

<sup>4</sup> "[die Produktion] rationell [zu] regeln, [sie] unter [...] gemeinschaftliche Kontrolle [zu] bringen" (MEW 25, p. 828)

<sup>5</sup> "[Den Produzenten] erscheinen daher die gesellschaftlichen Beziehungen ihrer Privatarbeiten als das, was sie sind, d.h. nicht als unmittelbare gesellschaftliche Verhältnisse der Personen in ihren Arbeiten selbst, sondern vielmehr als sachliche Verhältnisse der Personen und gesellschaftliche Verhältnisse der Sachen." (MEW 23, p. 87)

<sup>6</sup> "Das Geheimnisvolle der Warenform besteht also einfach darin, daß sie den Menschen die gesellschaftlichen Charaktere ihrer eignen Arbeit als gegenständliche Charaktere der Arbeitsprodukte selbst, als gesellschaftliche Natureigenschaften dieser Dinge zurückspiegelt, daher auch das gesellschaftliche Verhältnis der Produzenten zur Gesamtarbeit als ein außer ihnen existierendes gesellschaftliches Verhältnis von Gegenständen. Durch dies Quidproquo werden die Arbeitsprodukte Waren, sinnlich übersinnliche oder gesellschaftliche Dinge." (MEW 23, p. 86)

<sup>7</sup> "Dass ein gesellschaftliches Produktionsverhältnis sich als ein außer den Individuen vorhandener Gegenstand und die bestimmten Beziehungen, die wie im Produktionsprozess ihres gesellschaftlichen Lebens eingehen, sich als spezifische Eigenschaft eines Dings darstellen, diese Verkehrung und nicht eingebildete, sondern prosaisch reelle Mystifikation charakterisiert alle gesellschaftlichen Formen der tauschwertsetzenden Arbeit." (MEW 13, p. 35)

<sup>8</sup> "[...] Fetischismus, der den Arbeitsprodukten anklebt, sobald sie als Waren produziert werden, und der daher von der Warenproduktion unzertrennlich ist." (MEW 23, pp. 86-87)

<sup>9</sup> "Fetischismus [verwandelt] den gesellschaftlichen, ökonomischen Charakter, welchen Dinge im gesellschaftlichen Produktionsprozeß aufgeprägt erhalten, in einen natürlichen, aus der stofflichen Natur dieser

Dinge entspringenden Charakter [...]“ (MEW 24, p.228)

<sup>10</sup> “der bürgerlichen Ökonomie eigentümliche Fetischismus“ (MEW 24, p. 228)

<sup>11</sup> “Der grobe Materialismus der Ökonomen, die gesellschaftlichen Produktionsverhältnisse der Menschen und die Bestimmungen, die die Sachen erhalten, als unter diese Verhältnisse subsumiert, als natürliche Eigenschaften der Dinge zu betrachten, ist ein ebenso grober Idealismus, ja Fetischismus, der den Dingen gesellschaftliche Beziehungen aus ihnen immanente Bestimmungen zuschreibt und sie so mystifiziert.“ (MEW 42, p. 588)

<sup>12</sup> “Beschränktheit dieses Materialismus bestand in seiner Unfähigkeit, die Welt als einen Prozeß, als einen in einer geschichtlichen Fortbildung begriffenen Stoff aufzufassen.“ (MEW 21, pp. 278-279)

<sup>13</sup> “den gesellschaftlichen, ökonomischen Charakter, welchen Dinge im gesellschaftlichen Produktionsprozeß aufgeprägt erhalten, in einen natürlichen, aus der stofflichen Natur dieser Dinge entspringenden Charakter verwandelt“ (MEW 24, p. 228)

<sup>14</sup> “Fetischismus: eine Ware scheint nicht erst Geld zu werden, weil die andern Waren allseitig ihre Werte in ihr darstellen, sondern sie scheinen umgekehrt ihre Werte in ihr darzustellen, weil sie *Geld* ist.“ (MEW 16, p. 246)

<sup>15</sup> “als einen außer und neben ihnen existierenden Warenkörper“ (MEW 23, p. 107)

<sup>16</sup> “die unmittelbare Inkarnation aller menschlichen Arbeit“ (MEW 23, p. 107)

<sup>17</sup> “Die vermittelnde Bewegung verschwindet in ihrem eignen Resultat und läßt keine Spur zurück.“ (MEW 23, p. 107)

<sup>18</sup> “Das Rätsel des Geldfetichs ist daher nur das sichtbar gewordne, die Augen blendende Rätsel des Warenfetichs.“ (MEW 23, p. 108)

<sup>19</sup> “die Warenform die allgemeinste und unentwickeltste Form der bürgerlichen Produktion ist“ (MEW 23, p. 97)

<sup>20</sup> “Veräußerlichung des Kapitalverhältnisses in der Form des zinstragenden Kapitals“ (MEW 25, p. 404)

- <sup>21</sup> "Hier ist die Fetischgestalt des Kapitals und die Vorstellung vom Kapitalfetisch fertig." (MEW 25, p. 405)
- <sup>22</sup> "Im zinstragenden Kapital erreicht das Kapitalverhältnis seine äußerlichste und fetischartigste Form." (MEW 25, p. 404)
- <sup>23</sup> "reine Fetischform" (MEW 25, p. 406)
- <sup>24</sup> "inhaltslose Form" (MEW 25, p. 405)
- <sup>25</sup> "In G - G' haben wir die begriffslose Form des Kapitals, die Verkehrung und Versachlichung der Produktionsverhältnisse in der höchsten Potenz: zinstragende Gestalt, die einfache Gestalt des Kapitals, worin es seinem eignen Reproduktionsprozeß vorausgesetzt ist; Fähigkeit des Geldes, resp. der Ware, ihren eignen Wert zu verwerten, unabhängig von der Reproduktion - die Kapitalmystifikation in der grellsten Form." (MEW 25, p. 405)
- <sup>26</sup> "Charakter und die Gestalt des Kapitals" (MEW 26/3, p. 484)
- <sup>27</sup> "Darstellung" (MEW 26/3, p. 484)
- <sup>28</sup> "Die Transsubstantion, der Fetischismus ist vollendet." (MEW 26/3, p. 485)
- <sup>29</sup> "Verkehrung und Versachlichung der Produktionsverhältnisse" (MEW 25, p. 405)
- <sup>30</sup> "Das Ding (Geld, Ware, Wert) ist nun als bloßes Ding schon Kapital, und das Kapital erscheint als bloßes Ding; das Resultat des gesamten Reproduktionsprozesses erscheint als eine, einem Ding von selbst zukommende Eigenschaft; [...] Im zinstragenden Kapital ist daher dieser automatische Fetisch rein herausgearbeitet, der sich selbst verwertende Wert, Geld heckendes Geld, und trägt es in dieser Form keine Narben seiner Entstehung mehr. Das gesellschaftliche Verhältnis ist vollendet als Verhältnis eines Dings, des Geldes, zu sich selbst." (MEW 25, p. 405)
- <sup>31</sup> "Man weiß dagegen, daß [...] das Kommando der Produkte vergangner Arbeit über lebendige Mehrarbeit grade nur so lange dauert, wie das Kapitalverhältnis dauert, das bestimmte soziale Verhältnis, worin die vergangne Arbeit selbständig und übermächtig der lebendigen gegenübertritt." (MEW 25, p. 412)

<sup>32</sup> “Die verdrehte Form [des zinstragenden Kapitals], worin die wirkliche Verdrehung sich ausdrückt, findet sich natürlich reproduziert in den Vorstellungen der Agenten dieser Produktionsweise.” (MEW 26/3, p. 445)

<sup>33</sup> “In dem zinstragenden Kapital ist aber die Vorstellung vom Kapitalfetisch vollendet, die Vorstellung, die dem aufgehäuften Arbeitsprodukt, und noch dazu fixiert als Geld, die Kraft zuschreibt, durch eine eingeborne geheime Qualität, als reiner Automat, in geometrischer Progression Mehrwert zu erzeugen, so daß dies aufgehäuften Arbeitsprodukt, wie der »Economist« meint, allen Reichtum der Welt für alle Zeiten als ihm von Rechts wegen gehörig und zufallend schon längst diskontiert hat.” (MEW 25, p. 412)

<sup>34</sup> “Man weiß dagegen” (MEW 25, p. 412)

<sup>35</sup> “diesen falschen Schein und Trug, diese Verselbständigung und Verknöcherung der verschiedenen gesellschaftlichen Elemente des Reichtums gegeneinander, diese Personifizierung der Sachen und Versachlichung der Produktionsverhältnisse [...] aufgelöst zu haben” (MEW 25, p. 838)

<sup>36</sup> “die Vulgärökonomie, die das Kapital als selbständige Quelle des Werts, der Wertschöpfung, darstellen will” (MEW 25, pp. 405-406)

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# The Time of Capital and the Messianicity of Time. Marx with Benjamin

by Sami Khatib

*The train of events is a train unrolling its rails ahead of itself. The river of time is a river sweeping its banks along with it. The traveller moves about on a solid floor between solid walls; but the floor and the walls are being moved along too, imperceptibly, and yet in a very lively fashion, by the movements that his fellow travellers make.*

Robert Musil: *The Man Without Qualities*

In 1978, the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben wrote an intriguing commentary summing up his take on revolutionary critiques of capitalism.<sup>1</sup>

The original task of a genuine revolution [...] is never merely to 'change the world', but also – and above all – to 'change time'. Modern political thought has concentrated its attention on history, and has not elaborated a corresponding concept of time. Even historical materialism has until now neglected to elaborate a concept of time that compares with its concept of history (Agamben, 1993: 91).

Taking my cue from Agamben's plea, I will argue in this article that it is in Marx himself that we find grounds for a materialist theory of time. Marx never wrote a chapter on the 'time of capital'; however, the concept of time-as-measure is crucial to his entire theory of the value form in terms of materialized "congealed" labour. Distilling from Marx's mature writings on the critique of political economy, this article plays out a confrontation between his implicit theory of the "time of capital" and Walter Benjamin's late writings on messianic time outlined in his famous theses *On the Concept of History*. Benjamin's messianic inversion of historical materialism addresses Marxism's most decisive points of critique: (1) the historicization of capitalism as a socially specific and historically contingent mode of production; and (2) the conceptualization of history as a process of dynamic social forces and their struggles. As we shall see, Benjamin's criticism of vulgar-Marxist and historicist historiography lays bare the fundamental paradox of any concept of history based upon linearity, succession, and



homogeneity. Benjamin's deeply Marxian question is: how to conceive of the relationship of the *political presence* of class struggle and authentically *historical experience* without relying on a meta- or trans-historical standpoint. If past and present are not bound together in a linear and continuous way, but form an a-chronic constellation of *Jetztzeit*, "now-time", how are we to refrain from taking the oppressive perspective of world history as the teleology of the coming-to-itself of capital-history?<sup>2</sup> Or, to put it differently: how are we to historicize capitalism's own mode of historicization by constructing a *materialist concept of time*, which is based on a non-relativist, truly *universal concept of history* devoid of any falsely universal, teleological, or metaphysical concepts?<sup>3</sup>

### Marx, or the time of capital

In Marx, we can detect at least two dimensions of temporality: a homogeneous, cyclical, and ultimately 'time-less' time of capitalism and a disruptive, revolutionary opening-up of historical time. This duality is itself twofold: it can be addressed in terms of a historical process *within time*, that is to say, political struggles, social relations and dynamic productivity, as well as in terms of *time itself* as a repetitive time of capital. The same applies to the prognosticated end of capitalism: whereas for orthodox Marxism history was immanently driven by 'objective' historical forces towards its communist *telos* (the classless society) *within history*, or, rather, to end pre-history and to *enter history proper*, critical Marxism attempted an a-teleological, utopian or messianic blast of the horizon of *history itself*. To unravel these two aspects of historical temporality, I propose to differentiate between two levels of presentation: firstly, on the level of capitalism as a *social formation within history*; secondly, on the categorical level of capital as the production of *capitalism's own historical time*. The question, however, is: how do these two levels interact?

As a starting point, I take the basic nexus of time and society. If the proverbial saying 'time is money' is to be taken literally, we have to examine the temporal structure of capital accumulation and labour-power in their mutual interdependency. Capital, as Marx claimed, "is not a thing, but rather a definite social relation of production, belonging to a definite historical formation of society, which is presented by a thing and lends this thing a specific social character" (Marx, MEW 25: 822).<sup>4</sup> If capital is a historically specific relation of production, how can we conceive of the temporal structure of this relation? The movement of capital is defined as the self-valorization of value, the "substance" of which is formed by congealed, "abstract human labour". If the latter consists of condensed labour time

devoid of any specific quality or subjectivity, how can its temporality be measured? Is there a specific ‘time of capital’ beyond chronometric time? As a preliminary hypothesis, I take my cue from Heinz Dieter Kittsteiner’s Hegelian-Heideggerian definition of the time of capital: “The movement of the self-valorizing substance-subject temporalizes [*zeitigt*] the historical time of capital” (Kittsteiner 2004: 120).<sup>5</sup> In other words, the circular movement of capital produces an intrinsic “capital-time” which can not be registered by the extrinsic chronometric time measured by weeks, days, and hours. But how can capital as the “automatic subject” (Marx 1990: 255) proceed *in time* while producing its *own time*? – And furthermore, to what extent can we think of time as a social relation?

Unfolding this question, I argue that a materialist subtraction or de-potentialization of the capitalist *dynamis* cannot merely rely on traditional concepts of temporality such as absolute Newtonian, relativist Aristotelian, or transcendental Kantian time. Since orthodox Marxism was constructed along a scientific-economist concept of time broadly based on Newtonian physics and Aristotelian ontology, retrospectively it might not be surprising that its revolutionary thought remained within the boundaries of an objectivist linear, evolutionist or historicist framework. Walter Benjamin’s late Marxism might be one of the richest contributions to the question of how to blast open history without relying on metaphysics of history – be it historicism’s implicit reference to a historical ‘God’s-eye view’ or a teleological belief in historical progress.

### **Benjamin, or the messianicity of time**

In his thesis *On the Concept of History*, Benjamin rejected any evolutionist orientation towards futurity; instead, he called for a revolutionary “tiger’s leap into the past” based on a messianic standstill of history (Benjamin, SW 4: 395). Written in 1940, Benjamin’s theses were politically directed against vulgar-Marxism and its belief in historical progress that was irretrievably discredited after the Hitler-Stalin Pact in 1939. For Benjamin, however, the political miscalculations made by Western European socialist and communist parties were not only derived from tactical or strategic failures but also concerned their underlying historicist and progressive concepts of history. Consequently, Benjamin’s messianic Marxism tried to sketch a different concept of history and temporality. He called this alternative time *Jetztzeit* or “now-time”: a condensed or contracted time providing a model of fulfilled, messianic time as opposed to the repetitive, “homogenous, empty time” implied by vulgar-Marxist, historicist, or evolutionist historiography (SW 4: 395). In doing so, Benjamin enlists

theology, or, more precisely, the Judaist and early Christian motif of messianic time. But how are we to conceive of this theological allusion from a materialist point of view?

In an alternative version of thesis 17 *On the Concept of History*, Benjamin stated a stunning résumé summing up his political take on the relation of messianic thought and Marxism.

In the idea of classless society, Marx secularized the idea of messianic time. And that was a good thing. It was only when the Social Democrats elevated this idea to an ‘ideal’ that the trouble began. [...] Once the classless society had been defined as an infinite task, the empty and homogeneous time was transformed into an anteroom, so to speak, in which one could wait for the emergence of the revolutionary situation with more or less equanimity. In reality, there is not a moment that would not carry with it its revolutionary chance – provided only that it is defined in a specific way, namely as the chance for a completely new resolution of a completely new task (SW 4: 401f.).

As we shall later see, the historical horizon of this “infinite task” is precisely the spuriously infinite horizon of capital-time. Against the latter, Benjamin proposes a messianic politics of urgency opposed to neo-Kantian idealism as well as to any secular or religious versions of Social Democracy. Consequently, Benjamin’s take on the messianic idea is neither to be confused with a theological version of Marxism nor with a Marxist adaptation of political theology; rather, he attempts to conceive of a different historical temporality suspending any linear and progressive concepts of futurity. Paradoxically, for Benjamin *profane* history can only be truly *historical* insofar as it maintains standing in an antithetical, unresolvable, and uncompleted relation to the *messianic*. For “[o]nly the Messiah himself completes all history, in the sense that he alone redeems, completes, creates its relation to the Messianic” (SW 3: 305). This inaccessible relation (or *a*-relation) is not directed toward a utopian future but accounts for a certain constellation short-circuiting past and present as *Jetztzeit*.

This synchronistic short-circuit or, as Benjamin calls it, “actualization” (1999: 460), corresponds to a “*weak* messianic power” (SW 4: 390) of past generations striving for redemption. As Slavoj Žižek has argued, it is precisely this short-circuit by which Benjamin attempts to retroactively redeem the potentialities of past failed revolutions and to actualize the still insisting – however weak – claims of the ‘undead’ of history.<sup>6</sup> Therefore,

Benjamin's anti-historicist stance is not limited to an alternative historiography but aims at a radically new concept of history affecting the ontological status of the past happening. History is never completed or perfect, but radically *imperfect* and open to its retroactive modification.<sup>7</sup> The task of the historiographer, thus, ultimately coincides with the historical subject – both exposed to their unfulfilled past without being contemplatively separated from it. As a consequence, the critique of progress and the linear continuum is not limited to a critique of social democratic *ideology* but points to the *Realprozeß* of capital-history itself; that is to say, “homogenous, empty time” is not only a question of false historiography but also a question of a never closed or accomplished ontology of capital-time. For in capitalism, progressivist ideology has ultimately become part of reality.

### The aporia of time-as-measure

Already in Marx's *The Poverty of Philosophy* (1847), we can find a preliminary outline of what later might be called a Marxian theory of time: “Time is everything, man is nothing; he is, at the most, time's carcass. Quality no longer matters. Quantity alone decides everything; hour for hour, day for day [...].” (MEW 4: 86).<sup>8</sup> In capitalism, time appears as an alienating, negative principle systematically subordinating the human being under its laws. As a result of modern industry, man is abstracted from all of his generic faculties, abilities and potentialities and becomes the mere embodiment of an empty mechanical time. Marx's ‘humanist’ critique of time in terms of a homogeneous, quantitative and levelling principle can also be found in his later *Grundrisse* (1857) where he opposes the immanent limitations of capitalism to the “absolute working out of creative potentialities” (MEGA II.1: 392).<sup>9</sup> If in capitalist societies it is the “[e]conomy of time” to which “all economy ultimately reduces itself”, any attempt to change the mode of production must also change the constitution of time (MEGA II.1: 103f.).<sup>10</sup>

As Peter Osborne (2008) has shown, the difference between capitalism and communism is not only social but also temporal, that is the difference between homogeneous time (capitalism) and the absolute movement of becoming (communism).<sup>11</sup> This temporal difference, however, is itself socially produced and is not to be conflated with the categorical difference between quantity and quality. In contrast to the young Marx, the mature Marx of *Das Kapital* knows at least two temporal dimensions of capital. With the rise of capitalism, social relations become an embodiment of time – labour time – that is itself measured by time. Hence, time is not just a measure but expresses a social relation at once producing *and* limiting the

creative potentialities of human productivity. In other words, the time of capital is not merely quantitative but both quantitative *and* qualitative time and cannot be opposed symmetrically to the qualitative time of communism or free activity. To unravel this paradoxical temporality – time as measure (quantity) and time as a social relation (quality) – let us briefly turn to the temporal dimension of value.

### The temporal dimension of value

The commodity, as Marx defined it in *Das Kapital*, is the materialization or crystallization of a certain social substance, the value:

How, then, is the magnitude of this value to be measured? Plainly, by the quantity of the ‘value-creating substance’, the labour, contained in the article. The quantity of labour, however, is measured by its duration, and labour time in its turn finds its standard in weeks, days, and hours (1990: 129).<sup>12</sup>

Philosophically speaking, this definition of the value as being measured by time follows the Aristotelian concept of time. In his *Physics*, Aristotle defines time as the measure of movement and *vice versa*, movement as the measure of time:

Not only do we measure the movement by the time, but also the time by the movement, because they define each other. The time marks the movement, since it is its number, and the movement the time. We describe the time as much or little, measuring it by the movement, just as we know the number by what is numbered, e.g. the number of the horses by one horse as the unit (Aristotle, 220 b 15).

Hence if a thing is in time it will be measured by time. But time will measure what is moved and what is at rest, the one qua moved, the other qua at rest; for it will measure their motion and rest respectively (221 b 16).<sup>13</sup>

Thus, being *in* time is being measured by time. The expenditure of labour-power is in time; yet, this time is measured by labour’s expending movement. Following this reversible relation, Marx transposes the Aristotelian theory of time to the social domain: to the “value-creating substance”, which becomes the socio-temporal basic-unit allowing for the

measurability (quality) and countability (quantity) of the value. This basic-unit, however, is itself “made” of time – of social or ‘abstract labour-time’ which is not measurable in time; rather, it is the crystal of the totality of all socially expended labour measured by time. Unlike in Aristotle, however, abstract labour time cannot be measured by its “movement” (here: expenditure) but only retroactively by its results. These results are expressed in the register of the value since capital is indifferent to the “material” quality, the use-value dimension of the commodity.<sup>14</sup> In short, from an Aristotelian perspective, abstract labour time is not “in time.”

The paradox of the Marxian time-as-measure, hence, is the following: on the one hand, “socially necessary labour-time” (Marx, 1990: 129) implies an abstract measurement, since the very idea of a socially necessary time span is already an abstraction from the multitude of concrete labour-time the standard of which is chronometric time counted in “weeks, days, and hours.” On the other hand, it is abstract labour itself that produces this very standard allowing for quantifiable time-units. Put differently, the category of abstract labour already implies a social mode of “time-as-measure” which is not merely a concept applied to a given mode of production but the very *production* of this standard qua abstract labour time-unit. This temporal unit is not fixed or predetermined but a historical variable resulting from what Marx called the “struggle for a normal working day”.

What is a working day? [...] [T]he working day contains the full 24 hours, with the deduction of the few hours of rest without which labour-power is absolutely incapable of renewing its services. Hence, it is self-evident that the worker is nothing other than labour-power for the duration of his whole life, and that therefore all his disposable time is by nature and by right labour-time, to be devoted to the self-valorization of capital. [...] It is not the normal maintenance of labour-power which determines the limits of the working day here, but rather the greatest possible daily expenditure of labour-power, no matter how diseased, compulsory and painful it may be, which determines the limits of the workers’ period of rest (1990: 375f.).

Labour power, as the potentiality to create more value in a given time-period than necessary to reproduce it, is not a fixed parameter since its “greatest possible daily expenditure” is the historically flexible result of political struggles that have no absolute temporal measurement. With the increase of productivity, the value creating aspect of labour power – its use-value for capital – also changed. This *historical* change, however, cannot be

measured by an external standard of time but is itself the historically accelerating movement of this standard, the basic unit of which is the expenditure of abstract labour-time. Since there is no labour power as such – as generic quality or pure *potentia* or *dynamis* as post-Operatism would have it – abstract labour is at once effect and precondition of *historically* different levels of the productivity of labour power. Abstract labour as value is thus the bearer of an historical index that cannot be measured by chronometric time as external to the movement of the self-valorization of capital. Yet, the level of productivity can only be determined when abstract labour is already presupposed as the condition of the possibility of quanta of concrete labour.

To grasp the temporal paradox of the ‘auto-temporalizing’ movement of abstract labour as measurement (quantity) and social relation (quality), we firstly have to reject any essentialist, physiologist or empiricist interpretation of abstract labour as the “value creating substance”. Value is a social relation introducing a socio-temporal register that has a material objectivity [*Gegenständlichkeit*] but nonetheless cannot be reduced to the sensuous-empirical sphere. Marx’s term for this sensuous-supra-sensuous, “sinnlich-übersinnliche” (MEW 23: 85) materiality is the oxymoronic compound “Wertgegenständlichkeit” (MEW 23: 66), a term only imperfectly translated as the “objectivity of the value”.<sup>15</sup>

In contrast to the coarsely sensuous *Gegenständlichkeit* [objectivity, “thingish-ness”] of the commodity’s body, not one atom of matter enters into the *Wertgegenständlichkeit* [“value-objectivity”] of the commodity. We may twist and turn a single commodity as we wish; it remains impossible to grasp it as a thing possessing value. However, let us remember that commodities possess a *Wertgegenständlichkeit* only in so far as they are all expressions of an identical social unit, human labour, that their *Wertgegenständlichkeit* is therefore purely social. From this it follows self-evidently that it can only appear in the social relation between commodity and commodity (1990, 138f.).<sup>16</sup>

Therefore, abstract human labour, abstract labour, can neither be grasped in spatial terms of sensuous materiality (quanta of simple or average labour) nor in temporal terms of chronometric time (measured by weeks, days, and hours) but only as a *purely social relation* devoid of all empirical traces, exceeding the Kantian transcendental forms of intuition, time and space. It is this social relation, encompassing the totality of all expended abstract labour, that provides, in the first place, the “identical social unit”,



which allows for the commensurability of commodities. This social relation, however, can never appear 'as such'; it is always covered by empirical *Gegenstände*, objects. It is in this sense that in capitalism, objects become the "sachliche Hülle" (MEW 23: 105), objective shell of social relations, that is to say, of value.<sup>17</sup>

The spectral materiality of *Wertgegenständlichkeit*, "value-objectivity" always implies a transformation of social relations into a relation of things as their necessary semblance, form of appearance. In capitalist everyday-life, the only way to account for this *Wertgegenständlichkeit* is money in its threefold function as measurement, means of circulation, and capital. In order to determine the value of a commodity by referring to its value, money as the universal measurement has always already to be presupposed to allow for quantifiable social basic units of abstract labour. For money is the transcendental of "Warensprache" (MEW 23: 66), commodity-language, "that form which vouchsafes all other forms their [the commodities', S.K.] commensurability, appearing as a copula in all the statements and postulates of commodity-language" (Hamacher 1999: 174). Money is the necessary condition for the possibility of quantifiable relations of value and its "substance", that is abstract labour. As soon as money as the general equivalent comes into being, the socio-temporal transformation of concrete labour-time (measured by chronometric time) into abstract labour-time (implying the totality of all social relations in a given society) becomes possible. Money is the sensuous-supra-sensuous register that does not only account for this conversion but, at the same time, is its very condition.

### The historical time of capital

In light of the paradox of abstract labour-time and the temporal dimension of value, I propose to differentiate between an intrinsic "time of capital" and an extrinsic measurement of time that is the chronometric time of concrete labour as measured by clocks. The attributes of these different modes of time are antithetical: whereas the time of capital is contracted, congealed in its crystallized aggregation status as money or commodity, chronometric time provides a linear, continuous, homogenous time-scale which is historically experienced as an empty, mechanical, and abstract time providing the measurement of concrete labour. Following Moishe Postone's path breaking study *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*, I call the former the "historical" or concrete and the latter the "abstract" dimension of capitalist time (1993: 291ff.). Given this terminology, we have to be aware that the twofold character of abstract and concrete labour as mentioned on the level of the commodity form is not symmetrical to Postone's distinction between



abstract and historical time. Rather, their attributes form a chiasm: while historical time expresses the temporal dimension of abstract labour, abstract (chronometric) time functions as an absolute measurement of concrete labour. "Historical time", as Postone proceeds, "is not an abstract continuum within which events take place and whose flow is apparently independent of human activity; rather, it is the movement of *time*, as opposed to the movement *in time*" (1993: 294). In capitalist everyday life, however, the historical time of capital ("movement of *time*") and the abstract time of chronometric measurement ("movement *in time*") are intertwined – they depend on each other in a reciprocal manner which Postone calls a "*treadmill effect*" (1993: 289ff.). Whereas the historical time of capital is constituted by the historical standard of productivity in terms of more goods produced within a given time span, abstract time seems without any traces of historicity. However, according to Postone, "the interaction of two dimensions of the commodity form involves a substantive redetermination of an abstract temporal constant" (1993: 292). Within a given time span the increase in productivity results in shorter or "denser" units of abstract labour that retroactively re-constitute a new level of productivity. This new level of productivity or density in terms of abstract labour cannot be measured by abstract time.<sup>18</sup> Hence, the inner conjunction of historical and abstract time – its *treadmill effect* – resides in the fact that historical time expresses the movement of the entire abstract time scale or, as Postone put it: "The entire abstract temporal axis, or frame of reference, is moved with each socially general increase in productivity; both the social labor hour and the base level of productivity are moved 'forward in time'" (1993: 293). In this way, historical time is a function of abstract time retroactively changing the parameter of this function. Without going further into this inextricable interaction of the two temporal dimensions of the commodity form (abstract and historical time), I follow Postone's conclusion: "[t]hat this paradox cannot be resolved within the framework of abstract Newtonian time" (1993: 292). But how are we to conceive of this new "form of concrete temporality" (ibid.)?

In contrast to Postone, I argue that the temporal dimension of the value and thus the temporal structure of capital do not only transcend the framework of abstract Newtonian time but also the traditional Aristotelian concept of time. For Postone, historical time emerges from the permanent re-constitution of the historical level of productivity: "Hence, this movement of time is a function of the use value dimension of labour as it interacts with the value frame" (1993: 293). In other words, historical time becomes a function of space. This is precisely the underlying idea of the Aristotelian concept of time as mentioned before: "Time is a measure of motion and of

being moved" (220 b 33). Analogously, in Postone's definition of the historical level of productivity in capitalism, time functions as a relative measurement of spatial (commodities') movements, that is to say: concrete being-in-time is being measured by abstract time. As a result, Postone's "concreteness" of concrete temporality is only relatively achieved in spatial terms (i.e. more articles produced per unit of time). Ultimately, his attempt to rethink time in terms of a historical time remains within a traditional Aristotelian framework always already relying on the convertibility of space and time.

### **Repetition and spurious infinity**

If capital as the self-valorization of value is not a static situation but a dynamic process *in* time (quantity) and *of* time (quality), how are we to conceive of its paradoxical temporality in non-Aristotelian and non-Newtonian terms?

As other scholars have argued, the time of capital alludes to a cyclical time.<sup>19</sup> However, in contrast to a Nietzschean "eternal recurrence of the same," the circulation of capital is not cyclical in the strict sense. As Guy Debord's instructive term "pseudo-cyclical time" indicates, the repetitive time of capital is irreversibly directed to future circles of accumulation since every circle of valorisation requires – at least virtually – an externalization of capital into commodities and money (1994: 110).<sup>20</sup> Although capital seeks to minimize its time of circulation, it can never fully abolish the necessary metamorphosis of capital from one mode of its existence (money) into its other (commodity).<sup>21</sup> In doing so, the temporal index implied by capital circulation can never acquire a historical form proper since its pseudo cyclical movement lacks historical openness. Ultimately, the historical horizon of capital-time is what Hegel called "spurious infinity" – an infinite repetition of finite processes or entities. As Debord comments:

The time of production, time-as-commodity, is an infinite accumulation of equivalent intervals. It is irreversible time made abstract: each segment must demonstrate by the clock its purely quantitative equality with all other segments. This time manifests nothing in its effective reality aside from its *exchangeability* (1994: 110).

The infinite accumulation of equivalent intervals of time is spurious infinity precisely because it proceeds irreversibly and endlessly towards finite future accumulations. Time has become the equivalent and

exchangeable form of contingent events on a global scale – the temporal form of the world market. This empty temporality lacks historical openness since it ‘lacks’ the lack of linearity, that is to say, it does not allow for a temporal rupture or cut irreducible to equivalent intervals of exchangeable time units. In contrast to Debord, however, the time of capital is not only the irreversible time of production as *quantity* (accumulation, countability) but implies also the *quality* of commensurability (measurability) of this exchangeable time units. Paradoxically, in capital-time quantity and quality presuppose each other without forming a self-referencing cycle. Although Debord’s term “pseudo-cyclical time” already points to this strange peculiarity of capital-time, his theorization is limited to the everyday appearance of the time of capitalist production and, hence, does not face the paradoxical fact that capital-time has a twofold character allowing for both exchangeable units of time (concrete labour-time measured by chronometric time) *and* the quality of exchangeability itself, that is, the commensurability of different fragments of time (abstract labour time). This commensurability is guaranteed transcendently by the general equivalent of money and its threefold function as means of exchange, measure of values, and money as money (capital). Given this three functions, capital-time (“money-as-money”-time) presupposes money as an actual means of exchange, a measure of concrete labour (wage per time unit), and as the condition of the measurability of different commodities and labour powers. Whereas the chronometric aspect of *concrete labour* can be expressed quantitatively by money (wage) and time units (seconds, hours, weeks), the value aspect of the *expenditure of labour power*, that is *abstract labour*, introduces a temporal loop since abstract labour as value presupposes the money-form and, yet, can only be retroactively determined by means of a certain amount of money. Consequently, abstract labour time has no proper chronometric form; it rather expresses the historical movement of the entire time-scale of concrete labour and its historically specific levels of productivity. If we move from the level of presentation of value to capital, the temporal peculiarity of abstract labour time – as being congealed, curved, pseudo-repetitive, and, at the same time, homogeneous, linear, future-oriented – becomes even more striking.

Capital-time is insofar self-referential or cyclical as it requires money as its transcendental *condition* while, at the same time, producing this very condition as its own *result*. Even though money seems to be a mere sign, an abstraction from actual things, this nominal ‘thing’ has a material body: money appears as coins, notes, and other material representations. Moreover, as Marx succinctly put it, money ‘acts’ as if it had a *real* existence, even though it is an *abstract* concept. Explaining the peculiarities of the value-form, in the original 1867 edition of *Das Kapital* Marx employs a compelling

allegory he dropped in the later editions.

It is as if among and besides lions, tigers, hares, and all other real animals, which as classified groups constitute the various genera, species, subspecies, families etc. of the animal kingdom, there existed also *the animal*, the individual incarnation of the entire animal kingdom (MEGA, II.5: 37).<sup>22</sup>

Within the sphere of the value, thus, we are confronted with a fundamental paradox, an intertwining of nominalism and realism, that is to say, money is both a transcendental concept for value (a general equivalent *a priori*) and a commodity actually produced within the production sphere. This paradox cannot be solved on the basis of linear, chronometric (in Benjaminian terms: “homogeneous, empty”) time.

As Hegelian-Marxist scholars have argued, the Marxian concept of capital circulation resembles a Hegelian self-reflexive movement.<sup>23</sup> And indeed, within Marx’s logic of capital it seems that money has systematically replaced by the Hegelian *Begriff*, notion. Unlike a strictly Hegelian-Marxian reading would have it, the self-deployment of capital, however, never comes to itself. Although Marx called capital an “automatic subject” (Marx 1990: 255), the self-reflecting process of money-as-money is not structurally identical with the self-movement of the Hegelian *Begriff*. If we read Marx’s capital as an identical subject-object reflecting itself in its externalized moments of its self-movement, we miss one crucial feature of capital-time: in contrast to the Hegelian *Begriff*, capital never accomplishes its circulation and returns into itself as Žižek argues: “the point of Marx is that this movement never catches up with itself, that it never recovers its credit, that its resolution is postponed forever, that the crisis is its innermost constituent [...], which is why the movement is one of the ‘spurious infinity’, forever reproducing itself” (2006: 51). Credit funding, structural debt, and endless postponement of repayment are the parameters that curve, deform the full cycle of capital’s circulation leading into a movement of spurious infinity, in which capital and credit mutually presuppose each other without ever resolving their relation and catching up with each other.

Žižek’s reference to an spuriously infinite postponement points toward another strange peculiarity of capital: the dialectic of capital does not fall into historical time (like in Hegel); it rather seems that already capital’s dialectical movement contains an intrinsic contracted time exposed and post-poned to a future as spurious infinity of present time. Ultimately, the time of capital accounts for both a linear, “homogenous, empty time” and an abbreviated, curved time, which in Benjaminian terms might be called a

“time differential”.<sup>24</sup>

### Capital-time versus Jetztzeit

As I have argued capital-time is twofold: it proceeds in homogeneous, empty time measured chronometrically while producing its own non-linear or *historical* time. Given this twofold character, we are to refrain from opposing capital-time as merely quantitative to the qualitative free time of communism. With regard to the aporia of “time-as-measure”, the self-deployment of capital auto-temporalizes an endless repetition of commensurable time-units of abstract labour that cannot be measured by the standard of weeks, days, and hours. The historical dynamic of capital-time thus exceeds the linear-continuum since its value dimension implies a logical time – a *retroacting* and *anticipating* time. That is to say, value is formed by congealed or “dead” concrete labour time, which is, at the same time, retroactively determined by historically specific levels of productivity and oriented to future circles of accumulation.

In a polemical comment on Benjamin, Antonio Negri suggested that Benjamin’s *Jetztzeit* or now-time could provide a model to grasp the temporal peculiarity of capital.

Capital presents itself not only as measure and as system but also as *progress*. This definition is essential for its internal as well as external legitimization. From this perspective political economy is entirely directed towards drawing the *innovative element* that history – in any case – produces inside the time of administration (that is, the time of accumulation as administration, the reversible and cyclical time of the eternal return). *Jetztzeit*, innovative punctualness, utopia: capital considers them as its own. Progress is the eternal return lit up by the flash of a *Jetztzeit* (2003: 108).<sup>25</sup>

Before challenging this stunning misreading, Negri’s intuition is not as wrong as it seems at first sight. If one reduces capital-time to the merely “reversible and cyclical time of the eternal return”, one cannot conceive of innovation and progress. The systemic need for innovation is precisely what Benjamin called “the eternal recurrence of the new” the capitalist name of which is fashion (Benjamin, GS I: 677). If the orientation toward the new – new cycles of accumulation – is not only of ideological nature but inherent to the movement of capital itself: the prospect of higher levels of productivity in the future is always already part of the capitalist now. It is in this sense

that Negri is right to place the innovative element of capitalism *inside* the time of administration, that is, in Debord's terms not the reversible and cyclical but the *irreversible* and *pseudo-cyclical* time. The innovative element within capital accumulation alludes to the capitalist utopia of zero-time of production, of immediate productivity without externalized cycles of valorisation and metamorphoses of money into commodity. Negri, however, conflates the time of capital's utopia with Benjamin's *Jetztzeit* (now-time) obscuring not only the difference between the theologically charged idea of messianic time and secular visions of utopian time but also underestimating the temporal specificity of capital-time. Since the latter is not limited to "homogeneous, empty time" but carries with it a historical index that cannot appear on the level of concrete labour time, capital's own "historical time" (Postone), since the temporal dimension of value demands a different concept of time. Moreover, structurally not unlike Benjamin's kairological *Jetztzeit*, the historical time of capital consists of non-linear, disruptive short-circuits between historically different base levels of productivity. It is this ambiguous parallel that triggered Negri's misreading implicitly laying bare the twofold character of capital-time. Against Negri, we are to insist on a thin but crucial line of difference between capital-time and *Jetztzeit*: while Benjamin's *Jetztzeit* introduces a redemptive short-circuit between a certain fragment of the past and the now of political acting irreducible to "homogeneous, empty time" of official historiography, the now-time of capital cannot escape its measurement by abstract time. Moreover, capital-time structurally necessitates an endless repetition of its retroactive measurement – even though a final measurement is endlessly postponed. Against this form of spurious infinity, Benjamin called for a "messianic arrest of happening" (Benjamin, SW 4: 396) breaking off, interrupting, derailing the historical dynamic of the auto-temporalizing movement of capital-time.

In his reading of Negri, Cesare Casarino rightly criticized Negri for his "perverse reading" of Benjamin (2008: 227). Nevertheless, also Casarino finds a strong argument in Negri's parallelization of *Jetztzeit* and capital-time.

What Negri finds so pernicious about the *Jetztzeit* is that it transcendentalizes the plane of immanence constituted by time as productivity. The time of the now is zero time, that is, the negation of the real time of production. The problem faced by Benjamin was real enough: bourgeois historicism sublates time into the history of progress. The solution he found to this problem, however, backfired: in attempting to escape the history of progress, the *Jetztzeit* ends up escaping time



altogether. Benjamin's 'messianic arrest of happening' in the end turns out to be precisely that negation of time as productivity which capital itself – whether in its bourgeois or in its socialist forms – at once yearns for and can never accomplish. Now we can see that if the *Jetztzeit* is so co-optable, that is so because it has cut itself loose from the productive flux of becoming: once separated from its life supply, it becomes easy enough to reduce it to the abstract unit of time as measure and to put it in the service of the time of death (2008: 229).<sup>26</sup>

If the Benjaminian "now" marks the irreducibly contingent encounter of the true image of the past and the revolutionary chance of the struggling, oppressed class – which is, even for the late Benjamin, the proletariat<sup>27</sup> – the idea of messianic time concerns the temporal structure of authentic political action. In contrast to Negri and Casarino, however, Benjamin's *Jetztzeit* is not simply "zero time" or a "negation of time"; it does not simply transcendentalize the plane of immanence. Rather, messianic time, as Žižek claims, "is not another time beyond and above the 'normal' historical time, but a kind of inner loop within this time" (2003: 134). This inner loop within time allowing for *Jetztzeit* is not co-optable by capital-time precisely because Benjamin's *Jetztzeit* "has cut itself loose from the productive flux of becoming" (Casarino 2008: 229). *Jetztzeit* as Benjamin's profane "model of messianic time" (SW 4: 396) is not to be mistaken for a transcendent intrusion from 'outside' of our everyday world; rather, it demobilizes, derails the productive *dynamis* of capital-time from *within*. In other words, *Jetztzeit* designates a transcendent dimension within the immanence of capital-time – an inner loop that derails capital-time's trajectory. Nothing else is meant by Benjamin's famous metaphor of revolutions as the pulling of the emergency break. "Marx says that revolutions are the locomotive of world history. But perhaps it is quite otherwise. Perhaps revolutions are an attempt by the passengers on this train – namely, the human race – to activate the emergency brake" (SW 4: 402). The inner loop within capital-time giving us time to activate this break is neither representable by chronometric time nor by capitalism's own historical time; it cannot be pinned down by the temporal-spatial register of the instant-point and linear-continuum. The task of the Benjaminian "historical materialist" is thus to seize this inner loop within time, giving us time to free and retroactively redeem the contracted, congealed time encapsulated in capital-time. If the latter consists *not only* of accumulated chronometric homogeneous, empty time *but also* expresses the temporal dimension of value, that is, the non-linear, congealed 'abstract human labour time' spatialized and literally reified in the form of the

commodity, a materialist reading of messianic time is motivated by the temporal structure of capital itself.<sup>28</sup> On the one hand, Benjamin's messianic-materialist redemption of the past has to be strictly differentiated from the retroactive (and always postponed) measurement within the register of the value. On the other hand, however, the kairologically punctualizing *Jetztzeit* and the chronologically 'curved' capital-time (that is, abstract labour time 'thrown' into chronometric time while temporalizing its own historical time) are not to be conceived as non-dialectical oppositions belonging to heterogeneous spheres.

As Agamben has pointed out, the classic Greek distinction between *chronos* and *kairos* does not necessarily involve a categorical split between two radically different temporal orders. Even though the Greek understanding of *kairos* can be linked to the messianic idea in Judaism and to early Pauline Christianity, the specific temporal structure of messianic time cannot fully be understood in terms of binary attributes such as sequence-rupture, linear-curved, empty-full, abstract-concrete etc. Against a common understanding according to which "[k]airos and *chronos* are usually opposed to each other, as though they were qualitatively heterogeneous", Agamben argues that the *kairos* – the 'right' or 'opportune' moment indicating a time in between, a moment of an undetermined period of time in which something extraordinary happens – can also arise from chronological time (2005: 68). Moreover, the *kairos*, the instant in which the messianic "healing" happens, "is nothing else than seized *chronos*" (2005: 69). Hence, the kairological time, the time of the "Event" is not of a different quality opposed to mere chronological or "vulgar time" (Heidegger); rather, messianic time is a contracted and "enacted" chronological time. The messianic seizure of chronological time subtracts the "productive flux of becoming" from capital-time. It thereby designates a deactivating or inoperative 'operation' that cannot be translated into productive time at all. This irreducible difference is precisely what differentiates Benjamin's *Jetztzeit* from the perverse now-time of capital. For messianic time is nothing else than an inner loop of/within capital-time giving us time to subtract human labour from capital-time – to deactivate capital-time and ultimately to bring the latter to an end. This (in)operative ending of capital-time in terms of a classless society, however, "is not the final goal of historical progress but its frequent miscarried, ultimately [*endlich*] achieved interruption" (Benjamin, SW 4: 402).

**Sami R. Khatib** is a lecturer in Media and Cultural Theory at Freie Universität Berlin. In 2012, he handed in his doctoral dissertation on "'Teleology Without End'. Walter Benjamin's Dislocation of the Messianic."



He is currently working on a research project on 'messianic nihilism' and the Freudian notion of death-drive.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> This article is an ongoing work based on four papers presented at the "German Studies Association Annual Meeting" 2009, Washington D.C., the "Historical Materialism" conference 2009, London (UK), the "Spirit of Capital" conference 2011, New York City, and the "SSPT conference" 2011, Sussex (UK). I would like to thank Kieran Aarons, Cinzia Arruzza, Ali Alizadeh, Jacob Blumenfeld, Frank Engster, Andrew McGettigan, Alison Hugill, Blair Ogden, Moishe Postone, John Toews, Massimiliano Tomba, Alberto Toscano, and Chris Wright for their comments and critical remarks to earlier versions of this article.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Marx/Engels: "In der bisherigen Geschichte ist es allerdings ebensowohl eine empirische Tatsache, daß die einzelnen Individuen mit der Ausdehnung der Tätigkeit zur Weltgeschichtlichen immer mehr unter einer ihnen fremden Macht geknechtet worden sind (welchen Druck sie sich denn auch als Schikane des sogenannten Weltgeistes etc. vorstellten), einer Macht, die immer massenhafter geworden ist und sich in letzter Instanz als Weltmarkt ausweist." (Marx/Engels, MEW 3: 37.) "In history up to the present it is certainly an empirical fact that separate individuals have, with the broadening of their activity into world-historical activity, become more and more enslaved under a power alien to them (a pressure which they have conceived of as a dirty trick on the part of the so-called universal spirit, etc.), a power which has become more and more enormous and, in the last instance, turns out to be the world market." The English translation of Marx's and Engels's *German Ideology* is taken from the online source <[www.marxists.org](http://www.marxists.org)>, transcription: Tim Delaney, Bob Schwartz.

<sup>3</sup> In the *Grundrisse*, Marx highlights this methodological problem when he discusses at the teleological effect of linear historiography: "Die sogenannte historische Entwicklung beruht überhaupt darauf, daß die letzte Form die vergangnen als Stufen zu sich selbst betrachtet und, da sie selten und nur unter ganz bestimmten Bedingungen fähig ist, sich selbst zu kritisieren [...] sie immer einseitig auffaßt" (MEGA II.1: 40f.). "The so-called historical presentation of development is founded, as a rule, on the fact that the latest form regards the previous ones as steps leading up to itself, and, since it is only rarely and only under quite specific conditions able to criticize itself [...] it always conceives them one-sidedly." If not otherwise indicated, the

English translation of the *Grundrisse* is taken from the Penguin edition, transl. Martin Nicolaus, London 1973.

<sup>4</sup> Translation mine. Cf. Marx: “Aber das Kapital ist kein Ding, sondern ein bestimmtes, gesellschaftliches, einer bestimmten historischen Gesellschaftsformation angehöriges Produktionsverhältnis, das sich an einem Ding darstellt und diesem Ding einen spezifischen gesellschaftlichen Charakter gibt” (MEW 25: 822).

<sup>5</sup> Translation mine.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Žižek: “[W]hat specifies his historical materialism – in contrast to the Marxist doxa according to which we must grasp events in the totality of their interconnections and their dialectical movement – is its capacity to *arrest*, to *immobilize* historical movement and to *isolate* the detail from its historical totality. In this very crystallization, this ‘congelation’ of the movement in a monad, which announces the moment of appropriation of the past: the monad is an actual moment which conceives itself as a repetition of past failed situations, as their retroactive ‘redemption’ through the success of its own exploit” (1989: 139).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Benjamin’s note in the *Arcades Project*, Konvolute N 8,1: “What science has ‘determined’, remembrance can modify. Such remembrance [*Eingedenken*] can complete what is incomplete (happiness) and make incomplete what is complete (suffering). This is theology; but the experience of remembrance forbids us to grasp history in fundamentally atheological categories, however little we may [*dürfen*] try to write it in directly theological terms” (1999: 471).

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Marx: “Die Zeit ist alles, der Mensch ist nichts mehr, er ist höchstens noch die Verkörperung der Zeit. Es handelt sich nicht mehr um die Qualität. Die Quantität allein entscheidet alles: Stunde gegen Stunde, Tag gegen Tag [...]” (MEW 4: 86). The English translation of Marx’s *The Poverty of Philosophy* is taken from the online source <[www.marxists.org](http://www.marxists.org)>, translated from the French by the Institute of Marxism Leninism, 1955.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Marx: “In fact aber, wenn die bornirte bürgerliche Form abgestreift wird, was ist der Reichthum anders, als die im universellen Austausch erzeugte Universalität der Bedürfnisse, Fähigkeiten, Genüsse, Productivkräfte etc der Individuen? Die volle Entwicklung der menschlichen Herrschaft über die Naturkräfte, die der s. g. Natur sowohl, wie seiner

eigenen Natur? Das absolute Herausarbeiten seiner schöpferischen Anlagen, ohne andre Voraussetzung als die vorhergegangne historische Entwicklung, die diese Totalität der Entwicklung, d. h. der Entwicklung aller menschlichen Kräfte als solcher, nicht gemessen an einem vorhergegebenen Maaßstab, zum Selbstzweck macht?" (Marx, MEGA II.1: 392).

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Marx: "Oekonomie der Zeit, darin löst sich schließlich alle Oekonomie auf" (MEGA II.1: 103f.).

<sup>11</sup> Osborne suggests a binary structure of 'good' and 'bad' time within Marx's philosophy of time based on the socio-political antitheses of wage labour versus free activity, alienation versus appropriation, and value versus wealth (2008: 17).

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Marx: "Wie nun die Größe seines Werts messen? Durch das Quantum der in ihm enthaltenen 'wertbildenden Substanz', der Arbeit. Die Quantität der Arbeit selbst mißt sich an ihrer Zeitdauer, und die Arbeitszeit besitzt wieder ihren Maßstab an bestimmten Zeiteilen, wie Stunde, Tag usw" (MEW 23: 53).

<sup>13</sup> English translation is taken from the edition *Complete Works of Aristotle* (1991) ed. Jonathan Barnes, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

<sup>14</sup> By "material" I mean a material or immaterial commodity resulting from the expenditure of labour. The commodity-form of these results is not depending on their materiality or persistence in time. That is to say, a commodity which is not resulting in a stable object but is immediately consumed during the expenditure of labour (e.g. service industries) can nevertheless be a commodity in the strict sense of being one form of existence of capital. At this stage, I do not follow Marx's distinction between "productive and non-productive labour" as stated in *Resultate des unmittelbaren Produktionsprozesses* (MEGA II.4.1: 108ff.; resp. pp. 115-116).

<sup>15</sup> In post-structuralist terms, one could call the register of the value a *sensuous-supra-sensuous* sphere introducing a third register "between" the register of the "real" (the site of ontology of capital as a social relation) and the register of the "imaginary" (the site of the critique of ideology). The "symbolic" register of the value could then be conceived of as "commodity language" (Marx, MEW 23: 66).

<sup>16</sup> Translation modified; cf. Marx: "Im graden Gegenteil zur sinnlich groben

Gegenständlichkeit der Warenkörper geht kein Atom Naturstoff in ihre Wertgegenständlichkeit ein. Man mag daher eine einzelne Ware drehen und wenden, wie man will, sie bleibt unfafßbar als Wertding. Erinnern wir uns jedoch, daß die Waren nur Wertgegenständlichkeit besitzen, sofern sie Ausdrücke derselben gesellschaftlichen Einheit, menschlicher Arbeit, sind, daß ihre Wertgegenständlichkeit also rein gesellschaftlich ist, so versteht sich auch von selbst, daß sie nur im gesellschaftlichen Verhältnis von Ware zu Ware erscheinen kann" (MEW 23: 62).

<sup>17</sup> It should be clear that abstract labour as the substance of value *is* this social relation; there is no other material substance other than this relation.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Postone: "In Capital Marx roots capitalism's historical dynamic ultimately in the double character of the commodity and, hence, capital. The treadmill dynamic that I have outlined is at the heart of this dynamic. It cannot be grasped if the category of surplus-value is understood only as a category of exploitation— as surplus-value – and not also as surplus-value— as the surplus of a temporal form of wealth. The temporality of this dynamic is not only abstract. Although changes in productivity, in the use-value dimension, do not change the amount of value produced per unit time, they do change the determination of what counts as a given unit of time. The unit of (abstract) time remains constant – and, yet, it is pushed forward, as it were, in (historical) time. The movement here is not the movement in (abstract) time, but the movement of time. Both abstract time and historical time are constituted historically as structures of domination" (2009: 42).

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Lyotard, 1973; Assoun, 1999; Löschenkohl, 2008.

<sup>20</sup> Debord differentiates between the "cyclical time" of ancient and feudal societies and the "pseudo-cyclical time" of capitalism (1994: 92-117).

<sup>21</sup> Although today's stock market transactions are highly automatized by means of computer-to-computer communication, a minimal temporal delay between buying and selling yet remains. Latest up-to-date communication technology seeks to limit these delays toward the absolute speed of today's light-wave cable technology: the speed of light. Nevertheless, the separate transactions of selling and buying, be it M-M, C-M, or M-C, can never be identical by definition. Without this necessary circulation (and its temporal delay – as minimal as it may be) the commodity-form cannot be maintained.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Marx: "Es ist als ob neben und außer Löwen, Tigern, Hasen und allen

ändern wirklichen Thieren, die gruppirt die verschiedenen Geschlechter, Arten, Unterarten, Familien u. s. w. des Thierreichs bilden, auch noch *das Thier* existirte, die individuelle Incarnation des ganzen Thierreichs“ (MEGA II.5: 37). Translation mine.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Reichelt, 1970.

<sup>24</sup> Benjamin's idea of the "dialectical image" and its "time differential" could provide a model of how to conceive of the inner structure of capital-time and its dialectics. In his first sketches of the *Arcades Project* Benjamin notes: "On the dialectical image. In it lies [steckt] time. Already with Hegel, time enters into dialectic. But the Hegelian dialectic knows time solely as the properly historical, if not psychological, time of thinking. The time differential [Zeitdifferential] in which alone the dialectical image is real is still unknown to him. [...] Real time enters the dialectical image not in natural magnitude – let alone psychologically – but in its smallest *gestalt*" (Benjamin 1999: 867). Reading Marx with Benjamin, the self-movement of capital could be conceived of as a capitalist "dialectical image" containing an abbreviated time structurally identical to what we previously called "abstract labour time."

<sup>25</sup> Translation modified.

<sup>26</sup> Translation of Casarino's Benjamin quote modified.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. the paralipomena to Benjamin's *On the Concept of History*: "A genuinely messianic face must be restored to the concept of classless society and, to be sure, in the interest of furthering the revolutionary politics of the proletariat itself" (SW 4: 403).

<sup>28</sup> In a stunning article on the messianism of commodity language, Werner Hamacher elaborated this parallel further. In short, it is capitalism and its "commodity language" (Marx, MEW 23: 66) itself that produces an immanently messianic promise – a promise that is already at work on the categorical level of the *quidproquo* of the form of value. "The commodity cloth not only speaks, it promises (itself) something else, and it is its promise of something else: as a phenomenon it is, like every phenomenon and every possible and real world, spectrally and henceforth messianically constituted" (Hamacher 1999: 170). Marx's famous idea of a "Reich der Freiheit" (MEW 25: 828), a realm of freedom is thus derived from commodity's own promise to finally overcome labour and to turn human existence into an immediately

productive activity. As Hamacher comments on Marx's promise of a realm of freedom beyond the realm of necessity: "But doesn't this promise necessarily remain the promise of capital, of self-capitalizing and abstract labor, the promise that labor itself is capital, a selfproducing and self-reproducing substance?" (1990: 179). Without answering this question, one can also turn Hamacher's argument upside down and ask whether the messianic structure of commodity language is precisely the reason why a messianic 'derailing' of capital-time has to find its grounds *within* the temporal structure of capital itself.

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# Through the Eyes of Habermas: The Heritage of Liberalism and Deliberative Politics

by Stephanie Morrow

## Abstract

Liberalism is a recognized term in the United States, yet it is somewhat misunderstood. In the most recent elections, the term has been equated to negative connotations of politicians who want to raise taxes and increase the size of government using a socialist agenda in order to control our individual rights and freedoms. This paper analyzes the liberal tradition to establish whether this political view has always been regarded negatively and if today's interpretation of liberalism coincides with the term's heritage. This analysis uses the political theories of Jürgen Habermas as a basis for this study, and details how his research has exposed the weaknesses of liberalism and, in turn, developed an alternative identified as deliberative politics. By analyzing the heritage of liberalism and comparing it to Habermas's deliberative politics, this paper argues that what the public interprets as liberal does not reflect the original form of the political term or Habermas's clarifications of this term. In addition, similarities are reviewed between today's forms of liberalism, republicanism, and Habermas's deliberative politics, and why Habermas's third form of democracy should be incorporated into America's political system.

On December 7, 2010, President Barack Obama urged liberal Democrats to compromise with Republicans and continue the tax cuts, originally intended for the wealthiest Americans, which were initiated by President George W. Bush. President Obama called the liberal critics of the tax cuts "sanctimonious," dismissed his party's views against the tax cuts as unrealistic, and threatened that, if compromise was not instituted, "we will never get anything done" (Bacon & Wilson, 2010: ¶ 2). President Obama's actions have led to many liberal journalists and groups to question whether



the president, who has been characterized as liberal by his Republican opponents, is selling out the liberals who originally elected him (Stone, 2010). For example, liberal economist Paul Krugman (2010) wrote a column in the *New York Times* entitled "Let's Not Make a Deal" in which he said the president was giving in to Republican "blackmail" and if he "will endanger America's fiscal future to avoid a tax increase, what will he give to avoid a government shutdown?" (27). If liberal Democrats do not find the president's governing effective, and Republicans continue to be disappointed, a third form of democracy is needed to be theorized and then put into practice in order to effectively run America's government and avoid the dreaded gridlock that is impending in Congress.

The term liberal has been equated with President Obama since he first ran for the Oval Office. During the 2008 presidential campaign, his Republican rival, Senator John McCain, was quoted in a speech as stating that "in just a few years in office, Sen. Obama has accumulated the most liberal voting record in the Senate" (Adair, 2008: ¶ 1). Senator McCain made numerous attempts during the 2008 presidential campaign to equate Obama's liberal personification to higher taxation and a larger government. In fact, linguists who examine political rhetoric have acknowledged that because Republicans have been so successful at giving the word liberal a negative connotation, many Democrats refuse to call themselves liberals and are instead referring to themselves as progressives (Politico.com, n.d.).

The liberal and republican traditions are recognized throughout the United States, yet the basis of these terms, particularly liberalism, is somewhat misunderstood. This paper will analyze liberalism to establish whether it has always been regarded negatively and if today's interpretation of liberalism coincides with the term's heritage. Following a brief historical overview of liberalism, this analysis will incorporate the political ideals of Jürgen Habermas and how his research has exposed the weaknesses of liberalism and, in turn, developed an alternative identified as deliberative politics. Deliberative politics has been debated as an alternative to liberal and republican politics for years, and the most influential critic of liberalism and supporter of deliberative politics is Habermas (Maffettone, 2000).

By analyzing the heritage of liberalism and comparing it to Habermas's deliberative politics, this paper will argue that what the public interprets as liberal does not reflect the original form of the political term or Habermas's clarifications of this term. In addition, similarities will be reviewed between today's forms of liberalism, republicanism, and Habermas's deliberative politics, and why this third form of democracy should be incorporated into America's political system.

## Liberalism – A Historical Perspective

When one views the media, the term liberalism is under constant attack, and a viewer may be prone to accept the description of being a liberal as a connotation for a politician known as a “bleeding-heart liberal” or “pointy-headed liberal” (Michelman, 1989: 445). Proponents of deliberative politics, including Josh Cohen, Dennis Thompson and Amy Gutmann (see J. Cohen, ‘Deliberation and Democratic Legitimacy’ in A. Hamlin and P. Pettit [eds] *The Good Polity* [1989], and A. Gutmann & D. Thompson, *Democracy and Disagreement* [1996]), have found deliberative politics to be a more practical vision of democracy than liberalism (Maffettone, 2000). However, no one has assessed the importance of political deliberation as well as Habermas.

One of the most prolific theorists of our time who has significantly influenced the fields of communications, sociology, philosophy, linguistics, and political science, Habermas's (1998) view on liberalism was that it originally “invoked the danger of tyrannical majorities and postulated the priority of human rights” (258). These human rights are free and equal to all; it morally satisfies an open and equal system, which allows for respect and consideration for all individuals, while ethically allowing individuals the right to live their own life according to their own preferences and beliefs (Habermas, 2005b).

With a foundation that dates back to philosopher John Locke, liberalism stresses the protection of each individual's personal freedom and an impersonal rule of law (Habermas, 1996). Originally serving as a guide to social policy in England and the United States in the eighteenth century, liberalism's basis was to create prosperity that benefits all, not only a select class of privileged citizens (Mises, 1985). On the surface, this interpretation of liberalism seems to be a utopian society in which everyone can live their life without worrying about the persecution of a meddling government. However, the liberal view, according to Habermas (1998), only ensures that the democratic process occurs solely in “the form of compromises between competing interests” (246). Liberalism's democratic process is limited by an individual's personal rights, and the role of politics in the liberal view is to program the state in the interest of society, as an apparatus of public administration, and “society is conceived as a system of market-structured interactions of private persons and their labor” (Habermas, 1998: 239). This model is concerned with a citizen's individual rights, and individuals have the freedom to pursue his or her goals as he or she sees fit without the interference of government (Habermas, 1996). In addition, politics is viewed as a market, and individual rights are negative rights that cannot be taken away from private citizens (Habermas, 2006).

This basis of classical liberalism is contradictory to the characterizations Republicans use to fault liberals today; a bigger government with a socialist agenda that controls our individual rights and freedoms. The media has also perpetuated these views that liberalism equates to a bigger, more controlling government. For example, a *New York Times* article stated that

Over the past 50 years, we've been having a big debate over two rival economic systems. Conservatives have tended to favor the American model, with smaller government and lower taxes, but less social support. Liberals have supported programs that lead to the European model, with bigger government, more generous support and less inequality. (Brooks, 2005: 19)

Although this does reference liberalism's stance on equality for all, the stereotype of a larger government that favors the European model of governing still holds true in the media's eyes. Jonathan Chait, senior editor of *The New Republic*, explained his views of liberalism versus conservatism a bit differently, stating that liberals only look to grow government if it is in the best interest of the citizens of the United States:

We're accustomed to thinking of liberalism and conservatism as parallel ideologies, with conservatives preferring less government and liberals preferring more. The equivalency breaks down, though, when you consider that liberals never claim that increasing the size of government is an end in itself. Liberals only support larger government if they have some reason to believe that it will lead to material improvement in people's lives. (2005: ¶ 5)

These are just two examples of how the media maintains this stereotypical view that liberalism equates to bigger government, yet Habermas clearly states that liberalism upholds a belief that human rights should provide "legitimate barriers that prevented the sovereign will of the people from encroaching on inviolable spheres of individual freedom" (Habermas, 1998: 258-259). The liberal view, according to Habermas, maintains that an individual's status is determined by his or her individual rights and, as the possessor of these rights, an individual is free to pursue his or her private interests without a fear of government interference. Through the electing of government officials, private citizens have the ability to determine whether or not the government is exercising its authority in the interest of its citizens (Habermas, 1998).

Law and legal order are also determined in terms of individual rights in the liberal view; “the point of a legal order is to make it possible to determine which individuals in each case are entitled to which rights” (Habermas, 1998: 242). While the republican concept of law considers, not only the individual, but also the community and the common good, liberalism upholds an interest-centered construction that allows for higher-law rights that “provide the transactional structures and the curbs on power required so that pluralistic pursuit of diverse and conflicting interests may proceed as satisfactorily as possible” (Michelman, 1989: 446-447). The political process amounts to simply a measurement of how satisfied individuals are with what they are getting from the administration; politicians are elected to administer programs that benefit individuals, and their success is measured by whether or not they are voted to stay in office (Habermas, 1998). In addition, the generality of laws is meant to express the equality of all individuals and guarantee that every citizen is able to live and pursue his or her life according to his or her personal beliefs.

However, Habermas finds the “equal interest of all” (Habermas, 2005b: 1) aspect of liberalism problematic. Because liberalism promotes a self-centered, idiosyncratic interpretation of individual rights, it fails to unite citizens as members of the political community who can play an integral role in democracy. Habermas (2006) reiterates this fact when comparing the liberal tradition to the republican and deliberative traditions; the liberal tradition favors the liberties of private citizens, whereas the republican and deliberative traditions emphasize the importance of citizens’ political participation and the creation of public opinions. However, the republican tradition only welcomes the political participation of a sequestered group of individuals. Habermas, therefore, introduces a third option of democracy, deliberative politics, which stresses the development of public opinions stemming from rationalization to acquire reasonable outcomes (Habermas, 1996).

### **Political Success Through Deliberative Politics**

In *The Inclusion of the Other: Studies in Political Theory*, Habermas introduces liberalism, republicanism, and deliberative politics as the three normative models of democracy, and justifies the need for deliberative politics beyond liberalism and republicanism (Habermas, 1998). While liberalism is based on interest-group democracy and republicanism calls for an ethically-based dialogic democracy, Habermas’s form of deliberative politics is a balance of liberal and republican traditions that also ensures the formation of a variety of carefully pondered and reasoned public opinions

that influence political decision-making and policy (Habermas, 2006). Habermas's deliberative politics ensures that politics is more than liberalism's minimal government that is limited to maintaining a market economy under law and ignores public deliberation, yet is less than the republican model's restriction of having only an ethically uniform society involved in collective participation (Habermas, 1996). For successful deliberation in modern democracy, three elements must be brought together, according to Habermas:

first, the private autonomy of citizens, each of whom pursues a life of his or her own; second, democratic citizenship, that is, the inclusion of free and equal citizens in the political community; and third, the independence of a public sphere that operates as an intermediary system between state and society. (2006: 412)

#### *Deliberative Politics versus Liberalism: Private Autonomy of Citizens*

For successful deliberation in modern democracy, Habermas's deliberative politics is similar to liberalism in that it requires the private independence of all citizens, who have the ability to pursue life as they see fit. Each member of civil society is guaranteed equal protection through the legal system, including the same basic liberties and an independent court system that is accessible to everyone and protects all citizens equally. In addition, the powers of government are divided between the three branches of government – the legislative, judicial, and executive branches – so that public administration is tied to law (Habermas, 2006).

Liberalism's foundation that the collective must respect individual citizens' liberties and equalities is supported through communicative action. The fundamental position in liberalism that is similar to deliberative politics is that "communicative action is an intractable part, arguably a foundational part, of our present, historical nature as persons. Communicative action is central to our identities, as well as to deliberative politics" (Baker, 1989: 514). An individual can engage in communicative action while not denying his or her pursuit of private interests, necessitating a political system that is deliberative and constitutive (Baker, 1989).

The liberal view of politics entails that the process of will-formation has the sole function of "*legitimizing* the exercise of political power" (Habermas, 1994: 8, emphasis in the original). This is accomplished through elections, in which the government must substantiate the use of its power to the public (Habermas, 1994). Similar to this liberal view, the discursive process of opinion and will-formation is essential to Habermas's discourse

theory of democracy and focuses on the importance of political legitimation (Habermas, 1998). Although the state, as a political system, has the ultimate power to make decisions and act accordingly through the creation of law, "its action is legitimate only if the formal decision-making procedures within the constitutional state have a discursive character that preserves, under conditions of complexity, the democratic sources of legitimacy in the public at large" (Habermas, 1996: xxxi).

Although both liberal and deliberative politics support legitimation, a legitimating authority can only occur when the democratic process is based on a rational acceptability of law from citizens. Politicians must recognize that legitimation occurs when the government listens to the people so that laws are made as a result of well-informed deliberations between individuals who are invested in the political welfare of society. Therefore, a deliberative process that allows for the political participation of citizens is required to generate a true and valid legitimacy within a civil society (Habermas, 2005a).

### *Deliberative Politics versus Republicanism: Participation in the Political Community*

Deliberative politics is similar to the republican view, as they both stress the importance of citizens being active in political participation; citizens do not just contemplate their own individual liberties as in the liberal view. "Human freedom has its summit not in the pursuit of private preferences but in self-governance through political participation" (Habermas, 1996: xxv). Although the republican approach views deliberation as collective, the democratic process takes the form of ethical discourse, which leads citizens to reach agreement that benefits the common good of those who share the same ethical views (Habermas, 1998). Political rights in the republican view are positive liberties, and the republican model constitutes politics as dialogue and as a representative form of ethical life. Although Habermas is essentially reworking Hegel's *Sittlichkeit*, which positions ethical theory as an universal understanding of human good that is established in human self-understanding in family, civil society, and the state (Luther, 2009), Habermas expands this notion in that social pressures to abide by these agreed upon ethics is administered by law, although this ethical life appears to be natural (Habermas, 1998).

Both republicanism and deliberative politics encourage the political participation of as many interested citizens as possible (Habermas, 2006). However, even though republicanism does encourage participation, it also excludes those from whom intelligent participation may be deemed as unlikely by an ethically prominent group of individuals. The tradition of republicanism was originally dependent on "slaves or noncitizen workers



and embodied complicated hierarchical arrangements of 'estates'" (Baker, 1989: 504), and today these repressive forms of republicanism limit the rights of certain groups and enforce the ethics and beliefs of others by rejecting legislation that does not adhere to those said groups' ethical standards (Baker, 1989).

According to Habermas, through the republican model, societies would operate through a shared way of life; however, each individual does not share the same religious, spiritual, political and ethical beliefs. For example, individuals with conflicting religions and beliefs must reach agreement and overcome limitations concerning the freedom to practice one's religions and the freedom to not be inundated by the religious practices of others (Habermas, 2005c). Tolerance of one another's diverse ethical and religious views is also imperative if decisions are going to be made in politics. Therefore, an inclusive deliberation process is needed that embraces the participation of all who are apprised of society's political problems and are interested in rational conversation. Deliberative politics recognizes that each citizen may not share the same values, but through verbal communication agreements can be reached that encourage reasonable outcomes and mutual understanding, and the political community should include free and equal citizens who are willing to participate in the democratic process.

Deliberative politics requires public argument and reasoning among individuals, and the participants direct their arguments, not at one another, but toward an outcome of arriving at a reasonable solution (Maffettone, 2000). "The deliberative attitude aims not at dissolution of difference but at conciliation within reason" (Michelman, 1989: 447). Habermas perceives the deliberative process as citizens using deliberation to find solutions to political problems through reasoning and cognitive thinking, in lieu of the liberal view of only considering the private citizen or the republican view of benefiting an ethically-unified nation (Habermas, 2006).

While liberalism centers upon individual needs and republicanism focuses on groups with the same ethical base, deliberative politics is essential for all individuals of different beliefs to be properly represented in the United States through deliberation and reasoning. Political deliberation serves numerous purposes, including the shaping of opinions and will-formation in a public sphere (Habermas, 2005a). However, the liberal view of opinion and will-formation in the public sphere entails individuals who are fighting to maintain their positions of administrative power, and the republican view sees political opinion and will-formation in the public sphere as "obstinate structures of a public communication oriented to mutual understanding" (Habermas, 1998: 243). Deliberative politics is needed to ensure that political deliberations of opinion and will-formation



are between citizens within an informal public sphere, and between politicians and other representatives who enact law in a formal setting (Habermas, 2005a).

### *Where Does Deliberation Occur? The Public Sphere*

The public sphere has been treated in a variety of ways; Hauser (1998) has said the public sphere is a model that is formed around the dialogue and specific issues, not the participants, while Negt and Kluge (1993) have argued that the public sphere represents the working class and production. No matter how the public sphere has been represented by theorists, it was of little interest to researchers until Habermas embarked upon the topic in 1962 when *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* was first published in German and later published in English in 1989 (Delanty, 2007).

A successful democratic system guarantees a political public sphere that allows the free flow of public opinions through the separation of a tax-based state and market-based society (Habermas, 2006). As in the liberal model of democracy, the separation of state and society is recognized. However, individuals arrive at reasonable outcomes through communication and dialogue, and this occurs through deliberation in the political public sphere. The public aspect of this argument is not only a physical place in which people gather and deliberate; it is a category of publicness in which political information is disseminated, relevant issues are filtered, and individuals can make reasonable decisions that influence public policy (Habermas, 1998).

Before the public sphere assumed the political functions that shape political policy today, it originated in the more intimate domain of the family. A representative publicness developed in the Middle Ages, stemming from Greek and Roman origins in which it was common for the free citizens to commune in the polis, which was where political life existed. The citizens developed a social status in this polis based on their role as head of their oikos, or household. "Status in the polis was therefore based upon status as the unlimited master of an oikos" (Habermas, 1991: 3).

In this early form of a public sphere, citizens were able to discuss issues of importance as long as they met the status criteria worthy to enter this sphere; that is, they were males who owned property and were educated, and the categories of public and private began to take shape. Publicity was the act of making things public, and this act established a contrast of public versus private that "was passed on in the definitions of Roman law" (Habermas, 1991: 3). This early form of the public sphere

reflects the conditions of Habermas's present political public sphere, which is a category of thought that individuals use to analyze the world around them, and where citizens are free to deliberate with the intention of influencing political decision-makers. It allows for a place in which civil society advances political will-formation through open, reasonable discussion, and this reasonable discussion implements informal public opinion, which creates an influential form of communicative power (Habermas, 1994). When the state interacts with its social environments through the political public sphere, it fulfills a democratic function for society by providing a means of communication that connects the public sphere to a civil society and incorporates individuals who have the ability to identify important social issues (Habermas, 1998). A diverse group of individuals are represented in this public sphere and discussions center on the benefit of all of these individuals through deliberation and reasoning, unlike the individualistic-based liberalism or ethically-based republicanism.

The public sphere comprises numerous groups that respond to political problems that affect society and then encourage public opinions that influence political change. Even though this public opinion cannot change law on its own, it does become communicative power that can influence the administrative powers that have the ability to change law in the best interest of society (Habermas, 1994). The participants who play a pivotal role in the flow of communication within the public sphere include lobbyists, special interest groups, politicians, advocates, and the media. Habermas's public sphere is based on rational discussions amongst private citizens and these groups, and these discussions need to be of a certain kind of quality that generates truth that is representative of an entire community. Those within the community are free to discuss and identify societal problems, and then publicize these problems in such a way that the discussions affect political action.

The public sphere is also a link between the state and civil society, in which relevant issues are assembled and organized so that individuals can make informed public opinions. Public opinion is constructed by journalists, politicians, political parties, lobbyists, special interest groups, and advocates, and these public opinions are then fed into the public sphere; therefore, this political public sphere ensures "the formation of a plurality of considered public opinions" (Habermas, 1996: 416).

Habermas's model of deliberative politics is imperative in today's political public sphere. Individuals deliberate to attain reasonable outcomes to political problems, and these reasonable outcomes are based on the assumption that relevant topics are assembled, critically evaluated, and resolved with a rational yes or no response. Deliberation within the public

sphere will help filter the messages received from different politicians and groups and, essentially, places the relevant issues into the forefront for individuals to process and make informative decisions (Habermas, 2006). For example, a dependable mass media that responsibly reports social issues and allows these social concerns to be placed on the agenda of those within the political system is imperative for a public sphere to successfully fulfill its democratic function (Habermas, 1996). Habermas finds this role the media plays in the public sphere to be significant, not only because the media is the gateway to sending and receiving political information, but because a manipulative media will weaken the political public sphere. "In the realm of the mass media, of course, publicity has changed its meaning. Originally a function of public opinion, it has become an attribute of whatever attracts public opinion" (Habermas, 1991: 2)

The public sphere lies at the edge of the political system and is "rooted in networks for wild flows of messages" (Habermas, 2006: 415). These messages, which come across as political public opinion, may come from political commentaries, news programs or even television shows or films. Politicians are the coauthors and addressees of these public opinions, while lobbyists, advocates, experts, moral entrepreneurs, and intellectuals promote the interests of specific groups of individuals. Because there are so many actors who come into play in the political public sphere, deliberation assists with the filtering out of any unclear, ambiguous, or doubtful elements from this informally-structured legitimation process (Habermas, 2006). Individuals are bombarded by messages from different sources, and deliberation assembles what messages are relevant and what messages are not. In addition, deliberation interprets the meanings of these messages and generates rational attitudes. These rational attitudes then help individuals determine the correct course of action in making decisions (Habermas, 1996). "To put it in a nutshell, the deliberative model expects the political public sphere to ensure the formation of a plurality of considered public opinions" (Habermas, 2006: 416).

### *Challenges of Deliberative Politics*

Deliberative democracy is part of political discourse, and although Habermas's deliberative politics incorporates aspects of the liberal and republican traditions, it succeeds through rational discourse theory. This theory allows for an ideal democratic project that is concerned with "the ongoing realization, in the context of a particular constitutional state, of a set of rights that is presupposed by the idea of a self-regulating legal community" (O'Neill, 2000: 507). However, there have been criticisms of

Habermas's deliberative politics; Maffettone (2000) has criticized that deliberative democracy is similar to liberalism because "the will to qualify deliberative democracy, to differentiate it from simple or populist democracy, implies the assumption of deontological constraints of rightness [and] these constraints are conceptually like liberal deontological principles" (Maffettone, 2000: 6). Habermas even recognizes that political deliberation and decision-making has its challenges; political issues can be complex, and in order to deliberate properly individuals need to analyze these issues "in terms of empirical, evaluative and normative components" (Habermas, 2005a: 387).

In addition, voter apathy that has been increasing over the years challenges the existence of deliberative politics in society. However, the most recent elections, in which the majority of incumbents in the House of Representatives and Senate were fired by the American people, does show a society that desires a political body that listens to the public opinions and wills of the people.

### **Conclusion: Implementing Habermas's Deliberative Politics**

Individuals ought not to view politics as a market that simply administers entitlements to individuals and where compromises take place between competing interests, as in the liberal view, and individuals are not all the same or carry similar ethical views, as in the republican model. Therefore, a third view must rely on several forms of communication in which a common will and rational results are produced, "not just ethical self-clarification but also the balancing of interests and compromise" (Habermas, 1998: 245). Habermas offers one approach to a solution, which is the concept of deliberative politics, which is an ideal process that ensures decisions are made through reasoning and rational discussion, securing fair results for all (Habermas, 2006).

If both the Democrats and Republicans in Congress practice deliberative politics, controversial issues, such as the extension of the Bush tax cuts, could be dealt with reasonably and respectfully. Habermas's deliberative politics is ideal for the current state of the United States government. However, neither the Republicans nor the Democrats are willing to deliberate or compromise, and this is reflecting negatively on the citizens who voted them into office. Before the 2010 elections, Senate Republican leader, Mitch McConnell (R-KY), said in an interview with the *National Journal* that "the single most important thing we want to achieve is for President Obama to be a one-term president" (Herszenhorn, 2010: ¶ 2). This statement does not emphasize deliberation or communication amongst

the two parties; it emphasizes gridlock, and this ongoing conflict between the two parties is resonating negatively with voters. The latest national survey by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, conducted November 4-7, 2010, showed that 55% of Americans want Republican leaders in Congress to work with President Obama, and 62% want Obama to cooperate with Republican leaders (The Pew Research Center, 2006).

Successful communication among different people involves mutual understanding, and this can be complicated when communication flows through the different networks of the political public sphere. Therefore, the political public sphere must be available as a field in which citizens can make up their own mind about political issues and as an audience responding to the political elites who have the power to make and change law (Habermas, 2005a). In order to accept deliberative politics, citizens, politicians, and other members of the public sphere must first have a true understanding of the heritage of liberalism and republicanism as clarified by Habermas. Only then can Habermas's deliberative politics be accepted as a satisfactory normative model of democracy that should be incorporated into America's political system.

**Stephanie Morrow (stephmorrow72@yahoo.com)** is a PhD student in the Mass Communications Department at Temple University in Philadelphia. Her dissertation thesis uses framing theory and semiotics to investigate how the 1969 York, Pennsylvania race riots, which resulted in two murders, were covered by the media.

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# How to Understand Rawls's Law of Peoples

by Veljko Dubljevic

"...though I would not deny that such elements can be misconceived, I believe the idea of a realistic utopia is essential." (Rawls 2002, p. 6)

Rawls's views on international justice have been widely criticized.<sup>1</sup> The first type of criticisms mostly start from the premise that the right level of analysis should be global and not *merely* international. According to some, Rawls assumes an outmoded view of the relations between the states, ignoring relevant interconnectedness, especially the extent of global cooperation and coercion. Others claim that his account is faulty as peoples may experience unfavorable conditions not only because of local factors but also because of unfavorable factors in the global basic structure.

A second line of criticism against Rawls's theory is that it focuses on peoples and relations between them instead of individuals. Some think that the concept of a people is not sufficiently clear or important to do the kind of work Rawls wants it to do. Others contend that Rawls's reasons for excluding more socio-economic equality are unconvincing.

Rawls's justification of human rights has also come under heavy fire, and this issue forms the basis for the third type of criticism. According to some, it is unclear why only the abridged list of human rights is included, and also not clear why non-liberal peoples would endorse the human rights on Rawls's list. Others claim that Rawls's failure to include full democratic rights is a grave mistake.

A fourth type of criticism points to the alleged conservatism in Rawls. According to some, Rawls takes cultural pluralism seriously, but at the expense of legitimate differences among persons. Others claim that Rawls's *Law of Peoples* has offered us nothing more than a *modus vivendi* with oppressor states, or that there is no such thing as a "decent consultative hierarchy" in reality – only oppressive undemocratic states.

Although they are clearly a minority, there are some scholars who argue that many of the arguments in these criticisms rely on a false view of Rawls's conception, as some of its finer points are easily misunderstood (Bernstein 2004, 2006; Freeman 2003, Wenar 2006). I will present an interpretation of Rawls's *Law of Peoples*, that is in general accordance with these minority interpretations (that have been deemed as unconvincing, e.g. by Brock 2009). Three aspects are especially important for my interpretation:

the difference between justice and legitimacy, the distinction between the reasonable and the decent, and the notion of development of morality on a social scale. Rawls's debate with Habermas is the starting point of my interpretation and on my view, many helpful insights for understanding *Law of Peoples* can be gained by reading his Reply to Habermas.

According to some interpretations, Rawls has made a methodological turn from the liberal principles of justice, that are the result of deliberation by individuals, to non-liberal principles that are the result of bargaining by peoples. It is claimed that in order to understand Rawls's later writings, one should look for themes in communitarian and multicultural criticism, as Rawls's liberalism has "suffered a breakdown" and he has drastically changed his approach (Pavlović 2002/2005). Opposing such views, I will try to show that Rawls had a similar approach to international relations as early as his *A Theory of Justice*, and that the changes in his views could be linked to Habermas's theses about the "modesty of practical philosophy" and inability to deal with injustices (Habermas 1976, [1983] 2007, [1990] 2005a, [1992] 2004, [1996] 2005b, chap. 2). I will argue that Rawls's definitions of the difference between justice and legitimacy, reasonableness and decency and the four roles of political philosophy, could all be plausibly interpreted as answers to Habermas and Habermasian criticism of alleged paternalism and undemocratic imposition of liberal principles of justice.

Rawls has dedicated the largest part of his "Reply to Habermas" to refuting these claims. In three distinct chapters he has tried to answer three possible interpretations that Joshua Cohen has named the thesis of *institutional subordination*, the charge of *denigrating* the importance of public argument and political participation, and that the theory of justice is founded on *mistrust* of citizens (Rawls 2005, Lecture IX; Cohen 2003). It is plausible to assume that this debate has had an impact on Rawls's later writings, and so can be useful for a reading that would shed light on some aspects of *Law of Peoples* that many liberal authors have found to be puzzling or even anti-liberal.

I start with the comparative analysis of the article "The Law of Peoples" with the elements of the idea of international relations in *A Theory of Justice* and the final statement in order to support my view that much of Rawls's specific approach to international law is already contained in his previous writings. Rawls claimed that Habermas's criticism has made him aware how unclear some of his thoughts were. I will make use of the distinction between justice and legitimacy, that was specifically formulated in the response to Habermas (Rawls 2005, Lecture IX), in order to explain the intent and scope of the approach in *The Law of Peoples* (1). I will continue with the analysis of the definition of consultative hierarchy, and further distinction between the reasonable and the decent, that I take could be a

result of Habermas's view that the notion of reasonableness is too ambiguous (2). Finally, I will compare Rawls's article "Fifty Years after Hiroshima" with the final version in *The Law of Peoples*, and analyze the notions of realistic utopia and reconciliation with our social world in order to explain the genesis and development of some of Rawls's new ideas (3).

(1) In *A Theory of Justice* Rawls gives a short sketch of principles for just relations between nations (Rawls 1999, sec. 58). Although this account is fairly short, almost all principles from the list in *The Law of Peoples* are already present (1-5 and 7), together with the idea of a original position for the representatives of peoples (or nations). That is why it could be reasonably concluded that there is no difference in the setting of the original position in his "early" and his "later" writings. Principles that are new explicitly determine the duty of peoples to observe human rights and duty of assistance. Thus, relations between peoples are not tackled with the difference principle, but rather in the manner previously reserved for natural duties applying to individuals. Although the article "The Law of Peoples" states only 7 principles in a different ordering, the question of mutual assistance is already present. Thus, the final version of the principles for international relations in the book is just a new ordering with explicit stating of all important questions that are reflected upon in the article.<sup>2</sup>

Bearing this in mind, Rawls's claim that his law of peoples is in accord with his liberal principles of justice seems credible. Still, for a proper reading of his views one needs to find out why are the conditions for the international arena weaker, and why the original position is not simply applied to all individuals globally. These questions are the basis for the interpretation according to which he has weakened his liberal principles of justice, and "made a concession" to communitarian and multiculturalist criticism (Pavlović 2002/2005). To help answer these questions, the distinction Rawls first stated in his "Reply to Habermas" is useful.

He claims that we should not confuse justice, that can in principle be achieved in a well ordered liberal democratic society, with legitimacy which is sufficient for a decision, policy or society to be acceptable. Although "legitimate" and "just" are often used synonymously, Rawls stated the examples of a legitimate ruler which rules in a unjust manner, and a legitimate democratic regime or a legitimate law that has unjust results. In his view, legitimacy describes the procedure for attaining power or ordering social institutions, while justice characterizes the outcomes.

According to Rawls, "legitimacy is a weaker idea than justice, and provides weaker constraints on what can be done ... (and so) allows an undetermined range of injustice, that justice might not permit" (Rawls 2005,

p. 428). This weaker idea of legitimacy is needed because of the “burdens of judgment”, and the distinction has been put forward in order to refute Habermas’s charges about paternalism and lack of democracy in substantial as opposed to procedural accounts of justice (Habermas 2005b, chap. 2 and 3). Legitimacy is defined as that which is in accordance with a legally enacted procedure, while not gravely insulting the most basic moral intuitions of reasonable persons. Rawls claims that “... our considered judgments with their fixed points - such as the condemned institutions of slavery and serfdom, religious persecution, the subjection of the working classes, the oppression of women, and the unlimited accumulation of vast fortunes, together with the hideousness of cruelty and torture, and the evil of the pleasures of exercising domination - stand in the background as substantive checks” (Rawls 2005, p. 430). The main point is that legitimacy defines what is acceptable and tolerable even if not strictly just. This means that a society does not need to be fully just (or a liberal democracy) in order to be a member in good standing of a society of peoples and protected from outside intervention by legitimate international law.

The basis for this interpretation could be ordered in a logical sequence. Although this is just one reading among many, it could be argued that it is grounded in Rawls’s original view, and that it explains many finer points that have frequently been misunderstood. It also starts from the premise that his justification of human rights should be convincing and acceptable to persons or peoples that a) uphold a collectivist common good conception of justice (religious or Hegelian-Marxist), b) are wary of past imperialistic encroachments by liberal-democratic societies and c) are concerned that human rights interventions are masking hidden interests for exercising domination:

1. For a society to be considered a well ordered liberal democratic society, it should be just.
2. For a society to be just, it must observe strict principles of justice, including the difference principle, and a strict conception of human rights that is part of a liberal political culture.
3. It is not to be expected that international law could establish just relations in the strict sense between peoples in the near future, so we must make do with the idea of legitimacy.
4. Legitimacy is weaker than justice, it provides weaker constraints on what can be done, because it allows an (as yet) undetermined range of injustice, that justice might not permit.
5. A well ordered liberal democratic society (due to burdens of

- judgment) does not have the right to impose its culture or way of life to other peoples and societies, or to sanction them simply because they are not liberal.
6. A well ordered liberal democratic society should tolerate societies that are legitimate, according to the existing procedure stemming from their understanding of justice and the will of the majority of people.
  7. As legitimacy allows an undetermined range of injustice, the representatives of all well ordered societies should formulate minimal conditions for toleration, that are acceptable to representatives of legitimate societies that are not liberal.
  8. Thus, for a society to be considered legitimate it must observe at least a less strict range of human rights, while questions of basic social justice must not be contrary to minimal natural duties that apply to all moral agents, and all peoples should be bound by minimal moral constraints stemming from the natural duties of justice, civility and assistance.<sup>3</sup>

In order to refute the claims that *The Law of Peoples* introduces a radical shift or even a breakdown in Rawls's liberalism, some further reasons for accepting standards of mere legitimacy in international relations as opposed to strict standards of justice should be examined. First of all, as the forceful imposition of an internal order is unjust as well as leaving international relations of internally just societies to merely rational interests, a moral minimum needs to be determined. Natural duties are the moral minimum for individuals as moral agents, and thus if we view peoples as morally responsible, and capable of being reasonable and not merely rational, they should be bound by natural duties as moral agents.<sup>4</sup>

Further corroboration for this interpretation can be found in Rawls's writings. Both in the article and in the book he distinguishes between the law of peoples and international law. International law is existing positive legal order, that is incomplete in many ways, as it lacks an effective scheme of sanctions that normally characterizes domestic law. The law of peoples consists of a family of political concepts, with the principles of rights, justice and the common good. These concepts specify the content of a liberal conception of justice worked up to extend to and apply to international law, and provides the principles by which that law is to be judged (Rawls 2001a, p. 536. Rawls 2002, pp. 3-10).

Rawls started with the point of view of a well ordered liberal society, which is consistent with his aim to specify conditions that a society must meet in order to be just in relations with other societies as well, and not only

internally. The next step is the point of view of a non-liberal society. Rawls emphasized that such societies are to be respected although they are not liberal (according to the duty of civility), and that they are not to be pressured if their institutions are in line with a common good idea of justice (according to the duty of justice). The terms of legitimacy are here expressed with conditions for acceptability for the non-liberal society's legal system. The first condition is that the society in question is not aggressive (does not impose its belief system on others). The second condition has three parts: a) the system of law secures for all members of the people basic human rights in accordance with a common good idea of justice; b) the system of law must impose *bona fide* moral duties and obligations (other than human rights) on all persons within the people's territory, and c) there must be a sincere and not unreasonable belief on the part of judges and other officials who administer the legal system that the law is guided by a common good idea of justice (Rawls 2002, pp. 64-67; Rawls 2001a, p. 546). On the other hand, societies that have not been able to achieve these standards are to be helped, according to the duty of justice and duty of assistance. Such societies have not yet attained equal status, and it is a duty for well ordered societies (liberal and non-liberal alike) to help them achieve equality and the status of a full moral agent.

Charles Beitz claims (Beitz 2000) that Rawls's approach in considering peoples and not individuals stems from pragmatic reasons and concerns that a cosmopolitan approach would prove less tolerant toward different political traditions and cultures. He argues that the first reason could be refuted as a *non sequitur*, and that the second rests on a circular explanation (Beitz 2000, pp. 681-682).<sup>5</sup> My interpretation sheds different light on the issue, as the definition of the moral minimum for all agents explains how fairness toward peoples implicates equality in principle. Peoples can have their own common good idea of justice that emphasizes collectivity and not individuality, and is supported by a substantial majority of members of the people. If the construction of the second original position had forbidden collectivist comprehensive ideas of justice, some peoples would be denied equality and the status of moral agents. Again, corroboration for such an interpretation can be found in what Rawls said about territory as the property of people: "unless a definitive agent is given responsibility for maintaining an asset and bears the loss for not doing so, that asset tends to deteriorate. In this case the asset is people's territory and its capacity to support them in perpetuity; and the agent is the people themselves as politically organized" (Rawls 2002, p. 39; Rawls 2001a, p 541). As individuals cannot bear responsibility for a people's territory (in perpetuity or otherwise), and a state is not a moral agent with appropriate moral rights (a



state as a political organization does not have the absolute right to exist, while a people does), the proper approach in systematic justification of human rights and international law should proceed from the notion of the people.

This interpretation clarifies one more issue that is disputed by Beitz. Namely, he claims that "in contrast to the conventional view, and perhaps surprisingly, Rawls does not hold that reform intervention would be justified by the good that would be done for those whose rights are in jeopardy ... (but rather) by considerations of international stability" (Beitz 2000, p. 685). He argues that the strategic interest in international security has no correlation with the moral status of human rights. Thus, in his view, Rawls's formulation is insufficient and ungrounded.

Nevertheless, according to my interpretation of Rawls's view, a forceful intervention could not be justified by individual cases of human rights violations and injustice. Rawls frequently emphasized how so called liberal societies can be unjust, especially when dealing with other societies. The proper justification stems from the *inability* of legal institutions of a society to *react* to human rights violations and injustices in general. According to this interpretation, intervention is grounded in the duty of justice and observance of the idea of legitimacy as weaker than justice. According to Rawls "This duty requires us to support and to comply with just institutions that exist and ... to further just arrangements not yet established, at least when this can be done without too much cost to ourselves" (Rawls 1999, p. 99). If the logical sequence is considered, it is clear that the duty of justice holds for legitimacy as well in the international arena.

The conclusion that the exclusion of some societies has damaged the presumed universality of human rights is false. Although "people are entitled to be treated in certain ways in virtue of their characteristics as human beings and independently of considerations that might be particular to their own institutions and political culture" (Beitz 2000, p. 686), Beitz has not proven that Rawls denies that, and my interpretation shows that questions of justice are strict and universal, while legitimacy is less strict and linked to particular institutions and political culture. Rawls's view about the acceptability of consultative hierarchies that are not strictly democratic can be explained in similar terms.<sup>6</sup>

Namely, if a society is to be just, it has to be democratic, and it also has to tolerate hierarchical societies that publicly represent the interests of different estates in a consultation process. Hierarchical societies, as guided by their common good conception of justice, could withhold leading positions to members of certain religious or political groups (say, the communist party), but if the interests of all are taken into account, it is not



entirely unreasonable. One could say that these societies are on their own way toward democracy, and modern day liberal democratic societies have had (and still have) their share of discriminated minorities, and their citizens were able to reform the institutions, while outside intervention would have probably set back the natural process of democratization. This interpretation explains Rawls's remarks that having prejudice about such societies and interfering would do harm, damage the self-respect of non-liberal peoples and the duty of civility.

The conclusion that such peoples are viewed as on their own way toward democracy is based on Rawls's formulation of the development of morality in a well ordered society. According to Rawls, morality of association is the second stage of development and it naturally leads to morality of principles (Rawls 1999, chap. 69-72). The stages of development (morality of authority, association and principles) can be viewed as stages for individuals as well as social order as a whole. Rawls claimed that "it is characteristic of the morality of authority when conceived as a morality for the social order as a whole to demand self-sacrifice for the sake of a higher good and to deprecate the worth of the individual and the lesser associations" (Rawls 1999, p.438). I conclude that according to Rawls's view, morality of authority could not be tolerated as a social order for a people in good standing in the society of peoples, while morality of association could and should, as it leads developing peoples to morality of principles. One could guess that Rawls's distinction between societies is founded on these stages. If that is the case, liberal societies would be the most developed (morality of principles), decent societies would be developing (morality of association), and any benevolent absolutism would be underdeveloped (morality of authority). The non-ideal cases of burdened societies and outlaw states are examples of societies that have not been able to achieve moral status for various reasons, or whose regimes have decided to neglect the moral point of view and to exploit their own people.

It is important to note that there are two possible versions of this *moral development* reading of Rawls. The strong version would be that this was Rawls's actual view, though he didn't express it explicitly. The weaker version is that this is merely an interpretation that Rawls may not have intended, but that makes various apparently contradictory aspects of his work seem more consonant. Although I believe that the strong version is true, the weak version suffices for the purposes of understanding the argument presented here.

The issues of stability (both theoretical and political) are crucial for an adequate understanding of Rawls's position. That is why the claim that his theory is unstable because it rests on a sharp distinction between the

domestic and international realm, stemming from the application of the difference principle and duty of assistance should be considered (Beitz 2000, pp. 691-694). In any case, one should always ask why we would settle for less (duty of assistance), if we already have a better alternative (difference principle). I will try to present some answers from Rawls's other writings.

In his *Lectures on the History of Political Philosophy*, while discussing Locke's theory, he presents his view of the reasons that citizens as rational and reasonable could hold while choosing class society and property voting qualification, that we take as undemocratic and unjust today (Rawls 2007, pp. 138-155). In this analysis, Rawls started with the interests of those who have sufficient property and those who do not. As both sides are rational and reasonable, they wish to fulfill their interests as much as possible and to reach an agreement. As none can prevent less desirable alternatives, or convince the other side to accept their preferred alternative, in this case they all agree to property voting qualification as the alternative that is the least harmful to their interests.

It is important to note that the point in Rawls's analysis is not a mere *modus vivendi*. This argument could be interpreted (or used) in contemporary issues as an important clarification to his views on non-ideal theory. Namely, it could be assumed that the citizens with sufficient property are endorsing a conservative common good conception of justice, while those who do not endorse a socialist common good conception of justice. Both groups of citizens believe that their conception is fully just but decide that the considered judgments of the other group are reasonable, and opt for an alternative that they view as legitimate, if not fully just, in order to reach a more just society *in the future*.

Analogous to this line of thought, one could start with a premise that in international relations, reaching strict justice and/or the cosmopolitan ideal *with one agreement* is not a feasible alternative. The reason for that might be that there is no moral agent on the global level that could adequately protect the interests of all peoples and persons, and that an effective scheme of sanctions, which normally characterizes domestic law, is lacking. This view does not exclude the possibilities that such an agent could exist in the future, and that cosmopolitan global justice could be achieved in a foreseeable future, *depending on further agreements*. As peoples could be viewed as moral agents, and treated as responsible and lawful, the remaining alternatives are: a) preservation of the *status quo*, and b) agreeing to at least legitimate relations. Rational and reasonable representatives of peoples could, should and perhaps would accept legitimate relations as the alternative that is the least harmful to their interests and the interests of all. Again, various peoples believe that their conception of justice is fully just

but decide that the considered judgments of other peoples are reasonable, and opt for an alternative that they view as legitimate, if not fully just, in order to reach a more just society of peoples *in the future*.

Until now it has been shown only that the claims about radical difference between Rawls's early and later writings about international relations are false. My interpretation is founded on Rawls's debate with Habermas, and it has shown that the distinction between justice and legitimacy and the notion of moral development of peoples could be used to make the "later writings" more clear. But what of the changes that really took place in the formulation of Rawls's view?

Originally, the basis for the law of peoples was founded on the notion of reasonableness. Allen Buchanan has made a clear point of that in his analysis of Rawls's article. According to his interpretation, a society that is non-liberal could be tolerated only if it is reasonable. The comprehensive doctrine of good that informs such a society is reasonable if and only if such a doctrine could be consistently affirmed by a reasonable person (Buchanan 2000).<sup>7</sup>

This points to one of the important changes in Rawls's view. As opposed to the original formulation in the article "The Law of Peoples", in his book Rawls no longer claims that non-liberal peoples are reasonable. He argues that they should properly be viewed as decent and offers the definition of decency that is the basis of legitimacy for non-liberal societies. I argue that the debate with Habermas, and especially his critique of the ambiguity of the reasonable, can be used to shed some light on these changes.

(2) Habermas argues that Rawls used *reasonable* interchangeably in the sense of moral truth of categorical imperative, and in the sense of tolerance toward different authentic worldviews (Habermas 2005b, chap. 2). Habermas insisted on a more strict differentiation between questions of justice and the ethical questions of the good life stemming from ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*). His view is that one should not confuse distinct uses of practical reason (pragmatic, ethical and moral), although traditional ethical theory does precisely that. He claims that different traditions inflate one of the aspects of the practical and that this results in shortsighted views (Habermas 2005a).<sup>8</sup> It seems that Rawls's distinction between reasonable and decent mirrors the difference between questions of justice construed as a proper political conception (moral) and common good conceptions of justice (ethical).

One could argue that the basis of this interpretation could be false, because Habermas is not the only author that has observed ambiguities in

Rawls's notion of reasonableness. Important and diverse remarks about the formulation of reasonableness or the use of it as a criterion could be found in Gaus (Gaus 1995, 1997, 1999) and Friedman (Friedman 2000), for instance. How can anyone be sure that the debate with Habermas offers the key for a proper reading? One of the important cues is an unusual complementarity between Rawls's notions of the rational, the decent and the reasonable, with Habermas's pragmatic, ethical and moral use of reason. Although Rawls claims that the notions he uses are not deduced from a conception of practical reason, he argues that they express the *content* of practical reason (Rawls 2002, pp. 86-88).

Rawls claims that if the content of reasonableness, decency and rationality is laid out properly, the resulting principles and standards of right and justice will "hang together" and "will be affirmed on due reflection" (2002, p. 87). He specified the content of these ideas by giving the relevant criteria for each subject: "reasonable citizens are characterized by their willingness to offer fair terms of social cooperation among equals and by their recognition of the burdens of judgment ... (and) affirm only reasonable comprehensive doctrines ... such doctrines are reasonable provided they recognize the essentials of a liberal democratic regime and exhibit a reasoned ordering of the many values of life ... in a coherent and consistent manner" (Rawls 2002, p. 87). Rawls gives the meaning of decency by specifying criteria for a decent society as a society that is: "not aggressive and engages in war only in self defense. It has a common good idea of justice that assigns human rights to all its members; its basic structure includes a decent consultation hierarchy that protects these and other rights and ensures that all groups in society are decently represented by elected bodies in the system of consultation. Finally, there must be a sincere and not unreasonable belief on the part of judges and officials who administer the legal system that the law is indeed guided by a common good idea of justice" (Rawls 2002, p. 88). Rawls defines the rational in the sense of principles of rational choice, such as: "other things being equal, it is rational to select the most effective means to one's ends ... or: ... it is rational to select the more inclusive alternative, the one that enables us to realize all the aims the others do, as well as some additional ends" (Rawls 2002, p. 88).

In his "Reply to Habermas" (Rawls 2005, Lecture IX) Rawls admitted that the idea of reasonable needs further elaboration, but left no doubts about the analogy with the notion of truth. On the one hand, he has applied the method of avoidance, and steered clear of arguing that his conception of justice is true, or to be imposed on any society. On the other hand, he has noted that collectivist common good conceptions of justice, that some peoples might have, should not be viewed as fully reasonable. If they were

viewed as fully reasonable, the notion of reasonableness could be weakened and reduced to a mere tolerance toward different authentic worldviews and conceptions of the good that individuals and groups might hold.

Therefore, ideas of legitimacy and decency are defined as weaker than ideas of justice and reasonableness. Although critics often miss this point, Rawls had been clear about justice and legitimacy, and he was equally explicit when he claimed that he uses "decency as a normative idea of the same kind as reasonableness, though weaker" (Rawls 2002, p.67). The notion of decency emerges together with legitimacy and applies to non-liberal hierarchical societies, while ideas of justice and reasonableness are reserved for liberal-democratic well ordered societies. This interpretation can be corroborated with Rawls's *Lectures on the History of Moral Philosophy*. On the one hand, during his analysis of Kant's moral philosophy, he maintained that the reasonable is connected with the categorical imperative, while the rational connects with the hypothetical imperative. On the other hand, while analyzing Hegel's philosophy of law and doctrine of ethical life he maintained that a collectivist approach to justice and state is not unreasonable (Rawls 2003).

Rawls's regard for the collectivist ethical doctrines is expressed with the formulation of the reasonable consultation hierarchy, in which persons first belong to estates, associations and corporate bodies. In Hegel's view, these social forms represent the interests of their members through a consultation process. Rawls viewed this scheme as a deliberate restriction of the influence that market and business class could have on the political process. If the aim is that public decisions should represent universal interests and the common good of a society as a whole, it is not unreasonable, and therefore it could be acceptable.

After the debate with Habermas, Rawls took more care to avoid criticism about alleged paternalism, lack of democracy and the ambiguity of the reasonable. Thus, deviation from the liberal-democratic principle "one person – one vote" showed that collectivist common good conceptions of justice, and societies holding them could not be called reasonable or just, without weakening these ideas greatly. Therefore, Rawls introduced the notion of decency, and replaced the concept of "reasonable consultation hierarchy" (Rawls 2001a, p. 546) with the "decent consultation hierarchy" (Rawls 2002, p. 67).

As Rawls admitted that the idea of reasonableness needed further elaboration, it is plausible to assume that he has given the idea some thought. According to my interpretation, the collectivist ethical life was a form of social cooperation that needed somehow to be expressed. As universal acceptability of the political conception of justice is crucial for the idea of

reasonableness, a new idea was necessary to adequately define a particular collectivist ethical life that is not unreasonable. Habermas resolved this dialectic of the universal and particular by starting with the idea of ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*) in his definition of the ethical use of practical reason. Rawls, on the other hand, introduced decency as the minimum that defines what kind of ethical life would be tolerated by reasonable persons. This criteria is evident in Rawls's claims that the representatives of non-liberal peoples are "decent and rational", as opposed to reasonable and rational representatives of liberal peoples (Rawls 2002, pp. 67-70). Although this was not Rawls's primary intention, his view has become more complementary with Habermas's. Corresponding to the pragmatic, ethical and moral use of practical reason, Rawls's view contains the idea of rational, decent and reasonable.<sup>9</sup>

Critics have largely assumed that such distinctions are irrelevant, as such "decent" peoples do not exist and have never existed. Rawls's example of Kazanistan as a decent society based on the moral teachings in Islam (that is already tolerated within liberal-democratic societies) and subsequent historical contingencies have created a lot of misunderstanding. Opposing the claims that decent societies have never existed and that democracy should be enforced as a human right (Christiano, 2010), I argue that decent societies have existed and have been regarded as members of good standing in the society of peoples, and that the moral development of peoples *requires* that they be allowed (with non-interference) to reach higher stages of morality themselves. Rawls merely introduced standards according to which societies organized along the lines of various comprehensive doctrines should be judged and treated.

Consider the example of Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (before the breakup). Yugoslav system of law instituted a profound separation of church and state, and all religions were publicly regarded as reactionary superstition and "opium for the masses". Only members of the communist party could hold the upper positions of political authority and influence the government's main decisions and policies, including foreign affairs. Yet religions were tolerated (and not persecuted) and were practiced without loss of most civic rights, except the right to hold the higher political and judicial offices. Yugoslavia was non-aggressive, and while certainly not disinterested in economic gain, the unlimited accumulation of vast fortunes was forbidden by the Hegelian-Marxist common good conception of justice. The governments of liberal societies (while their citizens and culture were respected) were often criticized for interfering and or exercising domination over undeveloped peoples.

The point of this example is that decent societies could be organized



according to any comprehensive doctrine that is not unreasonable. Further examples could include Tibet (before the Chinese invasion) or the Vatican city-state. Any version of a collectivist ethical life that meets the standards of decency would do. And liberal-democratic societies should recognize that such societies should be treated as equals and that the imposition of their way of life would be (and has been) a great injustice.

(3) It is important to note that most interpretations of *The Law of Peoples* neglect Rawls's concerns about historical injustices and the role liberal states had in some of them. These are a valuable clue which points at the aims of his view of international law. I believe that Rawls takes historical injustices into account in order to refute Habermas's criticism. Namely, representatives of critical theory were pessimistic or skeptical about the role of philosophy (moral, legal or political) after Auschwitz and Hiroshima. Habermas argues for a more modest role of philosophy due to "four big moral-political liabilities of our time – hunger and poverty in the third world, torture and continuous violations of human dignity in autocratic regimes, increasing unemployment and disparities of social wealth in Western industrial nations, and finally the self-destructive risks of the nuclear arms race" (Habermas [1990]2007, p. 211).

Instead of a pessimistic account, Rawls tried to tackle the historical injustices and to provide a normative framework for international relations that is legitimate, if not fully just. Rawls started the analysis of the great evils and injustices right after the debate with Habermas, and one could speculate that the new ideas actually answer the "liabilities of our time" and the question of the role of political philosophy. Rawls sees philosophy as having four important tasks: the practical task of clarifying and resolving conflicts, the task of orienting us in our political life, the task of reconciling us to our social institutions, and the task of probing the limits of politically possible by projecting a realistic utopia (2001b, pp. 1–5; 2007, pp. 1-20). Although I shall not pursue to clarify all four roles here, as the analysis is limited to the interpretation of Rawls's *Law of Peoples*, these roles could be plausibly interpreted as providing answers to Habermas's criticism.

The final version of Rawls's philosophy of international law starts and ends with the formulations of a realistic utopia and reconciliation to our social world. As Rawls claims that our hope for the future rests on the belief that at least a decent political order is possible, one could argue that the final end of a realistic utopia is a world with legitimate international relations. This is possible because it is realistic to expect that moral agents can observe the moral minimum and the natural duties, despite the existence of some great injustices.



Rawls used historical examples to show how Auschwitz, or any other great evil and injustice in human history, does not exclude the possibility of a realistic utopia. He argued that "we must not allow these great evils of the past and present to undermine our hope for the future of our society as belonging to a Society of liberal and decent Peoples around the world. ... rather we must support and strengthen our hope by developing a reasonable and workable conception of political right and justice applying to the relations between peoples" (Rawls 2002, p.22).

The second aim is reconciliation to our social world. Rawls elaborates two ideas as the motivation for the law of peoples. According to the first, the great evils result from political injustice. The second is that these evils will eventually disappear once political injustice has been eliminated by following just (or at least decent/legitimate) social policies and establishing just (or at least decent/legitimate) basic institutions. The law of peoples "reconciles us to our social world by showing us that a reasonably just constitutional democracy existing as a member of a reasonably just Society of Peoples is possible" (Rawls 2002, p. 127). Reconciliation requires acknowledging the fact of reasonable pluralism both within liberal and decent societies and in their relations with one another, and so fundamentalists and those who ask that the social order guarantee spiritual well-being as well and not only freedom and equality for all, might reject it.

Rawls argued that the very possibility of such a liberal and decent political and social order can itself reconcile us to the social world, although realization is certainly not unimportant. By showing that a self-sustaining and legitimate political and social order both at home and abroad is possible, philosophy banishes "the dangers of resignation and cynicism", "provides a long-term goal of political endeavor", and "gives meaning to what we can do today" (Rawls 2002, p. 128).

I have tried to show that Rawls's *Law of Peoples* is best understood in the context of the debate with Habermas. I argued that the difference between justice and legitimacy, the distinction between the reasonable and the decent, and the idea of moral development of peoples provide valuable insights. Rawls's conception of international relations is marked by the clash of Marxist and liberal traditions of philosophizing about justice. Different positions in the self-understanding of philosophical thought in modern society provide opposing views of the social world and international relations. Namely, Habermas has (in line with the "founding fathers" of critical theory) concluded that philosophy should restrict itself to the critical role, i.e. remain realistic and moderately pessimistic, because of the fact of great injustices. On the other hand, Rawls's conception of a realistic utopia

is moderately optimistic, and concludes from the same fact that we should strive for justice and legitimacy all the more. Therefore, it could be argued that this debate motivated Rawls to express the meaning of key notions of justice, human rights and legitimacy, and to give a realistic account of legitimate international relations.

My interpretation tries to clear some of the finer points in this account. As a way of defending it from likely objections, I will cite Rawls's conclusion to his introduction to the lectures on history of moral philosophy: "I don't think for a moment that my interpretations are plainly correct; other interpretations are surely possible, and some are almost certainly better. It's just that I don't know what they are. ... So if I present an interpretation, it is ... to encourage you to work out a better interpretation, one that is sensitive to more features of the text than mine, and makes better sense of the whole" (Rawls 2003, p. 18).

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Although it is impossible to give a comprehensive list of all relevant criticism, it should include: Baynes 2009; Beitz 2000; Dallmayr 2004; Forst 2001; Hinsch 2001; Moon 2003; Nussbaum 2002; O'Neill 2001; Pavlović 2002/2005; Pogge 1994; and Tan 2001. In setting the stage of the debate on Rawls's *The Law of Peoples*, I draw on Brock 2009.

<sup>2</sup> The original formulation in the article states that: 1. "Peoples (as organized by their government) are free and independent, and their freedom and independence is to be respected by other peoples;" 2. "Peoples are equal and parties to their own agreements;" 3. "Peoples have the right of self-defense but no right to war;" 4. "Peoples are to observe a duty of non-intervention;" 5. "Peoples are to observe treaties and undertakings;" 6. "Peoples are to observe certain specified restrictions on the conduct of war (assumed to be in self-defense);" 7. "Peoples are to honor human rights." Rawls, John: "The Law of Peoples", in Rawls 2001a; p. 540. The additional principle is formulated as 8: "Peoples have a duty to assist other peoples living under unfavorable conditions that prevent their having a just or decent political and social regime." One should note that the principles number 6 and 7 have switched places in the final version. Compare: Rawls 2002, p. 37.

<sup>3</sup> These natural duties are specified in Rawls 1999, chap. 18, 19, 51, and 52. This logical sequence should refute the claim that Rawls has decided to defend a *status quo* in international relations, and damaged the universal scope of his principles of justice.

<sup>4</sup> See: Rawls 2002, p. vi. Rawls has made a distinction between 1. liberal societies; 2. decent societies, 3. burdened societies, 4. outlaw states, and 5. benevolent absolutisms. As can be seen in this distinction, Rawls thinks that only states can be outlaws, not peoples. Furthermore, only peoples are capable of being reasonable, while states are merely rational. See: Rawls 2002, pp. 4, 5, 9, 48, 80-81, 94-95.

<sup>5</sup> Pavlović, drawing on Barry and Pogge, argues in much the same way, although he concludes rather sharply that Rawls had slipped in moral relativism, skepticism and cynicism. Compare: Pavlović 2005, pp. 38-39; and 229-231.

<sup>6</sup> This interpretation could be corroborated by Rawls's claim that once content of human rights is constructed on the basis of a collectivist doctrine, it could not be rejected as merely a western atomistic view. See: Rawls 2001a, pp. 552-553. Compare: Rawls 2002, pp. 72-73. One should bear in mind that in order to be acceptable, a people must have at least some form of consultation process and observance of popular will. Alyssa Bernstein argues on this issue in a similar way. See: Bernstein 2006.

<sup>7</sup> He proposed the following logical sequence for the adequate interpretation of Rawls's view: "1. A society is entitled to noninterference (and to be regarded as a member of good standing in the society of peoples) if and only if it is organized by reasonable principles; 2. Principles for organizing society are reasonable if and only if they could be accepted by reasonable persons, that is, by those who a) acknowledge the burdens of judgement, and b) are willing to propose and accept fair terms of cooperation; 3. Those who acknowledge the burdens of judgement will not attempt to impose their conception of the good on other societies (i.e. are nonexpansionist); 4. A society is organized on the basis of fair terms of cooperation if and only if it is organized by a common good conception of justice; 5. If a society is organized by a common good conception of justice, it will respect the human rights proper and 6. Therefore, a society is entitled to noninterference (and to be regarded as a member of good standing in the society of peoples) if and only if it is nonexpansionist and respects the human rights proper." Buchanan 2000, p. 78.

<sup>8</sup> Habermas argues that "for Kant practical reason is coextensive with morality; only in autonomy do reason (*Vernunft*) and the will attain unity. Empiricism assimilates practical reason to its pragmatic use; in Kantian terminology, it is reduced to the purposive exercise of the understanding

(*Verstand*). And in the Aristotelian tradition, practical reason assumes the role of a faculty of judgement (*Urteilkraft*) that illuminates the life historical horizon of a customary *ethos*." Habermas 2005a, p.10.

<sup>9</sup> One could ask, does this mean that members of a society with an unreasonable ethical life are merely rational? The answer is no, and once again the comparison with Habermas's view might be helpful. Namely, ethical life represents a particular point of view distinct from the rational and the reasonable. In Habermas's view this is clear, and unreasonable practices such as female genital mutilation or blood feuds can be understood using his category of the ethical. On the other hand, decency represents only ethical life that is not unreasonable. This could be resolved by using another general term for this point of view. The notion of prudence in the original meaning (*φρονεσις*; *Prudentia*) corresponds with the ethical use of reason, Aristotelian ethics and Kantian faculty of judgement. Using this notion, one can easily refute Gaus's critique of the notion reasonable. Namely, Gaus concluded that Rawls's reasonable is ambiguous, and that a Machiavellistic position could be seen as reasonable, as it could be accepted as fair in some circumstances (e.g. regrettably, one should murder the children of his enemies, as they might come seeking revenge upon his children). The notion of decency does not reply to such criticism, so it is clear that Rawls does not introduce it in order to answer his or any other moral relativist's criticism. On the other hand, if we use the notion of prudence, we could say that it could be rational and prudent (i.e. intelligent and according to collective norms of certain groups) to commit some of the aforementioned deeds, but that it is not and it could never be reasonable. For the example of murdering children, see: Gaus 1997.

**Veljko Dubljevic** ([veljko.dubljevic@izew.uni-tuebingen.de](mailto:veljko.dubljevic@izew.uni-tuebingen.de)) completed his second PhD in Philosophy/Neuroethics as a member of the research training group "Bioethics" at the International Centre for Ethics in the Sciences and Humanities in Tübingen. Dr. Dubljevic's primary research interests include neuroethics, bioethics, political theory, moral theory, business ethics, and philosophy of law.

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# The Task of Dialectic beyond Domination and Dogmatism

by Richard Fitch

## Abstract

This essay explores the philosophical reasons why successful attempts to overturn domination and dogmatism only seem to result in the emergence of new forms of domination and dogmatism, and thus in political disappointment. It is argued that the epistemic key to this problem is to be found in Pyrrhonian scepticism. To begin, the way dialectic developed so as to be understood, in Hegel, as a response to this problem, is examined. How this was then forgotten in Marx is explored through Lucio Colletti's flawed critique of Hegelian Marxism. The essay concludes that political thought, if it truly aspires to overturn domination and dogmatism, should address itself directly to the sceptical problem by adopting a Left Pyrrhonian dialectical strategy.

*Wer sich nicht bewegt, spürt seine Fesseln nicht!*

*Rosa Luxembourg*

Domination is to social life what dogmatism is to thinking.<sup>1</sup> If that is so then emancipation is to social life what philosophy is to thinking. Emancipation should remove domination from social life, and philosophy should remove dogmatism from thinking. Yet rather than fostering political or intellectual liberation, they only seem to bring about new forms of domination and dogmatism. Why is this the case, and how might this be otherwise? In what follows I will approach this question from a broadly epistemic perspective.

We can identify a common characteristic of domination and dogmatism: the desire that what is contingently given should not be otherwise. The possibility of a response to these attitudes of politics and

thought we can find in the work of Hegel with regard to dogmatism, and in the work of Marx with regard to domination. Both of these promises carry the name *dialectic*. Furthermore, in the best dialectical thought there is the recognition that domination and dogmatism are somehow intertwined, and that dealing with the one entails dealing with the other. If emancipation is a social good, then effective political action and competent philosophy are entangled and mutually reinforcing practices of emancipation, so that, for the Marx of the mid 1840's, "The *head* of this emancipation is *philosophy*, its *heart* the *proletariat*" such that as "philosophy finds its *material* weapons in the proletariat, so the proletariat finds its *intellectual* weapons in philosophy" (Marx, 1975: 257). But what are these weapons, and how can they bring about both the dissolution of existing domination and the "total redemption of humanity" (Marx, 1975: 256)? And whatever the nature of these weapons, have they not long since disintegrated? If dialectic is a weapon, how might it remain? And finally, have not the names of Hegel and Marx become, with what can appear to be the best of reasons, bywords for philosophical and political dogmatism? What sense does it make to continue to broach such questions against a backdrop of the deepest disappointment of the highest expectations?

### Towards the Origins of Dialectic

The thesis that the understanding of Marx requires an understanding of Hegel, in particular of his logic, is well-established (e.g. Arthur, 1986). What follows extends this hermeneutic investigation in order to ask what is required in order to understand Hegel's logic. This path does not consist of other great names whose thought must be grasped, but of the philosophical problems to which Hegel was responding. In the present case, a sceptical problem that follows from the sociality of reason is to be found at the end of the hermeneutic regress. Political philosophy, indeed social philosophy in general, looks to reason to guide the organisation of social and political life. The nub of the sceptical problem is that the sociality of reason appears to render reason-giving both desirable and impossible. Reason-giving is desirable as the only alternatives to reason-giving appear to be chance or coercion, entailing physical or mental violence. Reason-giving is impossible because it appears to logically undo itself. The conceit of my argument is that, functionally, dialectic should be understood as a philosophical response to this logical undoing prompted by the fact that reason exists socially. In Classical Greek thought this problem was seen as through a glass darkly. In Hellenistic thought earlier weaknesses were exploited in order to articulate this perplexity with a clarity, elegance, and power that remains unsurpassed.

The history of subsequent responses to this perplexity, concerning the need for, and impossibility of, reason, has not provided a satisfactory answer, and only Hegel emerges with his reputation as a thinker enhanced.<sup>2</sup> In the Marxist tradition, to the best of my knowledge, only Lucio Colletti broaches the topic as part of his polemic against Hegelian Marxism (Colletti, 1979). I want to quickly address this history in order to sketch how the task of dialectic remains urgent today.

I want to set off from a provisional understanding of dialectic, of Classical inspiration, as the resolution of disagreement through reasoned conversation. Within this conception, reasons are exchanged such that better reasons displace worse reasons in order to move towards reconciliation where there was once social discord. Dialectic here is essentially about the social movement of reasons. Through this social movement of reasons violence is progressively excluded from social life, knowledge and truth are established, and the effects of blind chance are ameliorated.

In the Platonic *Definitions*, *epistēmē* (knowledge) is defined variously as the “conception of the soul which cannot be dislodged by reasoning; ability to conceive one or more things which cannot be dislodged by reasoning; true argument which cannot be dislodged by thinking”. Whereas, by contrast, *doxa* (opinion) is defined as a “conception which is open to persuasion by reason; fluctuation in reasoning; the thinking which is led by reason to the false as well as the true” (Plato, 1997: *Definitions* 414b-c). In knowledge reasons do not move, while in opinion they can. They are moved in Socratic dialectic, for example, whether the conversation is with oneself when thinking, or with others (Plato, 1997: *Philebus* 38e, *Theaetetus* 190a, *Sophist* 230b-c).

For Aristotle “Dialectic is merely critical where philosophy claims to know” (Aristotle, 1995: *Metaphysics* 1004b 25). It is a lesser but not worthless form of thinking. It is lesser because dialectic begins from opinions, whereas knowledge, via demonstration, begins from first principles (*archē*). Thus, in the *Topics*, he states:

Now a deduction is an argument in which, certain things being laid down, something other than these necessarily comes about through them. It is a demonstration, when the premises from which the deduction starts are true and primitive, or are such that our knowledge of them has originally come through premises which are primitive and true; and it is a dialectical deduction, if it reasons from reputable opinions. Things are true and primitive which are convincing on the strength not of anything else but themselves; for in regard to the first principles

of science it is improper to ask any further for the why and wherefore of them; each of the first principles should command belief in and by itself (Aristotle, 1995: *Topics* 100a 25- 100b 20).

Dialectic is defined against demonstration and knowledge: in demonstration one finds the domination of the *archē*, whereas in dialectic one finds contested communication. Demonstration causes reasons not to move, and knowledge results; knowledge is secure against the movement of reasons. In dialectic reasons move, but they move only from reputable opinion to reputable opinion.

That this has political implications is already evident from Book *Delta* of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* where the fifth of six definitions of *archē* is, "That by whose choice that which is moved is moved and that which changes changes, e.g. the magistracies in cities, and oligarchies and monarchies and tyrannies, are called origins" (Aristotle, 1995: *Metaphysics* 1013a 9-14). *Archē* is origin, rule, and office.<sup>3</sup> First principles, from which, through demonstration, knowledge emerges and the movements of reason cease, are as one with the oligarchs and tyrants. Or, in another language, *archē*, understood both epistemically and politically, should be hegemonic in the sense of being beyond the grasp of the demand for reasons. From this perspective it is improper to question them, and any who do so will soon find themselves excluded both epistemically and politically. They will cease to be reputable. *De jure*, *archē* are not moved by the reasons of others; *de facto*, they must be protected from the movement of reasons. Domination strives for political stasis, dogmatism for epistemic stasis. Against them both, dialectic seeks to move with the reasons that move between people, though not yet all the people, only those with reputable opinions.

Now we move from the Classical to the Hellenistic. For the young Marx of his 1841 *Dissertation* the three schools of Hellenistic thought – Stoicism, Epicureanism, and Scepticism – "are the key to the true history of Greek philosophy" (Marx & Engels, 1975, 30). Of these the first two have long been respected, but Scepticism, especially in its Pyrrhonian guise, has always been something disreputable and worthy of denunciation (henceforward scepticism should be taken to refer to Pyrrhonism). As Marx noted, it is, at best, viewed as a "necessary evil" confronting philosophical dogmatisms (Marx & Engels, 1975, 34).<sup>4</sup> The Sceptic's crime is to not stop questioning. And a fruit of their stubborn questioning is an examination of the movement of reasons which appears to show that the notions of reason and knowledge, and in particular of the movement and stasis of reasons, to be found in Plato and Aristotle, and which still dominate so much of contemporary philosophising, were, and still are, arrant and oppressive

nonsense.

Most infamously it is the five modes of Agrippa which appear to show the impossibility of justification and thus knowledge: *archē* cannot escape the movement of reasons (Sextus Empiricus, 2000: I 164-177). These modes constitute a *Pentalemma*; a set of five interlocking sets of arguments which leave no room for escape. There is no sixth mode, or way out of the crushing logic of negativity which the *Pentalemma* elegantly unfolds. The first two modes from difference, relativity and disagreement, create a need for the giving and taking of reasons, but this practice will suffer one of three fates described by the three modes from logic; circularity, infinite regress, or hypothesis (simple dogmatism), and thus fail.<sup>5</sup> It fails because each of these fates leaves the movement of reasons in a condition of equipollence. All reasons appear as of equal value, so there are no better or worse reasons. As such, reasons, in their movement, cancel each other out. For the Pyrrhonians the answer was to suspend judgement, achieve tranquillity and live according to a fourfold practical criterion, living with careful attention to *phusis*, *pathē*, *technē*, and the *ethos* and *nomos* of the community in which one found oneself. However, they did not follow through the political implications of their investigations into the movement of reasons. We have to wait until Hegel for those to be made explicit.

The modes from difference are inherently social. Disagreement implies disagreement between more than one. Relativity, further explored in the ten modes of Aenesidemus (Sextus Empiricus, 2000: I. 35-163), concerns the fact that things appear differently to different creatures. We do not appear to be one person, or of one mind. Reason-giving is a response to this social condition. Where there is absolute agreement, or absolute identity, the need for reasons does not arise.

For Aristotle *archē* are true and primitive because they can stand on their own. This is what differentiates them from the dialectical concern with the opinions of others. In the Sceptic's idiom, *archē* do not require the external support of further reasons, and thus their justification, or legitimatization, does not fall into infinite regress or circularity and therefore fail. But to evade these modes *archē* must really stand on their own. They must be absolutely pure and primitive. But if they are so, then they fall into the other logical mode: the mode from hypothesis. If a first principle 'A' holds purely on its own without further reason, then there is no reason why the first principle 'not-A' should not equally stand on its own without further reason. And if both 'A' and 'not-A' are true and primitive, then we find ourselves in a condition of equipollence. There is no reason for choosing 'A' or 'not-A'. If one does dominate over the other then that domination is arbitrary and without any reason whatsoever. The Pyrrhonians did not work out the

political implications of such reasoning. But as Aristotle has already made the connection for us, there is no reason why we shouldn't. One simply needs to understand *archē* as oligarch, tyrant or sovereign, rather than as first principle. And now, instead of undoing all epistemological justification, the movement of reasons described by the *Pentalemma* undoes all attempts to legitimate political regimes. If political regimes seek to justify themselves by reference to other reasons then their legitimacy will be undone by infinite regress or circularity. If they seek to stand on their own ground then they will be undone by the mode from hypothesis. There appears to be no escape, and thus all political regimes appear to be arbitrary. They are not supported by reasons and thus can only endure through unreasonable domination. Equipollence, when one translates *archē* from the epistemological to the political, becomes nihilistic chaos: the war of all against all.

What follows from the *Pentalemma* could be called epistemic implosion. Any structure putatively founded on reason evaporates, or is revealed as always having been an illusion. Perhaps the most emphatic examples of this epistemic implosion are those revolutionary moments when the legitimacy and authority of a regime disappears in little more than the blink of an eye. At one moment a regime can have a status akin to that of natural necessity, making resistance appear futile, but at the next the spell of its majesty is dispelled and almost anything seems politically possible. The activity of the *Pentalemma* dispels the mirages of *archē*, whether they are epistemological or political. In the *Communist Manifesto* Marx and Engels unconsciously, but accurately, describe another example of this epistemic process when they write "All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last forced to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind" (Marx, 1973: 70-71). Here it is the operation of capital, rather than the philosophical praxis of the Pyrrhonian, that does the work of the undoing of *archē*. Unfortunately, not only obnoxious political reasons or forms of life are prey to Scepticism; the good are also susceptible, leaving nothing. Much as capital might be celebrated for undoing feudalism, it does not produce utopia. It just brings novel forms of misery. Equally scepticism without dialectic can be celebrated for undoing the foulest dogmatism, but this in itself only results in an equipollence indistinguishable from nihilism. Nihilism is the fate of all, unless a way is found of neutering or harnessing the negative power of the *Pentalemma*. Dialectic seeks to harness it, keeping within itself the promise of social change, but also developing out of itself the practice of sustaining a free and equal social normativity. Social change



is simply social movement and thus analogous to the perpetual movement of reasons described by the *Pentalemma*. In radical political terms this leads on to the question of the possibility of post-revolutionary social forms. If the *Pentalemma* is not tackled then there is no hope for such forms of life, only the promise of eternal violence. While these epistemic obscurities are not sufficient conditions for a post-revolutionary society, they are necessary ones.

Are there epistemic and political alternatives to dialectic? The traditional philosophical approach to the threat of the *Pentalemma* has been to attempt to refute the three modes from logic. This appears to be logically impossible, leaving the two modes from difference as the focus of attack. Here political and epistemic strategies can merge. One strategy is to crush dissent, which, if successful, would disable the mode from disagreement. Politically this is commonplace, but it also operates in philosophy where the Sceptic suffers what can seem like perpetual *ad hominem* attacks. Sceptics are mad, bad, or mad and bad. Even the likes of Hume indulge in such slander and libel (Hume, 1975: 159-160). Analytic and Continental name-calling is another example of this poison-spitting practice. An even more violent strategy is to attempt to erase difference qua relativity and assert a totalitarian present. A direct path can conceptually be traced from the *Pentalemma*, via philosophical incompetence, to the world of propaganda, the camps and secret police. A less toxic variation on this approach might be to assert that the proletariat is the universal class, as Marx does in the introduction to the *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* (Marx, 1975: 243-257).<sup>6</sup> Evidently this was not consciously a counter-sceptical strategy, but through the cunning of reason it can be interpreted as serving as one. Philosophical problems do not evaporate, or cease to operate, just because one is not conscious of them.

These strategies attempt to forestall epistemic implosion. But epistemic implosion is also the moment of revolutionary opportunity, of free social movement. In it existing forms of life can be swept away. Philosophical dogmatism is here in league with political quietism.

Hegel realised that refutation was a fool's errand, and that erasing difference was politically and ethically obnoxious. He had seen the dashing of the hopes of 1789. He appreciated that the negative power of reason uncovered by the Sceptic must be domesticated. Hegel calls his instrument of domestication by the name of dialectic. One aspect of his strategy was to rearticulate differences as contradictions. As contradictions they presume a totality, and this totality allows one to escape the *Pentalemma*. But it is a totality where identity and difference are dialectically intertwined. Difference is not erased but taken up in *aufhebung*. In his *Science of Logic*



Hegel's 'Law' of contradiction is that "everything is inherently contradictory... Contradiction is the root of all movement and vitality; it is only in so far as something has a contradiction within it that it moves, has an urge and activity" (Hegel, 1969: 439). Difference can become contradiction, it is alleged, because "Difference as such contains its two sides as *moments*; in diversity they fall indifferently apart; in opposition as such, they are sides of the difference, one being determined only by the other, and therefore only moments; but they are no less determined within themselves, mutually indifferent and mutually exclusive: *the self-subsistent determinations of reflection*" (Hegel, 1969: 431). The *Pentalemma* shows how with diversity, justification and legitimization fails, and how values and institutions that depend on those processes fall apart. Contradiction is a device with which Hegel tries to reinterpret the undeniable diversity of life as identity-indifference and difference-in-identity. By dialectically contaminating simple diversity with identity, Hegel hopes to elude the falling apart that follows from diversity, without giving up on freedom. The *Pentalemma* becomes subsumed in the system. Indeed, in the 1825-6 *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* Hegel baldly asserts "Scepticism is dialectic" (Hegel, 2006: 302). However, so few readers of Hegel seem to be paying attention at such moments: not Marx, and not Hegelian Marxism. Dialectic and contradiction became the theoretical centrepiece of Marxism without anyone appearing to grasp what their actual function is (e.g. Schaff, 1960). Admittedly diligence in the reading of Hegel's logic is often a sanity-crushing ordeal, but something crucial is missed without it. An ingenuous, if in Hegel's hands flawed, epistemic device of some genius is too often mistaken for a thesis about how the world is. Dialectics becomes, in much Marxism, a dogmatic dialetheism (Priest, 1990, 1991). The problem here lies not with dialectics as ontology in itself. It is rather that if dialectic functions only ontologically, and not epistemically, then Marxism, or any emancipatory political endeavour, is condemned to dogmatism and thus to a fate of violence or epistemic implosion.

### Learning from the Mistakes of Lucio Colletti

The only discussion of Pyrrhonism in the Marxist tradition, that I have come across, is to be found in the work, from the late 1960s and early 1970s, of Lucio Colletti (a thinker best known in the English speaking world for his introduction to a volume of Marx's early writings (Marx, 1975: 7-56)). In his work Colletti has been presented as attempting to purge Marxism of Hegel and replace him with Kant. This was the only way, he believed, of maintaining the materialism of Marxism. The usual response to Colletti is to

point out the inadequacy of his understanding of Hegel (Smith, 1986). The focus is often on Colletti's seemingly wild claim that Hegel eradicates the material and thus is incompatible with Marx. There is merit to this objection, but I think that whatever his exegetical failings, Colletti did, perhaps unwittingly, put his finger on a real philosophical problem in his writings on Marx and Hegel. He raised the spectre of Pyrrhonism. And I still think this even when his exegetical failings are found to extend to Pyrrhonism.

In his 1968 essay 'From Hegel to Marcuse', Colletti equates Pyrrhonism, and the use made of its devices by Hegel in the chapter on 'Sense-Certainty' in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, with the "destruction... of the certainty that sensory reality exists" (Colletti, 1972: 126). He then claims that this destruction is equated by Marcuse with "the emancipation of Man himself" (Colletti, 1972: 134). Colletti thinks that this amounts not to an attack on capitalism, but to a denunciation of science and technology. For him, Marcuse is not a Marxist but a petty-bourgeois anarchist (Colletti, 1972: 233). Lukács is also accused of "inscribing Marxism itself in the arc of the idealistic reaction against science" (Colletti, 1972: 134). Marxism is not anarchism or liberalism for Colletti precisely because it *begins* by examining the world as it is in all its horror, and not with fantasies of how it might be. This examination is sustained by reason, and is in the spirit of careful scientific investigation.

Of course Hegel does not use Pyrrhonism to cultivate external-world scepticism or to destroy the material world. He is using the negativity of reason uncovered by Sceptics in order to himself uncover, amongst other things, the philosophical incompetence of empiricism. And empiricism is incompetent from the Sceptic's perspective, because it cannot resist the *Pentalemma*, and thus cannot provide knowledge of the world or of anything else. But Colletti gets stuck in his understanding of Pyrrhonism as what he calls in his 1975 New Left Review essay 'Marxism and the Dialectic', "skeptis directed *against matter*" (Colletti, 1975: 12). As he sees it, he wants to restore matter to Marxism, and so he feels he must resist the sceptical dialectic that he thinks Hegel uses to erase matter. For Colletti this entails replacing dialectical contradiction with real opposition (Kant's *Realopposition* or *Realrepugnanz*) as he feels the principle of non-contradiction is necessary for knowledge and science. He thinks he is disarming sceptical dialectic by replacing illusory contradiction with real opposition. He fails to grasp that Hegel probably developed epistemic contradiction out of Kantian opposition precisely in order to domesticate Scepticism. Colletti effectively reasserts the Sceptical modes from difference which Hegel tried to harness through contradiction. So actually Colletti is empowering the abyssal negativity of the unleashed *Pentalemma*. Instead of saving Marxism for science, he is

condemning it to a Pyrrhonian hell.

Colletti's most extensive consideration of Pyrrhonism takes place in two chapters of his *Marxism and Hegel* (Colletti, 1979: 68-105). Colletti is quite right there, in an attack on Lukács's pretensions to grasp Hegel, to claim that Hegel is incomprehensible without an understanding of the Pyrrhonian appreciation of the actual movement of reasons.<sup>7</sup> But then things go awry. He argues that Pyrrhonism *qua* *scepsis* towards matter "is indispensable to philosophy *qua* idealism, [but] the critico-materialist point of view cannot help but imply, contrariwise, a *scepsis towards reason*" (Colletti, 1973: 92). But Pyrrhonism is precisely a *scepsis towards reason* in that it investigates reason-giving more carefully than dogmatic philosophy does. Etymologically, scepticism means the practice of investigation, not the practice of doubting. The danger for Colletti is that in seeking to save Marx from vulgar Hegelian Marxists, he robs Marxism of the dialectic that it requires to avoid epistemic implosion or a collapse into violence. In the end he only robbed himself of Marx and began a long and unhappy political journey that ended, in the 1990s, in the fetid embrace of Silvio Berlusconi (Lane, 2001).

Why bother with Colletti at all? Is such a misunderstanding of Pyrrhonism really better than no understanding at all? Perhaps. His misguided championing of difference over contradiction, when viewed against the backdrop of the biography of his Marxist years, does raise an interesting question for the constellation: Marx – Domination – Emancipation. In championing difference he was unwittingly championing the emancipatory aspects of epistemic implosion: how the undoing of epistemic first principles is as one with the undoing of the oligarch and tyrant. The use of the *Pentalemma* emancipates, but dialectic, understood both epistemically and politically, is required if implosion or insurrection is to not simply deliver the emancipated into the hands of novel forms of domination.

From his experience of Italian fascism Colletti had a phobia of all "the paraphernalia of orchestrated unanimity", but he was drawn to Communism as "an historical movement whose acceptance involved no sacrifice of one's own reason" (Colletti, 1974: 4). He reacted against the local strategy of seeing Marxism, and in particular Gramsci, as the direct heir of Italian historicism and Hegelianism (i.e. Vico and Croce). Against these he argued that "from a strictly epistemological point of view, there is only one great modern thinker who can be of assistance to us in constructing a materialist theory of knowledge – Immanuel Kant" (Colletti, 1974: 2). He failed to appreciate that it was Hegel's insight into Kant's failure to refute scepticism towards matter and reason that set him on his path to his system. But in terms of responding to the *Pentalemma*, Colletti was repulsed by the negative strategies of the

extermination of difference and dissent, as well as positive strategies that attempt to conjure unity through propaganda and enforced totalities. For the contrarian Marxist Colletti, "The really important question is the political nature of the power that emerges after any revolution, whatever the coercive force of the struggles that precede it. My main preoccupation has been to combat the heritage of Stalinist contempt for socialist democracy" (Colletti, 1974: 23). Again: "the mere exercise of violence is not the same thing as the revolutionary transformation of social relationships, and does not guarantee it" (Colletti, 1974: 24). His sensitivity to the threat of domination is not cowardice in the face of the use of violence. He is taking the long view, not to create a constitution of the future, but to worry whether the tactics of today's political opposition might at least allow the future possibility of something that might fairly be called a form of social life without domination or dogmatism.

### Future Movements of Dialectic?

In Colletti's concern for socialist democracy, there is a sign of the problem of how disagreement can disable conversation. This is a practical as well as epistemic problem. How often has the Left, in whatever form, appeared to be unable to engage with those who do not already agree with it, even with those engaged in passionate insurrection? Colletti's regret was that Marxism, in his eyes, had "become a purely cultural and academic phenomenon... the foible of a few university professors" (Colletti, 1974: 28). When being interviewed by Perry Anderson for the *New Left Review*, he notoriously concluded "The only way Marxism can be revived is if no more books like *Marxism and Hegel* are published, and instead books [like]... Luxembourge's *Accumulation of Capital* – or even Lenin's *Imperialism*, which was a popular brochure – are once again written' as 'they are works which both have a true cognitive value, and an operative strategic purpose" (Colletti, 1974: 27-28). But for the cognitive value of any work to be sustained it must endure the *Pentalemma*. Dialectic, or something functionally akin to dialectic, must be operative.

Does this mean that more books like *Marxism and Hegel* are required? No, but work which aspires to an operative strategic purpose must be aware of what is required for true cognitive value to be sustained. They must be dialectical in an epistemic sense. Does this mean that Hegelian Marxism is the answer? Well a properly dialectical Hegelian Marxism would be a novelty and worth a try. Lukács, Korsch, Marcuse et al failed to grasp both the epistemic contours of Hegel's philosophy, and the fundamental philosophical problem raised by Pyrrhonism. But why go through the

Hegelian torture garden when one can address Pyrrhonism head on. Traditional Pyrrhonism is attacked for being politically quiescent. This might be called Right Pyrrhonism. As with Right Hegelianism, it is a form of thought that represses its own emancipatory potential. But this Right Pyrrhonism is, anyway, incoherent because it recommends submitting to the status quo (the *ethos* and *nomos* of where one finds oneself) when sceptical practice causes the epistemic implosion of that status quo. The strategy of political passivity adopted by Right Pyrrhonism undoes itself. A Left Pyrrhonism would focus less on the well-known sceptical mantra *ou mallon* – “No more this than that”, but on another: “Let us oppose!” (Sextus Empiricus, 2000: I 202-205). From this opposition to the world where one finds oneself, the task would be to develop a dialectic that coheres both with the insights into the nature of social reason found in the *Pentalemma*, as well as with the Leftist concern to move beyond the mere overturning of domination and dogmatism, and towards a sustainable post-revolutionary society. At least one could dream of futures other than that of the triumph of the Hegelian Absolute. Thus the operative strategic purpose identified by Colletti might be supplemented with a dialectic, not mediated by Hegelianism, but developed directly through a Left Pyrrhonism.

Hegel will always be there for hardy souls who revel on the iciest heights of philosophy. In Addition 3 to section 19 of the *Encyclopaedia Logic* a Pyrrhonian parable can be found: “In earlier days men meant no harm by thinking; they thought away freely and fearlessly. But because they pushed on thinking in this way, it turned out that the highest relationships in life were compromised by it. Thinking deprived what was positive of power. Political constitutions fell victim to thought... Consequently philosophers were banished and killed for seeking to overthrow religion and the State... In this way thinking asserted its validity in the actual world... Being thereby made aware of the power of thinking, people began to investigate its claims more closely, and professed to have discovered that it was presumptuous and could not accomplish what it had undertaken. Instead of arriving at the cognition of the essence of... truth itself, this thinking overturned the state and religion. For this reason, a justification of thinking with regard to its results was demanded; and the inquiry into the nature and competence of thinking is just what has very largely constituted the concern of modern philosophy” (Hegel, 1991: 48). This tale also calls into question the competence of political thought in so far as it guides political action. Without dialectic the Left cannot accomplish what it has undertaken. Insurrection in itself cannot lead to a post-revolutionary world. The answer need not be to, as Colletti did, give up and reconcile oneself to the contingent domination and slaughter of the world in which we find ourselves. The answer can be

for the philosophically inclined to take up anew the task of dialectic. For the task of dialectic is nothing other than putting reason in the service of human emancipation. This little story, as does a Left Pyrrhonism, begins to give the lie to Marx's eleventh thesis, or rather, requires its redrafting. It is dogmatists who have only interpreted the world. Competent and socially active philosophers have always changed the world negatively, or inspired others to do so. That in itself is no miraculous philosophical achievement. The real challenge is to be dialectical, to destroy dogma in order to permit the indistinct commonality of social life to flourish, to ensure that from the implosion of old dogmatism and domination something other than new dogmatism and domination can emerge. What follows is not simply *an-archē*. That would leave the problem untouched. What follows, for philosophy against dogmatism, is the future task of dialectic. It is the movement of reasons in the *Pentalemma*, taken up in dialectic, that can not only reveal the chains of dogmatism that bind, but also free us from them. As for struggle against domination, it will continue as it always has, but with renewed hope that the other worlds which remain possible might also be ones without dogmatism as well as domination.

**Richard Fitch (richardfitch1745@gmail.com)** is an independent legal and political philosopher whose research focuses on the social, legal, and political implications of radical scepticism. He recently received a doctorate in the philosophy of law from Birkbeck, University of London.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> A version of this essay was first delivered at the 2011 'Studies in Social & Political Thought Annual Conference: *Forms of Domination and Emancipation*'. I am grateful to the organisers for this opportunity.

<sup>2</sup> This is not to say the history is not philosophically intriguing. See (Popkin, 2003) for the early modern reception of Pyrrhonism. On Kant and Scepticism see (Forster, 2008). (Forster, 1989) can serve as an introduction to Hegel and Scepticism.

<sup>3</sup> Reiner Schürmann claims, in the wake of Heidegger, that it is Aristotle who first brings these meanings together (Schürmann, 1990: 97-105).

<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately Marx never wrote his promised work presenting 'in detail the cycle of Epicurean, Stoic, and Sceptic philosophy in their relation to the whole of Greek speculation' (Marx & Engels, 1975, 29).



<sup>5</sup> This reconstruction of Pyrrhonism, and its implications for social and political thought, relies on the fuller exposition found in (Fitch, 2011). Pending a published version of that exposition (Thorsrud, 2009) and (Bett, 2010) provide useful introductions to Pyrrhonism. The five modes of Agrippa are outlined at (Sextus Empiricus, 2000: I 164-177). They are explored in detail in (Barnes, 1990). The ten modes of Aenesidemus are explored in (Annas & Barnes, 1985).

<sup>6</sup> *Geist* in Hegel might also be taken to function in this manner.

<sup>7</sup> The challenge of scepticism, including the young Hegel's 1802 essay on the topic (Hegel, 2000), simply does not make an appearance in Lukács' *The Young Hegel* (Lukács, 1975).

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# On the Left-wing Reading of Levinas: Derrida, Lingis, Dussel

by Andrew Ryder

## Abstract

Leftists have often received the ethical phenomenology of Emmanuel Levinas with suspicion, on the grounds that it seems to lack a political appreciation of exploitation. While Levinas's thought includes strong considerations of cultural particularity, his ethics also emphasizes responsibility to the physical suffering of the oppressed. A reading of Derrida's approach to the political applications of Levinas's thought reveals broader significance to elements of Levinas's messianism than his Zionism first suggests. Building on this deconstructive reading, the respective works of Alphonso Lingis and Enrique Dussel emerge as new investigations of the political importance of Levinasian ethics to contemporary socialism.

The ethical thought of Emmanuel Levinas was intended as something other than a politics. In his article "Politics After!", Levinas explicitly asserts that the ethical must take precedence over the political (1994a: 188-195). The preface to *Totality and Infinity* suggests that his own thought of ethics as first philosophy would permanently dethrone the primacy of ontology, which will always rely on a politicized war of all against all (1969 [1961]: 21). This emphasis on the ethical, and specifically an ethics of alterity, has become widely influential. An unsettling face-to-face encounter that cannot be adequately anticipated by subjectivity or knowledge has become a paradigmatic outlook, one that demands the utmost rigor and responsibility, a refusal to disregard the necessarily foreign character of an object of study in favor of a devouring assimilation to the known.

However, this demand for responsibility, the exigency of a commitment to preserve alterity, can always be suspected of slipping into a weakened "respect for difference"—in the words of one scathing critic, "a guilt-driven empathy or compassion ultimately indistinguishable from a distanced condescension" (Hallward, 2001: xxxv). Levinas has been subject to a number of politicized interventions that suspect his project of obscuring

the political problem of exploitation. Among these we might mention Fredric Jameson's contention that "it is ethics itself which is the ideological vehicle and the legitimation of concrete structures of power and domination;" that is, a masking of the larger historico-political forces in which we are enmeshed (1981: 114).

The suspicion for Levinas felt by a number of figures on the left is doubtless inflected by the circumstances of his prominence in the French context. As Simon Critchley points out, the renewal of interest in ethics took place in large part in the wake of the death of revolutionary Marxism and the coming to prominence of the *nouveau philosophes* (2002: 2). Levinas's work was also approached with great interest alongside the theological turn in French phenomenology (Critchley, 2002: 3). For these reasons, Levinas's thought is sometimes caricatured as nothing more than "the holy water with which the priest consecrates the heart-burnings of the aristocrat," famously denounced by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (1983 [1848]: 230). However, while Levinas is often read as a religious thinker, the nature of the religion to which Levinas appeals should not be taken for granted. In Jill Robbins's reading, for Levinas,

the relationship to God is, however, not a *credo*, nor is it any kind of ontological assertion. It is the primacy of doing for the other. That is the sole relationship between man and God. In many ways this 'Judaism' is closer to an atheism (1991: 146-147).

From this perspective, Levinas's ethical thought is fundamentally concerned with relations between people and the concomitant dangers of violence and exploitation, rather than a treatment of a person's duties to an obscure God. We might locate two distinct strains of post-Levinasian thought that have considerable political import. The first, which one might consider as a "right wing" variant, is essentially bound up in the Zionist project and the unique ethical value of the Jewish people. This interpretation finds common cause with certain mainstream Catholics (famously, John Paul II), and maintains Levinas's Eurocentrism.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, a second line of thought derived from Levinas, we might describe as the Levinasian left. This current maintains the significance of the phenomenology of alterity and the theme of responsibility to an exploited other, done violence by subjectivity. However, these Levinasians are sharply critical of the apparent complicity of Levinas's opinions (if not his properly philosophical contributions) with Western imperialism.

More than this, a Levinasian left articulates an ethico-politico-economic imperative to alleviate human suffering by means of a collective task, a

renewed socialism in particular. These thinkers may be seen as comparable with, though notably distinct from, the post-Althusserians (Alain Badiou, Étienne Balibar, Jacques Rancière, Ernesto Laclau, Slavoj Žižek), left-Heideggerians (Jean-Luc Nancy, Giorgio Agamben, Bernard Stiegler), and Deleuzeans (Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri) who have achieved prominence in discussions regarding progressive politics. For the purposes of this study, I will approach this “Levinasan left” with a particularly classical understanding of the definition of the left-wing. That is to say, I take the term to refer to proponents of egalitarianism, including the overcoming of economic inequality and exploitation by means of a political struggle, particularly imprinted with an understanding guided by Marxism. For the purposes of this study, I will in large part bracket Levinas’s relevance to other political struggles and social movements, such as feminism and the question of animal rights. This is not to say that Dussel, Lingis and especially Derrida do not have a great deal to say about these broader concerns.

Political thought on both the right and the left can take inspiration from Levinas’s pronouncements regarding the practical effects of his work. Levinas famously advocated Zionism, and showed comparatively little concern for the predicament of the Palestinians (Caro, 2009: 671-684). Throughout Levinas’s comments, there is a worrisome emphasis on European pre-eminence and on Jewish and Greek civilization as expressing the essence of the human (2002: 65, 137). These cultural preferences seem to indicate a certain sympathy for the cultural right. However, Levinas also spoke strongly of ethics as necessarily indicating a concern for the material needs of other people, advocating for economic justice in terms that indicate socialist sympathies (2002: 52). We cannot be certain what relationship (if any) might exist between Levinas’s opinions, stated offhandedly in interviews, and the formal architecture of his philosophy. Because many alternative political positions appear validated by his statements, it is necessary to explore a more rigorous approach to his phenomenological writings and their apparent political implications.

## **Derrida and Levinasan Politics**

Jacques Derrida has been largely responsible for Levinas’s broader reception, particularly in the Anglophone world. In his 1964 article, “Violence and Metaphysics,” Derrida writes that Levinas’s ethics is distinct from our usual understanding of moral inquiry. This is because Levinas’s work is not at all prescriptive and does not approach behaviors or practices in order to determine if they are, or are not, ethical. Rather, Levinas attempts a phenomenological account of the experience of the ethical, prior to any

activity or the formulation of norms:

Levinas does not seek to propose laws or moral rules, does not seek to determine *a* morality, but rather the essence of the ethical relation in general. But as this determination does not offer itself as a *theory* of Ethics, in question then, is an Ethics of Ethics. In this case, it is perhaps serious that this Ethics of Ethics can occasion neither a determined ethics nor determined laws without negating and forgetting itself (Derrida, 1978 [1964]: 111).

This indicates that Levinas's ethics is so detached from daily programs and imperatives that it makes no pretense to governing the practical behavior of individuals, let alone their political relations. While Levinas's ethics remains more radical and originary than an inquiry into hypothetical behaviors, it would be too extreme to conclude that Levinas is entirely apolitical.

More than three decades later, in his 1996 article "A Word of Welcome," Derrida extends the necessity of a presence of a "third" in Levinas's work, mediating the asymmetrical relationship between Subject and Other, in order to locate the possibility of justice (1999 [1996]: 30). This third introduces a mediation that "protect[s] against the vertigo of ethical violence itself," preventing the mere masochism of an obstinate Other that makes constant and irresistible demands on me (Derrida, 1999 [1996]: 30). However, this third is paradoxically itself immediate, occurring at the very origin of the ethical relation (Derrida, 1999 [1996]: 32). This consideration of the third eventually inflects a particular understanding of messianism.

Derrida reads Levinas's Zionism as expressed in "Politics After!" as advocating a politics beyond politics and aimed at a peace that is not purely political; nonetheless, "in neither case does the beyond of the political, the beyond of the *purely* political, gesture toward the non-political" (Derrida, 1999 [1996]: 79). In Derrida's view, Levinas writes of a "messianic politics, that of the State of David as opposed to the State of Caesar," that would produce a peace that would not be non-political, but that "*perhaps exceeds* the political" (1999 [1996]: 79-80). Derrida reads the distinction between politics and ethics in Levinas as a hiatus that itself opens up the possibility of ethical or political decisions; rather than a statement of the intent to purify ethics of politics, it requires "us to think law and politics otherwise," extricating us from pre-established solutions and schemas (1999 [1996]: 20-21). Derrida points out that, in contrast to the tradition of political philosophy that sees war as primary, Levinas asserts a priority to the peaceful, one that is not achieved by a "dialectical treaty between the same and the other" (1999

[1996]: 91). Rather, peace, understood as the primacy of my responsibility to alterity, precedes the subjectivity that will later come into conflict with others.

Levinas denounces the “peace of empires” in the preface to *Totality and Infinity* (1969 [1961]: 22). This indicates that he does not have a merely adjudicated peace between states in mind. In the Levinasian schema, a mere absence of military hostility could not be considered peace. Indeed, circumstances in which certain elements of society are oppressed, excluded, or deprived of basic necessities of life would be included in the ontology of war. Levinas explicitly speaks of the need to be welcoming—that is, to provide for—even those who appear culturally other: “a people should accept those who come and settle among them—even though they are foreigners with their own customs and clothes, their own way of speaking, their own smell” (2000: 98). In “Peace and Proximity,” Levinas writes of a crisis in the European conscience and its “ancient universalism” (1996, 163). While National Socialism and Stalinism are the greatest catastrophes in the development of the West, Levinas also identifies “the continuing poverty of the Third World” (1996, 163). His response to this is to encourage attention to an understanding of peace derived from theology rather than political philosophy: “Peace as a relation with alterity, irreducible to a common genus where, already in a logical community, it would only have a relative alterity” (1996: 165). This ethical peace is necessary in order to ameliorate the merely political understanding of peace implicit in realist and idealist political traditions. For Levinas, then, the answer to Europe’s crisis is in European theological thought, brought into communication with political philosophy: “Both the hierarchy taught by Athens and the *abstract* and slightly *anarchical* ethical individualism taught by Jerusalem are *simultaneously necessary* in order to suppress violence” (1996, 24). This has the effect of a messianic politics, one that he believed could be exported into the Middle East by Zionism.

Levinas hoped that the messianic politics would take place alongside the Israeli state, a possibility about which Derrida expresses reservations (Derrida, 1999: 81-82). Derrida points out that what is essential in Levinas’s ethico-politics and that what is at the core of his Zionism is the insight he saw as essential to the Torah: “concern for the stranger, the widow and the orphan, a preoccupation with the other person” (Levinas, 2000: 61). Derrida points out the distinction between Levinas’s messianic Zionism, which hopes for a future state that will not rely on exploitation, and the unfortunate abuses on the part of the Israeli state that have in fact occurred (1999: 81-82). As Derrida reads Levinas’s insight,



It is necessary to welcome the other in his alterity, without warning, and thus not to pause to recognize his real predicates. It is thus necessary, beyond all perception, to receive the other while running the risk, a risk that is always troubling, strangely troubling, like the stranger (*unheimlich*), of a hospitality offered to the *guest* as *ghost* or *Geist* or *Gast*. There would be no hospitality without the chance of spectrality (1999: 111-112).

This passage clearly links the possibility of a Levinasan politics to the reinvestigation of Marxism suggested by Derrida in *Specters of Marx*. In this book, Derrida calls for “*a structural messianism, a messianism without religion, even a messianic without messianism, an idea of justice [...]*” (1994: 59). This possible link between Levinas and Marx had been explored previously by two thinkers: The first systematically, and the second implicitly. I would suggest that it was Enrique Dussel, the Latin American philosopher, who most fully advocated an alliance between Levinas and Marx. The North American writer Alphonso Lingis, in his *The Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common*, also pursues an extension of Levinas into Marxist territory, though in a more phenomenological and less historico-political vein than Dussel. Perhaps Derrida’s reading of Levinas will allow us to better hear these American voices, and to explore unexpected new avenues for the project of an ethics of alterity.

### **Lingis and the Transformation of Levinasan Geopolitics**

The reader may be surprised to see Lingis described as a “political” thinker, in that his work on the body, eroticism, culture, libido, and community seems to fall outside of the rubric of “political philosophy.” Nonetheless, I see Lingis as perhaps the first of the thinkers inspired by Levinas to attempt a severe break with his Eurocentrism in favor of a more pluralist, and indeed emancipatory, consideration of alterity.

Lingis met with Levinas while producing his translation of *Totality and Infinity* in the late 1960s (Hooke and Fuchs, 2003: 37). His work draws on a variety of thinkers, some of whom might be seen as conceptually linked to Levinas (Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Derrida), but also a number of others quite alien to Levinas’s perspective (Nietzsche, Freud, Lacan, Foucault, Lyotard, Deleuze and Guattari). Indeed, one might wonder whether Lingis is accurately described as a “Levinasan” at all. Nonetheless, Lingis names Levinas as the crucial figure for his thought (Hooke and Fuchs, 2003: 36). What is distinctive in his work is a speculative extension of the Levinasan insight into alterity.

In his 1994 work *The Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common*, Lingis anticipates the late Derrida's reading of Levinas by arguing that community can be thought otherwise, from outside the conditions of identity (Lingis, 1994: ix). Lingis explicitly speaks of our current political institutions as being judged by those they have excluded: "We obscurely feel that our generation is being judged, ultimately, by the abandon of the Cambodians, and Somalians, and the social outcasts in the streets of our own cities" (1994: x). Lingis reinvestigates the origins of rationalism by contending that Greek philosophy's break with tradition was predicated on an encounter with otherness. Reasons begin to be proffered that are other than the uninterrogated ancestral ones when "the Greeks begin to give a reason that the stranger, who does not have these fathers and these gods, can accept, a reason that any lucid mind can accept" (Lingis, 1994: 3). However, this rationalism establishes a universalism that elides alterity; rationality becomes the truth of everyone: "As the individual finds that his own thought is representative of the whole system of rational thought, he will find on his fellow-man but the reflection of his own rational nature" (Lingis, 1994: 10). Impersonal rationalism relies on a globalized ipseity.

Lingis's goal is to a return to a consideration of the initial encounter with the other that stands between traditionalism and rationalism: "This *other community* is not simply absorbed into the rational community; it recurs, it troubles the rational community, as its double or its shadow" (1994: 10). This other community is not the production of work, but instead is indicated by the imperative produced by the face of the other. This imperative is produced partly intellectually, but also empirically, by the sensibility of experience (Lingis, 1994: 11). Further, this community involves a relation to weakness and finitude: "One enters into community not by affirming oneself and one's forces but by exposing oneself as a loss, to sacrifice" (Lingis, 1994: 12). Unlike contract theories of government from Hobbes to Rousseau, the entry into community is not based on any rational calculus of goals or benefit to an individual. Rather, community imposes radical risk even to ontological self-definition.

While this is a formal or historical account, Lingis is not shy about linking it to more contemporary developments in geopolitics. He explicitly links this appearance of the other to Latin American guerrillas; more than once, to the Sandinistas (1994: 34-37, 61). In *Trust*, Lingis writes an encomium to Che Guevara (2004: 74-75). The reader might wonder whether this is simply an example of revolutionary romanticism. Lingis provides no explicitly political account of why an unsettling encounter with alterity that engenders ethical responsibility would be so well-exemplified by guerrilla fighters, rather than by other threatening examples of otherness, such as

paramilitaries or bandits. His phenomenological account moves the reader by its stylistic force and its descriptive fidelity to the experience of revolutionary struggle. The reader must link this illustration to a claim made by Levinas:

The other concerns me in all his material misery. It is a matter, eventually, of nourishing him, of clothing him. It is exactly the biblical assertion: Feed the hungry, clothe the naked, give drink to the thirsty, give shelter to the shelterless. The material side of man, the material life of the other, concerns me and, in the other, takes on for me an elevated signification and concerns my holiness (2002: 52).

While Levinas's phenomenological writings remain metaethical, he here affirms that the ethical duty to the other that animates his philosophical work is essentially a concern with physical well-being rather than spiritual edification. Levinas ties this to scripture and also to the holy, which for Levinas is the respect and awe for God (1990: 141).

Lingis maintains the essential ethical commitment to the material needs of the other from Levinas. However, he secularizes Levinas's biblical and religious commitments, as well as possibly removing their monotheistic biases. From here, we still find ourselves wondering how Lingis is able to find solid grounding for his support for leftist guerilla movements. We can demonstrate that Levinas's work provides a rigorous phenomenological argument for responsibility to the Other human, and that this responsibility is material and physical rather than being understood as a duty to the spiritual betterment of one's neighbor. However, while this perspective supports charity, generosity, and anti-poverty initiatives, we cannot establish how this might give inspiration to a revolutionary movement, particularly one that resorts to violence, as Guevara and other guerillas did. In fact, we might wonder whether this is an error on Lingis's part; Mahatma Gandhi or perhaps Nelson Mandela would seem to be much clearer examples of Levinas's principles.

If Lingis is right that the ethical encounter is made clear by guerilla fighters, he requires a consideration of political circumstances that is implicit rather than programmatically formulated in his work. Without providing an extensive argument, his work suggests a more just society in which men, women and children can be better fed, clothed and cared for on a mass scale—socialism is the natural consequence of the Levinasan perspective. Levinas himself said,

Marxism represented a generosity, whatever the way in which one understands the materialist doctrine which is its basis. There is in Marxism the recognition of the other; there is certainly the idea that the other must become egoist. But the noble hope consists in healing everything, in installing, beyond the chance of individual charity, a regime without evil (2002: 81).

Here Levinas indeed gives a partial endorsement of Marxist communism. Notwithstanding, he follows these remarks with deep concern regarding Stalinist historical consequences.

Lingis implies that the guerilla method practiced by Guevara is a process of bringing this ethico-political desideratum into reality. With this in mind, the guerilla warfare practiced in this context is apparently distinct from the ontological war described by Levinas in the preface of *Totality and Infinity* (1969 [1961]: 21). Rather, this struggle is conceived of as a necessary struggle on behalf of material ethical goals that must make strategic use of force in order to resist the violence of the established order. This can be compared to Levinas's own statements in defense of Zionism, describing the "noble adventure" and Israel's "running this great daily risk." He also speaks of a state as "the only form in which Israel—the people and the culture—can survive" (2002: 82). In another interview, Levinas states, "Israel represents a security in a world where politics count, and where the cultural depends on the political" (2002: 198). Here Levinas indicates a measured concern for realistic politics, in this particular instance, in support of Judaic culture.

Read in tandem with Lingis's comments on Guevara, it appears that Lingis has jettisoned Levinas's concern with an embattled culture that requires political security. He has replaced this with a greater emphasis on the material (rather than cultural) aspects of Levinas's ethics, leading him to a more permanent support for socialism than found in Levinas. He has maintained, however, the idea that ethical goals (in this case socialism) sometimes require adventure, risk, and a state protected by force of arms.

It is possible that the transformation here effected by Lingis is essentially the replacement of Israel as privileged site of geo-ethical-political engagement with Cuba or Nicaragua. This is accomplished by his comparative lack of concern for religious or cultural identity and corresponding greater emphasis on political enactment of socialist goals. If this is the case, can we be in any way convinced that either Cuba (at the time of Guevara's guerrilla revolution) or Israel (in the period of its struggle for survival) function as ethically privileged political sites? Is it possible that Levinas happens to prefer Israel, and that Lingis has a personal commitment

to Cuba and Nicaragua and that these are essentially psychological, pre-phenomenological opinions? As we have read in Derrida, it is conceivable that ethics happens at an entirely different level than this, and neither Levinas nor Lingis have truly articulated a relation between an ethics of alterity and a just politics.

With a view towards this question, it is important to consider the work of Enrique Dussel. Dussel's project, I argue, is very similar to aspects of Lingis's work, in that it argues for a profound link between socialist struggles and Levinasian ethics. While Lingis writes in a literary, anti-systematic style, Dussel constructs a metaphysical project that aims to produce political thought radically reformulated from a post-Levinasian perspective. Dussel provides a crucial supplement to or even explanation of Lingis's ethico-literary portrait of the guerrilla fighter; his writings provide the conceptual armature for a Levinasian understanding of socialist struggle.

### **Dussel and a Socialism of Ethical Alterity**

Levinas's *Philosophy of Liberation* begins with what appears to be a literalization of Levinas's *Totality and Infinity*. Levinas begins his famous work with a concatenation of reason, warfare, and politics: "Politics is opposed to morality, as philosophy is to naïveté" (1969 [1961]: 21). Dussel repeats this, but in an explicit geopolitical context: "From Heraclitus to Karl von Clausewitz and Henry Kissinger, 'war is the origin of everything,' if by 'everything' one understands the order or system that world dominators control by their power and armies" (1985: 1). Here Dussel argues that philosophy and its privilege for war is conditioned by the imperialist context in which it is formulated; philosophy has formulated the link between rationalism, ontology, and aggression as a corollary to the pre-eminence of these values in the conduct of international relations.

While Levinas writes of a radical conceptual problem, Dussel links this problem to its macrocosmic effects. Thought for Dussel is always already implicated in its conditioning environs, including the events of empirical politics. He argues that from the perspective of ontology, men, women and children are viewed "as interpretable beings, as known ideas, as mediations or internal possibilities with the horizon of the comprehension of Being (1985: 2-3). More than this, ontology has a precise geographical point of original perspective, that is, Europe, which posits itself as the archetypal first person singular (1985: 8). Dussel argues that subsequent critical developments, phenomenology and structuralism, whatever their apparent breaks with this transcendent subjectivity, lack an understanding of the interruption brought by alterity. This is his profound inspiration from

Levinas; however, he links this failure to the continuing pre-eminence of European imperialism, which makes it impossible for thought to arrest its striving for similitude. For this reason, the attention to alterity demonstrated by Levinas requires liberation from North American imperialism in order to be considered thoroughly (Dussel, 1985: 14).

Dussel argues for two understandings of freedom: One is individual, autonomous, and born of mediation and projects (Dussel, 1985: 18-19). The other is the freedom of the Other who “questions, provokes, and appears, as one who resists instrumental totalization;” this freedom is the “face of a person revealed as other” (Dussel, 1985: 40). This face of the other as unpredictable and resistant is especially evident in the encounter with the poor and the oppressed (Dussel, 1985: 43). Rather than merely negative, this exteriority also provides the possibility of justice. Justice, then, would be the material and conceptual world as reconceived to allow for the de-instrumentalized freedom of global others who are no longer subordinated to the demands of the productivity furnished by the international marketplace. This process of discovering justice is what Dussel calls liberation: “the praxis that subverts the phenomenological order and pierces it in order to let in a metaphysical transcendence, which is the plenary critique of the established, fixed, normalized, crystallized, dead” (1985: 58-59). This links a material political practice of a broadly Marxist variety to a transcendent ethical thought like that written by Levinas. For Dussel, political and social struggles are reciprocally linked to metaphysical developments.

Dussel writes of ideology as the covering-up of the possibility of the transcendent critique that can be brought by the face of alterity, concretely situated in impoverishment; he defines it as “the ensemble of semiotic expressions that justify or conceal domination” (1985: 167). Derrida describes Levinas as providing “the premises for a non-Marxist reading of philosophy as ideology” (1978: 97). From this deconstructive perspective, Levinas demonstrates the ideological complicity of the philosophical tradition in its reification of ethical obligations and concomitant failure to experience difference in the strong sense. Dussel’s reading restores a broadly Marxist sense to this understanding of ideology; the philosophical ideology of violence and power is reconsidered as the ally of European political and economic control.

**Andrew Ryder (aryder779@gmail.com)** is Postdoctoral Associate of French and Italian at the University of Pittsburgh. He has published several articles on phenomenology and post-Marxism, and is presently writing a book on political theory and feminism in conversation with the work of Georges

Bataille.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> For John Paul II's appreciation of Levinas, see Malka, 2006: 192-194. For an account of Levinas's Occidentalism, see Bernasconi, 2005: 5-30.

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# Reviews

## *The German Historicist Tradition*

by Frederick Beiser

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011, hbk. \$110.00 (ISBN: 978-0-19-969155-5), 648 pp.

by Colin McQuillan

Frederick Beiser's book *The Fate of Reason: German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte* (1987) is already a classic work on German philosophy at the end of the eighteenth century. His more recent work *Diotima's Children: German Aesthetic Rationalism from Leibniz to Lessing* (2009) is the first English-language study of an important but greatly underappreciated tradition. Beiser's books on German Idealism (2002), Schiller (2005), Hegel (2005), and German Romanticism (2006) also show that he can go beyond historical survey and deal with individual philosophers, their works, and the debates surrounding them in greater detail.

In his new book, *The German Historicist Tradition*, Beiser builds on an article on historicism he wrote for the *Oxford Handbook of Continental Philosophy* (2005). Humbly, in the preface, Beiser claims it is only after writing *The German Historicist Tradition* that he is able to justify the faith the editors of that volume placed in him. Many parts of *The German Historicist Tradition* echo his essay in the *Oxford Handbook*; yet Beiser has clearly expanded on his earlier work. *The German Historicist Tradition* is more than six hundred pages long; its thirteen chapters discuss Chladenius, Möser, Herder, Humboldt, Savigny, Ranke, Droysen, Dilthey, Windelband, Rickert, Lask, Simmel, and Weber. The lives of these figures reach from the end of the eighteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth century. They also represent a number of different movements and schools, including the enlightenment, romanticism, idealism, Neo-Kantianism, and positivism. Bringing all of these figures and movements together in one volume is certainly ambitious, but it poses serious methodological problems.

In earlier works, Beiser addressed different figures and movements under a strong central thesis. In *The Fate of Reason*, he claimed that philosophers began to question the authority of reason in the period between the publication of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781/1787) and Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre* (1794). This thesis gave Beiser's discussion of German intellectual history a dramatic narrative structure; yet it distorts our understanding of German philosophy at the end of the eighteenth century.

Beiser overestimates the significance of people like Hamann and Jacobi, whose polemics against the rationalism of the enlightenment hardly constitute a philosophical challenge to the authority of reason. Similar problems are to be found in *Diotima's Children*, where Beiser's attempt to defend the rationalist origins of German aesthetics leads him to credit Wolff with the invention of the philosophy of art. This is a striking claim, but it is based upon a confusion. Wolff does claim we have a duty to know the arts as well as possible in the *Discursus praeliminaris* (1728); however, it is clear from the context that he is talking about art as craft or skill rather than the fine arts. The example Wolff provides concerns the cutting of wood and the ways mathematics might be used to improve the woodcutter's technique. Beiser acknowledges this fact; yet he continues as though Wolff were discussing the fine arts, instead of granting that later philosophers, like Gottsched, Mendelssohn, and Lessing, were the real innovators in the philosophy of art.

The overarching narrative of *The German Historicist Tradition* does not force square pegs into round holes, the way it does in *The Fate of Reason* and *Diotima's Children*. Beiser acknowledges the diversity of the historicist tradition in the introduction to the book, where he denies that there is any one description that applies to all the different kinds of historicism that are found in the tradition. His treatment of the different figures and movements in later chapters of the book respects those differences, especially historicism's complex relationship to the enlightenment and the natural sciences. Beiser points out that some of the figures associated with the historicist tradition identified with the enlightenment, while others turned to historicism in reaction against the enlightenment. He also notes that many early historicists saw their work as an extension of enlightenment naturalism and the "science of man," while later historicists tried to distinguish their methods from those of the natural sciences. Understanding these differences and the way they persisted in the historicist tradition is crucial for understanding historicism, so Beiser's work represents a considerable advance on works by Friedrich Meinecke, Ernst Troeltsch, and other historians of historicism.

Of course, it could be argued that Beiser's attempt to present the diversity of the historicist tradition sacrifices depth for breadth, forcing him to spend the majority of *The German Historicist Tradition* summarizing the lives and works of the figures he describes. These summaries are valuable, because they help situate historicism in relation to nineteenth century aesthetics, hermeneutics, philosophy of language, moral philosophy, and theories of natural law, as well as the development of modern psychology, the rise of sociology, and attempts to found a science of history.

Unfortunately, Beiser's treatment of these subjects is compressed and abbreviated, because of the need to account for more and different figures, works, and debates. His approach also leads to a problem of selective emphasis. Beiser is keen to emphasize the contributions of Neo-Kantians like Windelband, Rickert, and Lask, in order to counteract conventional narratives about the history of German philosophy in the nineteenth century. Beiser has protested against these narratives in his review of the volume on nineteenth century philosophy in *The History of Continental Philosophy* (2010), where he objects to the neglect Neo-Kantianism has suffered in the standard curriculum of the history of philosophy. Beiser's engagement with Neo-Kantianism in *The German Historicist Tradition* is an attempt to compensate for this neglect, but it is not clear that emphasizing Neo-Kantianism, while excluding Hegel, Marx, and Nietzsche, really makes sense.

Inclusiveness and diversity are the principal virtues of *The German Historicist Tradition*. The prevalence of summary in the book and Beiser's selective emphasis on certain parts of the historicist tradition does not compromise the project as a whole; it simply requires emendation and expansion, qualification and detail, in subsequent works and new debates. *The German Historicist Tradition* is an invitation to those debates by a major scholar. As such, it deserves to be read and responded to.

**Colin McQuillan** ([jmcquillan@stmarytx.edu](mailto:jmcquillan@stmarytx.edu)) is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at St. Mary's University in San Antonio, TX.

*A Revolution of the Mind: Radical Enlightenment and the Intellectual Origins of Modern Democracy*

by Jonathan Israel

Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2011, pbk £13.95 (ISBN: 978-0-691-15260-8), 296pp.

by Ericka Tucker

Jonathan Israel is an academic on a mission. His aim is to reconceive the Enlightenment as a pan-European, transatlantic phenomenon with two distinct, incompatible strains: a Radical Enlightenment and a Moderate Enlightenment.

The Radical Enlightenment, Israel argues, was characterized philosophically by materialism, monism and determinism; religiously by secularism and universalism and politically by its commitment to democracy and revolutionary reform of political institutions. The Moderate Enlightenment, on the other hand, was characterized by its commitment to dualism, deism, constitutional monarchism, and a morality based on sentiment and tradition rather than the Radical insistence on reason. According to Israel, figures in the Moderate Enlightenment eschewed revolution and instead believed progress to be based on Providence. Israel argues that the revolutionary events of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century were preceded by revolutionary ideas of '*la nouvelle philosophie*', which he identifies with the Radical Enlightenment. In particular, revolutionary events in America, France and the Netherlands were preceded, Israel argues, by the ideas of equality, democracy, and reason as the basis of a universal morality, proposed by the most radical of the Enlightenment thinkers.

Israel does not write short books. His average tome weighs in at 3 lbs paperback, with an average of 800 pages. *A Revolution of the Mind* is a much shorter work; it is an attempt to bring out in a manageable length the core of Israel's project in his three larger works: *Radical Enlightenment*, *Enlightenment Contested* and *Democratic Enlightenment*. As such, it is a good place for the student of political philosophy to begin. Having used it in an undergraduate political philosophy class, I can attest that although it is dense, and its cast of characters rather large, the arguments are clear, original and provocative enough to engage students.

*A Revolution of the Mind* successfully brings out the original points of Israel's larger trilogy on the history of the Enlightenment, and engages students of philosophy and politics of all ages, backgrounds and expertise. As an original jaunt through the radical history of politics and metaphysics, this is an excellent beginning point for the student of history, contemporary

political philosophy and the history of political thought. *Revolution* also offers much to the philosopher, both professional and student, by offering again, a highly original alternative narrative of the politics and philosophy of the Enlightenment.

Although he focuses his attention on the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Israel recognizes the foundations of the Radical Enlightenment in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. He identifies the political and moral kernel of the Radical Enlightenment in Spinoza's metaphysics and political writings. According to Spinoza and his Radical Enlightenment followers, democracy is the freest and most absolute state and therefore the best form of state. However, we cannot count on human nature or Providence alone to achieve this political freedom. Action is required in order to achieve enlightenment.

Israel gives us not only an interesting new take on the historiography of the Enlightenment, but also does important philosophical work. He reveals what radicals in the 17<sup>th</sup> century knew – dualism and free will do not save genuine freedom; they deny its conditions of possibility. One cannot have genuine freedom, argued Spinoza, without understanding the causal conditions of our existence as material beings. To improve our lives and the lives of our neighbors, we need to understand ourselves as part of Nature, as part of the causal structure of the universe.

Beloved Enlightenment figures, such as Kant, Rousseau and Locke, are lambasted and replaced with new heroes: d'Holbach, Schimmelpenninck, Price and Helvétius. Although Kant, Rousseau and Locke are often forgiven their peccadilloes on race, imperialism and gender, their views on rights, freedom, the scope of reason and Enlightenment are taken as "radical for their time"; however, Israel exposes their views as comparatively conservative, and moderate given the radical ideas on offer.

Israel occasionally errs on the side of grand pronouncement over specific argumentation. For example, his major thesis, that there are two Enlightenments: Radical and Moderate, is well supported. Israel shows us a variety of ways in which the elements of the two Enlightenments can be differentiated. However, his further claim that these two are incompatible philosophically is a claim that merits more detailed argumentation. That is, to say two philosophical views are different is one thing; to say that they are incompatible because of those differences, is quite another. Israel's arguments for difference succeed, but he does not meet the burden of proof for incompatibility. Specialists may take issue with his interpretation of the central figures: Hume, Locke, Diderot, d'Holbach and Spinoza. Israel's interpretations of these figures are controversial; however, his extended arguments for his novel interpretation, while available in Israel's articles and longer works, here merit nary a footnote. Given the overarching mission and

argument of the book, Israel chooses to frustrate specialists in favour of greater readability.

Individual philosophers are always more wily and interesting than the 'schools' or movements to which they belong. Surely, Locke, Smith and Hume fit into Israel's category of Moderate, but their specific arguments and views are quite complex. This tension between the historian's aim to group and synthesize and the philosopher's tendency to find differences and to focus on nuances emerges in each chapter. Philosophers will be annoyed, but perhaps that's all the better. Part of the aim of the book is to reconsider our narratives of 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century philosophy and this book succeeds in doing so.

Methodologically, Israel practices what he calls the "controversialist method in the history of ideas." This method is characterized by interpreting the ideas of individual philosophers in the context of the debates of their own time, by which they are influenced and to which their work contributes. Seeing this method in action is perhaps the most promising aspect for contemporary philosophers who want to take historical context seriously. Too often, the ideas of philosophers such as Kant are cherry picked by contemporary philosophers, and the religious, political and philosophical context in which they were conceived is ignored. Israel shows us that by failing to understand the context and controversies in the history of ideas, we fail to understand the contextual nature of philosophy itself. In doing so, we deliberately misinterpret philosophers the past and ignore the contextual nature of our own work.

**Ericka Tucker (eltucker@csupomona.edu)** is an Assistant Professor at Cal Poly Pomona. She is currently developing a Spinozan framework for global justice.



*Marx at the Margins: On Nationalism, Ethnicity, and Non-Western Societies*

by Kevin B. Anderson

University of Chicago Press, 2010, pbk \$22.50 (ISBN: 978-0-226-01983-3), 336pp.

by Chris O’Kane

The publication of a number of Marx’s manuscripts had an important and varied influence on the development of Marxist theory in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. For the sake of convenience this can be broken into two phases: (1) the reception of the publication of the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, which was of central importance to the growth of Marxist humanism and its conception of alienation as the core idea unifying Marx’s thought, and (2) the reception of the *Grundrisse* and other material from Marx’s research into the critique of political economy—now collected in The *Marx-Engels-Gesamtausgabe* (MEGA) project—which has led to the burgeoning of a type of study, often termed Marxology, in which painstaking philological research by a number of scholars has argued for a distinction between Marx’s critique of political economy and traditional interpretations of it. Whilst the first phase led to the dissemination of a philosophical worldview with widespread influence and a prolonged debate with anti-humanism, the second phase has so far mostly been a concern only of Marxist scholars.

The Marxist humanist scholar Kevin B. Anderson’s most recent work, *Marx at the Margins*, is a unique synthesis of aspects of these two phases. Anderson utilizes the philological approach favoured by Marxologists to offer a humanist interpretation of Marx’s conception of nationalism, ethnicity and non-western societies. In contrast to anti-humanist criticisms of Marx by leading figures in post-structuralism and post-colonial theory, Anderson aims to show that Marx’s thought evolved into a multi-linear theory of history with a complex global critique of political economy. To do so Anderson uses a host of sources from MEGA to call into question the popular perception that Marx was a deeply ethnocentric thinker who held a Eurocentric and uni-linear model of historical development.

To prove this thesis Anderson provides a diligent exegesis of Marx’s writings on nationalism, ethnicity and non-western societies from *The Communist Manifesto*, through his journalism to the as yet unpublished notes Marx made concerning non-western societies towards the end of his life. Anderson then tries to relate these varied sources to Marx’s theoretical writings on political economy—*The Grundrisse* and *Capital*. In the course of this exegesis Anderson covers some very interesting ground. He unpacks

Marx's writings on a host of non-western areas like India, China, Algeria, Poland, Ireland and Russia as well as Marx's article on the American Civil War, demonstrating that there was a development in Marx's thinking following the *Manifesto*.

Since the particular developments that Anderson traces in each of these topics are too detailed to give a short recap, I will focus on those I found most interesting. In the case of India, Anderson shows that – in contrast to Edward W. Said's portrayal of Marx in *Orientalism* – Marx's later writings on India, Algeria and Latin America possess a "harsh and unremitting condemnation of colonialism" (242) that appreciates how "communal forms of property were directly tied into anti-colonial resistance." (242) In the case of Marx's writings on The Civil War and Ireland Anderson also shows how Marx considered racism a divisive and retarding factor for the labour movement, and in regards to the USA this caused Marx to presciently claim that the failures of reconstruction would "drown the country in blood." (239) In Ireland, the English workers' nationalism caused them to side with the English ruling class, leading Marx to argue that revolution in Ireland was a necessary impetus for revolution in Britain.

Anderson relates these writings to Marx's theoretical works by arguing that they informed important changes in Marx's critique of political economy that break with the views put forward in *The Manifesto*. For instance, the linear history of *The Manifesto* is eclipsed by the multi-linear history that Marx provides in the *Grundrisse*. More importantly, Anderson also argues that "almost all of these considerations" (241) found their way in as what he terms "subthemes" (241) in the French edition of *Capital*, which he argues is Marx's (not Engels's) definitive edition of *Capital*. (This is because it was the last edition Marx edited from which Engels excised 70 printed pages worth of material for later editions of *Capital*.) Here Anderson argues these considerations can be seen in Marx's comparative account of non-capitalist societies in the section on the fetish character of commodities. The multi-linear model of history can be seen in Marx's statement that primitive accumulation only applies to Western Europe, and Marx's new found appreciation of capitalism's degradation of non-western societies can be seen in the use of India and Ireland as examples of the heinous affects of capitalist development. Finally, Anderson closes by emphasizing Marx's late interest in Russia, whose communal villages led Marx to argue that Russia might transform into a communist society provided it had technological assistance from the West.

Anderson concludes by arguing that what he has uncovered provides potential grounds for a diverse, truly universal critique of capital which realizes difference and can be used in three potentially fruitful ways: as (a)

a multi-linear dialectic of social development, (b) a heuristic example that offers indications about the theorization of today's indigenous movements given the fact of global capitalism, and (c) a theorization of class in relation to race, ethnicity and nationalism.

In all, through the diligent examination of these disparate sources, Anderson's work successfully refutes the popular conception of Marx as having an ethnocentric and uni-linear idea of historical development. There are, however, a number of criticisms of the work that might be raised. The first has to do with the status of sources that Anderson uses, particularly the later notebooks, which were written by Marx in his later years, which many Marxists discount as a time of intellectual decline. While Anderson acknowledges this belief, he dismisses it rather than refuting it. This may be because Anderson believes the notes will speak for themselves, but if this is the case he should use them to help refute this perception; since he does not they become problematic especially when Anderson speculates that these notes might form the basis of an even later and more open development of Marx's thought. The second has to do with Anderson's interpretation of Marx's explanation of his critique of political economy, which outside of Anderson's Marxist humanist reliance on alienation as the fundamental basis of Marx's theory, and a few paragraphs summarizing *Capital* in relation to this interpretation, is largely absent. Although Anderson designates Marx's critique of political economy a dialectical and universal critique of political economy that utilizes particular examples, this omission leaves open the question of how Anderson views the relationship between the theoretical object of *Capital* and empirical reality. This also means that many of the important issues developed by Marxologists, such as how the model of the ideal average Marx presents in *Capital* relates to empirically existing capitalist societies, and the relation between the idea of alienation and Marx's theory of value, are not substantiated. As a result the questions of: (a) how or why Marx's critique of political economy is universal and (b) how the development of Marx's particular views on history and non-western society fit into the theoretical endeavour of his critique of political economy, are left largely unanswered at this time.

Nevertheless, Anderson's work does much to refute many of the leading misconceptions about Marx's supposed ethnocentric uni-linear social theory. As Anderson states, it also provides a "vantage point" (245) and a potential foundation for fruitful theoretical work that answers these vital questions.

**Chris O'Kane** ([theresonlyonechrisokane@gmail.com](mailto:theresonlyonechrisokane@gmail.com)) is currently completing a PhD in Social and Political Thought at the University of Sussex,

which focuses on fetishism and social domination in Marx, Lukacs, Adorno, and Lefebvre.



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