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# THEORIA

## Progress, Modernity and Marxism

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# THEORIA

## A Journal of Studies in the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences

# About Theoria

Based in South Africa, *Theoria* is a multidisciplinary journal of engaged theoretical reflection in the humanities and social sciences. Its purpose is to address, through scholarly debate, the many challenges posed to intellectual life by the major social, political and economic forces that configure the contemporary world. Thus it is principally concerned with questions such as how modern systems of power, processes of globalization and capitalist economic organization bear on matters such as justice, democracy and truth. How might such systems best be explained? In what do justice and freedom consist? How might these ends best be realized under the conditions both of advanced modernity and of uneven modernization in the 'developing' world? In what, precisely, do the problems of social and political identity consist, and how might sense best be made of phenomena such as resurgent ethnic nationalisms? And what, in addressing these concerns, is the scope of philosophy, art, literature, history, social and political theory and economics? These, among many others, are the kinds of questions by which *Theoria* is driven.

Although the compass of the journal is wide and any one issue may carry contributions in a diversity of fields, the editors have decided that the contents of each issue will be largely dictated by one or more governing themes. To secure contributions in good time, these themes will be announced well ahead of publication. Besides articles the editors would like to encourage communications from readers which are intended to further debate on topics addressed in the journal. The editors would also like to encourage a review essay tradition and maintain a book review/book note section.

## Note to Contributors

Contributors are requested to submit THREE hard copies (in double spacing) of their articles, as well as a disk version in any of the following: MS Word, WordPerfect, or XyWrite. Contributors are advised to retain copies of their texts as we do not return unused copy. A short abstract of each article should be included.

Single quotation marks should be used throughout. Quotations of more than 25 words should be indented, without quotation marks. Only the least familiar foreign words need to be italicised (or underlined). Notes should be in the form of endnotes rather than footnotes.

Contributors are also requested to submit brief biographical sketches indicating their institutional affiliation, research interests and the activities and publications they consider most important. This information should preferably be so formulated as to be reproduced in Theoria's brief *Contributors to Theoria* at the end of each issue.

Theoria uses the Harvard style of referencing i.e. in the text of articles, bracketed references appear like this: (Williams 1972:23).

A list of References should appear at the end of each article.

# Editorial

The idea of progress has fallen on hard times – at least among many intellectuals critical of contemporary societies. This disenchantment has been occasioned, among other things, by the perceived failure of socialism – especially in its Marxian forms – as intellectual project and as political and economic practice. This disenchantment has expressed itself in many registers: in a retreat from political engagement, in an embrace of a variety of right-wing positions, in a turn to relativism and in a 'rage against reason'. This turn away from the belief in progress, so central to so much of nineteenth and twentieth century political protest and social and economic analysis, invites us to revisit the idea itself. May it in some way be reclaimed? If so how and why? The contributions by Simon Beck and Raphael de Kadt engage directly with this question as it relates both to science and morality. It invites us, too, to examine the consequences of the widely perceived demise of Marxism. What, if anything, may be salvaged from Marxism? Are there questions posed in, and perhaps distinctive of, the Marxist tradition that still demand to be addressed? G. A. Cohen, Duncan Greaves and Ronald Aronson deal, engagingly, with these questions.

G. A. Cohen and David Schweikart in their contributions direct us to what is arguably the fundamental challenge to political and economic theory and practice: the problem of inequality. There is, clearly, something profoundly wrong with a world where some individuals can each own billions of dollars or earn as much as $30 000 an hour while millions of children die of starvation or suffer lifelong brain damage from malnutrition. Such facts offend our moral intuitions. The problem of inequality is urgent. What kinds and degrees of inequality – if any – are justifiable? How might inequality be explained and how might it be effectively challenged? On the answers to, and formulation of, such questions, much will depend. They will continue to tax the resources of philosophers, social scientists and policy makers. These contributions introduce the theme – states, markets and justice – central to the next issue of *Theoria*.

The transition to a constitutional democracy in South Africa has been accompanied by a lively debate on the relationship between the state and civil society. A moment in this debate was captured in *Theoria* 79, a special issue devoted to the topic. Maxine Reitzes and Iris Young extend this line of reflection, to which the editors hope to devote a future issue of the journal. The transition to liberal

democracy in South Africa not only invites reflection on the scope and limits of democratic arrangements. It also invites reflection on the specific character of South Africa's engagement with modernity and how that engagement might be illuminated. Mark Devenney's contribution directly addresses that question.

This issue of *Theoria* treats also of questions that do not appear to be of quite so immediate social, political or economic moment. Precisely where – if at all – the boundaries of literature and philosophy lie defines the debate between Paul Voice and Andries Gouws, and Robert Klitgaard opens up discussion on the intriguing question of insight and ideology.

### Future Issues of *Theoria*

*Theoria* 85. There is little doubt that among the institutions that determine the distribution of life chances, powers and freedoms, states and markets are perhaps the most important. This next issue of *Theoria* will thus be devoted to an exploration of the theme: 'States, Markets and Justice'. Contributions on this topic should reach the editors before 2 April 1995.

*Theoria* 86. The problems of democratic government and of democratic practices in the wider arenas of the economy and civil society pose challenges to both the advanced and developing areas of the world. These challenges are, necessarily, challenges to social and political theory too. This issue of *Theoria* will focus on the theme: 'Democracy and Development'. Contributions on this topic should reach the editors by 25 August 1995.

<div align="right">THE EDITORS</div>

# Equality as Fact and as Norm

## Reflections on the (partial) Demise of Marxism

### G.A. Cohen

This Colloquium is intended to address hard facts,[1] facts, more particularly, which represent real or putative obstacles to the achievement of greater equality.[2] But facts, alas, are not my field. Being a political philosopher of the Anglophone stamp, a dealer in arguments, facts, for me, belong to minor premisses the truth of which it is not my business to evaluate.

My ignorance of facts embarrasses me, since I am not only a philosopher, but also a kind of Marxist, or semi-Marxist, or semi-ex-Marxist. And that is embarrassing, or, at least, ironical, since the classical Marxist belief-structure distinguished itself from belief-structures adjacent to it precisely through its distinctive factual claims. Some would say, and Marx and Engels sometimes wrote as though they thought they agreed with this assessment, that Marxism consisted of factual claims only, that it thereby distinguished itself from what it called Utopian socialism, which was a set of dreams rather than of factual truths.

Now that assessment of the difference between Marxism and other socialisms certainly embodies an over-statement. For values of equality, community, and human self-realisation were undoubtedly integral to the classical Marxist belief structure, if we identify the latter as the belief structure of those who were classically identified as Marxists.

All classical Marxists believed in some kind of equality, even if many refused to acknowledge that they believed in it, and few could have said what kind of equality they believed in. But, what is certainly true, and this is what makes the exhibited assessment of the difference between Marxism and other socialisms an *over*-statement, rather than on outright falsehood, is that Marxists never investigated the value of equality, or, indeed, any other value, *in extenso*. Instead, they devoted their minds to the hard factual carapace surrounding their values, to theses about history in general and capitalism in particular, the theses which gave Marxism its particular authority, even, indeed, its moral authority.

But Marxism has lost that carapace, that hard shell of supposed fact,

and, to the extent that it is still alive, as, for example, one may say that it (sort of) is in the work of John Roemer or Philippe Van Parijs, it presents itself as a set of values and a set of designs for realising those values. Marxism now returns to the Utopian condition from which it was once so proud to distinguish itself. The soft under-belly is all.

I want, here, to illustrate Marxism's loss of factual carapace with respect to the value of equality in particular. In doing so, I shall make a number of amateurish broad claims about contemporary world facts. I look forward to being corrected. I think it is useful to venture broad factual claims before an audience which is professionally equipped to amend or refute them, because it may stimulate that audience to articulate highly general factual premisses which they take for granted, and the exposure of unarticulated general premisses is always instructive.

# I

Classical Marxists believed that economic equality was both historically inevitable and morally right. They believed the first entirely consciously, and they believed the second more or less consciously, and exhibited more or less evasion – Marx himself was evasive here – when asked whether they believed it. It was partly because they believed that economic equality was historically inevitable that classical Marxists did not spend much time thinking about its moral rightness, nor, therefore, about *why* it was morally right, about exactly what fundamental normative principles established its moral superiority. Communist equality was coming, it was welcome, and it would be a waste of time to theorize about why it was welcome, rather than about how to make it come as quickly and as painlessly as possible – for the speed and cost of the attainment of communist equality were, unlike communist equality, not themselves inevitable.

Two supposedly irrepressible historical trends established the inevitability of ultimate economic equality. One was the growth of the organized working class movement, which was constitutionally positioned to oppose inequality, because workers were at the short end of it. That movement would grow in numbers and in strength, until it had the power to topple the unequal society which had nurtured its growth. And the other trend guaranteeing an eventual equality was the development of the productive forces, the continual increase in the human power to transform nature for human benefit. This meant that there would be a future abundance so great that anything that anyone needed for a richly fulfilling life could be taken from the common store at no cost to anyone. No one would have to perform labour they

would rather not perform for everyone to have what they needed, in the most ambitious sense of the word 'need'. That guaranteed future abundance served as a source of rebuttal to any suggestion that inequality might re-emerge, in a new form, *after* the revolution, peaceful or bloody, legal or illegal, fast or slow, that the proletariat could and would accomplish. There would be an interim period of limited inequality, along the lines of the lower stage of communism as Marx described that in his *Gotha Programme* critique, but, when 'all the springs of social wealth [came] to flow more freely', even that limited inequality would disappear.

## II

Both of the predictions sketched in section I above turned out to be false. Instead of growing in strength, the proletariat has lost its unity because of the very processes of technological development which were supposed to expand its size and increase its weight. And the development of the productive forces ran up against a resource barrier: technical knowledge did not stop growing, but productive power, which is the capacity (all things considered) to transform nature into use-value, did not grow *pari passu* with the growth of technical knowledge, because the planet Earth rebelled: its resources turned out to be not extensive enough for continuous growth in technical knowledge to generate continual growth in use-value.

My own loss of confidence in the two large Marxist factual claims helped to alter the direction of my professional research. Having spent (what I hope will turn out to be only) the first third of my academic career devoting myself to exploring the ground and character of the two equality-favouring inevitabilitarian theses described above, I find myself, at the end of the second third of my career, engaged by moral-philosophical questions about the normative ground of equality that I would earlier have thought do not require investigation, from a practical point of view. There was no need, in the past, so it seemed, to *argue* for, and about, equality, as a norm. Now I do little else.

## III

I now want to explore some of the political consequences of the falsehood of the two leading Marxist inevitabilitarian claims that I distinguished above.[3]

The first claim is false because the proletariat is in process of disintegration, in a sense that I shall shortly try to make precise.

Socialist values have consequently lost their mooring in capitalist social structure: the struggle for equality is no longer a reflex movement within the capitalist process itself. Accordingly, and as I shall now explain, issues arise for socialist moral philosophy that did not have to be faced in the past. And Marxists or ex-Marxists, like Roemer and Van Parijs and me, find themselves engaged by questions in moral and political philosophy which have not, in the past, attracted the attention of Marxists, and which very often earned their disdain.

The sharp shift of attention is explained by profound changes in the class structure of Western capitalist societies, changes which raise normative problems which did not exist before, or, rather, which previously had little political significance. Those normative problems have great political significance now.

As a way into the normative problems, I shall begin by quoting from the second verse of 'Solidarity Forever', an old American socialist song:

> It is we who ploughed the prairies, built the cities where they trade,
> Dug the mines and built the workshops, endless miles of railroad laid;
> Now we stand outcast and starving, 'mid the wonders we have made . . .

The part of that verse on which I here invite focus is the couplet: 'Now we stand outcast and starving, 'mid the wonders we have made'.

'Solidarity Forever' was sung not only by revolutionary communists but also by social democrats whose socialist aspiration did not go beyond a demand for welfare state provision in a capitalism that, initially, did nothing for those who were thrown out of work in hard times. As the song's words suggest, the campaign for the welfare state was seen as a struggle for basic minima for *working* people in particular: public provision was regarded as a modest rectification of the wrongs done to labour with respect to the product of its own activity, its products being the wonders it had made. In 'Solidarity Forever', the outcast and starving people who need the welfare state are the very people who created the wealth of society. Compare the famous American lamentation of the nineteen-thirties, 'Buddy, Can you Spare a Dime?'. The man says 'Once I built a railroad, made it run . . . once I built a tower, up to the sun . . .'; and those creations are supposed to show that he should have at least a dime.

In the lines of those songs, people do not demand relief from starvation on the ground that they cannot produce but on the ground that they have produced and should therefore not be left to starve. Two claims to recompense, *need* and *entitlement through labour*, are fused, in a fashion typical of the old socialist rhetoric, in the 'Solidarity' couplet. It was possible to fuse such claims at the time

when the song was written because socialists saw the set of exploited producers as roughly coterminous with the set of those who needed the welfare state's benefits. Accordingly, they did not sense any conflict between the producer entitlement doctrine implied by the second part of the couplet ('Mid the wonders we have made') and the more egalitarian doctrine suggested in the first part ('Now, we stand outcast and starving'), when it is read on its own. For it does not require much argument to show that there is indeed a difference of principle between the appeals in the two parts of the couplet. Starving people are not necessarily people who have produced what starving people need, and, if what people produce belongs of right to them, the people who have produced it, then starving people who have not produced it have no claim on it. The old image of the working class, as a set of people who *both* make the wealth *and* don't have it, conceals, in its fusion of those characteristics, the poignant and problematic truth that the two claims to sustenance, namely, 'I made this and I should therefore have it' and 'I need this, I will die or wither if I do not get it' are not only different but potentially contradictory pleas.

That they created the wonders and that they were outcast and starving were two of four characteristics which Marxists perceived in the working class in the heyday of the socialist movement. The four features never belonged to any single set of people anywhere, but there used to be enough convergence among them for an impression of their coincidence to be sustainable, given a dose of enthusiasm and a bit of self-deception. The communist impression of the working class was that its members

(1) constituted the majority of society
(2) produced the wealth of society
(3) were the exploited people in society, and
(4) were the needy people in society.

There were, moreover, in the same impression, two further characteristics consequent on those four. The workers were *so* needy that they

(5) would have nothing to lose from revolution, whatever its upshot might be

and, because of (1), (2) and (5), it was within the capacity (1), (2) and in the interest (5) of the working class to change society, so that it

(6) could and would transform society.

We can use these names to denote the six features: *majority, production, exploitation, need, nothing-to-lose,* and *revolution.*

Many of the present problems of socialist theory, and of socialist and communist parties, reflect the increasing lack of coincidence of

the first four characteristics. Particularly problematic, from the point of view of a political philosopher, is the coming apart of the exploitation and need features. It forces a choice between the principle of a right to the product of one's labour embedded in the doctrine of exploitation and a principle of equality of benefits and burdens which negates the right to the product of one's labour and which is required to defend support for very needy people who are not producers and who are, *a fortiori*, not exploited. This is the central new normative problem which Marxists did not have to face in the past.

If you can get yourself to believe that the features cohere, you then have a very powerful political posture.[4] You can say to democrats that they should embrace socialism, because workers form the immense majority of the population. You can say the same to humanitarians, because workers suffer tremendous need. And, very importantly, you are under less pressure than you otherwise would be to worry about the exact ideals and principles of socialism, and that is so for two reasons. The first is that, when the features are seen to cohere, several kinds of moral principle will justify a struggle for socialism, and there is then no practical urgency about identifying which principle or principles are essential: from a practical point of view, such discussion will appear unnecessary, and a waste of political energy. And the second reason for not worrying too much about principles, when the features (seem to) cohere, is that you do not then need to recruit people to the socialist cause by articulating principles which will draw them to it: success of the cause is guaranteed, by the majority, production, and nothing-to-lose features.

It is partly because there is now patently no group that has those features and, therefore, the revolution feature, that Marxists, or what were Marxists, are increasingly impelled to enter normative political philosophy. The disintegration of the characteristics produces an intellectual need to philosophize which is related to a political need to be clear as never before about values and principles, for the sake of socialist advocacy. Normative socialist advocacy is less necessary when the features coincide. You do not have to justify a socialist transformation as a matter of principle when people are driven to make it by the urgencies of their situation, and in a good position to succeed.

Each of characteristics (1)–(4) is now the leading motif in a certain kind of left-wing or post-left-wing politics in Britain. First, there is (what is sometimes called *rainbow*) majority politics, adopted by socialists who recognize the disintegration and look to generate a majority for egalitarian social change out of heterogenous elements: badly paid workers, the unemployed, oppressed races, people oppressed because of their gender or their sexual preference,

neglected old people, single-parent families, the infirm, and so forth. A producer politics with reduced emphasis on exploitation characterized the Harold Wilsonian rhetoric of 1964 which promised a melting away of reactionary British structures in the 'white heat' of a technological transformation of the country in which an alliance of proletarian and highly educated producers would overcome the power of City and landed and other drones. Producer politics projects a Saint-Simonian alliance of workers and high-tech producers with greater emphasis on the parasitism of those who do not produce than on the exploitation of those who do (since some of the high fliers who fall within the Saint-Simonian inclusion could hardly be regarded as exploited). An exploitation politics, with a degree of pretence that the other features are still there, characterizes various forms of obsolescent Scargillian labourism. And, finally, there is the need-centred politics of welfare rights action, a politics of those who think that suffering has the first claim on radical energy and who devote it to new organizations such as Shelter, the Child Poverty Action Group, Age Concern, and the panoply of groups which confront world-wide deprivation, hunger, and injustice. Such organizations did not exist when the disintegration was less advanced and the labour movement and the welfare movement were pretty well identical. (Philanthropic activity on behalf of deprived children, the homeless and the indigent old long predates the founding of the organizations named above, but they pursue their aims in a new spirit, not the old one of providing charity, but a new spirit of rectifying injustice; injustice, moreover, which cannot be brought under the concept of exploitation.)

When those who suffer dire need can be conceived as coinciding with, or as a subset of, the exploited working class, then the socialist doctrine of exploitation does not cause much difficulty for the socialist principle of distribution according to need. But, once the really needy and the exploited producers cease to coincide, then the Marxist doctrine of exploitation is flagrantly incongruent with even the minimal principle of the welfare state. And tasks are thereby set for socialist political philosophy that did not have to be addressed in the past.

Sometimes, when I present the foregoing reflections about the disintegration of the working class at a seminar, or to some more political audience, someone rises and urges that if I widen my focus I will see that the features I list remain integrated, but, now, on a world scale. I am said to show blindness, in the foregoing, to the fact that a classically featured *international* proletariat has emerged or is emerging.

But that is instructively false. It is no doubt true that across the countries which form the bulk of the world's population there are

producers, previously cut off from capitalism, who amply realise the exploitation and need characteristics, in Indian steel mills, in Korean electronic assembly factories, and so on. But they hardly form a majority within or across the societies in question,[5] which remain largely agrarian, and they do not represent producers on whose labour capitalism is dependent, in the traditional projected sense. The engine of production in today's world is the trans-national corporation, which absorbs and rejects sets of workers at will: no group of its workers have substantial clout, because so many other groups form a kind of industrial reserve army *vis-à-vis* any one of those groups. The actual and potential proletariats of India and China stand ready at the factory gates of Birmingham, Detroit and Lille, and of Manila and São Paulo and Cape Town.

Concentration and unification of capital historically precedes unification of labour, within concentric geo-social circles. Capital coagulates in joint stock companies before such companies face a unionized work force, and companies intermerge across a nation-state before scattered unionized work forces begin to achieve a unified national presence. Although it takes time for it to do so, labour catches up eventually, within a nation-state. But, for combined cultural and economic reasons, it is far more difficult for labour to catch up at the international level. The problem does not lie in the dimension Marx and Engels would have focused on: that of transport and communication. Communication is now easy, and cheap. But the cultural diversity across nations and the huge gulfs between them in expected and actual living standards make mutual identification of their working classes difficult.

In one of the socialist songs ('The Banks of Marble') that expressed the sentiments of the old working class movement, the last verse begins:

> I see my brothers working
> Throughout this mighty land
> I pray we'll get together
> And together make a stand.

This getting together, this transcendence of cultural and economic difference, was more or less attainable, and was sometimes achieved, within a single country. But it is an implausible prospect on a world scale. How can a Seattle technician at Boeing envisage getting together with a labourer on an Indian tea plantation? If there is to be any form of solidarity linking such people, it needs, once again, the moral leavening which seemed so unnecessary[6] for proletarian solidarity in the past. The hugely better off in the world's proletariat must be sensitive to a moral appeal for there to be any progress along those lines.

**IV**

So much on the consequences of the prospects for equality of the falsehood of Marxism's unification of labour prediction. The old (partly real, partly imagined) agency of socialist transformation *is* gone, and there is not, and never will be, another one like it. We have to settle for something less, and for more moral advocacy than used to be fashionable. But there is a feature of the new situation which brings a demand for equality to the fore on an entirely new and, as we shall see, a paradoxical, basis, a basis which is connected with the failure of Marxism's abundance prediction.

The new basis of a demand for equality relates to the ecological crises, which, perhaps uniquely in the history of our species, is a crisis for the whole of humanity. The scale of the crisis is necessarily a matter of controversy, and so is the shape of the remedy, if, indeed, it is not too late to speak of a remedy. But, although there are hard controversial questions, two propositions seem to me to be beyond dispute: that the crisis is large and immediate, and that the remedy requires a radical change of life-style, in the direction of much less consumption than what is now the mean in Western industrial countries. Western living standards, measured in terms of energy and resource consumption, have to fall, drastically, and non-Western living standards will never reach current Western levels.

Now, when living standards are generally rising, it is relatively easy for those at the bottom of the rising wave to tolerate the gap between themselves and those at the top. Under circumstances of general improvement, the various ideologies which endorse inequality have their uses, but they are not necessary to sustain acceptance of inequality. The ideologies are not really required because the alternative to acceptance of inequality is so costly in commitment, energy and blood that it is a better bet, in terms of their living standards in the foreseeable future, for the relative have-nots to accept inequality in the context of economic progress than to disrupt that progress for the sake of equality. But, when progress must give way to regress, when material living standards must fall, on pain of the extinction of the race, then no ideology, so I hazard, will reconcile poor people, and poor *nations*, to continuing huge disparities of wealth and amenity.

Now, if ideology will no longer serve to maintain inequality together with social and international peace, then, as far as I can see, only two scenarios are possible. In one, inequality is maintained, even as mass living standards fall, through the application of brute force. In the second, coercion is less necessary, or, at any rate, less coercion is necessary, because the drop in general standards goes with a softening

of inequality and a raising, even in the context of the general drop, of the condition of life of the worst off people. And then liberalism, whose relationship to equality has always been ambiguous, liberalism, with its huge arsenal of ideology and sentiment must stand, unambiguously, for the first time, on the side of equality, for the alternative to equality is the coercion which liberalism condemns.

But I said that this new basis of the demand for equality has a paradoxical aspect, and I shall close by explaining what it is.

Recall the slogan characterizing the full consummation of Marxist communism: from each according to his ability, to each according to his need. That is the most egalitarian formula that has ever been devised, and one may wonder how so hard-headed a thinker as Marx could have not only hoped but expected such a society to supervene. The answer lies in his belief that industrial progress would bring society to a condition of such fluent abundance that there would be no conflict between satisfying one person's needs and satisfying those of anyone else's, and, therefore, no scope for inegalitarian competition, between individuals and across groups.

We can no longer sustain Marx's pre-green materialist optimism. We have to give up that vision. But, if I am right about the narrow choices posed by the ecological crisis, we also have to give up a pessimism about *social* possibility which was background to Marx's optimism about *material* possibility. For Marx thought that material abundance was not only a sufficient but also a necessary condition of equality. He thought that anything short of an abundance so complete that it removes all major conflicts of interest would guarantee continued social strife, a 'struggle for necessities . . . and all the old filthy business'. *It was because he was so uncompromisingly pessimistic about the social consequences of anything less than limitless abundance that Marx needed to be so optimistic about the possibility of that abundance.*

Because we cannot share Marx's optimism about material possibility, we also cannot share his pessimism, the pessimism about social possibility, if we wish to sustain a vision in which humanity faces a tolerable future. We cannot rely on technology to fix things for us: we have to fix them ourselves. So the paradox is that, while the most developed form of socialist thought, Marxism, saw equality resting on abundance, we have to seek equality in the context, and under the stimulus, of scarcity. That recognition must govern the future efforts of socialist economists and philosophers.

## NOTES

1. By 'facts' I mean, throughout, 'empirical facts'.
2. The present article was originally written for presentation at a Colloquium in June 1994 at Louvain-la-Neuve in Belgium. The topic was 'Economic Inequality'. The convenor of the Colloquium was Prof Philippe Van Parijs. In the event, illness prevented me from attending the meeting.
3. All but the last five paragraphs of the present section of this paper originally appeared, in a more elaborated form, in 'Marxism and Contemporary Political Philosophy', *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, Supp. Vol. No. 16, 1990.
4. That posture is struck in 'Solidarity Forever' (see p. 4 above), which brings all of the features together, and whose verses run, in full, as follows:

> When the union's inspiration through the workers' blood shall run,
> There can be no power greater anywhere beneath the sun;
> Yet what force on earth is weaker than the feeble strength of one,
> For the union makes us strong.
>
> It is we who ploughed the prairies, built the cities where they trade,
> Dug the mines and built the workshops, endless miles of railroad laid;
> Now we stand outcast and starving, 'mid the wonders we have made,
> But the union makes us strong.
>
> They have taken untold millions that they never toiled to earn,
> But without our brain and muscle not a single wheel can turn;
> We can break their haughty power, gain our freedom when we learn
> That the union makes us strong.
>
> In our hands is placed a power greater than their hoarded gold,
> Greater than the might of atoms magnified a thousandfold;
> We can bring to birth a new world from the ashes of the old,
> For the union makes us strong.

   Feature (1), that the workers constitute the majority of society, is not explicitly affirmed, but it is surely implied as part of the explanation of the immense potential power of the working class asserted in the first, third and fourth stanzas. The other part of the explanation of that power is that the workers are the producers, as the second stanza, and the all-important second line of the third, assure us. The feature of exploitation is apparent in the first line of the third stanza, and the third line of the second indicates how utterly deprived the workers are, no doubt on such a scale that the fifth feature (nothing-to-lose) obtains. As for the revolution feature, the third lines of each of the last two verses, and the second of the first, imply that the workers *can* transform society, and it is clearly part of the message of the whole song that they will.
5. And they never will, because, if and as their societies undergo further industrialization, then the dissociation of the characteristics which characterized Western proletariats will also occur in the East and South: plenty of producers will no longer be exploited and needy.
6. By which I emphatically do not mean that it really was unnecessary, or absent.

# Marx, Justice and History

*Duncan Greaves*

Recent controversies over Marx's account of justice point to deep-seated ambiguities and incoherencies in his views on the problem. In this paper I shall argue that there are indeed ambiguities and incoherencies, but that their nature has been misinterpreted and they have not been properly connected to other, larger concerns in his argument as a whole. I shall want to claim (1) that Marx works with two quite distinct images of justice, which are rooted in the theory of history on the one hand and the philosophical anthropology on the other; (2) that these two underlying theories are not strongly connected; (3) that the vision of justice implicit in the philosophical anthropology has come to dominate the prevailing literature; (4) that this is a bad theory, both in its own and in strictly Marxian terms, and cannot be salvaged; and (5) that the account of justice implicit in the materialist conception of history is a much better account, in the sense that there is rather more hope of salvaging the undergirding principle in terms of new work on the theory of exploitation.

I proceed as follows: (1) I show first that Marx is committed to the view that history progresses – in every sense of the verb – through distinct and sequentially logical stages, and that theories of 'permanent revolution' have no sound theoretical status in his work, being little more than historical curiosities. I do this at some length, since my subsequent argument stands or falls on this basis, and there is a ghost to be laid here; both Trotskyites and Popperians have undermined the basic account of history that Marx attempts to sketch, and I must first defend the notion of historical logic that Marx, in my view, is committed to. Readers who are willing to accept this position may skip section (1) entirely. (2) On this basis, I resolve the debate between Wood and Husami on the in/justice of capitalism; (3) I then demonstrate that the theory of communist society, as the culmination of the logic of history, is powerfully contaminated with elements of the pre-1848 philosophical anthropology; (4) I show by exegesis that the philosophical anthropology is itself incoherent on the question of the historicisation of needs; and (5) I suggest that, as a result, Marx is working with two entirely different accounts of the relationship between necessity and justice. By way of conclusion, I anticipate a possible objection to my argument. Since Marx's central moral commitment resides in the idea of *autonomy* rather than distributive

justice, it might be argued that Marx does indeed lack any coherent account of justice. I answer this objection by showing that conceptions of justice must be related to some other conception of the social good, and that this is as true of Marx as it is of Rawls.

## Contending Accounts of Historical Logic

It is so commonly assumed that Marx's theory of history is built upon a notion of distinctive and inescapable stages that the alternative model – the theory of permanent revolution – is regarded either as something of an oddity or as a fairly radical revision of Marx's position. Certainly it is not difficult to show that the whole tenor of Marx's work is an incrementalist one. At the same time, however, there is plenty of evidence in Marx's text to show that he also employed, at varying times, a notion of permanent revolution, and that Trotsky is quite correct to attribute the origination of the theory to Marx. In what follows I shall show that both these positions may be extracted from Marx's writings. The point, however, is not to demonstrate this duality, but to interpret it. It is not the case that Marx is simply inconsistent, or confused, or even self-contradictory; nor is it merely that there is a powerful tension in his work between these two positions. The disjuncture, I shall argue, turns finally on a political issue, namely, what sort of political behaviour can be expected from the bourgeois class under varying circumstances. The issue is one that Marx does not succeed in resolving (hence the tension) and the problem thus points us towards a related problem, namely, whether the agency of classes as Marx conceives it is at all plausible.

The 'incrementalist' position in Marx is well known, and I shall not restate it in any detail here. It appears in its most dramatic form in Marx's programmatic texts, of which the *Communist Manifesto* – in the opening lines of which Marx sketches for us the general schema of sequential class rule – is merely the best known. The essence of Marx's position is that human society does not spring fully formed as if from the head of Zeus, but is always constructed on the basis of what went before; each level of human development grows out of the previous level, and each level posits the subsequent level at a certain stage of its internal development. In the canonical text, the *Preface to a Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy*, the argument for the incrementalist reading of history is most pithily stated:

> No social order ever perishes before all the productive forces for which
> there is room in it have been developed; and new, higher relations of
> production never appear before the material conditions for their

existence have matured within the womb of the old society itself. Mankind, therefore, always sets itself only such tasks as it can solve, for looking at the matter more closely, it will always be found that the task itself arises only when the material conditions for its solution already exist or are at least in the process of formation. In broad outlines, Asian, ancient, feudal and modern bourgeois forms of production can be designated as progressive epochs in the economic formation of society. (Marx 1977b:390)

The basis of Marx's disagreement with the utopian socialists is expressed here in a nutshell. What is at issue is not such categories as justice, freedom, equality, etc., but the material preconditions under which human needs can be satisfied: for 'right can never be higher than the economic structure of society and its cultural development conditioned thereby' (Marx 1977b:569). On this score the theory is quite unforgiving, to the extent that in constructing a communist society out of the old capitalist order one must accept certain defects (most notably, of course, those associated with the notion of 'equal right'); these are simply unavoidable prior to the full development of the material basis of communist society.

The political consequences of this position are important, and it is from these that the incessant quarrelling with the utopian socialists (and to some extent the anarchists) arises. If communist society can only grow out of capitalist society, it follows that there is no possibility of making a 'leap across history', of bypassing the stage of capitalist development before reaching the stage of full communist society. It is for this reason that Marx's attitude towards capitalism is so complexly ambivalent. On the one hand his entire project is devoted to the revolutionary overthrow of capitalist society; on the other hand, capitalist society is an historically necessary stage of human development. It is for precisely this reason that Marx and Engels could regard with equanimity the havoc that the penetration of capitalism brought to Indian village society. While they saw clearly the social disruption and misery that it brought, they argued that it was only the displacement of traditional village society by capitalist relations of production that would make possible the ultimate establishment of communist society:

> England, it is true, in causing a social revolution in Hindostan, was actuated only by the vilest interests, and was stupid in her manner of enforcing them. But that is not the question. The question is, can mankind fulfil its destiny without a fundamental revolution in the social state of Asia? If not, whatever may have been the crimes of England she was the unconscious tool of history in bringing about that revolution. (Marx & Engels 1977:493)

Nowhere is this ambivalence more apparent than in the *Communist Manifesto*, in those extraordinary passages in which Marx sings the praises of the bourgeoisie:

> The bourgeoisie, during its rule of scarcely one hundred years, has created more massive and more colossal productive forces than have all preceding generations together. Subjection of nature's forces to man, machinery, application of chemistry to industry and agriculture, steam navigation, railways, electric telegraphs, clearing of whole continents for cultivation, canalization of rivers, whole populations conjured out of the ground – what earlier century had even a presentiment that such productive forces slumbered in the lap of social labour? (Marx 1977b:225)

What are we to make of this ambivalence? Some of Marx's critics have interpreted it as a sort of transmogrified Hegelianism, in which the march of reason in history proceeds by way of contradiction. Certainly this is true in one sense, in the sense that Marx's method here is Hegelian in character. But there is much more at stake. What is at issue is the manner in which human societies evolve to the point of producing surplus, for the core of Marx's argument is that it is only on the basis of a socially appropriable surplus product that human needs – including the needs for freedom, for self-actualization, and for authentic collective association – can be met. The point is of crucial importance in evaluating whether the conception of 'stages of history' is justified, and I shall return to it below.

The alternative perspective – that of 'permanent revolution' – is most usually associated with Trotsky; in its developed form, it asserts that revolutions can be forged by the proletariat in underdeveloped, pre- or semi-capitalist societies, that such revolutions can pass in uninterrupted fashion from the 'democratic' to the 'socialist' stage, through the pursuit by the proletariat of these twin goals in parallel rather than in series, and that the construction of socialism by 'permanentist' means is an international rather than a national problem (Löwy 1981:1). In this form, the theory is clearly a revision (I use the word carefully) of Marx. But it is not a radical departure from Marx, for it can be shown without difficulty that a 'permanentist' perspective is employed by Marx and Engels at different times throughout their lives.

Some of the evidence, to be sure, is ambiguous. For example, where Marx argues in the *Communist Manifesto* that

> The first step in the revolution by the working class is to raise the proletariat to the position of ruling class, to win the battle of democracy. (Marx 1977b:237)

it is possible to interpret his position either way. Michael Löwy has

argued that this is clear evidence for a permanentist perspective, in the sense that 'democracy' is here depicted as a task of socialist rather than bourgeois revolution. But the opposite case can be made with equal, and perhaps greater, plausibility; for Marx may mean simply – the context is not clear – that the proletariat can forge a socialist revolution only on the basis of a pre-existing democratic electoral machinery (in which case it must follow that the democratic revolution is the necessary precondition for the socialist revolution). Certainly this latter case is more consistent with the kinds of arguments that Engels made, after Marx's death, in the context of the SPD's adoption of the parliamentary road to socialism.

Similarly, some of Marx's arguments appear to stand midway between the two perspectives. For example, when he argues in *Moralising Criticism and Critical Morality* that

> The workers . . . know that their own revolutionary movement can only be accelerated through the revolutionary movement of the bourgeoisie against the feudal orders and the absolute monarchy. They know that their own struggle against the bourgeoisie can only break out on the day the bourgeoisie triumphs. (Marx 1977b:218)

the conception of distinct stages is clearly evident, but in a dramatically telescoped fashion, so that it is relatively easy to conceive of the one spilling over into the other. Precisely the same construction can be placed upon his treatment of the prospects of revolution in Germany in the *Communist Manifesto*:

> The Communists turn their attention chiefly to Germany, because that country is on the eve of a bourgeois revolution that is bound to be carried out under more advanced conditions of European civilization, and with a much more advanced proletariat, than that of England was in the seventeenth, and France in the eighteenth century, and because the bourgeois revolution in Germany will be but the prelude to an immediately following proletarian revolution. (Marx 1977b:246)

The perspective here is neither fully 'permanentist' nor 'incrementalist'; the stages of revolution are conceived of as distinct, but in such a way that the one leads immediately to the other. In these formulations it is clear, however, that although Marx expects the socialist revolution to follow close on the heels of its bourgeois precursor, the likelihood of the bourgeois revolution is not open to question.

It is precisely when Marx begins to query the inevitability of the bourgeois revolution, however, that the permanentist position in his writings begins to emerge. Of crucial importance here is the vacillation and temporization of the German bourgeoisie in the 1840s, and particularly during the revolutions of 1848. As a class, they draw

back timidly from making the final break with absolutism – the sort of break that Marx and Engels had at various times associated with the role of the bourgeoisie in the French revolution. In disgust, he concluded that 'a purely *bourgeois revolution* . . . is impossible in Germany. What is possible is either feudal and absolutist counter-revolution or the *social-republican* revolution' (Löwy 1981:13). This argument raises crucial questions about the forms of political expression of the bourgeois class and the sort of statal relations that are appropriate to, or compatible with, capitalist relations of production – questions that Marx was to ask again and again, particularly in relation to the phenomenon of Bonapartism. It is the capitulation of the German bourgeoisie to absolutism which initially triggers this train of questions, and it is in asking these questions that Marx begins to develop the embryo of the theory of permanent revolution. From the debacle of 1848 Engels concluded that

> Ever since the defeat of June 1848 the question for the civilized part of the European continent has stood thus: either the rule of the revolutionary proletariat or the rule of the classes who ruled before February. A middle road is no longer possible. In Germany, in particular, the bourgeoisie has shown itself incapable of ruling; it could only maintain its rule over the people by surrendering it once more to the aristocracy and the bureaucracy . . . the revolution can no longer be brought to a conclusion in Germany except with the complete rule of the proletariat. (Löwy 1981:14)

It is perhaps typical of Engels's style in politics – in particular, his tendency to view the field of possibilities in terms of sharp dichotomies – that he should rule out the prospect of a 'middle road'. Marx, however, certainly concurred, for in the 'Address of the Central Committee to the Communist League' he argued with Engels that

> while the democratic petty bourgeoisie [to which Marx and Engels now pinned their hopes] wish to bring the revolution to an end as quickly as possible . . . it is our interest and our task to make the revolution permanent, until all more or less propertied classes have been forced out of their position of dominance, until the proletariat has conquered state power, and the association of proletarians, not only in this country but in all the dominant countries of the world, has advanced so far that competition among the proletarians of these countries has ceased and that at least the decisive productive forces are concentrated in the hands of the proletarians. (Marx 1977b:280)

Michael Löwy comments:

> This striking passage contains three of the fundamental themes that Trotsky would later develop in the theory of permanent revolution: (1) the uninterrupted development of the revolution in a semi-feudal country, leading to the conquest of power by the working class; (2) the

> application of the proletariat in power of explicitly anti-capitalist and
> socialist measures; (3) the necessarily international character of the
> revolutionary process and of the new socialist society, without classes
> or private property. (1981:15)

On the face of it, the evidence here is quite unambiguous, and does not
need to be emphasized; the 'stagist' or 'incrementalist' perspective is
entirely displaced by an embryonic theory of the permanent revolu-
tion. (It is, however, worth entering a small note of caution in
interpreting this, and similar, texts, and this concerns what Elster has
called the 'bias of compromise'. It is quite possible that Marx is
compromising here – for purely political purposes – with a radical
artisan constituency concerned to drive the revolution forward at
once.)

It might, furthermore, be objected that these ideas are developed
prior to the mature treatment of capitalist society and the economics of
surplus production to which Marx devotes so much of his later life;
and there is certainly an important case to be made here, for it is clear
that Marx conceives of socialism as a form of social and economic
organization that is predicated upon the mature development of the
forces of production, the sort of development that capitalism achieves
so successfully. What is at issue in these early and fleeting visions of
the permanent revolution is a *political* problem, namely the vacilla-
tion of the bourgeoisie. But to recast the politics of the problem is not
to wish away the economics, as I shall argue below. Furthermore,
Marx's thinking about the politics of the bourgeoisie is far from
unambiguous, and there is thus at best weak justification for the theory
of permanent revolution in his political thought.

This is not to argue that the early visions of 'permanent revolution'
are dismissed or transcended in the light of the project that produced
*Capital*. It has been argued that they appear and reappear constantly
throughout Marx's and Engels's work. It is not my purpose to prove or
disprove this case. Rather, what I wish to consider here is the
argument which Marx made towards the end of his life concerning the
possibility of socialist revolution in Tsarist Russia. This argument, I
shall suggest, contains both a restatement of the embryonic theory of
permanent revolution and at the same time a serious qualification of it.
In the light of this I shall return to the relationship between the
economics of surplus production and Marx's project of emancipation.
I shall then offer a concluding argument concerning the status of
'incrementalist' and 'permanentist' models of revolution in Marx and
the general significance of the conception of 'stages of history'.

Although the entire emphasis of Marx's project is on revolution in
the advanced capitalist societies, there emerges from the 1870s
onwards a general interest in the prospects of revolution in Russia

which reproduces crucial elements of the early embryonic theory of permanent revolution: the characteristics of combined and uneven development, the tasks of the proletariat in 'backward' societies, and the international nature of the revolutionary process. What interested Marx about Russian society, of course, was the persistence of communal social structures in the form of the *obshchina*, the peasant commune responsible for the periodic redistribution of land and the performance of collective social tasks. Whether Russian village society qualified for the status of 'primitive communism' or not is open to question. The point is that its survival suggested to Marx the possibility of constructing upon it a developed communist society: it represented 'the finest occasion that history has ever offered a people not to undergo all the sudden turns of fortune of the capitalist system' (cited in Löwy 1981:25). In the celebrated drafts of the letter to Zasulich, however, Marx makes it clear that what is at issue is not the Russian commune system, but the sort of revolution that will be needed to build upon it an authentic communist society. What sort of a revolution did Marx have in mind? On the one hand, he appears to have believed that Russia might be able to 'go it alone', so to speak:

> To save the Russian commune, a Russian revolution is necessary . . . If the revolution comes at an opportune moment, if it concentrates all forces to ensure the free development of the rural commune, this commune will soon develop into an element that regenerates Russian society and guarantees superiority over countries enslaved by the capitalist regime. (Marx 1977b:580)

On the other hand, Marx also suggests that the projected revolution in Russia is contingent upon a simultaneous revolution in western Europe. Nowhere is this clearer than in the much-quoted preface to the 1882 Russian edition of the *Communist Manifesto*:

> If the Russian Revolution sounds the signal for a proletarian revolution in the West, so that both complement each other, the present Russian common ownership of land may serve as the starting-point for a communist development. (Marx 1977b:584)

Kautsky was to make much of this argument in berating the Bolsheviks for launching a 'premature' revolution; and, indeed, the Bolsheviks (including Trotsky, the chief exponent of the theory of permanent revolution) were to make much of it themselves.

Here is clear evidence for a mature conception of 'permanent revolution' in Marx. What is at issue here, however, is not the evidence, but how we interpret it. It is perfectly true that, at one level, what is involved here is a repudiation of the notion of fixed and inevitable 'stages of history'. Indeed, Marx himself made the repudiation very clear: he accused the populist Mikhailovsky of trying

to 'metamorphose my historical sketch of the genesis of capitalism in Western Europe into a historico-philosophical theory of the general path every people is fated to tread, whatever the historical circumstances in which it finds itself' (1977b:572); and he explicitly denied that *Capital* was a 'theory of the historical necessity for all countries of the world to pass through the phases of capitalist production' (cited in Löwy 1981:23). Clearly, this stands in sharp contrast to the assertion in the 1867 preface to *Capital* that 'the country that is more developed industrially only shows, to the less developed, the image of its own future' (Marx 1977b:416). However, we may reconcile these views by distinguishing between the underlying logic of history and the relatively contingent circumstances of its actual creation. Marx clearly had such a distinction in mind in the following extract from a letter to Engels in 1871:

> World history would indeed be very easy to make if the struggle were taken up on condition of infallibly favourable chances. On the other hand, it would be of a very mystical nature if 'chances' played no role. These accidents themselves naturally fall in to the general course of development and are again compensated by other accidents. But acceleration and delay are very dependent upon such 'accidents' – which include the 'accident' of the character of those who at first stand at the head of the movement. (Marx 1979:281)

On the one hand, then, the 'stages of history' are not a matter of immutable necessity or the basis of 'iron laws' of historical development. On the other hand, however, these disclaimers are not a licence to read in Marx the opposite case, that socialist revolutions can be forged at whim without respect to either international context or level of economic development. Marx does, after all, have clear principles about the economic bases of socialist society; it is precisely on these grounds that the lifelong conflict with the utopian socialists rests. What is at issue here is a careful analysis of historical circumstances. Having said that, it must then be added that Marx is offering here an historical analysis of a society that is, in many ways, exceptional; that he is tentatively optimistic about the prospects of revolution in the Russian case, but his optimism is nowhere near the sort of optimism he expresses at various times about revolution in western Europe (however misplaced it may have been); and that, finally, he insists that revolution in Russia is contingent upon simultaneous and successful revolution in western Europe.

The chequered course of Soviet economic development brings the point out nicely. Faced with the failure of the European revolution between 1919 and 1922, the Bolsheviks were compelled to formulate a strategy for capital accumulation that was both 'permanentist' in

character and appropriate to the intractable economic necessities in which they found themselves trapped. Having foregone the capitalist road to accumulation, only one path remained. As Bahro comments,

> Labour above that immediately necessary is not something that lies in the 'nature' of man, but it needs *generations of capitalist* compulsion to create the *type of producer*, the *human* productive force, that for the first time makes possible a communism of wealth. Bourgeois society could achieve precisely its freedom and democracy, what Marx saw as its political advances that deserved to be raised to a higher level, because labour discipline was enforced by economics. But there is no way, Marx implies, that a pre-capitalist country can industrialize without *either* wage-labour *or* extra-economic compulsion. One of the two is needed. (1977:27)

Either the one or the other: there is no middle road. Now, at a purely conceptual level, there is nothing to choose between these two. If we draw a necessary link between socialism and industrialism (a link that some socialists have questioned, but which a Marxist cannot reject without doing serious violence to the basic theory) then it is possible to travel both a capitalist and a non-capitalist road to socialism. However, while there is nothing at a conceptual level to recommend either the one path or the other, there is much to be said concerning considerations of prudence. For if the history of socialist struggles in the twentieth century teaches anything, it teaches us that the path of extra-economic coercion can go catastrophically wrong. Nor is it simply the case that there are serious political dangers in the authoritarian road to socialism; the issue goes beyond recognizing dangers (and hence being sensitive to them) to a much bleaker issue. It is this: the sort of social structures – in particular, the sort of bureaucratic apparatuses – that have been necessary to the non-capitalist road to socialism have not only proved to be exceedingly impervious to democratization, but may in fact represent a blind alley rather than a possible road to socialism. If this is the case – and I wish here to raise the possibility rather than to assert it – then the authoritarian road to socialism represents not merely a detour or an alternative but a regression, and a regression that may be of such a serious magnitude as to be unrectifiable without a further revolution. There is a sense, therefore, in which Kautsky's critique of the Russian Revolution has an extraordinary resonance after the passage of seventy years, and it compels us to examine more closely the entire point of a stagist or incrementalist conception of historical development.

I conclude therefore, that Marx offers us a *general theory* of the

stages of history which derives its meaning not from notions of historical inevitability or from the uncompromising requirements of a latter-day cunning of reason, but from fairly well elaborated arguments about the social and economic requirements of justice or, more broadly, human needs such as self-actualization and objectification. The general theory is not impervious to modification in the light of specific historical circumstances, nor to the possibility of non-capitalist paths to socialism. Nor does demonstrating that Marx works from such a theory imply that notions of 'permanent revolution' are absent from, or inimical to, his work. It is, however, precisely a general theory; and on the basis of the preceding analysis, I suggest that the conception of 'stages of history' is, within the terms of Marx's project, a reasonable one.

### The In/justice of Capitalism

Given that Marx is committed to the notion of historically successive modes of production, I now show how the problem of the justice or otherwise of capitalism can only be interpreted in the light of the general theory of history. I shall argue that justice, for Marx, is both an historical and a moral problem, and that attempts to resolve it purely morally are foredoomed to failure. I proceed by taking the debate between Wood and Husami as a convenient point of entry for the elaboration of this argument. I will begin by restating the terms of the debate very baldly; full reviews are to be found in Geras (1985) and de Kadt (1990).

Briefly, Wood argues that Marx regards capitalism as just for two reasons. The first reason is that, according to Wood, conceptions of justice are essentially superstructural in character, and therefore a practice is just not in virtue of its consequences but of its function with respect to the relevant mode of production in which it is embedded. Thus it is not possible to use conceptions of justice that are specific to one mode of production to evaluate another; moreover, in evaluating acts or practices, such acts or practices are said to be just if they conform to the relevant mode of production, and unjust if they do not. Hence Marx, on Wood's reading, must regard capitalism as just. More narrowly, Wood appeals to a passage in *Capital* in which Marx observes that the purchase of labour power by the capitalist and the consequent extraction of surplus value is 'no injustice' (since commodities in capitalist society typically exchange at their values, and the value of labour power, while perhaps less than the value of the commodities produced by it, is what the capitalist pays, hence no injustice is done. In the absence of the relevant value differentials there would be no incentive for capitalists to purchase labour power, and hence no capitalism.)

Against this, Husami argues that first, Marx is satirizing capital in the passage in question, and second, Wood's reading cannot be squared with the many passages in *Capital* and elsewhere in which Marx describes the general set of transactions between capitalists and proletarians in a morally laden language: 'booty', 'theft', 'embezzle-ment', 'plunder', etc. The use of such terms implies wrongful appropriation in some non-relativist sense. Husami then resolves the implicit ambiguity by distinguishing between Marx's sociology of morals and his moral theory, hence granting some of the force of Wood's argument while maintaining the possibility that Marx regarded capitalism as unjust.

This line of argument certainly works, but it leaves us with a further puzzle. Husami implies that Marx is working, at some level, with a conception of justice. The puzzle is that Marx's writings display an unremitting hostility to the very concept of justice, which is regarded as 'drivel', 'claptrap', 'trash', and worse:

> With the reaction and the downfall of the heroic epoch of philosophy in Germany, the 'petit bourgeois' innate in every German citizen has again asserted himself – in philosophic twaddle worthy of Moses Mendelssohn, shit-smart, peevish, know-it-all nitpicking. And so now even political economy is to be dissolved in drivel about *conceptions of justice*! (Marx 1979:275)

Some elegant solutions to this puzzle have been advanced, but they all involve the proposition, in some form, that Marx has a theory of justice *malgré lui* (Lukes 1987; Geras 1985). I find this line of reasoning unsatisfactory, not least because of its implicit superior knowledge, and I think there is a better way of reading the evidence, which I now advance.

Talk of justice, as with value-laden categories in general, entails the implicit or explicit identification of appropriate counterfactuals, and it is not possible to determine the justice or otherwise of a transaction or a set of social relations prior to consideration of such counterfactuals. To speak of justice or injustice is to say that things could have happened or been arranged differently. Now, there is no sense in carping about capitalism if it is at the same time depicted as being *necessary*; and, if the reading of Marx developed in section (1) is correct, then Marx *does* regard capitalism as necessary. There are several connected reasons for this, the most important of which is the tremendous development of the forces of production which only capital is thought capable of effecting. But along with this go certain *cultural* consequences which are central to Marx's argument. The historic destiny of capital, Marx argues,

> is fulfilled as soon as, on one side, there has been such a development of needs that surplus labour above and beyond necessity has itself become a general need arising out of individual needs themselves – and, on the other hand, when the severe discipline of capital, acting on succeeding generations, has developed general industriousness as the general property of the new species. (cited in Bahro 1977:27)

It is central to Marx's argument that capital liberates in the very process by which it enslaves. Thus

> What characterizes the division of labour in the automatic workshop is that labour has there completely lost its specialized character. But the moment every special development stops, the need for universality, the tendency towards an integral development of the individual begins to be felt. (cited in Cohen 1988:195)

Moreover, it is the phenomenon of capital which makes global emancipation possible:

> Hence the great civilizing influence of capital, its production of a stage of society compared with which all earlier stages appear to be merely *local development* of humanity and idolatry of nature. (cited in Cohen 1988:197)

I shall return to these themes below, since they are critically important in elaborating the account of justice that I believe Marx was working with. The puzzle, however, remains: how could Marx condemn capitalism while simultaneously insisting on its necessity? The answer lies precisely in the general theory of history which gives rise to the defence of capitalism in the first place; for

> no social order ever perishes before all the productive forces for which there is room in it have developed; and new, higher relations of production never appear before the material conditions of their existence have matured in the womb of the old society itself. Therefore mankind always sets itself only such tasks as it can solve; since, looking at the matter more closely, it will be found that the task itself arises only when the material conditions for its solution already exist or are at least in the process of formation. (Marx 1977b:390)

This, I think, exactly reflects the argument earlier that talk of justice involves the identification of relevant counterfactuals. To set the task of justice prior to the material conditions for its solution is simply unintelligible. But note that we have here three different cases: (1) prior to the full development of the forces of production necessary to communism there can be no meaningful talk of justice; (2) with the appropriate development the problem of justice can at last be solved; indeed, its solution is automatic; (3) finally, and more interestingly, there is an intermediate possibility in which the forces of production are not fully developed, but are sufficiently developed at least to place

the task on the agenda. Marx clearly believed that the capitalism of his time had attained either case (2) or (3). (I make no attempt to justify this proposition, but I think it is clear from even a cursory reading of *Capital* and Marx's correspondence with Engels.) Hence the puzzle disappears; Marx does indeed believe that capitalism is unjust, but only at that point when the forces of production are sufficiently developed to allow of an alternative.

Is capitalism unjust prior to this stage? There are two possible cases. (1) Capitalism might be historically necessary but is still unjust. (2) Ruling classes might exploit subaltern classes more than is historically necessary, in which case their practices are unjust but the mode of production as a whole is not. Cohen has argued case (1) (1988:303–4), but I think he is wrong. As for case (2), it points to the injustice of capitalists rather than capitalism, and I suspect that it explains much of the morally laden language that Marx deploys in the writing of *Capital*.

### The Non/justice of Communism

I have shown that capitalism is unjust at and beyond the point where the development of the forces of production is sufficient to permit its transcendence. Is communism then a just society? Marx's writings on the problem are too scattered to give a short answer, and the long answer requires an initial detour into the philosophical anthropology that lies at the heart of his early work.

Prior to 1848 Marx is primarily concerned to establish, against the Young Hegelians, the elements of an ontology that is essentially materialist in character. After 1848 comes exile and political economy, and the project shifts in a fundamentally different direction. But there is no point in invoking the notion of an 'epistemological break' to account for this, for such a notion presupposes that Marxism is one theory, whereas I am happy to assume that it is in fact several. Marx is laying down different theories before and after 1848.

The early concerns are quickly summarized. Marx tries to show that Hegel's epistemology is essentially a misappropriation of Kant; via Feuerbach, he suggests that human beings are to be understood as objective beings, with characteristic powers and needs objectively defined. Powers and needs are mutually entailing, in that every satisfaction of a power is the expression of a need and vice versa. To be human is thus to see oneself reflected in, and transformed through, a world that one has fashioned; it is to be inserted into an ensemble of active and practical sensuous relationships with nature and with society. This capacity for creative activity gives rise to the human propensity to produce above and beyond immediate necessity. The

sum of these needs, powers and capacities is expressed in the term praxis, as the defining character and capacity of every objective being:

> Man is a *natural* being. As a living natural being he is, in one aspect, endowed with the *natural capacities* and *vital powers* of an *active* natural being. These capacities exist in him as tendencies and capabilities, as *drives*. In another aspect as a natural, living, sentient and objective being man is a *suffering*, conditioned, and limited creature like an animal or plant. The *objects* of his drives, that is to say, exist outside him as independent, yet they are *objects* of his *need*, essential and indispensable to the exercise and confirmation of his *essential capacities*. The fact that man is a *corporeal*, actual, sentient, objective being with natural capacities means that he has *actual, sensuous objects* for his nature as objects of his life-expression, or that he can only *express* his life in actual sensuous objects. (Marx 1967:325) [The German rendering would appear far less ugly since Marx would have used letter-spacing instead of italic type.]

But praxis has a dark, a counterfinal, side; an anti-praxis, which Marx terms alienation. To show that Marx is working with a variant of a theory of counterfinality, consider the following celebrated passage from the *German Ideology*:

> as soon as labour is distributed, each person has a particular, exclusive area of activity which is imposed on him and from which he cannot escape. He is a hunter, a fisherman, a herdsman, or a critical critic, and he must remain so if he does not want to lose his means of livelihood. In communist society, however, where nobody has an exclusive area of activity and each can train himself in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production, thus making it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, breed cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner, just as I like, without ever becoming a hunter, a fisherman, a herdsman, or a critic. (Marx 1967:424–5)

This much is well known. Consider, however, the continuation:

> This fixation of social activity, this consolidation of our own products into an objective power above us, growing out of our control, thwarting our expectations, and nullifying our calculations, is one of the chief factors in historical development so far . . . (Marx 1967:425)

There follow nine lines deleted (and unfortunately illegible); but it is clear that Marx is describing the process by which choices result in unintended consequences: in counterfinality, in suboptimality, in the practico-inert. This is even clearer when viewed in the light of the addendum inserted in Engels's script at the right of the paragraph just quoted from. Engels writes:

> Out of this very contradiction between the interest of the individual and that of the community the latter takes an independent form as the *State*... every class striving to gain control – even when such control means the transcendence of the entire old form of society and of control itself, as in the case of the proletariat – must first win political power in order to represent its interest in turn as the universal interest, something which the class is forced to do immediately. (Marx 1967:425)

In short – though Marx and Engels would not use the terminology – the state is derived from what is essentially a choice-theoretical problem; the interest of each gives rise to various forms of counterfinal social relations (division of labour, abstract economic laws that appear uncontrollable, the fetishisation of capital, and social structure generally as a violation of human autonomy). This is borne out by what is added to the text in Marx's script:

> Just because individuals seek *only* their particular interest, which for them does not coincide with their communal interest, the latter will be imposed on them as something 'alien' and 'independent', as a 'universal' interest of a particular and peculiar nature in its turn. Otherwise they themselves must remain within this discord, as in democracy. On the other hand, the *practical* struggle of these particular interests, which constantly *really* run counter to the communal and illusory communal interests, necessitates *practical* intervention and control through the illusory 'universal' interest in the form of the state. (Marx 1967:425–6)

Where and when individuals seek *only* their individual interest, counterfinalities of this kind necessarily arise and necessitate the existence of the state, garbed in the cloth of (illusory) universal interest, to mediate between forms of particularity. Incidentally, this line of argument permits us to resolve finally one of the oldest puzzles in Marx, namely, why he should have chosen to depict the proletariat as a 'universal' class instead of a particular one. Far from the merely 'metaphysical' case that critics have read in the *Introduction to a Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, Marx is merely arguing that the proletariat is the revolutionary class agent which appears at that stage of history when productive power is sufficiently developed to permit the solution to these choice-theoretical problems and restore real human autonomy to the seemingly uncontrollable forces of social logic. This link between class and the development of productive power is central to Marx's argument:

> The conditions under which definite productive forces can be applied are the conditions of the rule of a definite class of society. (cited in Cohen 1986:20)

Of course Marx may have been wrong to believe this, but the

argument is not grounded in metaphysics but in the logic of collective action.

The key point here is that Marx clearly does believe that the seemingly blind forces of economics are (1) microfoundationally derived and (2) – more importantly – subject to human control in such a way that the anti-praxis of class society can be restored to an authentic praxis of communist society. Now, Marx depicts anti-praxis – alienation – in vivid and outraged terms, both in the *German Ideology* and in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* that preceded it. The systematic inversion, characteristic of capitalism, of the capacity for free creative labour renders human beings all that they are not, and a grotesque parody of all that they could be. Marx's language in the latter text is one of burning moral indignation. But the status of this moral disapprobation is highly confused. For at one level Marx clearly suggests that alienation is wrong, and perhaps unjust; it is 'a mistake, a defect that ought not to be' (Ollman 1976:132). At the same time, however, Marx also suggests that alienation is not only historically inevitable, but actively necessary. To show this, let us return to the locus in the *German Ideology* from which the earlier discussion was derived. Referring to the phenomenon of counterfinality, Marx goes on to add that

> The social power, that is, the multiplied productive force from the co-operation of different individuals determined by the division of labour, appears to these individuals not as their own united power but as a force alien and outside them because their co-operation is not voluntary but has come about naturally. They do not know the origin and the goal of this alien force, and they cannot control it. On the contrary, it passes through a peculiar series of phases and stages independent of the will and the action of men, even directing their will. (Marx 1967:426)

In the light of these observations let us examine the account of justice that follows some thirty years later.

To be human is to have powers and needs that are expressed and met in creative labour, in praxis. Now, taking powers as the obverse of needs, and taking the notion of the *development* of one's powers as the central theme in Marx's claims about emancipation, we have four possibilities:

(1)  Some powers partially developed;
(2)  All powers partially developed;
(3)  Some powers fully developed;
(4)  All powers fully developed.

(1) is the weakest combination, (4) is the strongest; (2) and (3) are intermediate possibilities. The vision of emancipation entailed in the

philosophical anthropology requires combination (4): 'free activity is for the communists the creative manifestation of life arising from the free development of *all* abilities' (cited in Cohen 1988:142). Elsewhere Marx looks to the 'full and free development of every individual', and to the 'free development of the individual as a whole' (cited in Cohen 1988:142). Referring to this vision, Cohen argues that

> Now, whether or not that ideal is desirable, it is certainly unrealizable, as you will see if you imagine someone trying to realize it, in a single lifetime. But it is not even desirable, in every case, to realize it as much as possible. There is often a choice between modest development of each of quite a few abilities and virtuoso development of one or very few, and there is no basis for asserting the *general* superiority of either of these choices. [i.e. combinations 2 and 3 are defensible but there is no obvious warrant for defending the one rather than the other.] What constitutes the free development of the individual in a given case depends on many things, and his *free* development is never his *full* development, for that is possible only for beings which are sub- or super-human. A society in which everyone is free to develop in any direction is not the same as a society in which anyone is free to develop in every direction; that kind of society will never exist, because there will never be people with that order of ability. (1988:142)

If we now look, in the light of these considerations, at the standard text on the *justice* of communist society – the *Critique of the Gotha Programme* – we can show that the way in which Marx construes the problem of distribution under communism is hopelessly contaminated with the flight of fancy entailed in combination (4), *which is also the central proposition of the philosophical anthropology.* Communism entails two principles of distribution, depending on its level of development; the first stage involves the contribution principle (from each according to ability to each according to contribution) and the second, the needs principle (from each according to ability to each according to need). I shall say more about the contribution principle in due course; for now my focus is on the needs principle. The key passage reads as follows:

> In a higher phase of communist society, after the enslaving subordination of the individual to the division of labour, and therewith also the antithesis between mental and physical labour, has vanished; after labour has become not only a means of life but life's prime want; after the productive forces have also increased with the all-round development of the individual, and all the springs of co-operative wealth flow more abundantly – only then can the narrow horizon of bourgeois right be crossed in its entirety and society inscribe on its banners: from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs! (Marx 1977b:569)

Notice the similarities between the language deployed in this

passage and that of the early philosophical anthropology: the fundamental concern with the enslaving character of the division of labour, and the theme of the all-round development of the individual. Now, this vision can and has been attacked on a number of grounds: (1) the image of technological super-abundance which Marx foresees is implausible; (2) the disappearance of some kinds of scarcity – most notably scarcity of time – is impossible; (3) the capacity of the global ecology to absorb industrialization of the required order is probably impossible; (4) the tension between individual needs and commmu-nitarian needs that is implicit here is severely aggravated by Marx's rejection of politics in communist society. These, and others, are important criticisms. However, they do not concern me here; instead, I want to draw attention to the vision of autonomy that Marx projects. It is the same vision as that deployed in the philosophical anthropo-logy: the full development of all powers, through creative activity, in the absence of scarcity. It is a vision that we can with confidence reject, and it gives rise to the failure of the needs principle as an account of distributive justice. For Marx argues that the distribution of the means of consumption is a consequence of the distribution of the means of production. Hence, the needs principle cannot function as a regulative principle; it is merely a description of a state of affairs. Circumstances of scarcity give rise to regulative principles, and the absence of such circumstances obviates the need for appropriate principles. On this account of communism, the problem of justice is not solved – it simply disappears.

It is worth recalling that we are dealing here with a polemic written for private circulation. It has attracted inordinate notice from Marxists, including Lenin, who based much of the argument in the *State and Revolution* on it. Its central argument reproduces all the tensions and failures of the early philosophical anthropology. Now, the anthropology appears to have an intimate connection with the materialist conception of history, and on this reading we would expect to find the same tensions and failures in the latter theory. Consider, then, the following passage from the third volume of *Capital*:

> The actual wealth of society, and the possibility of constantly expanding its reproduction process, therefore, do not depend upon the duration of surplus labour, but upon its productivity and the more or less copious conditions of production under which it is performed. In fact, the realm of freedom actually begins only where labour which is determined by necessity and mundane considerations ceases; thus in the very nature of things it lies beyond the sphere of actual material production. Just as the savage must wrestle with Nature to satisfy his wants, to maintain and reproduce life, so must civilized man, and he must do so in all social formations and under all possible modes of

production. With his development this realm of physical necessity
expands as a result of his wants; but at the same time, the forces of
production which satisfy those wants also increase. Freedom in this
field can only consist in socialized man, the associated producers,
rationally regulating their interchange with Nature, bringing it under
their common control, instead of being ruled by it as by the blind forces
of Nature; and achieving this with the least expenditure of energy and
under conditions most favourable to, and worthy of, their human
nature. But it none the less remains a realm of necessity. Beyond it
begins that development of human energy which is an end in itself, the
true realm of freedom, which, however, can blossom forth only with
this realm of necessity as its basis. The shortening of the working day is
its basic prerequisite. (1977b:497)

This is almost a rejoinder to the anthropology. Consider it with the
following continuation of the earlier argument from the *German
Ideology*:

. . . this development of productive forces (which already implies the
actual empirical existence of men on a *world-historical* rather than
local scale) is an absolutely necessary practical premise because,
without it, *want* is merely made general, and with *destitution* the
struggle for necessities and all the old muck would necessarily be
reproduced. (Marx 1967:427)

In the first account, the struggle for necessities remains; in the
second, it its transcended. In the second, freedom is expressed through
labour; in the first, freedom is expressed outside this 'realm of
necessity'. In the second account, alienated labour disappears; in the
first, something very much like alienation (the escape of the product
from one's control) persists. The vision of communist society in both
the *German Ideology* and the *Critique of the Gotha Programme*
assumes the transcendence of necessity; the vision in the passage from
*Capital* III assumes its persistence.

One way of treating this tension is simply to say that in the passage
from *Capital* quoted above Marx is simply in a more sober, even
gloomy, mood than usual. But I think this is a weak treatment of the
problem. Instead, I want to argue that we are dealing here with two
different theories rather than different variants of the same theory; and
the difference is one between the philosophical anthropology and the
materialist conception of history. Cohen has argued for this distinc-
tion at some length, and I believe his argument is exactly to the point:

Production in the philosophical anthropology is not identical with
production in the theory of history. According to the anthropology,
people flourish in the cultivation and exercise of their manifold
powers, and they are especially productive – which in *this* instance
means creative – in the condition of freedom conferred by material
plenty. But, in the production of interest to the theory of history, people

> produce not freely but because they have to, since nature does not
> otherwise supply their wants; and the development in history of the
> productive power of *man* (that is, of man as such, of man as a species)
> occurs at the expense of the creative capacity of the *men* who are the
> agents and victims of that development. They are forced to perform
> repugnant labour which is a denial, not an expression, of their natures:
> it is not the 'free play of their own physical and mental powers'. The
> historically necessitated production is transformation of the world into
> an habitable place by arduous labour, but the human essence of the
> anthropology is expressed in production as an end in itself, and such
> production differs not only in aim, but, typically, in form and in
> content, from production which has an instrumental rationale.
> (1988:148)

It is for this reason that the passage from *Capital* III quoted above
must be connected, not to the philosophical anthropology, but to the
theory of history; the necessity that Marx there describes is exactly the
necessity that gives rise in the first place to history itself, and he
assumes here that such necessity is finally necessary in 'all social
formations and under all possible modes of production'. The necessity
can be ameliorated (that is the point of the logic of history) but not
transcended. It follows that the needs principle belongs in the domain
of the philosophical anthropology – as I have tried to show in the
earlier discussion of the *German Ideology*. And since the philo-
sophical anthropology is untenable as a description or a vision of what
human beings could be, we are forced back upon the mediation of
necessity.

This is exactly the point of the contribution principle. Now, the
central problem here is a problem of adducing a suitable metric for
evaluating contribution. Marx suggests two – duration and
intensity – but while the first is mensurable, the second is not, and
certainly not if one remains committed to the labour theory of value.
But if we jettison the labour theory of value while retaining the idea of
*exploitation*, interesting things can be done. Roemer, for example, has
suggested that we can build a model of exploitation in terms of labour
transfers rather than value transfers, thus obviating the horrendous
value calculations that would otherwise be entailed. Elaboration of
this argument is beyond the scope of this paper, but it is worth at least
raising the possibility here. Moreover, this approach has a signal
advantage over a value model of exploitation, in that it can provide
justice-orientated motivations for collective action in ways that the
labour theory of value cannot.

I conclude, therefore, that Marx is offering us two quite different
accounts of the circumstances under which human potential can be
realized. They are essentially different arguments because they derive
from essentially different theoretical bases. What connects them is the

underlying concept of autonomy: to be human is to be self-determining, and self-determination entails the circumvention of constraint. The great originality of Marx, as against earlier philosophers, is his demonstration that constraint resides in considerable measure in the logic of social systems which are themselves a product of human choice. Of course he may be wrong to assume that such structural constraints are finally surmountable. But that is another story.

### Concluding Observation: On Justice and Autonomy

Marx's concept of autonomy requires an underlying concept of justice. In his work he offers two, one better than the other; and the difference resides precisely in the conception of historical necessity that attends these models.

Why, if Marx is so hostile to the concept of justice, should we want to read such a concept into his work? The answer, I believe, lies in the character of the notion of justice itself. Justice, I suggest, is not ever an end in itself, but a means to some further end, some conception of the human good which does not inhere merely in the distribution of scarce goods. Distribution *for what*? Different answers suggest themselves to different theorists; happiness, dignity, autonomy, freedom, and so on. Marx's argument is that autonomy is both a moral and an historical problem, and the failure of previous accounts of justice is to treat it only in the first dimension. To drown political economy in talk of justice is to ignore the historical dimension of the problem. But that consideration, I believe, and I believe that Marx believed, is not a warrant to drown talk of justice in political economy.

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# On Socialist Envy

## David Schweickart

Modern socialism, particularly Third World socialism, is beset with a difficult dilemma. On the one hand, socialist movements have been motivated by an ethical ideal – that of equality. They have been powered by a deep hatred of inequality, and have aspired to create a more egalitarian social order. On the other hand, the very passions that have been mobilized against oppressive inequality shade easily into envy, envy of a particularly destructive sort.

Marx himself was quite aware of this dilemma. Consider his harsh criticism of what he called 'crude communism', a communism that, in his words, 'aims to destroy everything which is incapable of being possessed by everyone.' This communism, Marx argues, appears to be exceedingly radical, but it is in fact the mirror image of capitalism. It is capitalism's 'abstract negation' as it were, because it, like capitalism, is based on envy. Under crude communism, he says, 'universal envy [sets] itself up as a power' that aims at 'leveling-down on the basis of a preconceived minimum'. But this envy is only a 'camouflaged form of [the envy that animates capitalism], which re-establishes itself and seeks to satisfy itself in a different way'.

As a matter of fact, this crude communism, Marx suggests, is worse than capitalism. Under capitalism envy motivates many people to strive to raise themselves up to the level of the wealthy, whereas under crude communism, envy motivates people to pull down those who have more. Marx writes:

> How little this abolition of private property represents a genuine [communism] is shown by the abstract negation of the whole world of culture and civilization, and the regression to the *unnatural* simplicity of the poor and wantless individual who has not only surpassed private property but has not yet even attained to it.[1]

Few socialist movements that have come to power have attempted to impose an egalitarianism so severe as that against which Marx warned. (Pol Pot's Kampuchea is the only example I can think of – although a 'politics of envy' has flared from time to time in various countries, usually with destructive results.) Almost all socialist societies have recognized the need for material incentives as a motivation for productive labor. But the attempt was made, almost everywhere, to 'rationalize' the resulting inequalities; that is to say, to

tie the differentials in income and special perquisites to 'objective' criteria: skill, training, responsibility, importance of the work, etc. The underlying idea has been to replace the irrational inequalities of the *market* with a more rational system of differential rewards, as determined by the *planners*.

It is my contention that this strategy has failed. It has failed not because the ideal of replacing irrational inequalities by more rational ones is an unworthy goal, but because the planning mechanisms created to accomplish this goal have proven to be inadequate to the task. The empirical evidence is now clear: central planning generates its own irrationalities, and these become increasingly severe as a society's economy develops. It has become clear – clear to me at any rate – that a socialism that wishes to meet the legitimate economic aspirations of its citizens must be a *market* socialism. The market must be utilized as a basic economic mechanism. I do not claim that the market should be the sole economic mechanism. Certainly not. Nor do I claim that the other defining features of capitalism, namely private ownership of the means of production and wage labour, are essential to economic viability. They are not. But a socialism that is both economically viable and worthy of its ethical heritage must be a market socialism. (I have argued these claims at length elsewhere. I won't pursue them further here.[2])

Let us come back to envy. If my basic claim is true, that a viable socialism must be a market socialism, then it follows that socialism must tolerate inequalities that would seem to have no 'rational' justification. The market does not reward 'rationally'. Hard work matters, but so does luck. Enterprises must take risks. Some risks pay off, but some do not. Customers can be fickle. Tastes can change. Managers can mismanage. Promising technologies can fail. Under such circumstances, some firms prosper, but others do not. Some even go bankrupt.

Needless to say, such conditions offer much more scope for envy – particularly in a culture with an egalitarian ethos. There is much room for bitterness and discontent. Basic socialist ideals, for which many have sacrificed, seem to have been betrayed.

And it is indeed possible that basic ideals will be betrayed. There is real danger here. The market is a powerful force. Properly utilized, it can be an instrument of great value, but improperly utilized, it can wreak havoc. (Eastern Europe is littered now with examples of the latter possibility.) This is not the place to discuss technical questions of market reform, but it is worth asking here about general criteria. If market-generated inequalities are not 'rational', in the sense of corresponding to standards of objective merit, how can we say whether or not they are excessive? One plausible answer to this

question – a good answer, I think – comes from an unlikely quarter. The most influential text in Anglo-American political philosophy since World War II is John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice*.[3] In this work Rawls sets out a simple principle (which he calls 'the difference principle') by which to determine if the inequalities of wealth and power in a society are just: they are just only if they benefit the least advantaged stratum of society. That is to say, if the least advantaged members of society are better off than they would be if the society were more egalitarian, then the inequalities are justified. To put the matter in a slightly different fashion: Rawls starts with a presumption in favor of equality. Inequalities are then admitted, provided (1) their motivational effects are sufficient to increase the total output of goods and services, and (2) some of this increase really does make the worst off segments of society better off.[4]

I've said that this is help from an unlikely quarter, because Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* has been widely regarded as a defence of Keynesian-liberal capitalism. And indeed, it can be so regarded, although, as I have argued elsewhere, capitalism, even that of a social-democratic structure, fails utterly to accord with Rawls's normative theory.[5] Whatever the intentions of its author, Rawls's theory provides justification for socialism (certain forms of socialism) – not for capitalism.

Interestingly enough, Rawls addresses explicitly the problem of envy. Given 'human beings as they are', he says, great disparities of income and wealth are bound to induce envy, and even wound a person's self-respect. If the inequalities exceed those permitted by the difference principle, a person cannot 'reasonably be asked to overcome his rancorous feelings'. Such envy is 'excusable'.[6]

If we accept this Rawlsian analysis, we may conclude the following: A society may justly employ the market as a part of its economic structure, so long as the resulting inequalities work to the benefit of the least advantaged strata. So long as inequalities remain within these bounds, whatever envy they generate is morally *in*excusable. This is true *even if* the inequalities do not correspond to effort, skill, responsibility or other such quasi-objective criteria. But if the inequalities exceed those permitted by the difference principle, they are not justified, and the envy to which they give rise is excusable.

The analysis just given constitutes, I think, a reasonably adequate *general account* of the relationship between equality and envy under socialism. Inequalities do not betray basic socialist commitments so long as they serve to motivate producers to produce more efficiently, and so long as the gains thus registered transfer in part to the least

advantaged strata. Under such circumstances envy is a vice – understandable, perhaps, but not excusable.

There is another important matter to consider. The account just given, however adequate as a general analysis, does not do justice to a particularly pressing problem today: the problem of making a *transition* from a non-market to a market form of socialism. It has long been recognized that the market has a corrosive effect on traditional values. In Marx's telling phrase, 'all that is solid melts into air'.[7]

It has been argued, by Habermas among other, that capitalism itself may come into crisis precisely because the capitalist market, in the long run, so undermines the moral character and even psychic structure of individuals that the system ceases to function effectively.[8] The market, to be effective, cannot operate in a moral vacuum. If the citizenry become excessively cynical, uncaring of the common good, too little concerned about future generations – in short, too possessed of 'possessive individualism' – then the market, rather than stimulating efficient production, will breed mainly corruption, crime and social devastation.

An analogous problem faces a socialist society attempting to introduce market reforms. Such reforms, properly introduced, can greatly enhance the material well-being of the population (China – the most dynamic economy in the world today – is proof positive of this.) But such reforms must be introduced in such a way so as to avoid not only major economic dislocation, but also moral degradation. Some of each – economic dislocation and moral degradation – is inevitable, but it is crucial that neither become too severe. It is crucial that measures be taken to counteract both.

Needless to say, there are no magic formulas to be invoked here. This is uncharted, difficult territory. It may well be the case that those who remain most loyal to the ideals of socialism will benefit least from the reforms. And yet, if the reforms are to be successful, economically as well as morally, it is vital that the ethical ideals of socialism be upheld – in a free and open fashion, not corroded by envy. It is vital that those who benefit most from the reforms recognize (1) that not all are benefiting equally, (2) that their good fortune is justified only if those less well off ultimately benefit also, and (3) that the long range success of the reforms depends crucially on maintaining the moral integrity of society. Likewise, it is vital that those who care about socialism work hard to see to it that proper safeguards are maintained so as to keep the market forces within bounds, while at the same time, resisting the temptation to a 'politics of envy', a politics that denounces indiscriminately those who benefit most from the reforms.

One should have no illusions as to the difficulty of the task at hand.

Marx has written that 'mankind only sets itself such problems as it can solve; for when we look closer we will always find that the problem itself only arises when the material conditions for its solution are present or at least in the process of coming into being'.[9] Let us hope that he is right in this instance.

## NOTES

1. Karl Marx, 'Private Property and Communism', in *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*. (In Erich Fromm, *Marx's Concept of Man*, Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1966, p. 125.) The other quotes given above are from the same source, pp. 124–25.
2. For a full statement of the case, see my *Against Capitalism*, Cambridge University Press, 1993.
3. Harvard University Press, 1971.
4. I'm oversimplifying here somewhat for purposes of exposition. For a careful analysis of Rawls, by a Marxist sympathetic to Rawls's general orientation, and some insightful modifications, see R.G. Peffer, *Marxism, Morality and Social Justice*, Princeton University Press, 1990.
5. See my 'Should Rawls Be a Socialist?', *Social Theory and Practice*, Fall 1978; see also Chapter Six of *Against Capitalism*.
6. Rawls, p. 534.
7. *Communist Manifesto*, in D. McLellan, *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985, p. 224.
8. Jürgen Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis*, Beacon Press, 1971.
9. *Preface to a Contribution of the Critique of Political Economy*, in Fromm, p. 218.

# Modernization and Moral Progress

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### The Origins of These Reflections

These reflections[1] have their origin in an attempt to explore the interconnections between the principal concerns of modern social and political philosophy – specifically the concerns with the structure of rights, freedom and justice – and the historico-sociological interpretation of modern societies. In conventional disciplinary traditions, these two enterprises – the historico-sociological and the politico-philosophical – have tended to develop independently of one another. The arguments presented in this paper rest on the assumption that this division, although it has been associated with the development of ever more technically complex discourses – especially in literature dealing with substantive moral and political philosophy – works to the detriment of both areas of reflection.

The principal questions that guide and shape this enquiry are the following:

(1) In what would principles of justice and right action that 'fit' and are appropriate to such societies consist?
(2) How might such principles be grounded? In what would the relevant criteria of 'fitness' consist?
(3) In what way do the character of such criteria and the structure of such principles relate to the way in which the relevant societies are described? That is, is there a symmetry, or perhaps even a relationship of conceptual entailment between the 'deep' structure of a society and the structure of normative discourses? Thus, if certain types of societies can be characterized in terms of 'logics of modernization' – i.e. in terms of economic and technological progress, might such characterization not also imply characterization in terms of moral progress? If so, what does such a connection *mean*?

The broad case that I wish to advance in this paper is that built into the rules according to which modern societies have evolved is the information with respect to which the idea of moral progress can be defined and defended. The underlying intuition is, of course, not new. It informs, in different ways, the diverse and often divergent writings of many major intellectual protagonists of modernity. Implicitly or

explicitly articulated, this intuition may be discerned in the writings of Condorcet, Cournot, Hegel, Marx, Habermas and, though less grounded than the thought of Marx or Habermas, in historical sociology, in the work of John Rawls.[2]

## The Elements of the Argument

This article is informed by the assertion that there exists a 'tension' or 'antinomy' between the phenomena of institutional modernization and the principal moral constructs of modernity. Specifically, there exists – and has always existed – a tension between the modern conceptions of the self as autonomous, rational and equal and the complex social, political and economic institutions with respect to which these conceptions of the self have been formulated.[3] Indeed, most of the major critiques of the institutional forms of the modern world have focused on this tension. It is the burden of this present article to show that this tension can be resolved both in theory and in practice.

The argument is that the basis of this resolution inheres in both the institutional logics of modernization and the ongoing articulation of the concept of the self as a moral agent or, following Kant, a 'person' with the description of which these logics have been systematically connected.

To this end it is useful to observe that the pathologies of the modern world have regularly been described by its critical interpreters (including both Marx and Freud) in a moral vocabulary that accepts the value and integrity of this account of the self as an autonomous moral agent. These pathologies, furthermore, are defined through an account or description of the structural or institutional factors which render moral personhood problematic and, under some conditions, unrealizable. Such structural or institutional factors may be either societal or intrapsychic or both. The Marxian category of alienation and the Freudian account of psychoneurosis constitute two paradigmatic descriptions of such pathologies. Thus, the telos of both socialist revolution and psychoanalysis is therapeutic; though articulated in very different – some might even say mutually incompatible theoretical registers – their purpose is to negate the conditions that render individual autonomy unrealizable. Implicit in such therapeutic strategies lies a model of moral progress. The good society needs to be shaped so as to be consistent with modernity's highest moral intuitions; the good life is a life lived in accordance with rational, autonomous moral agency.[4]

It might be said that the politico-economic programme embryonically encoded in the Enlightenment project entails an injunction to

work towards the rational construction of a rational society.[5] For our purposes, at least two broadly different approaches to this task may be discerned. The one, expressed most emphatically in the revolutionary socialist enterprise, rests on the assumption that only a comprehensive and fundamental transcendence of existing societal relationships can effect such a rational reconstruction. The old, deformed system of societal arrangements must be completely uprooted through revolutionary class action. Mere reforms cannot recast the system in ways that are really significant. For, as long as the system of private property relations remains intact, such reforms – no matter how noble-sounding – remain superficial. The other approach is that of reformism. The assumption underlying reformism – which on this interpretation encompasses a great variety of positions ranging from what might be termed 'conservative' through to 'radical' reformism – is that systemic constraints on action render, at least in the short to medium term, the fundamental recasting of principles of economic, social and political association impossible if not dangerous.[6]

In addition to the always problematic distinction between reform and revolution, there is a further distinction between those who assert that, regarding a determinate vision of moral progress, moral argumentation and the articulation of critical, corrective or transcendent moral perspectives have a specific role to play in effecting changes in societal systems and those who deny or minimize the role of such argumentation or discourse. The former place considerable emphasis on the role of conscious human agency in the processes of societal transformation; thus they insist on some or other version of the claim that moral argument and reason are in some significant respects autonomous. The latter tend to insist that moral argument and normative discourses largely reflect existing relations of power and interests. Thus they tend to deny the 'autonomy' and effectiveness of moral argument. The status of such argument is seen as essentially derivative of other, usually 'material', factors. The arguments to be advanced in this essay press the more general claim that normative discourses do indeed have a potent effect in either maintaining or altering the character of societal systems and that moral argument has a specific effectiveness – subject of course to complex systemic constraints – in altering the structure of societal arrangements.[7] In particular, the position defended in this article, which I have termed 'critical realism', entails the claim that not only is ethical argumentation a means for 'making' moral progress in respect of the content and design of institutions, but that such argumentation can never be dismissed as 'mere moralism'. It also contains the strong claim that such critical ethical realism does not collapse into yet another 'moral

relativism'. For, as will be shown, the rules constitutive of ethical modernization contain a necessary impulse to universalism.[8]

## The Logics of Modernization

Underlying this essay as an exercise in substantive moral and political theory is the claim that the content of modern moral discourse structures, and is structured by, the organizational and developmental logics of modern societies.[9] In what, then, do these organizational and developmental logics consist, and how might they best be characterized?

The modernization of societies involves a number of specific processes. These might be outlined as follows. First, there is an ongoing process that involves the ever more complex differentiation and re-differentiation of rules, roles, functions and functional spheres. Canonically, this is captured by the concept of the division of labour and by the conventional differentiation of institutional spheres into the economic, political, juridical and cultural.

Second, there is a shift – as turn of the century sociologists observed – from 'gemeinschaft' to 'gesellschaft' or, in Durkheim's terms, from 'mechanical' to 'organic' solidarity. Aspects or dimensions of this transformation have been captured in a number of different sociological vocabularies. Coleman suggests that distinctive of the modern age is the emergence of 'purposive' as distinct from 'primordial' institutions as the principal institutional modalities of cooperation, coordination and the articulation of needs and interests (Coleman 1990; 1993). Weber, too, grasped an aspect of this transformation with his definition of 'legal-rational' as distinct from 'traditional' and 'charismatic' forms of authority. What this shift in the structure of societal arrangements has involved, wherever it has occurred, is a breakdown of traditional constructions of community. 'Face to face' relations of trust are increasingly replaced by systems of 'abstract' trust and complex systems of risk-management (Giddens 1989; Beck 1992). Characteristic of the modern age is the increasingly important phenomenon of space-time distantiation in which action is, increasingly, coordinated over ever greater distances in both spatial and temporal terms. Such 'distantiated' coordination necessitates, for its administration, such 'disembedded' systems of abstract trust and risk-management (Giddens 1989; Beck 1992). Indeed, the shift from 'status' to 'contract' as axial principles of association and coordination fits perfectly the extension to almost all arenas of action of systems of 'abstract' trust. Indeed, the category of 'contract' epitomizes the concept of 'abstract' trust; for there is, indeed, a deep, systematic connection between the development of contract theory in

general (including, not least, the great seminal treatises in the social contract tradition) and the evolution of the institutional forms of modern society. The deep structural reconfiguration of European society has here been perfectly mirrored in its ethico-philosophical meditations.

Third, pivotal to the phenomenon of modernization is the institutionalization of mechanisms of accumulation – of wealth, capital, information and 'knowledges'. Furthermore, during modernization processes the distribution of that which is accumulated is, it seems, invariably uneven (no matter under what regime of accumulation it occurs) and contested. This is related to the complexly patterned systems of scarcity which, I shall argue, are specific to and distinctive of modern societies and which are analysed more fully in what follows.

Fourth, scarcity under conditions of modernization is 'generated' in a number of specific ways and has a *meaning* quite distinct from scarcity under pre-modern conditions. Scarcity is no longer principally a function of, and cannot be understood primarily in terms of, 'natural cycles' or divinely ordained constraints; rather it is socially defined and re-defined. Indeed, scarcity as perpetually re-created and re-configured at ever higher levels of economic and technological development and under new and ever changing structures of expectation, is defining of Occidental modernization – and not merely of modern western capitalist development but of modern social and economic systems generally.[10] Thus, modern societies are characterized by the institutionalization of scarcity and its related patterns of conflict and competition with respect to scarce material, positional and moral goods. Indeed, scarcity, conflict and competition might even be construed as the 'driving forces' of modernization, as has been intimated – in different ways and with different emphases – by various modern theorists such as Marx, Sorel, Simmel and Coser. Linked immanently to this phenomenon of institutionalized, protean scarcity is the idea of its transcendence. New wants and needs are continually generated, and their satisfaction never adequately effected. Requitement is forever deferred, fulfilment forever postponed. New niches of expertise, affluence and privilege are regularly created and come to be inhabited by new occupants. New modalities of power emerge, the design, comprehension and harnessing of which becomes the special preserve of new clusters of specialists.[11] The allocation of the multiplicity of goods created and distributed through such complex systems is necessarily contested. For such systems of power are increasingly inaccessible, and often incomprehensible, to many categories of excluded persons.

Yet – and this is the paradox of 'Occidental' modernization – the

logic of accumulation and the imperative to control and harness the environment require the genesis of such systems of power with their multiple specialized knowledges and complex gate-keeping mechanisms. For without them, economic growth would be compromised and the intricately patterned schemes of cooperation specific to modern societies would not be sustainable. Thus modern societies are quintessentially systems of both competition and cooperation; sectional empowerment and sectional disempowerment co-exist necessarily in a relationship of tension. Envy, resentment and the demand for inclusion are conjoined to a universal condition of dependence.

Thus the ethical order of modernity is constructed around the need for 'scarcity management' or 'scarcity regulation'. More specifically, the ethical discourses or normative vocabularies of modernity are constructed with respect to the need to manage and administer and, in particular, to *define the rules* for the management and administration of scarcity as an *ontologically necessary* attribute of multi-dimensional accumulation and thus of modernization. The discourses of rights, liberties and justice are exemplary of such normative vocabularies as are the correlative discourses of political association. One might here refer, paradigmatically, to the reflections on and arguments about the division of power, bills of rights and many other juridico-constitutional arrangements.

Fifth, and fundamental to the process of modernization is the concept of the rational agent. The idea of the rational agent – a calculating, utility maximizing, disutility minimizing agent – is systematically linked to the conception of the individual so fundamental to modern societal systems. It is to the *individual* under conditions of modernity that rights and liberties are properly attached. It was the securement of the well-being, security and freedom of the individual that constituted the original legitimating arguments for the modern state. Although the structure and content of the arguments were different, this was as much the case in Rousseau's *Social Contract* as it was in Hobbes's *Leviathan*.[12] It is worth emphasizing that individualism is not only a central feature of modern liberal and libertarian modes of thought; it is fundamental even to *some* collectivist projects and enterprises of modernity. Thus most socialist endeavours, including Marxian socialism, have been conceived of and constituted to repair a damaged or threatened individuality. Marx, after all, can be read, in many very important respects, as a defender of a particular form of ethical or moral individualism. Similarly the welfare state and social-democratic programmes, although they take the form of public arrangements and collective strategies, are concerned principally to provide for the needs and interests of

individuals. Indeed, the collectivist projects of the modern age that have overridden the claims, interests and integrity of individuals have tended, in the longer run, to fail – at least in terms of the predominant criteria of institutional success which inform modernity. One thinks here particularly of regressive movements and experiments such as Nazism and other varieties of fascism, exclusionary and particularist nationalisms and the cumbersome systems of state-socialism that evolved under the aegis of Stalin. Indeed, systems that have discounted or undervalued individual rights and freedoms have for deep structural reasons tended to fail under conditions of advanced modernization. In a manner of speaking, they fail the societal evolutionary test. Such systems have tended always to be associated with relative backwardness.

The centrality of the individual to the ethical and political discourses of modernity is not fortuitous. The impulse towards 'abstraction' under conditions of modernization – towards the creation of abstract systems of trust characterized by contract, and abstract systems of production and exchange characterized by money-based markets and economies – is complexly intertwined with the constitution of the self as self-directing, as the generator of its own ends and values. The individual, in terms of this construction, is 'up-anchored', dislodged from any coherent cosmic order of meaning. The normative self, in this sense, is 'mobile', never fully described or pre-given in its qualities. It is rather like some free particle that attaches itself to, and detaches itself from causes, occupations and contexts. But the self produces itself; the self is a project. It is contingent.[13] In terms of this construction of the self, the self is best understood as a bundle of potentialities, of skills realized and unrealized, of rights, freedoms and capacities redeemed and unredeemed. No societal system can modernize without this transformation in the constitution and meaning of the self.

This is not, of course, to say that this transformation takes place evenly and easily. The re-definition of the identity of the self is, in all determinate historical contexts, contested. Old social regimes and systems of power make bids to control and curtail the extent to which the self is allowed to be autonomous. In the context of European modernization, religious orders expressed considerable interest in determining who could and who could not become autonomous, and in what the limits to such autonomy might consist. When the conflict between church and secular state with respect to the management of public and scientific affairs was settled in favour of the state, the church – now relegated to a specific institutional sphere within civil society – concentrated much of its energy on the administration and disciplining of the domains of intimacy and private life. This had

significant implications for sexual mores and the structure of family life. One consequence is that women have had a much harder time becoming autonomous than men. More generally, the church and other institutional custodians of tradition became involved in a complex series of compromises and accommodations with the predominantly secular forces of societal rationalization – even to the extent that in some contexts the church sided with the progressive modernizers.

There are, of course, some anomalous cases that need to be noted. In particular, Japan is an interesting example of a society that, in the course of its processes of advanced modernization, has placed much greater emphasis on team, group and corporate effort and identity than have western type advanced industrial societies. (See, for instance, the discussion in Kennedy 1993.) It might even be argued that systems of group and team incentives function, at least with respect to many different endeavours, as generally more conducive to high levels of output and productivity. This might seem especially to be the case regarding educational institutions (see Klitgaard 1993.) It is my contention, however, that while returns to cooperative endeavours are most often likely to be more encouraging of corporate loyalty and individual productivity than the returns to systems premised on fierce competition between individuals, the underlying centrality of individualism is not fundamentally affected. For there is no basic contradiction between emphasizing the rights and freedoms of individuals and constructing systems of cooperation where, in order better to secure such rights and freedoms, 'negative', 'selfish' or generally 'disruptive' (as distinct from creative) forms of individualism are discouraged.[14]

**The Self and the System**

The regulation of modern systems of power – the articulation and application of the rules by which their functioning is conditioned and defined – is nominally concerned primarily (although not exclusively) with the definition, codification and protection of those bundles of attributes which constitute the person and with the securement and elaboration of those conditions which make possible the realization of such potentialities. It is, of course, often the case that collective action or the collective provision of public goods is necessary to the realization of these ends; but the point is that it is *these* ends which are to be realized. The modern public goods debate is unintelligible without reference to this conception of the self.

The modern liberal state and modern welfare state arrangements are premised on, and to a greater or lesser extent underwrite this model

of the individual self. Indeed, even the entitlement to 'sociality', to (for example) leisure, a family life or free time has, in the advanced societies and the more advanced segments of less highly developed societies, come to be justified as an individual entitlement. Further – and this is a strong claim – no other conception of a relevant moral agent – an ethnic group, a nation or even a class – is able in the end to do the work of the individual in modern ethical discourse. For the individual – however 'thickly' or 'thinly' constituted – is the only unit of analysis that serves as an appropriately intelligible basis for ethical theory in the modern world. The reason for this lies principally in the very organizational structure of modern societies.

If this claim is sustainable, then the implications for the various trajectories of social, political and economic development are significant. The long term prospects for social movements and forms of state and social organization that do not accommodate this conception of the self are seriously constrained. More generally, movements and organizational forms that do not institutionally accommodate the structural features and developmental dynamics of modernizing societies will tend not to survive or to survive only vestigially (in perhaps some functionally interesting ways) in the 'margins' of such societies. They might articulate and protect certain distinctive interests and shield certain lifeworlds – especially more 'traditional' lifeworlds – that have not been comprehensively or at least substantially integrated into the central and dominant systems of instrumental rationality so distinctive of modern societies. These central systems, however, will continue to be characterized by a dynamic of ever more complete and thoroughgoing rationalization. Thus, for example, the long term prospects for a return to theocratism under conditions of ongoing modernization are poor. This is not to underestimate the power and potentially disruptive force of movements which mobilize around the ideas of nation, faith or ethnic community.[15]

The processes of modernization are always uneven; the existential horror of uprootment inevitably forces individuals, these 'free particles', to search for some home, for some community. This problem has been registered in philosophical reflection from Hegel through to contemporary Anglo-American political philosophers such as Michael Sandel, Alasdair MacIntyre, Michael Walzer and Charles Taylor who, in different ways, have attempted to give philosophical definition to the relationship between the individual and society. In particular, they have been concerned to philosophically ground constructions of community and of an ethical life that limit the damage inflicted by an unbounded, radical individualism.[16] Indeed, at a specifically socio-political level, it might even be hypothesized that

the failure of abstract systems such as the secular state, with the correspondingly abstract forms of 'community' (or better, perhaps, 'association') which they foster, forms at least part of the explanation for the recent resurgent nationalisms and ethnicity mobilizing movements in eastern Europe. For it is in this region, especially, that it could be said that allegedly highly evolved modern systems have failed to deliver on their original promises.[17] They have, in at least some respects, constituted spectacular failures of modernization.

Yet, in the end, the only forms of community that are viable under conditions of 'high' modernity are those which recognize and institutionally accommodate the necessarily fragile and elective nature of such community, which acknowledge its passing, ephemeral, fugitive character. For the search for community is necessarily futile except where such community is abstract, elective and functional to the pursuit of some or other more or less contingent collective interest or instrumental purpose. Such is the foundational nature of community in the advanced modern world. Forbidding, perhaps even brutal, its principal organizational logics allow little room for the nurturing of 'primordial' or 'essentialist' forms of communal life. Such belong only to the fantasies of the disenchanted, the imaginings of utopian critics and the mythical longings of those torn from some romanticized and generally 'invented' past. For such forms of communal life serve as fictional sources of comfort to those who may broadly be declared the 'losers' in the modernization process. Community (or, better, 'association') in the modern world is increasingly multi-layered, multi-stranded and characterized by a plurality of coincidences of interests, purposes and function. The self itself becomes, in this regard, increasingly 'multiple', with no one fixed locus of belonging, no one fixed focus of loyalty, no one uncontested set of goals or values. The essential self becomes thin, the site and source of perpetually re-examined choice and rational agency. Of course, this description fits some categories of people better than others – specifically the rich, the powerful and the highly skilled. But this is the telos of individual identity formation under conditions of advanced modernization.

### The Moral Self

In what, then, does moral progress consist and why do I claim that the possibility of moral progress is written into, and is underwritten by, the 'logics of modernization'?

First, accumulation and technological progress serve the 'ends of the self'; they, combined with appropriate forms of social organization and appropriate mechanisms and practices for reaching inter-

subjective understanding and agreement, make possible (and some might even suggest make necessary) the continuation of the struggle to overcome scarcity and to make possible the realization of the capacities, projects and potentialities of individuals. Moral progress, under the constitutive normative assumptions of modernity, consists in extending these possibilities for self-realization on an ever greater scale to ever larger numbers of people. The organizational and normative logics of modernization entail the imperative to provide to individuals the capacities necessary maximally to define and control the circumstances of their lives and to give expression to their projects as rational selves – which expression gives meaning to their lives, to their personhood. For modernity, as Josiah Royce so accurately captured it, constitutes a person 'as a life lived according to a rational plan'.[18] Thus moral progress entails the idea of securing and extending the capacities for self direction by persons.

It is crucial to note that the individual actors constitutive of modern societies are themselves so constituted by these societies, their identities so shaped by their very membership of these societies, as necessarily to want – even demand – such control. Here, perhaps, we need to note the problematic relationship between the free, elective choice which defines individuals and the social construction of these individuals as capable of free, elective choice. Critical, self-reflexive consciousness is so built into the self-description of modern agents as to render any invocation of 'natural limits' to self-direction challengeable. Indeed, the conceptual moves which entail the radical separation of nature from culture, of *res extensa* from *res cogitans*, and which are fundamental to modern thought, render the idea of such natural limits implausible. The claim to self-realization does not, and logically cannot, end with the achievement of formal conditions of democratic citizenship. The democratic revolutions of modern times which have issued in the construction of the *Rechtstaat*, of formal systems of universal franchise and political representation, have been harbingers of later movements – most obviously the women's, consumerist and environmentalist movements – which have been concerned to give substantive content to formal structures of right not only in relation to the state but within the framework of civil society too.

This brings us to the question of equality. Built into the organizational logic of modernizing societies is a presumption in favour of equality. This is not to be confused with the manifest inequalities of such societies; rather, it is precisely a *presumption*. Persons are, in terms of the predominant ethical discourses of the modern age, no longer principally defined as merely the occupants of some or another niche within some naturally or divinely ordained 'chain of being'; they are no longer actors merely enacting roles in some divinely

scripted cosmic drama. Rather, the 'mobile', 'thinly' constituted 'free particles' to which I have referred are nominally equal in their status as parties to contract, as self-directing agents. This presumption in favour of equality is encoded in the ideal of the 'rule of law', in the arguments of all the major social contract theorists from Hobbes to Rawls as well as in the reflections of utilitarian thinkers. The idea of moral equality is a distinctively modern idea. Modern markets, states and abstract systems of trust, interaction, exchange and, increasingly, political and administrative power – although they certainly register in their systems of reward and recognition the substantive *differences* between individual persons and classes or categories of persons – require for their proper functioning the *assumption* (however mythical it might be) that persons are *formally* equal. This regulative ideal is, perhaps, best captured in the Weberian account of bureaucratic office, where the office is not the property or possession of its incumbent. One consequence of this presumption is that modern societies have a propensity to problems of legitimacy. This propensity has its roots in the tension between the highly stratified structure of the various systems and the demands for equal recognition and equal incorporation by its formally equal members.

One implication of this, I want to argue, is that the range of forms of life – and therefore of ethical forms – is, under conditions of modernization, constrained. Only those ethical positions that 'fit' with the organizational logics of modernizing societies are, in the longer run, viable. They are, if it may be so put, 'selected out'. Thus slavery is no longer possible. Whatever other forms of domination or exploitation might obtain, the literal owning of one person by another is incompatible with systems of accumulation and of scarcity management that depend on the mutual recognition of agents and the construction of ever more complex systems of elective and functional affinity.

### The Moral Self, Technology and Globalisation

There is a systematic connection between the pivotal role of the values of self protection, self constitution and self reconstitution in modern societal systems and technological development. Technology in the modern world is the body of knowledge that makes possible the continual re-definition of the frontiers of scarcity. Technology makes possible the extension of environmental control and management; and, under the premises and presuppositions of modernization, technological progress is inevitable. The modern conception of the self *entails* the idea of technological advancement, for the modern self as 'ongoing project' cannot continue as such without it. Indeed, it

could be argued that the entailment is conceptual. It is for this reason, among others, that modern capitalism and the forms of life associated with it have come to embrace the globe. Pre-modern societies with their constrained technologies have been unable to withstand the onslaught of Occidental modernization. The premium the agents of modernization place on the expansion of technological capabilities guarantees the displacement of the pre-modern and the less-modern. For technology is both the preeminent source and form of power under conditions of modernity.[19] Thus modernization processes carry with them a globalising imperative. In this they bear enormous destructive as well as liberatory potential. On the one hand, the environment, traditional cultures and folkways, older institutions of power and authority such as religious orders have all been damaged, destroyed or transformed under the impact of these processes. On the other they have underwritten great affluence, enlarged the scope for the reflexive control and monitoring of both the natural and social environment and enhanced the comfort and safety of everyday life. This reflects what might be called a 'dialectic of modernization'.

### The 'Dark Side' of Modernity

The one side of this dialectic has manifested itself in the 'dark' phenomena of modernity. Modern systems of instrumental action and reason have, among other things, issued in the totalitarian systems of the twentieth century – in Nazism, Stalinism, in the Holocaust and Gulag. And, as Zygmunt Bauman has so brilliantly shown, these phenomena are precisely *phenomena of modernity*.[20] Indeed, these phenomena were only possible under the circumstances of modernity; pre-modern societies could not have given rise to them. It is not merely in the expanded technological capacities of modern societies that the potentiality for such catastrophic exercises in social and economic engineering lies. It lies, even more significantly, in the very discourses, routines, practices and modalities of power so distinctively constitutive of modernity. These discourses, practices, routines and modalities reflect a central preoccupation with elaborate schemes of classification and ordering oriented towards the total control of the environment. Disorder and the idea of a recalcitrant environment are anathema to the basic imperatives of modernization. They circumscribe the capacity to calculate and manage risk and to deploy administrative strategies informed by a narrowly instrumental form of rationality.[21] Further, modern systems of action involve the coordination of activities across great distances, both spatial and temporal. This has profound implications for the texture of moral life. The often radical separation of an act from its consequences blunts moral

sensitivity and perhaps limits the capacity for moral outrage. It is difficult to define and maintain a calculus of ethical accountability under such circumstances.[22]

The other side of this dialectic manifests itself in the broadly emancipatory political practices and programmes of modernity – in liberalism, non-totalitarian socialism and democracy. My claim is that it is these emancipatory phenomena which, ultimately, are dominant. The levels of critical individual reflexivity and the normative centrality of individual rights claims and freedoms to modern societal systems constitute constraints on the 'dark', totalitarian potentials of modern systems of power. For the dark phenomena of modernity *systematically* violate the foundational ethical and, therefore, organizational precepts of these systems.

## Moral Progress and the System

The institutional realization of the ethical structure of modernity – of individual rights and freedoms and of a broadly egalitarian structure of procedural and distributive justice – will always remain an incomplete project. With respect to justice – which, following Rawls, we can agree is the first virtue of social institutions – it means working out what is *possible* with respect to the distribution and redistribution of rights claims and duties under given circumstances of scarcity with a view to realizing the ends of the multiplicity of selves in competition for scarce material, positional and moral goods.

Two implications follow from this. First, that form of moral relativism which does not permit the comparative evaluation of different forms of ethical life is incompatible with the organizational principles of modern societies. That is, the logic of modernization allows only for the development of practices and institutional arrangements which maximize the scope for individual freedoms and increase the range of equal rights and entitlements compatible with the conditions of scarcity and the environmental constraints that obtain. That is, the range of arguable ethical positions is constrained. It is, however, constrained in an interesting way. It is constrained in the direction of both universality and the maximization of individual conceptions of the good. In this respect Rawls, in *A Theory of Justice*, accurately captured the basic *structure* that must inform any theory of distributive justice substantively relevant to the modern world.

Second, attempts to 'bypass' the principal institutional forms of modernity – attempts to transform modern systems by 'opting out' of the central systems of production, distribution and control – are doomed to failure, as are attempts to overthrow such systems in their

entirety. In this, Marx in his critique of utopian forms of socialism was largely correct. The history of utopian and anarchist experiments bears out this claim.

Rather, moral progress in the 'enlightenment register' requires engagement with these systems and their many mechanisms that make it possible to challenge and change arrangements in order to bring their institutional structures into closer alignment with the notions of the self that underlie them. Moral progress thus consists in marginal amelioration, in the fine-tuning of moral judgements and of moral agency as well as in the refinement of methods of philosophical analysis. It is in this, too that the *critical realism* to which I referred earlier consists.

Thus, insofar as one may speak of an agenda for the future, it would involve a commitment to 'piecemeal social engineering' and to institutional design with specific ethical content. Of course this raises difficult questions. How big should the pieces be?[23] Might it not be, as Alec Nove has pointed out, that 'reform comes in packages' and that 'if some aspects of a *system* fail to work satisfactorily, surely it is proper to consider changing the system'.[24] Does this not privilege technocratic elites? Who is to educate the technocrats and to whom are they accountable? Does efficiency not seem, in this perspective, to trump justice? Is a discursive politics possible within a Weberian 'iron cage' of instrumental rationality?[25] I hope to deal with these questions more fully in a subsequent study. Suffice, however, to say that the deliberative and institutional frameworks most enduringly compatible with rational modernization are necessarily democratic – and not just in the limited sense of parliamentary democracy. Societies are, as Jürgen Habermas has rightly insisted, learning systems and the evolution of ever greater learning capacities is pivotal to the survival of modern societies. Such capacities with ever more sophisticated feedback mechanisms, furthermore, are increasingly necessary to each of the different organizational spheres of modern societies. For organizational survival requires sensitivity to the environment and an openness to other systems.[26] The development of increased reflexive capacities is built into the developmental logic – notwithstanding counter-pressures – of modern societies. This means that the long-term extension of the scope for public reason is underwritten by this logic. With respect to efficiency, although it can never 'trump' justice, and though it should never be an end in itself, it is, *ceteris paribus*, necessary for the public good. Inefficient systems, subject of course to the moral desirablity of the ends they secure, cost more and do more harm than do efficient systems.

The business of progress is slow, the 'rational design of a rational society' difficult. The agenda for even the most radical and thorough-

going moral reconstruction of highly complex systems must necessarily be an agenda of reform.

## NOTES

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2. There are, of course, substantial differences between the thinkers referred to here. In particular, while Rawls's work exemplifies a non-historicising re-articulation of Rousseauian and especially Kantian contract theory, the writings of Hegel and Marx constitute a distinctively historicising mode of thought. The writings of Jürgen Habermas – especially the 'later writings' – occupy an interesting and original position somewhere between, or perhaps transcending, these two quite distinctive traditions.
3. See my *Modernity and the Future of Democracy* (de Kadt 1989) for an earlier formulation of this tension. The present study is an attempt further to explore the nature of this tension and to refine and substantiate the somewhat optimistic views advanced in that article.
4. This account of Marx is grounded in the assumption that his project consisted of an attempt to provide a thoroughgoing analysis of the phenomenon of alienation and that the principal elements of his critique of political economy can be derived through such an analysis. It accepts, too, that for Marx – as for Rousseau before him – the source of individual human misery is to be located in the structure of social relations. Furthermore, it accepts that Marx was, in an important respect, a 'moral individualist' albeit that a fundamental re-ordering of the public sphere and the construction of advanced systems of public cooperation were necessary for the securement of individual autonomy.
5. The suggestion that the proper task of sociology is to contribute towards the 'rational design of a rational society' has recently been reiterated by James S. Coleman in his 1992 Presidential Address to the American Sociological Association. (See Coleman 1993.)
6. The vexed and complex question of the relationship between revolution and reform has been central to much of modern social and political thought. Reflections are to be found in the literature on the question of civil disobedience as well, of course, in the extensive debates that shaped the development of the different and often divergent strands of twentieth century Marxism. See, for example, E. Kent (ed.), *Revolution and the Rule of Law* as well as the many writings of Kautsky, Bernstein, Luxemburg, Lenin and Trotsky in which, with respect to the revolutionary socialist project, most of the more important positions are articulated.
7. With specific respect to the question of Marx, justice and morality see, *inter alia*, Lukes (1986), Geras (1987), and de Kadt (1990).
8. For works that present similar (though not necessarily similarly argued) perspectives, see Jürgen Habermas (1984; 1990) and Allen Gilbert (1990).
9. For a full and rigorous development of this claim, see my forthcoming study entitled *Decoding the Logic of History: Agency, Structure and the Explanation of Societal Transformation.*

10. For further discussion of the question of scarcity, see Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (Sartre 1976) and Xenos' *Scarcity and Modernity* (Xenos 1989).
11. See Robert Reich, *The Work of Nations* and Peter F. Drucker, *Post-Capitalist Society* for popular accounts of this phenomenon.
12. For Hobbes, of course, the point of the covenant was, through the mutual transference of rights to a sovereign body, to secure the lives and interests of the members of the body politic. The argument rested on the assumption that individuals were acquisitive, appetitive and egoistic. They were, however, also rational and existed, in abstraction from civil society, in a relationship of fundamental equality one with the other. The calculations made by such self-interested rational agents lead logically to the argument for the 'absolute' but inherently *rational* state for which *Leviathan* is famous. (See Hobbes 1966; Rapaczynski 1987; and Hampton 1988.) For Rousseau, although the assumptions he made about human nature were fundamentally different from Hobbes's, the point of the social contract was to establish a form of collective association that would allow the citizens, in giving themselves to all, to give themselves to no one and 'be as free as before'. Individual freedom for Rousseau was inalienable. To relinquish one's freedom was to relinquish one's humanity. No man, said Rousseau, could be a slave by nature. The task, rather, was to transform 'natural' (pre-social) liberty into moral and social freedom. (See Rousseau 1973; Cassirer 1971; Rapaczynski 1987; and Macpherson 1962.)
13. For further discussion of the nature of the self, see Charles Taylor's *The Sources of the Self* (Taylor 1989), Anthony Giddens' *Modernity and Self-Identity* (Giddens 1991) and Agnes Heller's *A Philosophy of Morals* (Heller 1990).
14. On this, see Axelrod, *The Evolution of Cooperation* (Axelrod 1983).
15. One must, of course, be careful not to regard all such movements as anti-modernist or 'reactionary'. After all, nationalist movements in particular often have a strongly modernizing impulse to them, for they are concerned to seize control over that most modern of politico-constitutional devices – namely the nation state.
16. See Mulhall and Swift (1992); Sandel (1983); Walzer (1983); MacIntyre (1981; 1988; 1990) and Taylor (1985; 1989).
17. See especially Kornai (1992); Nove (1983); Brus (1975) and Wildavsky and Clark (1990).
18. Josiah Royce, cited in Rawls (1971:408).
19. It is for this reason that Robert Reich's claim that the wealth of the advanced societies is increasingly dependent upon symbolic-analytic work is so persuasive (Reich 1992).
20. See Zygmunt Bauman's remarkable *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Bauman 1989) and his *Modernity and Ambivalence* (Bauman 1991) for a rich and persuasive analysis. See also Ronald Aronson's earlier *The Dialectics of Disaster* for a wide ranging discussion of these phenomena (Aronson 1984).
21. For further reflections on this issue see Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (Foucault 1977); Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man* (Marcuse 1964) and Jürgen Habermas, *Towards a Rational Society* (Habermas 1974).
22. See Stanley Milgram's famous study (Milgram 1974) as well as Bauman's discussion (Bauman 1989:151–168). See also Hannah Arendt's reflections in *Eichman in Jerusalem* (Arendt 1964).
23. I am grateful to David Schweikart for alerting me to the importance of this question.
24. See Alec Nove (1983:232).
25. I am particularly grateful to James Bohman and Ronald Aronson for posing these questions so forcefully.
26. See Klaus Eder, 'Contradictions and Social Evolution', in Haferkamp and Smelser (1992:320–349).

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# Progress, the Sciences and Philosophy

*Simon Beck*

There is clearly a prima facie case for progress in science. We just know much more than we did 400 years ago. To deny this is to deny something which seems to be obvious. It is not nearly so obvious that there is progress in philosophy. Old and apparently long-refuted theories have a habit of cropping up again, sometimes disguised and sometimes not. Thus Aristotelian essences seemed to have gone for all time, until they were resurrected in the last thirty years by the work of Saul Kripke; at the turn of the century Bertrand Russell sent idealism packing, but it has come back with a vengeance under new names.[1] Yet there are still instances of theory-change in philosophy which look to be progressive, and which need explanation.

I do not plan to set out a theory of progress, either in science or philosophy. Rather, I wish to defend the possibility of such a theory, firstly by arguing that one of the strongest cases against progress in science does not succeed. The case mentioned argues against a realist view of science: a view which links closely to the notion of scientific progress. I take it on, not only because I am impressed by the prima facie argument for scientific progress and because I am sympathetic to realism, but also because the argument affects precisely the areas in philosophy where progress seems to be most evident. On top of this, the argument and its later descendant which I discuss in Section IV appear to have devastating consequences for the social sciences and morality as well, making them of even more general interest.

It is not a new contention that an adequate account of scientific progress requires some form of realism. For one theory to be better than another, they must be (more or less) about the same things. This calls for the realist view that there are objects which exist independently of our minds and theories. But realism is by no means a universally accepted doctrine, and it has been subject to powerful attacks over the last thirty years. It is on one of these that I will concentrate.

## I

What is the argument against viewing science realistically? The argument finds its place amongst those which claim to support the

view that past scientific theories are incommensurable with later and currently accepted ones. Versions of it occur in the writing of Feyerabend, Kuhn, Laudan and others (Feyerabend 1975; Kuhn 1970; Laudan 1981). Its roots are in the history of science, as are many of the arguments of these writers. Roughly speaking, the argument is that given our current science, many (or even all) of the crucial terms of scientific theories in the past just have no reference. If the terms of a now discarded theory fail to refer, then it immediately starts to become clear that a realistic view of science and its progress is in trouble: it cannot be the case that the new and the old theory are about the same thing, because in the light of the new theory, the old one is not *about anything*.

This is not the whole of the problem, but it would be useful to get some idea of the historical basis for this sort of claim now. There is a whole range of cases that get appealed to in the literature in support of the claim. One of Feyerabend's central arguments turns around a comparison of the change in meaning of the term 'mass' between classical mechanics and relativity theory. Crucially, he points out, mass in the classical theory is a property which an object has, whereas mass in relativity theory is a relation – relative to a frame of reference. This and other factors suggest that from the perspective of relativity theory, there just is nothing which matches up to the classical concept of mass. The term fails to refer.

Nor is this an isolated case in the history of science. Similar things can be said about Mendel's term 'gene' in the light of contemporary genetics. Dalton made claims about the atoms of gases in his *New System of Chemical Philosophy* of 1808 which, following Avogadro and his successors, are plain false. Bohr used the term 'electron' in such a way that he cannot have been referring to what are nowadays called by that name.

Although Kuhn does not list explicit examples like these, his defence of the thesis that, at least in some sense, scientists working in different paradigms inhabit different worlds (Kuhn 1970: Chapter 10) suggests precisely the same view. Finally there are still the most obvious cases to be mentioned: the 'phlogiston' of eighteenth century combustion theory vanishes altogether from its successor, as does 'aether' from celestial dynamics. There just was nothing, contemporary science tells us, to which these terms referred.

I said earlier that the problem as described was not the whole story. What remains to be pointed out is already suggested by the repeated remark that the claims of past science are false, and the objects they posit fail to exist, *relative to contemporary science*. The question which emerges is: how do we know that the objects which current science posits exist? Putnam puts the point succinctly:

> One reason this is a serious worry is that eventually the following meta-induction becomes overwhelmingly compelling: *just as no term used in the science of more than fifty* (or whatever) *years ago referred, so it will turn out that no term used now* (except maybe observation terms, if there are such) *refers.* (Putnam 1978:25)

Before I try and respond to this general line of argument, let me set out one of the instances which I claimed to show progress in philosophy. In doing this, I will also indicate why the sort of reasoning just seen threatens philosophy as well.

# II

The area concerned is the philosophy of mind. Since Descartes, and more specifically over the last forty years, a remarkable succession of theories has characterized this area of analytic philosophy. These theories have by no means been universally accepted even among analytic philosophers, but each has certainly had a degree of dominance at some point to the extent that it could be called the 'received theory'.

The story starts with a dualistic picture – explaining the rich mental lives of persons in terms of their having two distinct parts, mind and body. While the two parts interact, each is of a fundamentally different kind; in Descartes' terms each has its own essence, and shares no properties with the other. The mind is responsible for all mental goings-on, the body for all physical ones.

During the 1950s this view came under sustained attack from philosophers whose outlook was strongly influenced by logical positivism. Led by Gilbert Ryle (Ryle 1949), interactionist dualism took a back seat to a view now usually called philosophical behaviourism. Ryle drew attention to the close links between our ascriptions of mental states and behaviour, insisting that ascriptions of mental states are really no more than ascriptions of certain typical kinds of behaviour or tendencies to behave. To see a pain or belief as some kind of inner property or state is simply to be misled by the usual form such ascriptions take. Such talk is clearly meaningful, but it is not to be taken at face value: there is no such thing as a pain or the mind; what there is are complex patterns of behaviour.

Ryle's account seems to have many benefits over the dualistic one. It avoids the problems of explaining how two utterly distinct kinds of thing could interact causally, and where and when this interaction was supposed to happen. It also brings the mental lives of people within the explanatory bounds of more familiar and well-established theory with its reductionist strategy.

Ryle's account was not to last in its position of dominance. Its fall from favour was due not only to its counter-intuitive views (what you offer as an *explanation* of behaviour turns out to be no more than a mere *description* of it, and so on), but to even deeper problems. It analysed the central mental states of belief and desire and the like as dispositions to behave in certain ways in certain circumstances. However, not only can one not provide a dispositional account of belief without mentioning some mental state or other, but the attempt to do so leads to circularity as well. To explain some belief of a person in terms of their tendencies to behave requires one to mention their desires, while explaining some desire requires mention of their beliefs: ultimately nothing gets explained.

In the wake of behaviourism came the mind-brain identity theory or central state materialism (Place 1956; Smart 1959). Like behaviourism, the mental was brought into the explanatory field of physical science, but it was accepted that there are such things as pains and beliefs; it is just that they are physical things. With the avoidance of dispositional analyses the problem of circularity goes; and with an account of the nature of mental states as falling within the physical realm, the more obvious metaphysical problems of dualism are no longer troublesome. Some trouble remains, however. For, among other things, the claim that a mental state like belief is some type of physical state is implausibly strong. If to have a belief is to be in brain state X, then no creature which has a significantly different neural structure can have beliefs, and the same goes for more mundane states like pain. Unless one has a neural structure like that of a human, one is ruled unable to have a mental life.

This kind of chauvinism was one major factor precipitating the acceptance of the final theory in my story. This is the theory known as functionalism, or the causal theory of the mind (Lewis 1972 & 1980; Armstrong 1968). Drawing insights from both the behaviourist and the identity theorist, functionalism suggested that what characterized a mental state was its typical causal role. A pain or belief is not a pattern of behaviour, but the internal state which typically causes that behaviour. It is not simply behaviour that is important – equally important in characterizing a mental state are its typical relations to other mental states, and to the world (i.e. the circumstances which cause the state to occur). The typical causal roles are those described by common-sense or folk psychology: for example, 'if X desires p, and believes that doing A will lead to p, then X will tend to do A'. The functionalist suggests that the states which play these typical causal roles in humans are brain states, but this need not have been so.[2] Whatever plays the typical causal role of pain would be pain – the state which 'realizes' the role might even differ from human to

human, and for a single individual from time to time. Thus the benefits of both previous materialist theories remain, but the problems of both are avoided.

I have suggested reasons as I went along as to why one theory was better than its predecessor, but it should be stressed that these are 'pre-theoretical' reasons, not part of a worked-out theory of philosophical progress. They have been suggested in order to make out a prima facie case in favour of progress in at least this area of philosophy. The question I need to answer now is, how does the argument against a realistic view of science affect these philosophical theories and progress in philosophy? To start answering this we can look to Feyerabend, who actually brings the mind-body problem into his discussion of incommensurability.

Feyerabend uses dualistic and materialistic theories as an example of theories which are incommensurable. Relative to a materialist theory, the terms of dualism fail to refer. The central notions of dualism like belief and pain are ascribed non-physical properties by that theory. Since nothing has such properties, those terms must fail to refer. The materialist should eschew popular dualistic terminology altogether, and should not try to form bridge laws like 'X is a mental process of kind A = X is a (physical) process of kind $\phi$'. At best bridge laws work as re-definitions, but even then all they serve to do is to 'perpetuate ancient terminology' (Feyerabend 1963:204–5).

Feyerabend thus brings my example of philosophical progress right into the trouble-spot. Although his criticism is aimed at what I called the identity theory (that theory dominated in the early 1960s, when Feyerabend's cited argument was written), it clearly has repercussions way beyond that view alone. In arguing that materialistically-minded philosophers must give up 'belief-desire' terminology altogether – since those terms fail to refer – contemporary functionalism with its close reliance on the 'laws' of folk psychology and its dependence on the *truth* of that theory, is also under threat.

On top of this, it appears that talk of progress must be given up: the various theories involved are just not talking about the same things. In terms of none of the three materialist theories do the terms of dualism refer; and, relative to the two later theories, the claims made by the behaviourist about beliefs, pain, etc. are also false. Precisely to the point, each theory claims that there is *nothing* which matches up to the descriptions of its rival theories. As a result, the meanings of the terms change, and the theories talk past each other. There can then be no progress.[3]

## III

Before the outlook gets totally bleak, let us look critically at the anti-realist argument which is doing all the destructive work. While I am sceptical about the feasibility of any general theory of progress in philosophy, I don't believe that the reasons which stem from this argument are the ones which count.

Feyerabend and the others are no doubt correct that terms like 'phlogiston' and 'aether' failed when it comes to reference. Even a realist will agree that there was nothing to which they referred. But there is good reason to doubt whether the other examples provided in the literature are in the same position as these. It must also be borne in mind that to make the argument against realism and its associated views of progress stick, it has to be established that all, or at least most, of the terms of past science are in this invidious position.

Firstly, as has been argued elsewhere (Putnam 1978; Devitt 1984), the arguments offered for the cases of reference failure mentioned depend upon a specific kind of reference theory. The theory is usually called a description theory of reference − a label which applies to a variety of theories sharing a central feature. Basically, the theory is that the reference of a term is given by the description or descriptions of the object or kind in question which we associate with the term. Examples of this sort of theory have been explicitly set out by Russell, Searle and others (Russell 1919; Searle 1958). In the cases we have been concerned with, the descriptions associated with the term in question, or a large and crucial proportion of them, turn out to be false, at least in the light of later theory. As a result, the terms fail to refer: nothing matches up to the crucial identifying descriptions.

I believe that description theories have been shown by the arguments of Kripke and Putnam to be misguided (Kripke 1980; Putnam 1975). Such theories require one to have identifying knowledge of something (knowledge which picks out one and only one thing) in order to refer to it, and that is just not so. A far better picture is provided by the Kripke-Putnam view that one can refer to an object or kind knowing little or nothing about it, as long as one's use of the term is causally grounded in the object or kind concerned. One's beliefs about the nature of an object might be largely false, and yet one can still refer to it successfully. For example, if I use the term 'dahlia' I succeed in talking about dahlias as long as my usage can be traced back to actual dahlias[4] − even though I possess nothing which even vaguely amounts to identifying knowledge of those plants.

Given this view of reference, the falsity of, say, Dalton's claims about gas 'atoms' or Newton's claims about 'mass' do not imply that their terms do not refer, or do not refer to the same things as

contemporary scientists. The more intuitively plausible explanation is simply that they had some false beliefs about the things concerned. Closer examination of Dalton's published writings and notebooks leads to a fairly easy conclusion that he used the term 'atom' with regard to gases more or less as contemporary science uses 'molecule' – and that it is to *these* that Dalton's term refers (Smith 1981:106–112). In terms of the causal theory of reference, it is ultimately in gas molecules that Dalton's term is causally grounded.

Although this argument is hardly a conclusive one for the causal theory over the description theory of reference, it seems to me to be sufficient to undermine the case against realism. That case depends upon a particular theory of reference which we now know is at least of doubtful status. We also know that the damaging conclusions drawn from it do *not* follow given a rival theory of reference which is plausible in its own right. To argue that certain objects do not exist or that theory-change is not progressive on the grounds of a dubious theory of reference is to go about things in a very muddle-headed way. Our trust in the existence of the objects posited by a well-attested scientific theory should certainly be more confident than our trust in this semantic theory.

It is nevertheless true that science has been wrong in the past in claiming that certain objects, especially unobservable objects, exist. Our currently held mature sciences may well also be wrong in some cases. But that does not amount to an argument against the existence of all or even most of the objects posited by any scientific theory. It is this that has to be done if the argument is to undermine our belief that a theory and its successor (especially those which, like most, have a considerable overlap of terms) are talking about the same things. And without this grounding, we have been given no reason to perform Putnam's 'meta-induction', and to question to any significant degree the terms of current science.

Let us return to the question of philosophy and its progress. One point that immediately stands out is that simply because Cartesian dualists associated what later theories cast as false descriptions with mental terms like 'belief', it does not necessarily follow that these terms had no reference. Indeed, it was precisely the claim of identity theorists like J.J.C. Smart that 'pain' and 'brain state X', while having different *senses* shared a *referent*. For the identity theorist, 'pain' referred to a brain state; for the functionalist it refers to a functional state realized by a brain state in human x at time t, and each can say that this is what his predecessors were really talking about, even if they were making false claims.

## IV

Feyerabend's elimination of mental terminology did not catch on among philosophers of mind in the 1960s and 1970s.[5] No doubt its intuitive implausibility counted against it: for it implies that we are as misguided in ascribing beliefs to ourselves and others as the ancient Jews who followed the folklore of the cabala were in believing their fellows to be inhabited by dybbuks.[6] But we cannot leave things there. We are not left in the clear with what at least appears to be a case of progress, waiting for a theory. For the eliminative cause has been taken up with a vehemence by some contemporary philosophers of mind.

Interestingly enough, the argument comes from philosophers who on the whole espouse scientific realism (see especially Churchland 1983). It is thus not aimed at realism itself, but its effect on seeing the move in philosophy of mind as progressive, as well as its effect on social science, is the same as the effect of Feyerabend's argument would have been were it successful. The argument is set up as an attack on functionalism and its reliance on folk psychology. Like Feyerabend, contemporary eliminative materialists wish to reject folk psychology as radically false because there is nothing to which its terms refer (Churchland 1981 & 1985; Stich 1983). It is not that mental terminology can be reduced to the physical or the functional; beliefs and so on just are not there at all. In this, 'belief' is in precisely the same position as 'phlogiston'.

Eliminative materialists like Churchland and Stich hold that all mental talk must eventually give way to the terms of a mature cognitive science as our way of explaining behaviour, a cognitive science which will have no concepts which could be taken to be the new version of a discarded folk-psychological concept. If they are indeed correct, and functionalism becomes superseded by this cognitive science, then it would be totally unclear how functionalism could have been the culmination of a progressive trend from dualism. That is because what we have witnessed would not have been a series of changing views about the same things – they would not have been views *about* anything, since there would be no such things as beliefs, desires and so on. Theory change in the philosophy of mind would be shown to be totally erratic: one theory throws off much of the ontology of its predecessor, including what the earlier theory had saved from its predecessor; later some of this ontology is brought back, only to be thrown off again. This just cannot be progress.

What reasons does eliminative materialism have for rejecting folk psychology as false? I will take Churchland's 1985 summary as representative (Churchland 1985:45–47). He suggests three central

reasons. The first is the widespread explanatory failure of folk psychology: it cannot explain such central phenomena as sleep, memory or mental illness. Secondly, almost all of the folk theories people have held have proved to be totally misguided. Folk theories on the nature of fire, the nature of life, the nature and structure of the heavens, and all the others have proved to be way off beam and have been rejected over time. Says Churchland, 'it would be a *miracle* if we had got (folk psychology) right the very first time, when we fell down so badly on all the others' (1985:46). Finally, he sees little or no prospect for the smooth match up of the terms of folk psychology and the terms of mature neuroscience. That is, he holds out no hope for the successful reduction of the mental to the physical via their respective functional roles.

Does this leave us in the position mapped out, with the apparent progress in the area wiped out? Much contemporary social science would also be devastated by the soundness of the eliminativist argument. Ever since the work of Weber, beliefs, desires, intentions and so on have featured prominently in explanations in social science. Social scientists with a naturalistic bent take these states to be the causes of human actions; but if there are no such things as beliefs or desires, all the work which rests on this presupposition can not simply be re-written, but must be discarded. Perhaps the most chronically affected theory would be rational choice theory in economics, for that theory is at heart folk psychology formalized. Nor can those with an anti-naturalistic frame of mind who argue that beliefs and desires are not the *causes* of actions, but serve rather to provide an *interpretation* of those actions, feel smug at this result: for what use is a false interpretation (false because its terms fail to refer)? The thrust of the eliminativist's argument is that the terms 'belief' and 'desire' are literally meaningless.

Moral theory stands to be devastated as well: for a defining feature of *persons* is that they have beliefs and desires (Dennett 1976; Wiggins 1980). No beliefs and desires means no persons, and if anything has rights, obligations and deserts, it is a person. Of course, these points do not amount to a case against eliminativism: even if that theory has disastrous consequences for social science and morality, if Churchland's arguments show it to be correct then we must just learn to live with these consequences.

Churchland admits that these arguments are not conclusive, but I suspect they are a very long way indeed from being that, and should have nothing like the weight he attributes to them. It is true that folk psychology does not explain sleep, memory and so on. But then why should it? As Horgan and Woodward point out (1985:402) it is very difficult to make judgements on what sort of phenomena a theory can

be expected to explain, especially when knowledge in that area, as it is in regard to many psychological phenomena, is relatively primitive. The same sort of mistake occurred when early optical theories were called to task for not explaining phenomena which are now seen to be the subject matter of the *psychology* of perception.

Churchland's second objection seems likewise to miss its target. The longevity of folk psychology in the face of the demise of other folk theories, together with the enormous explanatory power it seems to have, suggest its truth rather than its falsehood. It has lasted so long while the others failed because, as far as it goes, it is more or less correct. Nor is it necessarily a miracle that our folk psychology is right even though folk theories of fire and celestial dynamics were wrong. There is a crucial difference between these sorts of cases, for in neither of the latter two instances do we have the first-person insight that we have into the former. Dualism may be a hopelessly wrong theory of the mind, but it has a point when it stresses the peculiar access we have to our own thoughts. In a way, as 'folk' we are in a position of expertise in this case which we lack totally in the case of other folk theories.

Churchland's final argument concerned the irreducibility of folk psychology to the physical terms of neuroscience. But the suggestion that the terms of folk psychology cannot be replaced by terms from neuroscience is not enough to support the claim that folk-psychological terms lack referents. It is not enough for, firstly, it is quite plausible that some sort of reduction *is* possible. And secondly the functionalist view of folk psychology is compatible with a *non-reductionist* materialism.

With regard to the possibility of a smooth reduction of terms, we cannot hope for a correlation between (say) the belief that rhubarb is delicious and a particular type of brain state that all who have this belief share. But a weaker version relative to an individual at a time (such as that proposed by Loar 1981) is by no means as hopeless an aim: there seems to be nothing absurdly unreasonable in proposing that a particular type of physical state instantiates the typical causal role of the belief that p *in individual X at time t*.

Nor is functionalism even committed to reduction in the first place. The functionalist view that mental states are defined by their causal roles is consistent with a non-reductionist materialism which accepts that while any mental token (that causal role) will be realized by some physical token or other, there are no general bridging principles between mental and physical *types* to be discovered here (Tye 1983). Such a view would be quite consistent with mature neuroscience as well.

## Conclusion

The upshot is that neither the case for Feyerabend's anti-realism nor that for the eliminativism of his later followers counts against the use of folk-psychological terms in social science or against the progressiveness of the trend outlined in the philosophy of mind. Just as the parallel argument against the possibility of progress in science failed to bite, so there is still room for social science and morality, as well as at least a limited theory of philosophical progress.

### NOTES

1. 'Post-modernism' is just one of its new names.
2. There are other versions of functionalism, but the one I discuss seems the most popular and plausible.
3. The apparently progressive rejection of a sense-datum theory of perception for a belief-acquisition one (Armstrong 1963), would likewise prove not to be progressive.
4. Even if it is via a long and convoluted chain of events which would only be possible in principle.
5. Although very similar views are expressed by Richard Rorty (Rorty 1965).
6. Dybbuks were believed to be the souls of dead sinners which take over the bodies of living people.

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# Civil Society and Social Change

## *Iris Young*

The overthrow of Communism in Eastern Europe has created a crisis of theory, principle and practice for many in the capitalist world who have called ourselves socialists, with whatever prefixes, suffixes or qualifications. On the one hand, we think that nothing has changed to falsify the old socialist critique of the injustices of poverty, exploitation, wasteful use of resources, alienating and numbing work, and domination of society's productive resources by a small class of owners and managers. On the other hand, many of us have lost confidence that we have alternative visions and a plan for enacting them. To be sure, at least in the last twenty five years few Western Marxists looked upon the societies of Eastern Europe as models of such alternatives. But the legitimation failure of 'really existing socialism', together with the consequent rhetorical discrediting of Marxism and socialism nearly everywhere in the world, leaves many leftists without even a name for our alternatives, let alone a vision of what they are and how to achieve them.

A theory of civil society is developing that attempts to address this unease. Contemporary theoretical discussions of civil society and social change are born partly from these Eastern European revolutions themselves. Some intellectuals there reconstructed a Western liberal concept of civil society as a realm of popular economic, social and political activity outside the state. Their critique of Communism focused on the Communist state's suppression of such civic activity, and they theorized the creation of civil society as the means of freeing people from state domination and creating liberal pluralist democracies.[1]

While initially most influential in Eastern European social movements against Communist state domination, the idea that social change should be made by deepening civil society as opposed to or in addition to seizing the state has influenced other contemporary radical social movements around the world. Some of those involved with, and reflecting on, oppositional organizing led by the African National Congress in South Africa today, for example, have described their efforts as at least partly working on the space of civil society; while they certainly envision their liberation movement assuming or participating in state power, they also emphasize the importance of

maintaining and deepening voluntary self-organized collectives of people outside the state.[2]

A theory of civil society as the basis of radical social change is developing among leftists in Western Europe and the United States as well. Led by John Keane in England[3] and Andrew Arato and Jean Cohen in the United States,[4] these theories of civil society claim to offer a left theory of progressive social change that is an alternative to traditional Marxism. Keane, Arato and Cohen are directly influenced by the Eastern European discussions of civil society, though there are many differences between them in their formulation of the concept and function of civil society. In Western Europe and North America, however, the theory of civil society also resonates with radical social movement critiques of Marxism that have bubbled in the West for more than twenty years – from feminism, through critical race theory, to environmentalism. These movements have criticized Marxist tendencies to insist on the unity of revolutionary agency, to reduce all oppressions to economic class, and to aim at controlling the state through a revolutionary party as the primary means of making social change.

In this article[5] I construct an account of this theory of civil society as an alternative theory of radical politics and progressive social change. I explain how this theory does help describe contemporary radical social movements in Western capitalist societies, and explain something about why they can be understood as radical. I raise some doubts, however, about whether the theory of civil society is an adequate alternative to traditional Marxism and socialism as a theory of social change. In particular, I argue that the theory of civil society has little theory of structural social power and therefore little vision about making structural social change. Since I believe that Western radicals cannot simply revert to traditional Marxism to find such a theory of structural power and structural change which is useable by activists today, I close with some questions that must be explored further for a theory of radical social change.

# I

I find it most helpful to contrast the theory of civil society with a Marxist theory of revolution. In Marxism class difference and antagonism are the major motors of social change, because relation to the means of production is the basis of structural power inequality and the source of the oppression that motivates revolutionary organizing to alter the power inequality. Workers, those at the point of production, are the revolutionary agents, because they have a motive

and interest in emancipation. They also have available one major means of curtailing the power of the ruling class, namely, the strike. All they have to do is unite behind a program to eliminate capitalist relations of production. If they so unite, struggle, and develop tight and thoughtful organization, they can seize the factories and the state, either by means of armed action or party politics, or a combination of both. Once the workers control the state through their representatives, they can use the coercive means of state power to transform the economy in a way that limits the ability of individuals and firms to produce for private profit, and reorients the relations of production toward meeting needs.

In this account of revolutionary social change there are only two social segments that matter: the state and the economy. Marxist theory has a strong tendency, though no logical imperative, to reduce one to the other. Classical Marxist theory of capitalism tends to reduce the state to a reflection or instrument of the imperatives and relations of the economy. Its theory of socialism, on the other hand, tends to assimilate the economy into the state.

Today many, if not most, of those interested in radical social change to eliminate oppression and injustice reject this model of social change, for a number of reasons. Feminist, nationalist, black liberation, gay and lesbian liberation, and other radical social movements question the Marxist assumption that there is one agent of revolutionary change, the working class, whose interests are uniformly progressive and universal. It is now widely agreed among people on the left all over the world that the structural causes of inequality and oppression are multiple, and that consequently the emancipatory collective subjects are also plural.

Both theoretical and historical developments have led many coming from a left tradition to conclude, moreover, that the goal of state control of the economy has totalitarian consequences. These may be necessary or only possible, but in either case they are unacceptable risks. The lessons of state socialism in Eastern Europe are that an economy with few or no markets is unacceptably coercive as well as inefficient. The goal of the unity of functions characteristic of state socialism appears to lead to a society with few civil and political rights. Differentiation of social activities thus appears necessary in order to preserve or create individual and associative freedoms. While Communist societies of Eastern Europe provide an important object lesson for these positions, many find similar though less extreme totalitarian tendencies in Western welfare states, where the bureaucratization of increasing areas of everyday life constrains personal liberty and discourages communities of mutual aid.

In some respects this new interest in civil society updates the

analysis of Gramsci. Largely through the influence of Gramsci, many leftists have come to see that focus on state and economy as the primary or only social functions leaves out a host of institutions and activities in which people carry on their daily lives. Schools, churches, guilds, popular culture all bear the marking of hegemonic relations that support existing relations of domination. Consequently, organized resistance to this hegemony must involve not only action at the point of production, but counter-hegemonic struggles potentially in all the institutions of everyday life.

No doubt there are other reasons that many leftists have largely rejected the most important socialist theory of social change. Not least of these may be a practical difficulty conceiving what it might mean to 'seize the state' in many large bureaucratic societies with large and diverse government programmes and departments. For these and other reasons many now see the need for a more complex understanding of society, a more differentiated conception of both the reality and the ideal of social functions, and a more plural understanding of the sources of oppression and the motives for resistance.

One of the purposes of a new theory of civil society, as I construe that theory, is to provide an alternative understanding of the institutional bases, meaning and possibilities of emancipatory political action. It proposes to help those of us who consider ourselves emancipatory social activists to understand what we are doing, how we might conceive strategy, where our successes may lie, and how to evaluate them. It offers an image of the meaning of radical social movements and their possibilities as more plural and limited than does the classic Marxist theory of revolution.

So, just what is this theory of civil society? Rather than review accounts of civil society which have been produced so far, for the sake of clarity and space I will here reconstruct a synthetic version of this theory. In doing so I rely most heavily on the massive treatise recently published by Andrew Arato and Jean Cohen. John Keane, Alberto Melucci and Michael Walzer have also contributed to my thinking on these issues, but the account I give below relies less directly on them.[6] While I follow Cohen and Arato in the basic theoretical framework, much of the account I construct here is my own formulation. I modify their theory by construing civil society as a kind of activity rather than a social 'sphere', and unlike them I distinguish private society from civil society. By construing the theory of civil society as a theory of radical social change, I set the theory in a particular context and problematic that asks and answers the question of what makes civic activity radical.

As an aspect of social life civil society is differentiated from both state and economy. While a discourse distinguishing state and civil

society goes back at least to the seventeenth century, the differentiation of civil society from economy is a relatively new theoretical turn. Civil society designates an area of social activity other than industry, commerce and finance, as well as other than state legislative, administrative, and court activity. As a rough and ready beginning, civil society corresponds to the broad range of organizations and institutions understood as 'civic': charity organizations, lobbying groups, political associations agitating for a particular cause or programme, neighbourhood associations, non-profit organizations promoting education or providing services, and the list goes on.

Theorists of civil society often use spatial or substantial language to define this concept, characterizing it as a realm, a sphere or a space, distinct from spheres of economy and state. I suggest that a more process oriented understanding of what civil society names, rather than a spatial or substantial understanding, helps clarify the theory. Rather than think of state, economy and civil society as 'spheres' or clusters of institutions, we should think of them as *kinds of activities*. Thus, *state* designates activities of formal and legal regulation backed by legitimate coercive apparatus of enforcement. *Economy* designates activities of production and distribution. Economic activity is market oriented activity concerned with the production and distribution of resources, income and wealth, which is constrained in its decision making by considerations of profit and loss, cost-minimization, and so on. Civil society, in this scheme, names another kind of activity, which for now I will call 'public voluntary associative' activity; as I will discuss later, I distinguish civil society from private society.

With Cohen and Arato I will follow Habermas in conceiving state and economy, understood as kinds of activities, as *systematic*. They have specific logics which create regulated imperatives of rational action. Economic market activity creates a system of investment opportunity or consumption alternatives, each with their own ratio of costs and benefits, as well as imperative relationships among economic factors. The player in the economic market has no choice about the 'laws of the market', and reasons strategically in the market to determine what will maximize his interests. Economic actors 'know' the laws or systemic imperatives of the market, they reason with them in mind, but they cannot change them. This is what it means to say that these processes are systemic.

State bureaucracy is also systemic, according to Habermas. The administration of things and records is most efficiently accomplished with a hierarchical division of labour in a large bureaucracy that centralizes information, decision making, and effective action. From collecting social security taxes and their distribution to beneficiaries, through the co-ordination of disaster relief efforts, to the apprehension

and trial of accused lawbreakers, state activity consists in co-ordinated obedience to rules that detail not only the division of labour, but also the rights and obligations of parties involved, and require feed-back reporting of each step. The main medium of co-ordination is authorized power, and actors reason in terms of the operation of such power.

Thus in Habermas's scheme, 'system' designates those modes of social organization that are rationalized according to instrumental and strategic reasoning. While the product of ongoing actions, the economic or bureaucratic system has a logic of its own, independent of the choice of the actors, in quasi-natural laws of its operation that are subject to rough and ready, though not exact, prediction. To 'get something done' – to acquire goods on the market or reap a profit from initial investment – economic actors must reason in certain ways that accept the logic of the economic system as restricting the possibilities of action. To 'get something done' bureaucratically similarly means understanding and following the imperatives of the administrative system and reasoning instrumentally and strategically in relation to them.

Habermas designates as 'lifeworld' those activities and institutions which are structured primarily through communicative interaction rather than by systemic imperatives in relation to which actors reason instrumentally and strategically. In the lifeworld, norms guide action rather than systemic imperatives – where norms are internalized standards of good and bad, right and wrong. Communicative action structures social relationships in the lifeworld, the creative offering and response of people to one another where their actions aim at mutual understanding rather than profit or instrumentally efficient enactment of a technical goal. Whether in the intimate and personal face to face relations of the family, or in the larger social settings of religious ceremonies, university lecture halls, or theatrical production, the lifeworld is guided by norms of cultural expression, co-operation, and self-determination.

The activities of civil society, which I call 'public voluntary associative activity', are activities of the lifeworld, as distinct from the systematically guided activities of state and economy. By no means all of what counts as lifeworld, however, counts as civil society as I wish to understand it. In particular, I wish to distinguish private society from civil society. Activities and institutions of family and personal intimacy, as well as social clubs, parties and other social events, are private. In general, private activities concern activities of enjoyment and suffering – light sociability, personal caretaking, consumption, entertainment, spiritual renewal. Such activities are private in the Arendtian sense that they concern basic matters of life,

death, need and pleasure which in the extreme cannot be shared, and in the sense that the social relations carrying out these activities are usually more or less exclusive. Private life and private activities are important for individual identities, and for that reason important conditions of civil society, but they are not themselves civic activity.[7]

By contrast, I define civil society as 'public voluntary associative' activity. Groups of people meet together, voluntarily, out of a motive to organize or establish some activities, and sometimes they establish ongoing institutions. Or they develop forms of ongoing multilateral communication without meeting face to face, through publications and electronic media. Their activities are public in two senses. First, their associations and activities are not exclusive; in principle membership is open to anyone who wishes to associate with the activity. Second, the associative activity is *civic*. It aims at providing a public service, or addressing some social needs, or creating a forum for public expression, or raising public issues. Whereas activities of private society face inward, to self-contemplation, enjoyment, the meeting of personal needs, activities of civil society face outward. The aims of public voluntary associative activity open out onto a wider public to which the association wishes to contribute some good, something of value, and in which the association often hopes to involve others.

Thus as I define it, civil society is much broader than political activity, which consists of raising issues for public debate about what ought to be done, what principles should guide social life, what policies should be adopted, etc. Much of the activity of civil society is not political in this sense. But by defining civil society as public, and as oriented towards doing some civic good, I aim to define civil society as latently political. Public voluntary association builds solidarity, forges a language of values and interests, and provides organizational infrastructure that can be mobilized when circumstances motivate people to fight about power and social policy. For this reason I differ from Cohen and Arato, who distinguish civil society from political society, where the latter designates primarily parties or similar organizations that function specifically to contextualize state power and public policy.

The major purpose of my defining state, civil society and economy as kinds of activity, rather than spheres or spaces, is to see that these activities may coexist in some institutions. Even state institutions, for example, function as economic actors; scarce resources constrain their decisions, and they must reason at least partly in terms of cost minimization and the maximization of return on investment. A primarily civic institution such as a non-profit women's health clinic nevertheless must also reason in economic terms.

Despite the non-exclusive identity of most institutions, it makes sense to cluster institutions according to which sorts of activities predominate in them. Thus courts are certainly state institutions and banks are economic institutions. Many institutions are primarily civic: political advocacy groups, charity organizations, public and popular arts associations, magazines and newspapers aimed at providing forums of public expression, non-profit service providers, issue oriented educational groups, and so on. But if we are to understand how civil society might serve social change, we need to see that civil society is not necessarily restricted to any particular cluster of institutions. Voluntary associative activity may take place within private profit making corporations, or in government institutions. The emergence of computerized e-mail networks, for example, has made possible a new kind of civil society within many corporations: bulletin boards and other ongoing forums of discussion, which are open to anyone with access to a computer account.

Following Weber, Habermas claims that modernization consists in the rationalization of social life. Unlike Weber, however, for whom instrumental rationality is the only form of rationality, Habermas uses the notion of communicative rationality to argue that the process of rationalization in modern liberal capitalist societies has been one-sidedly instrumental. Sophisticated intellectual and institutional techniques have been developed to enhance the instrumental and strategic reasoning characteristic of market and bureaucratic action, as well as to widen the scope of market and bureaucratic activity. Reflective processes of communicative reason, wherein people can articulate their social norms, bring their validity in question, develop arguments for accepting and rejecting them, and propose new ones, are underdeveloped. The state and economic systems have been rationalized in the modern world, but the lifeworld, relying on a different kind of reason, has been less rationalized.

Even worse, the rationalization processes of the state and economic systems have sought to overtake and incorporate the lifeworld. Methods and techniques of instrumental and strategic reasoning overtake the institutions where cultural norms and communicative interaction are more appropriate. Thus presidential candidates are 'sold' on the political 'market' in which citizens are encouraged to exercise their consumer preferences rather than communicate with one another and the candidate with the aim of reaching a conclusion about how to address political issues together. Personal, family, and sexual problems are theorized in relationship manuals that conceive relationships instrumentally and recommend various techniques and skills of child-rearing, getting dates, or sexual performance. As the state regulates an ever wider range of social life and an ever

increasing range of services, both private organizations and individual persons are caught in its bureaucratic logic of formal rules, hierarchical authority, complex and interlocking forms. At the same time, capital's insatiable search for profit seeks to bring more of everyday life into consumption activity, to stimulate and satisfy new desires with commodities. By multiplying forms of private consumption, this commodification of everyday life results in a withering of more public associative forms of life.

The colonization of the lifeworld thesis depicts the dwindling of civil society particularly in Western industrial societies. The state socialist societies of Eastern Europe, as well as the continuing state socialist regime in China, have exhibited another specific form of limitation and encroachment on public voluntary associative activity, with the state absorbing and regulating most aspects of economic and social life. The lack of freedom and oppression of many Third World countries, finally, consists at least partly in a suppression of civic activity, either through direct prohibition and violence, or through conditions of severe material deprivation.

In the theory of civil society, radical politics aims at neither the withering away of the state nor the abolition of the market. In this view, state bureaucracy and markets are important and inevitable components of the modern world, To the efficient operation of bureaucracies and markets members of modern societies owe much in the way of co-ordinated administrative effort and the mass production and distribution of goods. Instead of political or economic revolution, radical social action must be directed at expanding the sphere of communicative activity which is separate from the logics of state and economy, at pushing back the limits of these systems which have colonized the life world. Radical activity aiming to bring about social change for a more just, more free, less oppressive society, consists in expanding and deepening the self-organizing and democratic impulses of civil society. In freely established associations where people create publics of social criticism and cultural innovation, where they decide on their norms and goals together and enact them co-operatively, people expand the 'realm of freedom' and limit the 'realm of necessity'.

Thus the theory of civil society claims to describe the activity of those 'new' mass social movements that are radical because they challenge state or corporate power for the sake of bettering the situation of an oppressed or disadvantaged group or for the sake of peace or environmentalism. These contemporary radical social movements are 'new' because they do not follow a Marxist model of working class movement confronting capital at the 'point of production'; nor do they form unified parties with a broad unified

programme and aim to take state power. Rather, these new social movements are generally organized around one issue and/or constituency, often with small organizations that interact in a proliferation of networks. As I will discuss more extensively in the next section, the radical associations proliferating in civil society do one of two things, and sometimes both at once: (1) they foster identity formation, cultural expression and solidarity among groups, especially oppressed or marginalized groups, through the creation of autonomous services and institutions such as coffee houses, magazines, counselling services, shelters, co-operatives, theatre and music groups, and so on; (2) they foster critical public action, usually directed at influencing state policy but sometimes also directed at private corporate actors, through public street protest, lobbying, boycotts, civilly disobedient direct action, public forums of discussion.

Thus in this theory, civil society should be understood as both a means and a goal of social change. The way to engage in radical political activity is by creating or supporting public voluntary institutions and forums of association, with whatever constituencies find affinity and around whatever critical issues people argue are deeply important. The goals of such activity are democratization: converting bureaucracy or commodification into communicative interaction. A secure civil society requires a strong framework of state guaranteed rights. But it remains self-organized and critically autonomous from the logics of state and economy.

## II

Now I turn to the primary question of this essay. Does it make sense to see civil society as the vehicle and goal of progressive activism and the source of radical social change? In answering this question I must confess to ambivalence. The answer for me is yes and no.

On the one hand, this theory of civil society corresponds to my experience of radical political activity in the 1970s and 1980s. There has been no 'revolutionary subject', no unified class, party and programme for re-ordering society as a whole. Rather, we have witnessed proliferating movements, publics, and organizations, most of this activity taking place in autonomous units of self-organization – small non-profit corporations, single issue education and lobbying associations, journals, alternative presses, newsletters, electronic bulletin boards, solidarity groups, self-help associations, and small service providers. At least in advanced industrial societies, much of the radical activity of the last two decades has been devoted to liberation of discriminated against or excluded social groups, such as

racial minorities, women, people with disabilities, gay men and lesbians.

Most of these movements have radical vision and intention, in the sense that they have fundamental criticisms of major social institutions and practices. Those of us in them believe that the conditions of misery, injustice and oppression that motivate their activism require alterations in basic institutional structures. Yet when we meet to plan activities that further our goals, we usually decide to hold a rally, stage a peace and justice fair, hold a fundraising concert, organize a public forum. Often we have felt that such activity – requiring a great deal of work and often a lot of fun – amounted to very little. The theory of civil society both explains why such activities constitute radical political action and why they take this plural and proliferating form. It gives means to our struggles, and also reconceptualizes what we have been doing. It cannot be considered revolutionary because such activity does not directly take over, shift or eliminate particular power relations. But neither can it be considered merely reformist or the mere expression of interest group politics.

As I introduced it in the previous section, the activity of civil society has two basic aspects. First, there is autonomous self-organization for the purposes of developing a culture of group solidarity and instituting alternative forms of communicative practices outside established state and corporate institutions. Here I include support and solidarity groups, politically motivated artistic groups, alternative institutions such as bookstores, coffee houses, journal collectives, publications, group based or movement based health clinics, counselling centres, self-organizing co-operatives, community land trusts, neighbourhood groups. Such institutions and forms of association enable social groups with particular identities or issues to find one another, develop a sense of identity and shared culture, and empower one another through meeting some of their needs. This function of civic activity tends to take as its audience primarily those involved in the activity.

The second aspect of civic activity is directed outward. Civic activities create critical publics; they attempt to raise issues for public discussion in ways that bring them to wider public notice. Organizations and movements engage in activities that aim to bring the powerful to address issues they will likely ignore otherwise, because they are of primary concern to the less powerful, to the marginal or extreme. There are countless methods of raising such issues and thus creating publics – street demonstrations, theatrical acts of civil disobedience, participation in public hearings, self-organized public forums, letters to editors and legislators, and so on.

How can these sorts of civic activities be understood as radical? By

'radical' I mean concerned with undermining oppressions which are understood as systemic, that is, which the normal operations of society reproduce, activity that therefore considers itself opposed to established powers and practices engaging in the perpetuation of oppression. In our discussions among ourselves, radicals frequently distinguish our philosophy of social change and political activities from that of those we call 'liberals'. In this context a 'liberal' for us is one who believes either that the society is basically just and only needs tinkering reforms to improve it, or that there are injustices, and the only or best way to address them is to 'work within the system'. One way of understanding what is radical about social movement civic activity is to contrast it with this somewhat disparaging 'liberalism'.

A liberal pluralist conception of politics and social change thinks of political actors as self-interested individuals each aiming to maximize their own good. To do so, individuals often form associations and movements, or 'interest groups' because collectives can bring more resources, power and organization than can individuals, to try and get what they want. Sometimes people organize in collectives, moreover, because they are committed to a religious, ethnic or other group identity, and aim to maximize the benefits accruing to that group in relation to other social groups. Interest groups compete for resources and power, sometimes forming alliances, sometimes coming into direct conflict. They reason strategically both in relation to policy making processes and markets. That is, they act instrumentally and calculate how to bargain and manipulate circumstances so as to maximize the advantages to themselves.

Now the activities of civil society that I have described do not fit this model of liberal pluralism. Civic actors do not primarily have a self-conception of pursuing self-interest, whether individual or collective. Rather, they claim to protest injustice and promote justice. Most of the hundreds of thousands of people in the U.S. who devoted themselves for more than ten years to opposing U.S. policy in Central America were not promoting their own self-interest. Indeed, many sacrificed their time and money to organize, go to marches, perform non-violent illegal acts of protest for which they sometimes served time in jail, and to work with their church institutions to transport and harbour refugees in defiance of U.S. immigration policies. They engaged in self-organized material aid and service provision at the same time as they directed critical attention on and aimed to change the policies of the U.S. government. Most were motivated not by gain but by a sense of moral outrage at the injustice they believed was being perpetrated and perpetuated in their name.

To be sure, participants in many civic oriented social movements

are motivated by the desire to improve their social situation. Feminists, gay men and lesbians, discriminated against or excluded racial and ethnic minorities, all organize at least partly out of self-interest. Oppressed groups that organize in order to change their social conditions often do and should behave as interested groups competing for greater benefits. However, such groups are not merely motivated by the desire for gain; they are often impelled even more by anger, an outrage at what they perceive as wrongs they and their fellows suffer. They do not simply work to accumulate power and resources; they appeal to justice.

Activities of civil society are radical then, in the sense that they are principled. They are motivated by normative commitments and make moral appeals, and do not simply look on the social and political field as an arena of strategizing in order to maximize benefit to oneself. In such strategic thinking, anything can be traded against anything else for the sake of maximizing material benefit. Civic social movements often refer to activities of strategic manipulation for the sake of furthering the interests of the movement as 'selling out'.

In their outwardly directed civic activities, these social movements create politicized publics of discussion and criticism under circumstances where state and economic systems tend to depoliticize social life. Under modern systems of bureaucratic power and commercialized interaction, 'left to itself', the exercise of political and economic power will be depoliticized. Policy makers, administrators, and corporate managers prefer rule-bound, accountable and routinized processes in which a few top 'guys' meet and make basic decisions which a bureaucracy then implements as efficiently as possible. Each organization has its own charge, its own returns to maximize, and a system of private exchange best enables each to pursue their goals. Those with state or corporate power do not want wide social deliberation about issues and policies. Deliberation is too messy, raises too many questions, gets too many people and interests involved. Even elected representatives operate in this elitist and privatized fashion. What we call the 'mainstream' press tends to reinforce such depoliticized decision making. The press provides a forum for the powerful to make their policy statements. It focuses on 'human interest' stories about the powerful, but rarely presents deliberation about issues by a truly representative set of different voices.

Much civic activity aims to create the critical and deliberative publics that state and corporate activities normally discourage. Through disruption it aims to bring attention to issues, through lectures and publications it aims to provide information and analysis not otherwise publicly available, at least not in easily accessible form.

Despite their depoliticizing function, mainstream print, radio and television media nevertheless can and sometimes do function as forums for criticism and deliberation.

Although the media attend to the persons of the powerful, to their rhetorical pronouncements, their handshakes, their school choices, their jogging and shopping trips, in modern routinized bureaucratic and corporate systems, power loves to hide. It lurks between the lines of quarterly reports, executive orders and memos, which circulate and get filed, it feeds on the dull routines of everyday professional life. The effects of power are clear: A Third World government cannot renegotiate the terms of its debt, and therefore is forced to devalue its currency; 3 000 more people lose their jobs as General Motors undergoes reorganization. But the forces of power, the responsible parties, cannot be located. Everyone's hands are tied, constrained by market and regulative imperatives. Spokespeople who represent institutions or governments read prepared statements articulating in tones of quiet reason what the rules are and how decisions are constrained. The operations of the system plod along, day by day, in the same grooves, and often people find that these operations serve the interests of some more than others. They empower or re-empower some and disempower others, but the power cannot be located.

Civic activities do not smash these power structures, but by creating critical publics they often *expose* power.[8] By establishing public means of expressing their moral claims to right or justiice, and criticizing the policies of state or corporate actors, civic activity often exposes their power as arbitrary. When exposed the powerful often appear selfish, bullying, without legitimation or puny. Creative acts of civil disobedience often force power to become naked. Helicopters fly lower over women encamped in a New York field; marching nuns in the streets of Manila force soldiers to shoot or give up. The creation of critical forums often shows power as shameful or powerless.

An affordable housing coalition organizes homeless people to tell stories of landlord harassment, rent hikes, Housing Authority actions that brought them to homelessness, demanding of the City Manager and City Council action to provide affordable housing. The officials are speechless, or mutter about bringing business to the downtown. They say that the problem is all at the federal level, and discuss how the operations of government and the constraints it is under are far more complex than the naïve, amateurish and idealistic advocacy groups can begin to fathom.

Such actions expose power as powerless at the same time that it asserts its authority. In June 1991 tens of thousands of environmental activists from all over the world created a critical civic public in the parks, streets and hallways of Rio de Janeiro, with the intent of

shaming the heads of state, especially the head of state of the U.S. Such moral pressure forced President Bush to go to Rio even though he had planned not to, and probably had some influence on the wording of the texts discussed at the summit.

What makes civic activity radical in this sense is that it rejects 'business as usual' and aims to expose its lack of principle, elitism, biases toward some groups and interests, and arbitrariness. By 'speaking truth to power' it aims to de-legitimate the existing routines and institutions. Representatives of 'the establishment' in turn attempt to construct the civic activities as 'extremist' because they refuse to play by the rules, or 'naïve' and 'idealist' because they make moral appeals. But more often than they admit, this 'politics of embarrass-ment' succeeds in de-legitimating proposals, policies or actions of the powerful, and influences them to accommodate to what is perceived as a popular will.[9]

Finally, the activities of civil society are often 'radical' insofar as they reject a view that social change is accomplished primarily through legislation and state policy from the top down. This is another way social movement civic activity is distinct from what radicals call 'liberalism'. On this construction, liberals tend to think that social wrongs are best righted through laws and oppressions best overcome through state action. Liberals tend to think that strong laws against discrimination and other racist behaviours are the primary way to attack the problem. Radicals tend to believe that laws and public policy function primarily as an expression of dominant power and public opinion; thus laws and policy are only as strong as the public support for them. Where you have a citizenry and state bureaucracy which either enacts racism or is indifferent to it, anti-racist laws will not do much for the problem. This is not an argument against anti-racist laws, but rather an argument for additional anti-racist action outside state policy, both in the form of self-organization among oppressed racial groups to express their perspective and serve their needs, and in the form of multi-racial organization to promote direct public discussion of, and take direct people-to-people action about, racist incidents and practices. Civil society is radical insofar as in it people take matters into their own hands, to provide services or goods for themselves rather than relying on government or existing business. The proliferation of feminist rape and battery crisis centres, health centres, publishing efforts, bookstores, record com-panies, and coffee houses provide important contemporary examples of such activity.

To summarize, I find the theory of civil society as the medium and goal of social change plausible, both descriptively and normatively. I find that it describes my experience of self-conscious radical political

activity at least since the 1970s in the U.S. My reading and discussions with people about radical organizing in many developing countries, moreoever, makes me conclude that the theory of civil society describes much about social change organizing in those societies. Women's organizing in Chile or India, for example, has been dominated by civilly disobedient public protest, as in tree hugging, and in the creation of alternative institutions of barrio culture, service provision and credit.

I also find plausible the ideal or goal of radical activity thought of as the expansion of such civic activity – more self-organization, with people serving themselves, taking matters into their own hands, deliberating and making decisions, engaging in 'civic responsibility'. Nevertheless, I also have some worries about the claim that civil society is both the locus and goal of social change.

## III

A number of objections could be offered to the theory that civil society is a basis for social change. For example, there appears to be nothing specific to this theory to distinguish civic groups and movements working for emancipatory social change from those whose objectives are reactionary. Groups blocking abortion clinics, for example, fit my above account of movements in civil society. Without some thicker way to evaluate the goals of civic movements and organizations, the theory of civil society can look like liberal pluralism. Competing groups vie for voice and power in public life; some win and some lose, and there are no criteria for determining who deserves to win.

In this final section, however, I concentrate on a different set of worries. I worry that the theory and practice of civil society does not and perhaps cannot address issues of structural economic power, even though the need for addressing such issues is as pressing as ever. Democratization, while a good in itself, may not be sufficient to undermine oppression and increase social and material equality. The means for promoting these latter goals, moreoever, may conflict with the autonomy, plurality, and self-organizing democracy characteristic of civil society.

Traditional Marxism defines social change as altering the class structure. The primary issues of injustice and oppression concern control over the means of production, the dependence of most people on wage or salary labour, and the social and political domination that control over wealth, or lack of it, produces. Marxism considers these dimensions of power and control over resources as structural: various relations of power and control over resources interlock and reinforce

each other; they influence particular actions and decisions in the society as constraining conditions; they are reproduced over time and tend to reappear even when challenged. These structural relations are not impossible to change, however, since they are socially produced. For traditional Marxism, the means of changing these relations involve power confrontation by workers with owners about whether and how people will work, and eventually a seizing of the means of investment and production themselves, to reorient them away from private profit to meeting social needs.

The calamities of capitalist class society have by no means receded, indeed, by any measure things are getting worse. The social movements of the 1960s and 1970s came at a time of significant affluence and expansion in the advanced capitalist world. From where we sit in the 1990s, that period of economic optimism looks like an aberration. The movement of capital has become ever more global, but it seems to have become more difficult for many firms to make big profits or even stay afloat. So they shut down operations in the developed world and race after cheap labour in developing countries. There they are aided by development agencies' structural adjustment policies that help create the pool of cheap labour by decimating peasant economies. Meanwhile back in the advanced capitalist world, firms recreate cheap labour by defining work as part-time, seasonal, service. World investment focuses on such things as tourism and high tech equipment, rather than on housing, transportation, or other things that people need. Cities deteriorate for lack of investment in their infrastructure and services. High levels of unemployment and underemployment become normal in the advanced capitalist as well as the developing world, exacerbated by changes in Eastern Europe that have thrown millions of new people to the mercy of capitalist labour markets. All over the world an expanding sea of permanently unemployed people lives at various levels of misery. Plenty of people get or stay rich in this system, however, as they reap the fruits of short term speculation or defend their long term ownership interests in a more competitive environment. States are less able to mitigate the effects of these processes, themselves constrained by shrinking tax bases and expanding deficits. So they cut programmes in education, housing, transportation, social services, even as the need for these increases.

As originating in the struggle of Eastern Europeans against totalitarian states, the theory of civil society focuses most of its attention on the need to create and enlarge voluntary self-organized associative activity directed at the public good, as against the legalistic and hierarchical position of people as subjects and clients of state power. Much recent literature has persuasively argued that

Western and Southern societies also have significant need to cut off the tentacles of bureaucracy as they colonize people's everyday lives. But calls for greater autonomy for voluntary associative activity have a different meaning in societies governed by norms of free enterprise than in those where the state has dominated the economy. The expansion of civil society can be a strategy of radical change under a state dictatorship. The question is, can this activity promote radical change in capitalist democracy?

The theory of civil society I have summarized conceptualizes the political meaning of the activities of civil society as struggling about the border between lifeworld and system. The system–lifeworld distinction assumes that the economy has its own logic about which little can be done in a communicatively interactive context. In this logic, profit making enterprises seek to minimize labour costs and maximize revenues. A consequence of this logic is that those with resources to invest tend to acquire more resources, while those whose resources consist primarily in their ability to work are dependent on the labour-minimizing enterprises. Thus the logic of the economic system tends to be that the rich get relatively richer and the poor get relatively poorer. Insofar as state and bureaucratic activity acts to regulate and steer the economic system, including enacting some mitigating redistributive measures, it tends to reinforce the structural relations of this economic system.

The theory and practice of civil society addresses these issues of dependency and structural constraint by recommending democratic self-organization. One of the means of pushing back the system limits of state and economy is for citizens to form consumer or co-operative associations and enterprises. Civically minded enterprises and consumer groups can be democratically run, and can choose to promote values in addition to profit making. A long distance telephone service, for example, can have consumers elect officers and vote for the use of some of the profits to be distributed to civic organizations. Through democratic producer co-operatives some individuals can acquire much more control over their working conditions and the use of collectively produced resources than they would have in more standard firms. Even large corporations have space for zones of democratization within them, where individuals can engage in associative activity that increases their autonomy. Democratizing the relation between workers and consumers and economic enterprises is a good in itself, precisely because it empowers the people involved, and widens the possibility for deliberation about means and ends in the enterprise. But such efforts do not alter the structural imperatives of profit seeking, the ownership of and access to investment capital, the class inequalities in access to jobs, income and wealth. Indeed,

co-operatives and other relatively small economic enterprises are often more vulnerable to market pressures and constraints than are other businesses.

The second way that civic activity addresses these issues of economic structure is through aiming to influence the policies of state or corporate decision-makers. Usually such pressure movements are directed at state officials, because unlike corporate officials they depend on votes and legitimacy, and sometimes civic activists succeed in influencing state policy. But rarely can they touch structural relations of control over investment or the channelling of large resources. City and state officials themselves operate under resource constraint, and they assume the power of banks and multinational corporations as a given, with their imperatives determining limits on the possible.

The affordable housing coalition that I described in the previous section, for example, did nothing to change the alliance of development capital with city officials. Any new construction in the city, whether of affordable housing or downtown offices, depends on the willingness of developers to put up their own capital in a plan, and to work with banks and other financial agents to make a package that satisfies all investors. City officials perceive, not very wrongly, that the good of the city depends on the actions of these private developers, and thus they try to accommodate their wishes at the same time as they serve the interests of the citizens of the city. City officials have some leverage over developers, partly through zoning and other regulatory functions, but more importantly through the power of the city to allocate state or federal grants or low interest loans. Civic associations like the affordable housing coalition, however, usually have little but moral pressure with which to intervene in the bargaining process between developers and government. City processes are usually structured, moreover, such that civic organizations have no formal part in the bargaining or approval process, a situation that could and probably should be changed.

Let me emphasize that private voluntary associative activity in civil society is useful and good. I said in the previous section that a primary critical function of self-organizing civil society is to expose power. Power exposed is better than power hidden, because exposed power is more likely to operate within the law, and often does not wish to appear overly greedy or callous. Sometimes exposing power influences what the powerful do, but such public critical scrutiny does not significantly change the power relations themselves. While sometimes it can get a state or corporate functionary to act better, exposing power does not change the rights and privileges that constitute power.

It is plausible to construct this process of exposing and influencing power from autonomous associations of civil society as not terribly different from the liberal pluralist model that the theory of civil society claims to reject, at least in the respect that the pluralist process favours those with financial, organizational and communicative resources. Pluralism theorized democracy as a process of open competition among associations and interest groups in an attempt to influence the choice of policies and policy makers. Left critics of pluralist theory pointed out that the outcome of this competition will tend to favour those groups who for reasons of structural inequality are able to mobilize the greatest resources with the least effort. A major difference between the theory and practice of civil society and this model of interest group pluralism, I argued earlier, is that civic activism often is directed at a general good rather than a narrow interest. Nevertheless, civic activity tends to involve some sort of people more than others – the educated, the articulate, those with a relatively comfortable material life, those with more discretionary time, and so on. The people and groups with fewer economic and personal resources to draw on, whose lives are taken up largely by surviving, travel time to work, finding child care, waiting hours for services in bureaucratic or privately civic offices, tend not to participate in civic activity as much as do more privileged people. Civic groups tend to succeed more in their aims, moreoever, the more money or resources they have to support their activity. This in turn depends partly on the social networks to which those involved in the group belong and how professional and respectable their members and supporters appear to potential foundation donors. Less economically and culturally privileged people's organizations thus tend to have less money and other resources than do organizations with more privileged constituencies. Thus even if much civic activity is guided by moral principle and the public good, and not simply by narrow self-interest, these principles and definition of the good tend to reflect the perspectives of more economically privileged people. Civil society thus does little to challenge structural relations of class privilege and the processes that reproduce them, but may in fact reinforce that class inequality.

One of the conclusions that I draw from these considerations is that it is a mistake to equate radical politics with democracy, as many on the left are now doing in this age when socialism is discredited. Increasing democracy in civic associations or corporations is a good in itself, because it enhances participation and self-determination, but it does little to address problems of structural economic inequality and domination. Democratizing state decision making and policy imple-

mentation processes might address these structural issues to a greater degree, but only insofar as such democratization extends to control over resources and the regulation of private economic activity.

Social justice is related to democracy, but there are elements of justice not expressed or realizable simply through democracy. If democratic decision-making is constrained by the need to make huge interest payments to private banks, by the need to show potential investors in urban infrastructure that they will make more profit there than in sex-tour theme parks, by the need to fuel wastefully consuming growth that generates employment but puts the next generation in great ecological and fiscal danger, then having greater democracy is like being behind the wheel of a car without brakes: we are doing the driving, but we are not in control of the machine.

Actions to get this machine under control, to direct it toward greater social justice in meeting needs, fair distribution and satisfying work, require unified and co-ordinated planning and enforced policies that compel those who have an interest in maintaining the *status quo* to give up some or all of their power and privilege. They require, that is, the administrative and enforcement capacities of large centrally co-ordinated states. One can argue, as does John Keane, for example, that state policies to regulate economic activity and the activities of civil society ought to be complementary and mutually reinforcing, and I agree. But the programmes and policies necessary to shift basic investment priorities, provide the goods and services that all people need, and promote greater material equality, tend to conflict with the processes of civil society.

Because the movement of capital is increasingly global and centralized, policies that regulate and alter that movement must also be unified, global and centralized. This requirement pulls against the plurality and proliferation of civic activity, which is primarily local, diffuse, relatively uncoordinated.

To alter the structures of economic power and privilege, moreover, these unified and co-ordinated policies must be to some degree forced. The machine careens along on its current course because of a combination of inertia – that is, habit and routine – the constant self-interested decisions of many of those who currently exercise power and control over resources, and their ability to enforce their will in case of conflict with others. Bringing the brakeless flight of this machine under control thus requires forces that counteract these habits, interests and coercions. Civil society, however, relies on public voluntary associative activity, making it difficult to effect those changes.

The theory and practice of civil society encourages an emphasis on freedom from the state as a key to freedom. There is little doubt that

limiting bureaucratic control over everyday life and, instead, delivering services as much as possible through civic associations would be a good thing. Expansive, plural and public civic activity, moreover, is a crucial counterweight to state power and can make that power somewhat accountable. I am worried, however, that attention by leftists to the virtues of civil society has diverted us from seeing its limits, and thinking through in a new way for our times how movements can be developed that press for selective planning and public investment policies aimed at directly creating jobs, or providing goods and services directly, as well as wresting some economic power from the hands of private capital. I worry that a focus on democratization may be diverting progressives today from an equally important commitment to economic equality and social justice.

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**NOTES**

1. David A. Reidy, Jr., 'Eastern Europe, Civil Society and the Real Revolution', *Praxis International*, vol. 12, no. 2, July 1992, pp. 168–180.
2. Steven Friedman, 'An Unlikely Utopia: State and Civil Society in South Africa', *Politikon*, vol. 19, 1, pp. 5–19; J. Seekings, 'Civic Organizations in South African Townships', in G. Moss and I. Obey (eds), *South African Review*, 6, Johannesburg, Ravan, 1992, pp. 216–238.
3. Keane, *Democracy and Civil Society*, Verso, 1988.
4. Cohen and Arato, *Civil Society and Political Theory*, MIT Press, 1992.
5. I am grateful to David Alexander, Bob Beauregard, Jean Cohen, Frank Cunningham, David Plotke, Ted Shatsky and Tom Wartenberg for comments on an earlier version of this paper.
6. In addition to the writings of Cohen and Arato and Keane cited above, see Alberto Melucci, *Nomads of the Present*, Hutchison Radius, 1989. See also Michael Walzer, 'The Idea of Civil Society', *Dissent*, Spring 1991.
7. Here I depart from Cohen and Arato's model. See *Civil Society and Political Theory*, p. 411.
8. Alberto Melucci finds that making power visible is a major function of social movements. See *Nomads*, pp. 76–88.
9. Cohen and Arato call this process the 'politics of influence'. See Chapter 8.

# Civil Society, the Public Sphere and the State

## Reflections on Classical and Contemporary Discourses

*Maxine Reitzes*

### Introduction

The concept of civil society is enjoying a contemporary revival, and it is important to try to develop an understanding of why this is so. Civil society is essentially a construct of modernity, and historically has always been a relational one, arising simultaneously with the advent of the modern state. The exact nature of this relation has changed in practice, developed and assumed different forms in different historical, socio-political contexts, and been hotly debated in theory. These dynamic relations and accompanying debates have included questions concerning the relationship between civil society and the state, the location of the economy, the demarcation of public and private spheres and the situating of social, political and economic agents, structures and processes within and between these spheres.

### Civil Society: Why Then? Reflections on Classical Discourses

I begin with tracing the genesis of the construct of civil society, in order to:

(1) Penetrate some of the murkiness which surrounds the concept today by investigating the intellectual traditions which inform it. The stream is always less muddy at its source.
(2) Assess the contemporary validity of the tenets which inform these discourses themselves; discard those which are not appropriate, and try to accommodate those which are relevant to the re-imagining of civil society.

For the ancient Greeks, there was no distinction between society and the State. The state provided a public sphere for political action which was largely normatively conceived as a pursuit of ethics, of the good life. This sphere stood in contradistinction to the private. According to Arendt, 'the *polis* was for the Greeks, as the *res republica* was for the Romans, first of all their guarantee against the futility of an individual life, the space protected against this futility

and reserved for the relative permanence, if not immortality, of mortals' (cited in Benhabib 1992:78). The agonistic view of the public sphere envisions:

> that space of appearances in which moral and political greatness, heroism and pre-eminence are revealed, displayed, shared with others. This is a competitive space in which one competes for recognition, precedence, and acclaim. Ultimately, it is the space in which one seeks a guarantee against the futility and the passage of all things human . . .
>
> The agonistic space of the *polis* was made possible by a morally homogeneous and politically egalitarian but exclusive community in which action could also be a revelation of the self to others. Under conditions of moral and political homogeneity and lack of anonymity, the agonistic dimension, the vying for excellence among peers, could take place. (Benhabib 1992:77–78)

According to Arendt, it is this sphere which declined with the dual rise of the modern nation-state and the social, or civil, society. The same historical processes which resulted in the genesis of the modern nation-state also produced 'society', and its expansion led to the concomitant contraction and ultimate disappearance of the participation in, and by, the public. Hegel describes the emergence of society in the sphere of ethical life, interposing itself between the private sphere of the household and the public realm of the political state. This social sphere invaded the space of the public, usurped and undermined its normative and public role, and supplanted it with a 'system of needs', an arena characterized by the pursuit of private economic self-interest and governed by commodity exchange (1992:75). According to Benhabib's reading of Arendt, the public sphere of politics was transformed 'into a pseudospace of interaction in which individuals no longer "act" but "merely behave" as economic producers, consumers, and urban city dwellers' (1992:74).

For the social contract theorists Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau, the advent of society is predicated on an original contract. All three theorists posit society in contradistinction to the hypothetical state of nature i.e. to an unregulated, presocial condition, characterized by varying degrees of insecurity. The state, on the other hand, is a necessary and simultaneous condition of, and for, civil society. The emergence of the state and civil society is based on a social contract, premised on individual autonomy, voluntarism, rationality, consent, and morality and a notion of rights.

Contract theory was developed in a historical context characterized by immense political upheaval and social uncertainty, resulting from an increasing contestation and erosion of established traditions and certainties, including challenges to the absolutist claims of monarchs, suggesting the secularization of politics; intellectual enlightenment,

an increase in commerce and industry, and a growing mobility and flux of populations; all presaging an apparent collapse of civilization and a decline into barbarism. It is these concerns which resonate with those which are relevant to societies today.

For Hobbes, the contract is forged between atomized individuals turning their backs on the hypothetical state of nature which is a state of war, characteristically amoral, essentially competitive, insecure, and in which everyone's lives are necessarily 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short' (Hobbes 1968:186). The freedom and equality which are enjoyed in the state of nature are absolute and unlimited. Freedom is negatively defined as freedom from external impediments. Paradoxically it is precisely this unbounded, unlimited liberty (or licence, as Locke would have it), which results in the warlike state of incessant competition and fear, where everyone has a right to everything, even another's body (1968:190).

Hobbes attempted to conceptualize the relationship between the new emergent nation-state (as opposed to the city-state) and the individual citizen, who could no longer be regarded simply as having a set place in a divinely constituted order. In the old medieval society man[1] was bound by ties attaching his status to, and duties prescribed for him by, the Church. The individual or private sphere was seen as subordinate to the public. Tradition was the main form of social control. With the rise of individualism and the social mobility that accompanied the increase in commerce, this old conception of man in society no longer applied. If the fetters of tradition were being cast away, what other form of social control would take their place to prevent the anarchy of the state of nature? Hobbes claimed it was to be found in the increasing executive power of the state and in the growth of statutory law, enforced and backed by coercive sanctions. This occurred together with the development of the individual conscience, whereby rational regulation from within, complimented by individual voluntary consent and subordination to, and authorization of, the sovereign would replace the external authority of the Catholic church. The absolutist and non-contracted coercive state ensured and contained the existence of a bounded, normative community and protected it from its own innate potential for self-destruction. Legal limits were imposed on the freedom of each individual, creating greater freedom for all, from each. The alternatives were seen as too ghastly to contemplate. In the context of this absolutist state, individuals were guaranteed certain individual rights, and a limited private sphere was acknowledged over which the state had no jurisdiction (1968:264). The advent of the state and society was simultaneously accompanied by the advent of property (1968:203).

For Locke, the social contract is both vertical and horizontal:

subjects voluntarily contract both with one another and with the State, in the interests of securing life, liberty and estate. The chief end of civil society is the preservation of property. Political consent and obligation of the subjects to the state is predicated on the latter's protection of the former's property rights. The government holds fiduciary powers, and can be removed by the subjects if it breaks their trust. The State is subordinate to the interests and the will of the people.

According to Rousseau, it is precisely the advent of property which is the root of social conflict and corruption: 'It is conflict over things, not quarrels between men which constitute war, and the state of war cannot arise from mere personal relations, but only from property relations' (Rousseau 1968:55–56). For Rousseau, property itself is the cause of dissent and, by definition, of civil society: 'The first man who, after fencing off a piece of land, took it upon himself to say "This belongs to me" and found people simple-minded enough to believe him, was the true founder of civil society' (1968:21). It is society that corrupts, results in acrimony, inequality and unfreedom, and its worst excesses are in fact illustrated by the Hobbesian state of nature. Society stands not in contradistinction to war, but is fundamentally characterized by war, and necessitates a system of law to coerce competitive, oppositional individuals into a state of order.

> Such was, or may have been, the origin of civil society and laws, which gave new fetters to the poor, and new powers to the rich; which destroyed natural liberty for ever, fixed for all time the law of property and inequality, transformed shrewd usurpation into settled right, and to benefit a few ambitious persons, subjected the whole of the human race thenceforth to labour, servitude and wretchedness. (1968:21)

In contradistinction to this relentless attack on what is, Rousseau develops a normative alternative founded on the consideration of a legitimate principle of government, 'taking men as they are and laws as they might be' (1968:49). Rousseau develops his construct of the General Will, based on contract, consent and the recognition of the legitimacy of the State, which is the sovereign, which is the exercise of the general will (1968:62). He attacks the coercive Hobbesian state, claiming that 'force is a physical power; I do not see how its effects could produce morality' (1968:52). What can produce morality is the voluntary, direct participation of free, consenting individuals in the public construction of the state.

In terms of this construct, individuals collectively unite and subsume their individual wills under the General Will. The contract is not between a subordinate and a superordinate, but 'a covenant of the body with each of its members' (1968:77). The state is seen as the

ultimate realization and expression of humanity and civil freedom, and it is in and through this construction that individuals become fully realized as human beings. It is on the basis of this recognition of the indivisibility of general public freedom and particular individual freedom, and their reconciliation in and through the general will, that Rousseau argues

> that whoever refuses to obey the general will shall be constrained to do so by the whole body, which means nothing other than that he shall be forced to be free. (1968:64)

Neither state nor individual is subordinate to the other; the two become one.

> As soon as the multitude is united thus in a single body, no one can injure any one of the members without attacking the whole, still less injure the whole without each member feeling it. Duty and self-interest thus equally oblige the two contracting parties to give each other mutual aid; and the same men should seek to bring together in this dual relationship, all the advantages that flow from it. (1968:63)

There cannot, by definition, be any sectional associations within the state. Rousseau does, however, differentiate between the 'respective rights of the citizen and of the sovereign, and . . . those duties which the citizens have as subjects from the natural rights which they set out to enjoy as men' (1968:74). Those interests which cannot be accommodated by the limits of the General Will, and which are not governed by the contract, remain the preserve of the individual and are relegated to a private realm in which the sovereign cannot intervene (1968:77).

Finally, Rousseau insists on active, direct participation in the public business of the state, claiming that 'the moment a people adopts representatives it is no longer free; it no longer exists' (1968:143). 'As soon as someone says of the business of the state: "What does it matter to me?", then the state must be reckoned lost' (1968:141).

This ideal situation cannot be realized in today's modern mass societies, and was only conceivable at the time, given that communities were relatively small and discrete and political participation was highly circumscribed by gender and property qualifications. I would argue that such levels of participation can be realized within and through institutions of contemporary civil society and the reinvigoration of political society through the creation of public spheres as realms of positive freedom and mediation between civil agents and the State. Each realm constitutes a different level of heterogeneity, approximating increasing levels of consensus, and moving from a plurality of differentiated particular wills to the possibility of the expression of a consensual General Will.

What all three contract theorists seem to share is a conviction that society had to become civilized, that society did not (and does not) find itself in a given civil state:

> In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, civilization, the condition of becoming or of being civil, was understood to be something in the making and not at all in the finding . . . As such, the end result of civilization was itself taken to be somewhat less significant than the continuing practice and process of civilizing. (Tester 1992:9)[2]

To sum up: Contemporary liberal conceptions of civil society are largely informed by the intellectual tradition of contract theory. The realms of human interaction are identified and categorized as the State, civil society (which is essentially a public realm of private individual association, which includes the economy and is based on property and the protection of property rights), and the private, or intimate realm of the family or household and its associated roles and functions. Furthermore, women, children and workers are constructed as private, and propertied men as public.

Civil society represents a stable, homogeneous community, bounded by the state, against 'the other' of turbulence and difference. Civil society is a realm of negative freedom, demarcated and protected by the state, from this 'other'. The state and civil society are not posited in contradistinction to each other, but are mutually necessary and constitutive.

For Hegel, society was a private sphere of heterogeneous, competitive individual interests, for which the State provided the overarching, universalizing, unifying, integrating realm of reconciliation, homogenization and control. However, state control is not antithetical to freedom, but performs a morally regulative function and represents the realization of freedom, providing the legal, normative framework for the exercise and protection of individual freedom (Cohen & Arato 1992:101–102). Rights are created in and through autonomous social practices, but acquire validity and recognition in and through public legislation and administration.

Civil society was, by definition, bourgeois society, but it was also an ethical construct (Tester 1992:95). Hegel's theory of civil society includes a legal framework, general authority and the corporation. His theory of the state includes the bureaucratic executive, estate assembly or legislature and public opinion (Cohen & Arato 1992:100). For Hegel, the corporation is the central institution of civil society. It represents a second family, allowing genuine participation by all its members. By definition, the corporation inevitably represents only a particular interest in relation to other groups. Hegel's most explicit discussion of public freedom juxtaposes the corporation,

belonging to civil society, to the modern state:

> In our modern states (*modernen Staaten*) citizens have only a restricted part in the general (*allgemeinen*) business of the state; yet it is essential to provide men – ethical entities – with activity of general character over and above their private business. Their general activity which the modern state does not always provide is found in the corporation. (1992:113)

## Civil Society and its Critics

For Marx, the reification and naturalization of civil society and state is necessarily a function of capitalism. Whereas the state is a reflection of, and functions to reproduce the economic relations of domination, subordination and exploitation of capitalism, so the essence of civil society is essentially the embodiment of unfreedom, alienation and inequality, obscured by the appearance of individual equality, rights and freedom. Man appears in civil society

> uncultivated and unsocial, man in his accidental existence, man as he comes and goes, man as he is corrupted by the whole organisation of our society, lost to himself, sold, given over to the domination of inhuman conditions and elements. (Marx, in Tester 1992:20)

However, the reification of civil society and the state was accompanied by their inability to contain the inevitable contradictions between particularity and universality, homogeneity and heterogeneity, order and reflexivity:

> 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 compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life and his relations with his kind. (Marx & Engels, in Tester 1992:174)

The relationship between the capitalist state and civil society is such that with the demise of capitalism, the state will wither away, taking civil society with it.

Gramsci collapsed the dichotomy between civil society and state and saw the latter as a terrain of competing hegemonic forces. He realized that the state ensures conformity and obedience not only through coercion but also through the insidious penetration of all organs and institutions of society by manufacturing consensus and acquiescence. For Gramsci, the institutional network of civil society reproduces the capitalist economy and the liberal state. It is thus only through contestation in and through civil society that the state can be confronted and capitalism undermined (Cohen & Arato 1992:426). A liberation movement which seizes the state without forging hegemony and acquiring legitimacy, will fail.

## Why Now?: Reflections on Contemporary Discourses

According to Tester, for theorists such as Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau and Hegel, civil society was

> . . . an imagination which attempted to identify, represent and legislate some basic unity in the experience of being human, an essential sameness about what it involves to be an individual who lives a life of external compulsion and obligation. It had to be imagined simply because, outside of the act of the calling forth of the milieu called civil society, it was quite impossible to identify some regulatory or essential reciprocity in the relationship between people . . . But neither could the contours of the landscape simply be apprehended through an act of cognition or direct empirical observation. The landscape could only be understood in terms of an imaginative constitution of the category of civil society. It is the map of civil society which establishes the regularities and the relationships of civil society. (1992:124)

At the end of the century, we are again confronted by increasing social, political and economic uncertainties and national and international turmoil. The old world 'order' has disintegrated and been replaced by a new global disorder. Political, social and economic understandings which have been confidently assumed and taken for granted have gradually been eroded and are now being fundamentally challenged by anxiety and doubt. Ideologies have been discredited and conventional theories are being tried, tested and are failing to provide us with satisfactory explanatory responses to the apparent chaos in which we and the world now find ourselves. It is becoming increasingly futile to impose reified theories of what we think we know and understand on a rapidly changing and recalcitrant reality. New theoretical responses are required in order to attempt to explain what is, and to posit normative alternatives in terms of what ought to be. The debate on civil society must be understood in the context of the collapse of Stalinist states in Eastern Europe and the former USSR; the demise of the one-party state in Africa; and the overburdened welfare states of Western Europe. Accompanying these developments is the re-emergence of civil societies and a renewed interest, and sometimes faith, in the concept of civil society. However, given the historical specificity of the situation in which we now find ourselves, it is necessary to re-invent this construct and reformulate this concept. We must heed Tester's warning that it would be

> a very serious mistake, and . . . certainly historically and methodologically naïve, to assume that the category simply and perfectly represents some determinate reality existing 'out there'. (1992:124)

What we share with the earlier theorists is 'the possibility of society

again being popularly seen as a difficult problem rather than as a self-evident proposition' (1992:7). What we face is increasingly fractured and fragmented societies, riddled with growing internal diversity and apparent lack of cohesion. We are confronted by the rise of ethnic nationalisms, the assertion of gender differences, a proliferation of religious fundamentalism and racial and religious intolerance. Boundaries of nation-states are disintegrating, massive population movements are taking place, and there is a renewed search for identity. Minority groups are emerging and demanding their right to self-determination, positing essential difference as a distinguishing characteristic. In some contexts, this is accompanied by increasing atomization and privatization of society, to the extent that Margaret Thatcher asserted that there is no such thing as society, only individuals. It seems that the centre cannot hold.

According to Tester, it is precisely because of this fragmentation that civil society is no longer a useful or appropriate analytical or explanatory concept for society. He argues that the construct of civil society is essentially one of modernity which arose in response to the perception of an apparently increasingly objective disordered external world. The impulse for its genesis was the attempt to impose order on disorder, homogeneity on heterogeneity, universals on particulars. He argues that we are now in a post-modern era which is characterized by reflexivity. As a result of this shift from objective external construction to internal self-reflection, when we now look through the conceptual lens of civil society for unity within, we find diversity; where we look for sameness within, we find otherness: 'Behind the facade of universality and of order, there was a process of reflexivity which was running out of control' (1992:174). For him, order and reflexivity are antinomies which the concept and reality of civil society cannot accommodate or contain:

> . . . the concern with rigid and definite boundaries has been replaced with a need to come to terms with, and to learn how to make sense of, a world of boundlessness and fundamentalism. The modern imaginations of civil society are based on a series of problems and possibilities which means that they will be largely inadequate for the tasks of interpreting and creating maps of post-modernity. Civil society will only continue to be accepted as a satisfactory imagination to the extent that it can continue to provide easy and comforting answers to easy and irrelevant questions. (1992:176)

I would agree with Tester that the classical discourses of civil society, in some contexts, are no longer helpful or appropriate. However, where I disagree with him is that it can simply be discarded or dismissed as irrelevant. This presents us with a conceptual and political problem. Just as the genesis of the construct was informed by

the specific dynamics of a historical moment, so it now needs to be re-imagined and reconstructed in response to new and contemporary contexts. If we were to discard it, what would we replace it with conceptually, in order to analyse and explain how the institutions and processes which it sought to address, have transformed? What are the issues which its revival seeks to confront? Secondly, to dismiss it as irrelevant, is to ignore a range of political self-understandings of agents across the world, and their political projects, which are mobilized around the promises inherent in the construct of civil society. The renaissance of civil society discourse

> reveals that collective actors and sympathetic theorists are still oriented by the utopian ideals of modernity − the ideas of basic rights, liberty, equality, democracy, solidarity, and justice . . . Indeed, civil society itself has emerged as a new kind of utopia, a utopia that includes a range of complementary forms of democracy and a complex set of civil, social, and political rights that must be compatible with the modern differentiation of society. (Cohen & Arato 1992:xii)

There are obviously complex political and theoretical reasons for this. In many parts of the world, including South Africa, the project of civil society is very much in its infancy; very much still in the process of becoming. In the South African context it would be especially invidious to disregard the concept of civil society, especially since few of the conventionally accepted democratic pre-conditions for its existence have yet been realized, and it is precisely in the light of a commitment to the tenets of modernity that the construct of civil society is highly significant.

Accompanying the aforementioned global and local social and political developments is a disillusionment with the state, and an emergence of ideological and theoretical anti-statism. In the East, West and South, varieties of the capitalist and communist state have failed to meet expectations and to keep their promises. The capitalist welfare-state is increasingly unable to deliver goods and services, and is being 'rolled back' in the face of the onslaught of the New Right. Vast areas of social and economic life are being privatised, and the social and economic functions and activities of the state are being curtailed. This is accompanied, as Friedman points out, by increasing expenditure on policing society (1991:16). The growth of anti-democratic statist structures, and the Weberian nightmare of self-proliferating and ever-expanding bureaucracy characterizes modern societies. The state has also become increasingly unaccountable and unrepresentative. In the West liberal-democracy is seen by many as an illusion. Individual citizens have very little, if any, say in decisions which are supposedly made in the public interest, or for the common good. In Habermas's terms, the public sphere has been depoliticized,

and politics has been scientised (Reitzes 1992:43). The advent of mass society has been accompanied by impersonal mass production and consumerism. The rise of technology and technocracy and the scientism of social, political and economic engineering have produced Marcuse's 'one-dimensional man'. In the East the identification of 'the people's party' with the monolithic state and the assumed homogeneous and undifferentiated 'will of the people' has been recognized as spurious, and the notion of the morally regulative state has been discredited.

It is in the light of these dynamics that citizens and theorists have developed a tendency to demonize the state and deify civil society. The contract theorists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries turned their back on the natural artifice of the state of nature and looked in hope to its 'other', the state (and civil society). Contemporary theorists and activists are increasingly shifting their emphasis away from the naturalized, reified state and looking with renewed hope to its other, civil society. Swilling notes the suggestion 'that civil society, and not the state, should be the guardian of the public good' (1992a:78). This sentiment resonates around the world: Francisco Weffort from Brazil asserts: 'we want a civil society, we need to defend ourselves from the monstrous state in front of us. This means that if it does not exist, we need to invent it. If it is small, we need to enlarge it . . . In a word we want civil society because we want freedom' (Cohen & Arato 1992:50).

In South Africa the idea of civil society has fired the imagination of a multiplicity of diverse social agents and commentators across the political spectrum, and has come to mean all things to all people, and different things to different people. As South Africa stands on the threshold of potential social, political and economic change, and the prospect of democracy, with equal citizenship, individual and collective rights, and (re)distributive justice is tantalizingly imminent, the construct of civil society emerges as a utopia, pregnant with promise. This social construct is being burdened with the expectations of providing a panacea for many ills. Problems regarding development, active participation in decision making, the representativeness, accountability and transparency of social, political and economic structures, a watchdog role on the State and Government, responding to demands and expectations of communities which the state and capital cannot or will not meet; community self-identity and empowerment, are all seen as potentially solvable in and through the creation and existence of a vibrant civil society. Thus the central promise which civil society holds is its perceived socially transformative potential. The implicit question addressed to civil society, to which it is seen to provide one of the answers, is: 'how do we change society?'

**What Now?**

This section of the paper has two intentions:

(1) It suggests a four-fold conceptualization of the realms of human interaction.
(2) It proposes and explores the normative construct of spheres of positive freedom within civil and political society.

The proposed spheres of human interaction are the state, civil society, the economy and political society.[3] Within the realm of political society I wish to locate and develop the notion of public spheres or spheres of positive freedom. It must be stated at the outset that this representation is necessarily schematic, and does not intend to deny the complex multiplicity of interpenetrations which occur between these realms at different levels. The boundaries are infinitely permeable and dynamic. However, it is in the interests of conceptual clarity and political understanding that such a schema is presented.

As there is always a call for definitions, I would like to take a modification of Cohen and Arato's understanding of civil society as a general starting point. Civil society is:

> a sphere of social interaction between economy and [political society] and state, composed . . . of the intimate sphere (especially the family), the sphere of associations (especially voluntary associations), social movements, and forms of public communication. Modern civil society is created through forms of self-constitution and self-mobilisation. It is institutionalised and generalised through laws, and especially subject-ive rights, that stabilize social differentiation. (1992:ix)

The first break that I wish to make with classical contract theorists and some contemporary liberals, is the differentiation of civil society from the economy, and therefore, from bourgeois society. I argue that to situate the two within the same space is conceptually obfuscatory and politically dishonest. It obscures inequalities of material distribution and asymmetrical power relations, and denies the existence of real differential access to social, political and economic institutions. For Wood, the conceptual and political danger

> lies in the fact that the totalizing logic and the coercive power of capitalism become invisible, when the whole social system of capitalism is reduced to one set of institutions and relations among many others, on a conceptual par with households or voluntary associations . . . Its effects is (*sic*) to conceptualize away the problem of capitalism . . . (Wood 1990:65)

Furthermore, such a conflated conception assumes formal equality and freedom as opposed to acknowledging real inequalities and differential opportunities to exercise freedom. Politically, it under-

mines, in terms of their own self-understanding, the possibility and ability of social agents who do not control organs of political power and material production and distribution to influence the structure of power and distribution of material resources (Swilling 1992a:78). Thus the critical import of the concept of civil society is lost in the totalizing reductionism of civil society versus the state. However, the removal of the economy from civil society is not intended to suggest that what results is a realm in which everyone is equal. There are still inequalities based on gender, race, ethnicity, sexual preference, etc. within civil society. Yet these inequalities are not constitutive of an economic system, as are class inequalities; but symptomatic of particular political, social and economic systems.

This leads me to the second issue which I wish to take up from the classical theorists' understanding of civil society. As mentioned previously, for them

> . . . civil society was an imagination which attempted to *identify, represent and legislate* some *basic unity* in the experience of being human, an *essential sameness* about what it involves to be an individual who lives a life of *external compulsion and obligation.* (Tester 1992:124) (Italics mine)

Where I wish to diverge from this view, is that in terms of a contemporary understanding of civil society, what can be identified, and needs to be acknowledged, is not only its *plurality* but the essential *diversity* of political and social identities and self-understandings, needs and interests existing within this sphere. One cannot assume, and it is politically dangerous to presuppose, a universalizing and totalizing sameness, or the pre-existence of normative consensus. This would be a spurious claim especially in the context of a society like South Africa, which is fractured into a multiplicity of different communities which are frequently in conflict with one another and stand in fundamentally complex, differentiated and oppositional structural relations to one another. These relations are not dysfunctions of civil society, but irreducibly constitutive of it, 'not just as some alien and correctible disorder but as its very essence . . .' (Wood 1990:72). I would agree with Rousseau that the Hobbesian state of nature can be said to approximate some of the worst excesses of the condition of contemporary civil society. The disorder and compulsion is within, not only outside. According to Fine, a dynamic and robust civil society emerged in South Africa in the 1980s. Its distinguishing features, however, were anything but unity, consensus or civility:

> Seething beneath the surface of civil society . . . strong disintegrative forces were at work . . . Social and political frustrations were ex-

> pressed in the distorted forms of communal and gangster violence:
> elders versus comrades, Zulu versus Xhosa, warlord versus warlord.
> Many of the associations of civil society were not remotely 'civil'; thus
> 'popular justice' mainly degenerated into ghastly brutality that was
> neither popular nor just; and political argument sometimes degener-
> ated into endless blood-feuds. Even within the most 'civil' of societies,
> that of the trade unions, the pursuit of factional aims was marred by all
> manner of intimidation. (Fine 1992:25)

Similarly, to conceive of civil society, as some do, as a *given*
bounded autonomous sphere of freedom, voluntary association,
reciprocity, mutual recognition and tolerance, in contradistinction to
the *external compulsion and obligation* of the state, is to misunder-
stand its real nature. The compulsion and obligation are not only
external, but also very much internal, not only to civil society itself,
but internal to the very organs which constitute it. One needs to
question not only the civil nature of society, but of its agents. Very
often the institutions comprising civil society are themselves uncivil
and undemocratic. How does one overcome Michels's 'iron law of
oligarchy'? (But this is a topic for another article.)

It is also potentially politically dangerous to assume 'an essential
sameness' in terms of identity interests and norms. History has shown
us what pernicious and destructive results have followed from
policies and programmes predicated on, and carried out in the name
of, values and interests mistakenly or intentionally assumed to be
universal, in the public interest, for the common good. Furthermore,
assumptions of sameness can inform political intolerance and result in
attempted impositions of political uniformity. The assumption and
imposition of homogeneity from above and outside, can lead to
increased fragmentation on the ground. According to Fine this is
precisely what occurred in South Africa in the 1980s and is still very
much in evidence today:

> ... ANC-SACP approval was given to those who flew its flag,
> 'enemies of the people' were targeted, and 'unity' was turned into a
> demand for political conformity.
>     The central problem was that the unity of the 'people' tended to be
> conceived in terms of an abstract and monolithic 'general will',
> discounting the actual and divergent empirical wills of its constituent
> members. The 'people' tended to be conceived as singular interest or
> will which was embodied in a single movement. Rival claimants often
> shared the same conception of the 'people' as did those like the
> Communist Party which claimed to represent the 'working class' as a
> singular whole. In this rule of abstractions, there was a tendency for
> 'unity' to be imposed from above in a fashion that was destined to
> increase fragmentation on the ground. (1992:25)

One needs to question: Who constructs such universals? On the

basis of what criteria? In whose interests? Who has the power to decide upon and enforce an allegedly universal, transcendent morality? These are all essentially political questions, which are being, and need to be, addressed from below.

Not only can the imposition of universals from above increase fragmentation below, but in the face of an authoritarian and coercive state, institutions of civil society can lose their autonomy and be co-opted and appropriated by the state, serving merely as conveyor belts to propagate and implement unrepresentative state policy (Narsoo 1991:24). Furthermore, the state can use the concepts of civil society as part of a discourse of legitimation, claiming its existence, and, by implication, the recognition of its own democratic legitimacy.

In contradistinction to Fine, Shubane has suggested that the organizations which emerged in South Africa in the 1970s and 1980s have been misidentified as organs of civil society, insofar as they were necessarily and essentially oppositional, and sought to transform the apartheid state (1992:35–36). One could develop this argument further, noting that the membership of these organizations was largely comprised of individuals who were not enfranchised, and did not enjoy certain basic rights and freedoms. Thus in terms of some classical and conventional definitions of civil society which presuppose the existence of certain formal rights and liberties, one could argue that the absence of these necessarily means an absence of civil society. Furthermore, one could argue that those organizations which are fighting for precisely the conditions necessary for civil society, cannot, in the absence of such conditions, be said to comprise civil society.

A variation on the classical theorists' theme of an essential sameness characterizing civil society, is that of the hegemony thesis proposed by Nzimande and Sikhosana. Similar in many respects to that of Shubane, it argues that the struggle against apartheid is not yet over, and that organizations which Fine sees as constitutive of civil society are in fact part of hegemonic contestation, positing themselves as legitimate alternatives to the illegitimate authority of the state[4] (1991:37–39). Friedman identifies similar tendencies in Swilling's arguments, which, according to him, explicitly advocate the integration of organizations such as civics and self-defense units within hegemonic blocs, and their adoption of responsibilities which are normally presumed to be those of the state (1991:11). Friedman calls this the colonization of civil society.[5]

According to Cohen and Arato,

> an antagonistic relation of civil society, or its actors, to the economy or the state arises only when . . . the institutions of economic and

political society serve to insulate decision making and decision makers from the influence of social organisations, initiatives, and forms of public discussion. (1992:x-xi)

One can obviously understand the emergence of explicitly political organizations and the politicization of existing institutions of civil society, in and through which those who were denied access to existing formal institutions of representation and power seek to articulate and mobilize around their interests.

I suggest that a thesis which assumes that all organizations in society serve the function of political opposition is reductionist insofar as it: (1) Places all organizations in society in the same category; and (2) Is informed by a one-dimensional view of political power as state power.

(1) It is necessary to recognize the diversity of organizations constituting society. Narsoo's distinction between 'organizations of survival' and 'organizations of resistance' is helpful in this regard. The former, as distinct from the latter which seem to be the objects of Shubane's and Nzimande's arguments, 'were the burial clubs, stokvels . . . hawkers associations, and even football clubs. There were also trade unions and professional associations. Their basic project was to survive the rigours of apartheid and to provide some sustenance collectively' (1991:27).

   Furthermore, one cannot argue that simply because certain conditions which inform classical and Western liberal democratic theories do not exist, civil society does not exist. All that the absence of such conditions tells us, is that a particular *type* of civil society does not exist. What does exist is a society in the process of transforming and becoming civil, while simultaneously engaging with the state in mutually constitutive transformative processes of civilizing. The extent, diversity, and relative freedom of political activity since 2 February 1990 cannot be denied. In terms of this understanding, civil society does not posit itself as an alternative to the state, but attempts to civilize it. An extremely vital part of this process is that of forging a culture of political tolerance and reciprocally recognized rights *within* civil society. The fact that these also do not exist a priori, and are not externally provided and regulated by the state, also does not mean that civil society is an illusion:

> A civil society in formation, being moulded by movements and other civic initiatives . . . may for a time have to do without a settled structure of rights. We would argue, though, that the index of their success in institutionalizing civil society is the establish-

ment of rights, not just on paper but as working propositions. (Cohen & Arato 1992:440)

I suggest that, in the light of Fine's argument that the assumption and imposition of a community of interests from above ignores and exacerbates real empirical fragmentation below, it is evidently conceptually incorrect and politically dangerous to dismiss the existence of civil society on the basis of the presumed existence of hegemonic blocs which posit themselves as alternatives to state authority. Furthermore, it seems that to the extent that hegemony did exist between organizations of civil society, it was largely in and through a normative solidarity forged in the face of a common enemy, that of illegitimate state authority. In the face of the imminent transformation and legitimation of the state, civil society is increasingly turning in on itself and becoming more fractured and fragmented, as organizations formerly in solidarity with one another become adversaries competing for the social, economic and political spoils of the newly emergent order.

Another problem concerning social movements (or liberation movements) is raised by Arendt. She sees these movements as innately atomizing and de-individualizing:

> . . . in the absence of genuine public institutions, movements either organize masses or turn those they organize into masses. Social movements are mass movements, and mass movements carry on the work of the social principle by invading and levelling all hitherto private domains of life, including family, education, and culture. Thus, social movements are proto-totalitarian, and the totalitarian completion of the rise of society is not possible without them. (Cohen & Arato 1992:200)

According to the argument advanced by Shubane, 'there are *characteristics inherent to liberation movements which militate against the emergence of civil society*' (1992:37). Thus Swilling and Shubane raise the spectre of a weak civil society in South Africa, one riddled with political intolerance and antagonism, largely as a result of hegemonic contestation. Taken to its logical conclusion, their argument suggests that civil society faces the prospect of remaining weak in the face of an emergent state comprised of some agents who were former constituents of hegemonic blocs, informed by a totalizing and adversarial legacy, as opposed to a pluralistic and conciliatory tradition. Their position raises the concern of the extent to which a future post-apartheid state which is constituted of many of the agents previously involved in these movements will be able or willing to

tolerate and nurture a diverse, plural society. To what extent will they constitute an authoritative state, as opposed to an authoritarian state based on patrimony and nepotism? If democracy is a necessary condition for vigorous, robust, civil society, it is not only society which has to be civilized and democratized, but also the state itself.

(2) Nzimande's and Sikhosana's (and Shubane's) position also implies a limited, one-dimensional view of politics. I would suggest that an alternative approach for these movements to adopt is to move away from the state, and a one-dimensional identification of politics with power, and to reconceptualize power in terms of action and discourse. I would posit as a necessary condition for civilizing society and the state, the initiation of a process of attempting to forge a normative consensus which takes as its starting point a recognition of fundamental difference. This requires the creation of a culture of political tolerance. It involves the induction of agents constituting civil society into voluntary, active engagement in a critical, self-reflexive, dialogical encounter with the intention of creating normative consensus. Such a conception of politics is informed by a distinction between being and becoming, a journey from what is to what ought to be. This process would also facilitate the creation of public spheres; spheres of positive freedom, in and through which restrictive and inhibiting boundaries on political practice are pushed back and democratically transformed. This is very different from assuming that homogeneity and normative agreement exists a priori in the context of negative freedom.

Furthermore, I would suggest that it is fundamental not to conceive of civil society as positing itself as an alternative to the state:

> The political role of civil society . . . is not directly related to the control or conquest of power but to the generation of influence through the life of democratic associations and unconstrained discussion in the cultural public sphere. (Cohen & Arato 1992:ix-x)

I would argue that the target of such influence should not be the state itself, but political society, partially constituted of formal political parties and parliaments. Political society constitutes a realm of mediation between civil society and/or the economy, and the state, within which ought to be created a multiple diversity of public spheres:

> Between civil society and the state there has to be some general form of mediation, for if each particular interest of civil society

> lobbies the state on behalf of its own private concerns – no matter
> how justified – then judgement of their claims and determination
> of priorities between them are left in the hands of one body alone,
> the state executive. The state executive is in principle the
> representation of the state interest in civil society; the party system
> is in principle the representation of the private interests of civil
> society in the state. If the state executive is not to be the sole
> mediation between state and civil society, then the party system of
> representation is essential.
>     . . . Political parties . . . are the crucial means by which the
> particular interests of civil society are taken beyond themselves
> and lifted to the general interests of the state. For if this
> 'universalization of the particular' is not effected from below, it
> will necessarily be imposed from above. (Fine 1992:30–31)

This issue will be revisited later in the discussion on political
society and the public sphere.

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The concerns raised in relation to the assumption of an essential
sameness, and the attempt to identify, represent and legislate a basic
unity, are not to deny the desirability of a legislated democratic
constitutionalism based on the tenets of classical theory. A democratic
state needs to provide not only a formalized framework for the
pursuits and processes of agents of civil and political society, but also
basic services without which civil society cannot function. A
necessary requirement for the transformation of civil society and the
democratization of political society is the existence of a strong,
legitimate, authoritative state, which can play the role of moral
regulator and, up to a point, material provider. If there is not a
framework which ensures and protects citizenship, formal rights and
negative freedoms, which agents can assert and practice, and which
each recognizes and respects in relation to the other, the projects and
processes of civil and political society will be severely curtailed.
Likewise, if one is homeless, starving and uneducated, one's ability to
participate creatively and meaningfully in these two realms is
severely curtailed.

However, formal democracy cannot be reduced to, or identified
with, civil society. It is not in itself a sufficient condition for a
democratic civil society. It can only provide some of the necessary
conditions for its existence. A great deal of work still has to be done
within this formally constituted environment to realize the utopia of
civil society. This will include the active creation of a culture of rights,
the creation of mutuality and reciprocity, the creation of political
tolerance and, once again, a normative consensus. One cannot
legislate morality, tolerance, or reciprocal respect. At best, the formal

requirements for the possibility of their existence, of their becoming, can be legislated, and to a certain extent, materially provided for. As Cohen and Arato point out:

> While the state is the agency of the legalization of rights, it is neither their source nor the basis of their validity. Rights begin as claims asserted by groups and individuals in the public spaces of an emerging civil society. They can be guaranteed by positive law but are not equivalent to law or derivable from it; in the domain of rights, law secures and stabilizes what has been achieved autonomously by social actors. (1992:441)

The legislator and guarantor of rights has to be a legitimate, authoritative state whose formal existence and practices are based on consent. Finally, one of the ways in which such a state can achieve legitimacy and gain consent, is precisely by providing such an external framework.

The conditions of modernity which Western understandings of the concept of civil society in democratic theory presuppose either do not yet exist in South Africa, or exist at various levels of development and extents of penetration. These include:

(1)   an inclusive formal/legal constitutional framework;
(2)   inclusive legal citizenship;
(3)   a culture of rights and duties;
(4)   inclusive representative democracy;
(5)   a culture of political tolerance;
(6)   formal, legal equality of all individuals;
(7)   a legitimate government and state.

Those organizations which Shubane, Nzimande and Sikhosana identify were, and to a large extent still are, struggling for the creation of precisely such conditions. In other words, South Africa has a society struggling towards conditions of modernity which are necessary for the existence of a particular type of civil society. South African society is striving for the modernizing and civilizing of itself and the state. Thus Tester's post-modernist thesis is not applicable to South Africa: What South African society requires, as articulated by many of its agents, is more modernity.

## The Politics of the Public and the Private

The second part of this section of the argument is informed by a desire to move away from structural functionalist and deterministic, utilitarian and instrumentalist explanations of society, and to acknowledge and reinstate conscious, self-defining, self-determining, self-reflexive critical human agency in our understanding of social reality.

To this end, the theories of the public sphere as understood by Arendt and Habermas will be addressed. They provide us not only with the possibility of the reinvigoration of this sphere, but also with alternative definitions of politics and power.

Arendt distinguishes between the public and private, and claims that in the pre-modern condition it was the former sphere which dominated and was privileged. The public sphere, for Arendt, presupposed a sphere of non-coercive public interaction and the communication of a plurality of opinions. It was essentially a sphere of discourse, of positive freedom to act, to engage, to debate. It was constituted by unequal individuals who are nevertheless constructed as politically equal (Cohen & Arato 1992:179).

It was also a realm from which the presentation of private interests and needs was excluded (1992:179). This sphere was deformed and eventually squeezed out of existence by the rise of the 'social' which was a public realm in which private interests and needs were articulated and pursued. It was accompanied by the rise of civil rights and negative freedom, asserted by subjects both against the state and against each other. Freedom to act was replaced by freedom from the actions of others. The paradox of this development was that the institution which necessarily provides this framework of negative freedom is that body from which this freedom is protected: the state (1992:194). In the public sphere, power is created, established and defined; with the rise of the social, power is limited and restricted (1992:196). In the public space, power is a force 'that emanates from action, and it comes from the mutual action of a group of human beings: once in action, one can make things happen, thus becoming a source of a different kind of force' (Benhabib 1992:78).

For Arendt, the emergence of the 'social' and of political society, constituted partially by the party system, does not provide an adequate alternative to the ancient public sphere. It is not a forum of equality, of open debate and discussion, of dialogical encounters forging a normative consensus, but rather one of the representation of dissenting interests in hierarchically structured institutions: 'The [modern] state may be democratic in representing the interests of the many, but it is oligarchic in the sense of drastically curtailing participation on all but the highest levels of the state' (Cohen & Arato 1992:188). Furthermore, according to Habermas, the assumption of the existence of a consensual general will has been replaced with the notion of what is, essentially, a negotiated compromised will. *Negotiation starting from* given interests replaces *rational discourse towards consensus.*

> The process of the politically relevant exercise and equilibrium of power now takes place directly between the private bureaucracies, special-interest associations, parties, and public administration. The

public as such is included only sporadically in this circuit of power, and even then it is brought in only to contribute its acclamation. (Calhoun 1992:22)

For Habermas, the demise of the public sphere as a sphere of human discourse and debate, a sphere of the production of ideas, is exacerbated by the rise of mass society and cultural consumerism. The politically active and productive citizen has been replaced by the passively consuming one, absorbing packaged news and images generated by political parties, lobby groups, etc. In this sense the mass media play a significant role: 'Rational-critical debate had a tendency to be replaced by consumption, and the web of public communication unravelled into acts of individuated reception, however uniform in mode' (cited in Calhoun 1992:23). Furthermore, the invasion of political personalities into our homes through the medium of television, and the opportunity afforded them to present themselves personally, rather than politically, has also undermined rational political debate. 'A personalized politics revives representative publicity by making candidates into media stars' (1992:24).

The original public sphere was crowded out by the increasing interpenetration between the realms of the public and the private, rendering the difference totally indistinct. Economic functions are divorced from the private sphere and relocated in the social, which is massively invaded by the welfare state. Collective consumer society becomes an undifferentiated mass, a superhuman collective family.

Classical distinctions between public and private categorized issues of work, domesticity (care of the old, the young, the sick, reproduction and nurture) and sexuality as private. As Benhabib observes, 'along with their relegation, in Arendt's terms, to the "shadowy interior of the household" they have been treated, until recently, as "natural" and "immutable" aspects of human relations. They have remained prereflexive and inaccessible to discursive analysis' (1992:90). Thus relations of domination, exploitation and oppression which occurred in these realms were made invisible from the public view and thereby classified as non-political. Civil society itself was (and to the extent that some understandings of it are informed by classical definitions, still is) an essentially patriarchal political concept and sphere. When civil society was originally posited against nature, women were seen as being closer to the natural than the civil, and were thus literally and conceptually relegated to the sphere of the private. Any notion of the private presupposes the public: they are binary opposites. The question then arises not only of *what* is public and *what* is private, but *who* decides? According to Benhabib, these definitions have traditionally constituted part of a discourse of male domination, 'that legitimises women's oppression

and exploitation in the private realm' (1992:93). According to Carole Pateman, contract theories of civil society are founded on the premise that 'women have no part in the original contract, but they are not left behind in the state of nature – that would defeat the purpose of the sexual contract!' (cited in Tester 1992:134). She further interprets Hegel's version of civil society as presupposing that 'women are what they are by nature; men must create themselves and public life, and they are endowed with the masculine capacity to do so. Women must remain in the natural private sphere of the family' (1992:135). Attempts to marginalise gender issues and (mis)place them in the private sphere is evinced by the insistence of some to reduce gender issues to women's issues. Gender is a concept of social construction, it implies relations which are about politics and power. It is essentially a public and political issue. To reduce it to women's issues tends to depoliticize it, to remove its relational and power content, to make it the sole preserve and responsibility of women, and to privatize it. It is for these reasons that I concur with, and used as a starting definition of civil society, that offered by Cohen and Arato, which includes the family in the realm of civil society as an essentially public issue; and why my proposed conceptual schema discards the notion of a private realm.

I suggest that the sphere of the private, in modern society, has disappeared altogether. To persist in using this category is politically dangerous. In South Africa the family, inter-personal relationships, have been quite explicitly politicized. Dislocation and fragmentation of the family and household resulted from the policies of apartheid and state legislation concerning influx control, urban rights, etc. Legislation also determined who could marry, associate with, or have intimate relationships with whom, on the basis of race. Issues of single-parenting, reproductive technology, abortion and adoption are also legislated public political issues.

Questions of workers' and women's rights have brought issues previously hidden in the private realm into that of the public.

> All struggles against oppression in the modern world begin by redefining what had previously been considered private, non-public, and non-political issues as matters of public concern, as issues of justice, as sites of power that need discursive legitimation. In this respect, the women's movement, the peace movement, the ecology movements, and the new ethnic-identity movements follow a similar logic. (Benhabib 1992:84)

This is an enormously positive development, and results from the genesis of the creation of public spheres within an emergent reinvigorated, democratizing society.

I wish to advocate that in recognition of the diversity of the actors and opinions in society, we conceive of the generation and constitution of a multiplicity of public spheres within civil and political society, as opposed to a public sphere mediating between civil society and the state; and conceive of a political realm which mediates between civil society and/or the economy and the state.

A reinvigoration and repoliticization of political society requires the conscious intentional creation of autonomous public spaces in which citizens can participate in the determination of norms of action through rational discourse. I would furthermore suggest that formal political institutions be considered as constituting a public domain existing within a more broadly defined political society. There may be as many public spheres as there are debates about normative issues affecting the lives of citizens. The creation of such spaces provides for an arena of engagement with a discursive process of formulating, stipulating, legitimating and adopting norms which inform policy research, development and implementation. 'To make issues of common concern public in this . . . sense means making them increasingly accessible to discursive will formation; it means to democratize them; it means bringing them under standards of moral reflection compatible with autonomous postconventional identities' (Benhabib 1992:93).

It is this vision of the political which Habermas articulates in his construct of the Ideal Speech Situation. Such a situation can only ever be approximated, never fully realized. It takes as its starting point systematically distorted communication, in terms of which it defines its emancipatory project.

Ideal speech itself is

> . . . that form of discourse in which there is no other compulsion but the compulsion of argumentation itself; where there is a genuine symmetry among the participants involved, allowing a universal interchangeability of dialogue roles; where no form of domination exists. The power of ideal speech is the power of argumentation itself. (Bernstein 1976:212)

There are a number of problems with this construct. Firstly, who sets the agenda? If the public sphere is about public discourse and the addressing of issues of public concern, there immediately arises, as mentioned earlier, the issue of demarcation, and what issues are to be placed on the public agenda.

Another concern is the requirement of equality and symmetry between the participants. Even with the best intentions of the participants concerned, this is almost impossible to achieve. How does one overcome internalized gender and racial inequalities which

characterize discourse patterns, and relations of domination and subordination which inform discourse behaviour? Whose voice dominates? In South Africa these relations of domination and subordination are particularly acute. The construct also assumes consensus in terms of accepted patterns of discourse, 'dialogical etiquette'. What is considered to be rude or unacceptable in one speech culture is not necessarily so in another. What about differentials in language proficiency? What about sensitivity to, and (mis)-interpretation of non-verbal signs which are not necessarily uniformly interpreted across cultures? What about conflicting understandings of concepts based on vastly differing experiences which inform such understandings? How can one address the possibilities of the manipulation/subversion/undermining of the speech situation by those who are more linguistically competent? How can one militate against the co-optation of the speech situation by more powerful persons or groups within and outside it?

If we advocate the existence of a diversity of spheres of public freedom, how do we then reconcile or reach consensus between them? When does freedom to practise, for one group, impinge on another group's freedom from?

And how can the approximate consensus reached by any group in a public sphere be actualised, in terms of policy implementation or political practice. If such spheres are to be more than normative talk-shops, the question of access to and availability of resources has to be addressed. Policy implementation requires resources.

It is at this point that these groups constituting public spheres could address themselves to the formal political institutions of the public sphere: political parties, parliaments, etc. Thus public spheres in modern societies can be seen to occupy the realms of both civil society and political society, and the relations between civil society and the state are mediated through the formal institutions of the public sphere, such as parliaments and political parties.

## Conclusion

Civil society in South Africa, and the debates surrounding it, are still very much in their infancy. It is absolutely crucial that at this stage in our history, we engage critically and constructively in both the exercise of developing more sophisticated theoretical understandings of the construct in response to actual political and social dynamics; and that we continue to engage in the practice of democratizing civil and political society and the state, in practice. In pursuit of these goals, it would be short-sighted to totally disregard the intellectual traditions which can usefully inform our theoretical understandings and our

political practice, or to discount contemporary debates in other parts of the world as irrelevant: we must not throw out the baby with the bath water. At the same time it is necessary to modify existing understandings and create new ones which are appropriate to our current situation.

It is also important that we do not impose unrealistic expectations on civil society, or entirely turn our back on the state. We must explore new and creative ways of democratizing civil and political society and engaging with the state. To this end I would argue that the forging of public spheres of positive freedom, with all its attendant problems, is of vital importance.

## NOTES

1. As Carole Pateman has noted, 'civil society' is a patriarchal contruct (Tester 1992:24). Women were not (and in some contexts, still are not) part of the story of civil society. I therefore make no apology for using 'man' and 'he' in this discussion. However well intentioned gender-sensitivity might be, to be gender-neutral in this context would be inappropriate, misguided and would obscure an absolutely fundamental issue. This issue is addressed later on in the discussion.
2. This is highly significant for South Africa today: civil society has to be nourished, nurtured and developed; its existence cannot be assumed a priori.
3. This schema discards the notion of the private. Arguments for this will be developed later in the discussion.
4. In an article entitled 'Civics are Part of the National Democratic Revolution', Nzimande and Sikhosana argue that 'the reason, among others, why civics became popular . . . (w)as largely because their political perspective was that of our movement – the perspective of a national democratic revolution. It is also because of this that the civics were closely aligned to the ANC . . .' And, further on, 'The ANC is neither a political party nor a government, but a mass-based national liberation movement. However, the possibility of an ANC-dominated government in future is very real. This, nonetheless, does not justify the building of 'watchdogs', which in practice . . . are in fact slowing the process of building a strong, democratic ANC' (1991:37–39).
5. The existence of the ANC-SACP-COSATU Alliance, and the recent debacle over a proposed national strike, raise similar concerns – i.e. the ability of trade unions and labour now and in the future, to operate and organize as agents autonomous from the state.

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# Why Literature Cannot be Moral Philosophy

*Paul Voice*

Martha Nussbaum claims that some works of literature are also works of moral philosophy.[1] She goes further, and claims that traditional moral philosophy misses some important features of our moral lives and 'there are candidates for moral truth' which only literature could reveal and 'which the plainness of traditional moral philosophy lacks the power to express'.[2] I oppose Nussbaum's thesis; I shall argue that she fails to recognize the proper scope of moral philosophy, its concerns, its tasks and its method of inquiry.

Of course, it would of little interest if I merely *defined* moral philosophy in a way which was incompatible with Nussbaum's thesis. Instead I want to leave largely intact her claims about literature and its place in the discussion about how we are to live our lives, while convincing you that the aims of moral philosophy are directed elsewhere. In short, if we understand moral philosophy in the way I will propose, it should be clear that the very reasons Nussbaum offers for taking literature to be moral philosophy count against doing so. In section one I set out some considerations which make Nussbaum's claim plausible. In section two I give an account of Nussbaum's argument and the moral theory on which it depends, and in section three I show why this moral theory and the literary texts which allegedly express its truths have a much narrower scope than Nussbaum recognizes, and that to ignore this is to embrace what I take to be a dangerous conservatism. I conclude that if due consideration is paid to the question of scope in moral philosophy, it is no longer plausible to claim that literature can be moral philosophy.

## I

Anyone familiar with the very long tradition of moral philosophy and the works which have been regarded as examples of the tradition should be surprised by Nussbaum's claim that, for example, Henry James's *The Golden Bowl* is a work of moral philosophy. That the claim could be taken at all seriously indicates that there is something seriously amiss with the state of moral philosophy, if only that there is

confusion about what moral philosophy is supposed be doing. Indeed, for some time philosophers and others have written about the crisis of traditional moral philosophy and the following quotations reflect this attitude:

> The hypothesis which I wish to advance is that in the actual world which we inhabit the language of morality is in a state of grave disorder, we have – very largely, if not entirely – lost our comprehension, both theoretical and practical, of morality. (MacIntyre 1982:2)
>
> The resources of most modern moral philosophy are not well adjusted to the modern world. (Williams 1985:197)
>
> There are no objective values . . . But the main tradition of European moral philosophy includes the contrary claim. (Mackie 1977:15, 30)
>
> Moral hypotheses do not help explain why people observe what they observe. So ethics is problematic and nihilism must be taken seriously. (Harman)

These comments appear in four of the most widely read and influential recent books on moral philosophy. In general, they claim that moral philosophy has failed in two respects:

(1) Moral theory has failed to deliver a unique, defensible and recognized decision procedure for addressing and resolving moral dilemmas.
(2) Moral theory fails to address those pressing and practical concerns which we ordinarily think of as moral concerns.

In other words, moral theory has failed, it is claimed, to provide a rational foundation for our moral judgements and has failed to engage with our common and felt moral problems. But what is it, exactly, which has failed? To answer this we need an idea of what traditional moral philosophy conceived itself as doing.

Traditional moral philosophy begins with Henry Sidgwick's *The Methods of Ethics*, first published in 1874,[3] and probably ends as a settled paradigm of inquiry with Richard Hare's *The Language of Morals*, published in 1952. This tradition has its roots in Kant, from whom it inherits its central problem: how to ground practical reason without taking Kant's transcendental step of affirming practical reason to be self-originating and self-authenticating. Thus, utilitarianism is, in part, an attempt to ground practical reason in the empirical, and Hare's prescriptivism is explicitly an attempt to ground practical reason, this time, in language. What is important to this tradition is the role assigned to reason and rationality as the pre-eminent authorities in the domain of the moral. This is expressed by Sidgwick: the 'methods of ethics' are 'any rational procedure by which we determine what individual human beings "ought" – or what is right for them – to do or seek to realize by voluntary action'. This is the

task traditional moral philosophy set itself; to fashion a 'rational procedure' from which individuals may act rightly and by which they may judge the rightness of the actions of others and of themselves.

The allegation of the failure of traditional moral philosophy comes in three connected parts: first, no consensus has been reached on what such a 'rational procedure' might be; second, the a priori order of reason which supposedly informs the 'rational procedure' has no generally acceptable grounding; and third, the actual practice of moral decision-making and deliberation seems to have more to do with feelings, sensibilities, loyalties, love, hatred, generosity and the like, than it has to do with 'rational procedures'.

What a 'rational procedure' would give, if such a procedure were to be fully articulated, are *universal* rules of conduct which prescribe and oblige, irrespective of who one is, what one's station in life happens to be, and where one falls in the social order. The particulars of our individual lives and situations are, on this view, irrelevant to the moral worth of persons, objects and actions. What traditional moral philosophy leaves untouched then with its lofty concern with reason is the squalid reality of attempting to make out a life worth living in all its particularity, where we act not from reasons but from what seems appropriate to us now, living as we do in our inescapable, peculiar and necessarily local circumstances. In this regard Bernard Williams has remarked that: 'Contemporary moral philosophy has found an original way of being boring, which is by not discussing moral issues at all.'

This then is the background which makes a claim like Nussbaum's seem plausible. If traditional moral philosophy has so spectacularly failed in its task and has lost contact with ordinary moral experience and concerns, then the aims and indeed the content of moral philosophy is ready to be redefined.

## II

Before setting out the details of Nussbaum's argument we should be clear in what way literature is supposed to be moral philosophy. We can distinguish four ways moral philosophy and literature may be related:

(1) Literature can make use of moral philosophy;
(2) Moral philosophy can make use of literature;
(3) Moral philosophy can be a work of literature;
(4) Literature can be a work of moral philosophy.

We might think that some of the novels of Iris Murdoch and of J.-P. Sartre make use of moral philosophy, and many philosophical works use examples from literature to illustrate and exemplify, and some works of philosophy are rightly regarded as works of literature, but Nussbaum means more than any of this. Her claim is that some works of literature *are* works of moral philosophy and thus do the job of moral philosophy. These literary texts have philosophical standing on their own account, which is to say that they are works of moral philosophy *in virtue* of their literary qualities. We must distinguish this claim from another which would have it that moral philosophy is *nothing but* literature, that is, it has no higher epistemic standing than fiction writing. This is not what Nussbaum means. Rather, she thinks that some works of literature make claim to an epistemic standing on a par with the best works of philosophy.

Philosophy texts contain (at their best) reasoned argument, a setting out of premises leading to conclusions; they possess logical structure, proceed by valid inference and aim at unveiling truth. Literary texts are distinguished by plot and narrative, and the doings of fictional characters inhabiting fictional worlds. To make her thesis acceptable Nussbaum needs to convince us that there is something intrinsic to the literary text which allows it to capture the moral in a way traditional moral philosophy cannot.

I mentioned earlier that traditional moral philosophy has its roots in the Kantian tradition and in rejecting this tradition Nussbaum looks to Aristotle. An Aristotelian ethic differs from a Kantian ethic in the following way: the central question for Kant is 'What ought I to do?', with its implications of duty and obligation, whereas the central question for Aristotle is 'How should I live my life?'.[4] For Aristotle 'ethics is the search for a specification of the good life for a human being'.[5] In other words, what is important from the Aristotelian perspective is who a person is, what her characteristics and virtues are, and her relations to family, friends, community and the state. What matters here is how a person lives out her life as a complete enterprise.

In contrast, the focus of the Kantian is on actions and how those actions are willed. For Kant, what has moral worth is an action autonomously willed, which complies with a universalizable categorical imperative. There are two important and related points here: firstly, an agent who acts autonomously is one freed from the empirical constraints of her particular place in the social and communal order. So, to act merely because, for example, one holds some social office, or merely because one is a friend, or a father, or a lover, is to act non-autonomously and as such these acts have no moral worth whatsoever. Secondly, moral judgements are universalizable.

This means that if you judge that x ought to be done by Y, then you are constrained to judge that x ought to be done by anyone else in relevantly similar circumstances to Y. So, proper names which appear in moral judgements fill in for variables rather than appear as constants. Thus, if I judge that you should keep your promise in circumstances Z, then I should also judge that anyone else in your circumstances should likewise keep her promise. If it is the case that I ought to x and that you ought not to x, there must be some morally relevant difference between us and/or our respective situations – the difference cannot be because you are you, and I am me. A moral judgement applies, and the rule implied by that judgement applies, regardless of personal circumstances. So our moral judgements take the form of universal rules – that is, they range over *types* of situation and abstract from the messiness of *particular* situations.

Nussbaum argues that a moral philosophy guided by a principle of universalizability misses some of the important features of our moral lives. The Kantian approach elides the uniqueness of our situations from which moral demands arise and so this uniqueness cannot be captured by universal rules of conduct. For Nussbaum, a moral situation is not something *to which* rules are applied, but *from which* moral demands arise. Instead of turning our backs on the particularity of our circumstances and reaching for rules at a purely cognitive level, Nussbaum advocates that we confront the particular and apply to it a 'morally sensitive and intuitive' perception. For Nussbaum appropriate moral judgements are the outcome of 'seeing', of 'discovery', of intuition, of a 'fine awareness', and a 'rich' sense of responsibility. Getting morality right is not a question of measuring out a situation by the rules which antecedently apply to it, but of seeing and being sensitive to the 'bewildering moral occasion'. Getting it right involves making a judgement *suited* to the occasion, made at the right time, perhaps even said in the right tone of voice.

So, an awareness of the 'bewildering moral occasion' involves taking into account the peculiarities of the circumstances, including relationships both social and filial, and being sensitive to the uniqueness of each situation. Thus, Nussbaum turns to Aristotle rather than to Kant and in doing so attempts to reattach the concerns of moral philosophy to the felt concerns of ordinary agents. But where does literature fit into this?

Nussbaum's claim is that some pieces of literature can capture the uniqueness of the moral situation and portray through the devices of fiction the sensitivity and alertness demanded by the moral situation. She writes (1983:43):

> Any view of deliberation that holds that it is, first and foremost, a
> matter of intuitive perception and improvisatory response, where a
> fixed antecedent ordering or ranking of values is to be taken as a sign of
> immaturity rather than of excellence; any view that holds that it is the
> job of the adult agent to approach a complex situation responsively,
> with keen vision and alert feelings, prepared if need be, to alter his or
> her prima facie conception of the good in the light of the new
> experience, is likely to clash with certain classical aims and assertions
> of moral philosophy, which has usually claimed to make progress on
> our behalf precisely by extricating us from this bewilderment in the
> face of the present moment . . .

We are asked to agree that the 'complexity, the indeterminacy, the
sheer *difficulty* of moral choice' cannot be shown by 'texts which
speak in universal terms' (1983:43). For example, Nussbaum claims
that a philosophical text would have trouble arguing the following:
that 'love and commitments are so related that infidelity and failure of
response are more or less inevitable features even of the best examples
of loving' (1983:40). But the novel with its attention to the 'contingent
complexities of a tangled human life' (1983:40) can make a
persuasive argument of this sort. The fictional creation of situations
and characters which exemplify and display the intuitive moral
perception at work educate the reader's moral sense and in this way a
novel can be an *argument* with a claim to a philosophical status.

Literature can represent and draw attention to the concrete
particularities of a life lived, but the connection Nussbaum draws is
deeper than this. She also wants to claim (1987:169) that a 'well-lived
life is a work of literary art'. Thus, literature can portray aspects of a
well-lived life, in part, because a well-lived life is a literary
construction, and a novel a 'moral achievement'.

But, what is it about literary texts and the qualities they exemplify
which entitles them to claim a philosophical status? Nussbaum's
answer is that there is an intimate connection between style of
composition and claims to truth. So, the way something is said, the
style in which it is written, conveys, in part, the nature of the truth at
which the text aims, and identifies for the reader what is and is not
important.[6] Thus, it is not only what literary texts are about which
make them candidates for philosophical value, but also the style in
which they are composed, which brings with it a possibility of rigour
and precision appropriate to the task of moral reflection and
deliberation. Nussbaum alleges that the failure to recognize the place
of the literary within moral philosophy has been a failure to recognize
this relation between style and truth.

> . . . the conventional style of Anglo-American philosophical prose
> usually prevailed: a style correct, scientific, abstract, hygienically

> pallid, a style that seemed to be regarded as a kind of all-purpose solvent in which philosophical issues of any kind at all could be efficiently disentangled, any and all conclusions neatly disengaged. That there might be other ways of being precise, other conceptions of lucidity and completeness, that might be held to be more appropriate for ethical thought – this was on the whole, neither asserted nor even denied. (Nussbaum 1990:19)

For traditional moral philosophy its own style is invisible and the style of others an annoying and useless decoration. The claim is that moral truths demand a style appropriate to their expression which is not generally to be found in the works of traditional moral philosophy. Instead the fitting style is one most commonly found in literary texts, in particular, in novels. The style of the novel then is suited to the expression of moral truths. As she says (1990:3):

> Literary form is not separable from philosophical content, but is, itself, a part of content – an integral part, then, of the search for and the statement of truth.

To sum up so far: traditional moral philosophy is in crisis for three reasons; a failure to supply a settled 'rational procedure' for resolving moral dilemmas, a failure to ground practical reason, and a failure to engage with common moral concerns. Nussbaum adopts an Aristotelian position, thereby denying at the outset the possibility of supplying a universal rational procedure of the sort required by traditional moral philosophy, and placing the concerns of moral philosophy in the particularity and uniqueness of the contexts of our lives. She then goes on to claim that the novel most appropriately realizes an Aristotelian conception of the moral and this because of its literary features which can give expression to philosophical arguments not possible in traditional philosophical texts. Literature, on this account, can *be* moral philosophy.

### III

There have been a number of criticisms of Nussbaum's position.[7] Some critics have argued that the moral philosophy she associates with the novels she chooses happens not in the novels themselves but in the commentary Nussbaum provides on them.[8] This criticism is given some weight by the fact that Nussbaum has to *explain* the moral dimensions of her chosen novels; the novels do not unproblematically speak for themselves. Secondly, literary texts are open to quite divergent interpretations suggesting that 'moral truths', if there are any, need extracting from the text rather than to be simply noticed. We

might also question the epistemic status and independence Nussbaum assigns to novels and their production, and in this regard look with suspicion on the novels she regards as paradigmatic in her argument.[9] However, I will not take up these and other criticisms here; instead I direct my argument at her conception of the role of moral philosophy.

By way of opposition to Nussbaum's argument I first want to say something about the scope of moral theories. The scope of a moral theory is its range over persons and types of action. For example, some contractarian moral theories[10] limit their scope to certain kinds of agent and so exclude some agents from the moral domain.[11] More importantly though, it is uniformly considered that an adequate moral theory is one which has the widest possible scope with respect to the types of action it covers. The more general a moral theory the better it is considered to be.

The notable failure of traditional moral theory mentioned earlier, has been a failure of scope. As we have seen, Kantian deontological rules seem inappropriate in the context of relations of friendship, the obligations of parenthood, and so on. Here existing moral sentiments seem the surest and best guide to conduct rather than rules fashioned from the impartiality and impersonality of reason. Impartiality and impersonality, both central to the Kantian and utilitarian moral systems, make no sense, it is argued, as criteria of sound moral judgement. Is it really appropriate to turn to a Rawlsian thought experiment to understand one's duties towards one's child? Is it appropriate to undertake a utility calculation to weigh one's obligations to one's parents? A Kantian ethic seeks a neutral position outside of our affective concerns and sentimental attachments – it aims at occupying an Archimedean point from which a moral judgement, sanitized by reason, can be made. But in occupying this point the situations which make the issues of filial obligation, special duties, and personal commitment real, are washed away, leaving agents undifferentiated by their circumstances. The Archimedean point which ensures impartiality is a view from nowhere[12] from which we are supposed to make judgements about ourselves and others condemned, as we are, to live out our lives *somewhere*.

But on the other hand, reason and rules do seem appropriate if we are regulating conduct between strangers and in situations where interests and sentiments conflict. In these latter situations it would be just as inappropriate to allow antecedent sentiment and private perspective to govern our interactions. The ethic of fine sensibility and rich awareness that Nussbaum advocates is so bound within the particularities of individual and social circumstance that it relies on an intimate and mutual understanding between the 'bewildered' parties. Here one has to bring to bear on a situation a sensibility acquired in a

determinant and partially experienced past. This sensibility regulates our treatment of others, but only those others who have a call on our sensibilities – family, friends, nation state, and so on. It remains silent when we are confronted with strangers whose interests not only clash with ours but which may even be incomprehensible to us. Strangers are those who stand outside the reach of our sensibilities and feelings, beyond the borders of our social norms, and most distant from an ethic of fine sensibility and rich awareness.[13]

Traditional moral philosophy has been at its best when articulating a morality suitable to the interactions between strangers where standing moral norms and existing customs have been silent. It has revealed the lie of particular and sectarian interests masquerading as universal interests; it has been subversive in undermining the legitimacy of regimes of discrimination; and has stood as a powerful source of ideological critique. Universalizable rules, disparaged by Nussbaum and others, overlook gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, tribe, material and social status, regarding these features as morally irrelevant. The Kantian tradition abstracts from pressing particular and local interests, from our present place in society and in this way makes possible a conception of people as free and equal. In contrast, relying on our sensibilities when we interact beyond our familiar social circumstances is to rely on our prejudices and blindnesses.

This is the danger of conservatism I mentioned at the beginning of the paper. If we allow an ethic of sensibility to go *all the way up* and structure our basic social and political institutions there would be no room for a plurality of attitudes, interests and conceptions of the good. We would have to assume a shared sensibility among persons governed by those institutions, an assumption incompatible with a constitutional democracy. While we may agree that in our intimate and daily interactions, confined (as they inevitably are) almost exclusively to our own family and class, etc., we do rely on acquired moral sensibilities, there is no reason to agree that an ethic of the sort advocated by Nussbaum should govern all our interactions at all levels. In fact there is good reason to strongly advocate the opposite.

Moral philosophy, as I have conceived it, has the preoccupations it has, and, indeed, employs the style it does, because we live in a world of strangers whose interests lie beyond our sympathetic reach. In a different, and past, world where our ancestors lived out their lives in closed communities where the borders of the moral universe ended with the boundaries of their village, a morality of fine sensibilities was, perhaps, enough to successfully govern their interactions. In the light of this, it is not odd that traditional moral philosophy has its roots in the eighteenth century when the imperatives of capitalist accumu-

lation first destroyed the isolated village and with it its parochial norms. To propose, as Nussbaum does, sensitivity as a criterion of moral concern is nostalgic at best and dangerously conservative at worst.[14]

The task of moral philosophy is then quite different from what Nussbaum supposes. It is to speak, in the language of reason (for in what other language could it speak?), when our sensibilities are silent, or when prejudice threatens. This is the proper scope of moral philosophy and its proper object is interactions between strangers. When we use traditional moral philosophy to regulate interactions between 'friends' we overstep its proper boundaries with disastrous results. This is to allow an ethic of detached reason to go *all the way down* and structure our intimate and private relations. Likewise, when we use an ethic of sensibility to regulate interactions between strangers we overstep its proper boundaries with, I would suggest, even more disastrous results.

What is required then is proper attention to the scope of a morality suited to regulating interactions between friends and a morality suited to regulating interactions between strangers. It may be objected that I fall naïvely into the trap of making a rigid distinction between the emotive and the cognitive, assigning reason wholly over to moral philosophy and the emotional wholly over to Nussbaum. This would be a mistake, for reasons Nussbaum herself mentions.[15] Emotions, sensibilities, and so on are interwoven with beliefs and in this way are open to rational scrutiny. This I do not deny. I would not deny either that a commitment to impartiality and reason is nevertheless a *commitment* with the non-cognitive dimension this implies. Nevertheless, aside from considerations of exposition which emphasize the differences between what I take moral philosophy to be and Nussbaum's position, I mean to convey the idea of a graduated scale with almost pure emotional response at one end and almost pure impartiality at the other. I have argued that moral philosophy conducts its business at the impartiality end of this scale and literature at the other.

This is, of course, too crude an image. There is no reason why a novel cannot comment on and turn our attention towards any idea, way of life, or whatever. A literary text can, as it were, put us *in the way* of an idea, but this is not all there is to doing philosophy. Likewise there is no reason why a philosophical text cannot appeal to our sensibilities and open up new views of our world, but this is not to write a novel.

What the image of a scale does do, I hope, is convey the inevitable uncertainty which accompanies our moral deliberations: when is the exercise of impartial reason appropriate and when not? How much

should we rely on local norms and customs when dealing with others who do not recognize any obligation in terms of these norms? This uncertainty is not an objection to my view; rather I take it as a recommendation. In the first place it demonstrates the complexity of the moral domain and serves as a warning against an arrogant reduction of its elements, and secondly, it fits with our intuition that it is a moral virtue to be perplexed and uncertain in the face of important moral choices. But complexity and uncertainty are not the same as bewilderment. What we can hope for from moral philosophy are provisional judgements which represent the best we can do, and which are temporary resting places for our thoughts. To require a strict, up-front definition of 'stranger' and 'friend' is to demand that we barge our way through the moral domain with the frightening certainty and in the manner of the fanatic.

Can literature be moral philosophy if moral philosophy is understood in the sense I advocate? Obviously not. Moral philosophy achieves its aims by abstraction from the concrete and the particular, and so commands our interest in proportion to its distance from what Nussbaum claims is the essential feature of the novel, namely, the particularity of its vision. Nevertheless, there is much left for literature to say and, indeed, argue in the domain of the ethical if we pay attention to the proper scope of this enterprise.

The thought that literature can be moral philosophy rests on a mistake about what moral philosophy is about. Once this error is corrected then it should be obvious that literature cannot be moral philosophy.

## NOTES

1. See, for example, Nussbaum 1983, 1987, and 1990.
2. Nussbaum (1983:44).
3. Darwell, Gibbard and Railton (1992) make this claim.
4. Williams (1985) makes the distinction between Kantian and Aristotelian ethics in this way.
5. This is how Nussbaum (1983:40) characterizes the Aristotelian position.
6. See Nussbaum (1990:3–53) for her discussion of the relation between form and content in philosophy and literature.
7. See Volume XV of *New Literary History*, 1983 for a number of critical responses.
8. Both Wollheim (1983) and Putnam (1983) make this point.
9. She chooses the novels of Henry James and Charles Dickens as examples of novels as moral philosophy.
10. For example, Rawls (1971) and especially Gauthier (1986).
11. I explore this problem in Voice (1993).
12. This is how Nagel (1986) characterizes an objective position.
13. I make the distinction between strangers and friends elsewhere (Voice 1993) while arguing a similar point about the proper scope of moral theory.
14. I make the connection between nostalgia and conservatism in a different context in Voice and Van Wyk (1990).
15. See Nussbaum (1990), from page 3.

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# Obvious Boundaries?

## A Response to Paul Voice

*Andries Gouws*

### Introduction: Boundaries and Definitions

> For how is the concept of a game bounded? What still counts as a game and what no longer does? Can you give [*angeben*] the boundary? No. You can *draw* one; for none so far has been drawn. (But that never troubled you before when you used the word 'game'.) (Wittgenstein 1968:33 [§68])

I cannot but be disturbed by the ease and certainty with which Paul Voice ascribes essences and boundaries to complex entities like 'traditional moral philosophy', 'moral philosophy', and 'literature'.

A related point is that his title question: 'Can literature be moral philosophy?' fills me with unease. If we assume that this question can be answered with an unequivocal 'yes' or 'no', then we immediately assume that the concepts or entities involved *have* clear boundaries. In this article[1] I argue:

*Firstly*, that concepts like 'literature', 'the novel', 'moral philosophy', 'to be', are open-ended, i.e. do not in themselves *have* clear boundaries, so that the boundaries Voice sees are those he himself draws, and

*Secondly*, that his conclusion that literature cannot be moral philosophy follows directly from the restrictive ways in which he defines 'moral philosophy' and 'literature'.

If we want to show that *x* cannot be moral philosophy', all we need to do is define *x* and moral philosophy in such a way that *x* cannot possibly fall within moral philosophy. Although Voice himself admits that it wouldn't be much help if he 'merely *defined* moral philosophy in a way which was incompatible with' the thesis he was opposing (p. 123), I think that in the end this is exactly what happens.

Instead of replacing his restrictive definitions by broader ones, I would rather resist the demand for exclusive definitions of such heterogeneous and hybrid phenomena as 'literature' and 'moral philosophy'. If essences and boundaries become more problematic, then the question: 'Can literature be moral philosophy?' is perhaps answerable with 'yes', perhaps undecidable, but mainly: not the type

of question I would ask in the first place, because it *presupposes* essences and boundaries where there are none.

Lest the reader see cause for alarm in my approach: I do not mean to indicate some fundamental aporia or irrationality concerning the field. Moral enquiry can proceed in a rational and productive way even if we cannot give an unequivocal answer to Voice's question. If the moral philosopher in a particular context for any reason needs to define the particular problem he is addressing, the method he is following, or the paradigm in which he is working, this does not necessarily mean that he needs a definition of 'moral philosophy' *in general*, for all contexts.

## The 'be' in *'Can Literature be Moral Philosophy?'*

The very question 'Can x be moral philosophy?' is problematic. It presupposes that the 'is' in 'x *is* y' is itself a single, univocal, concept which can be rigorously distinguished from 'x *resembles* y', 'x and y *overlap*', 'x can *use* y', 'y can *use* x' or 'x is y *in a metaphorical sense*'. And similarly, that there is some sharp distinction between 'x is not a clear or *paradigmatic* case of y' and 'x is not y, full stop'. None of these presuppositions is tenable. The verb 'to be' is probably one of the most polysemic terms in the English language.

## Literature

Literature is an extremely open-ended category, contrary to the essence suggested by Voice's explication of the term:

> Literary texts are distinguished by plot and narrative, and the doings of fictional characters inhabiting fictional worlds. (p. 126)

Countless counter-examples to this account of 'literary texts' could be found.[2] Such counter-examples suggest that we may have to retrace our steps, before leaping precipitately into a definition of literature.

In the first place, it is useful to remember that the word 'literature' is vague, polysemic and historically variable. In certain times and places it has been limited to *belles lettres*; in others it has also included other forms, such as the essay. Besides, *any* text – even a philosophical one – which is written in a superlative style can be called 'literature'. Voice himself acknowledges this, apparently without seeing in it any reason for caution: 'some works of philosophy are rightly regarded as works of literature' (p. 126). He seems to think that this sense of 'literature' is so distinct from the one that he is discussing, that no explanation is required as to why this admission does not undermine the conclusion that *literature cannot be moral philosophy*. Or why '(iii) Moral philosophy can be a work of

literature' and '(iv) Literature can be a work of moral philosophy' (p.125) refer to distinct options. (Having been told that 'A Russian can be a spy', Smiley presumably would not ask: 'Yes, but can a spy be a Russian?')

Secondly, literature cannot be equated with the novel. If Voice is only using the term 'novel' as a type of shorthand, this need not be objectionable. But when we unpack this shorthand, the reality referred to turns out to be so complex that it does not fit what has been said using this shorthand.

Literature also comprises phenomena like poetry, short stories, dramas (tragedies, comedies, farces), satires, fairy tales, screenplays; which have various intermediate forms and combinations, and shade off into essays, aphorisms or (in the case of 'faction') into journalism, history, biography and autobiography. (In faction the characters and worlds are not clearly fictional. In Plato's dialogues, to what extent are the characters 'real' and to what extent 'fictional'? And do these dialogues become less philosophical as 'Socrates' becomes more fictional?) Besides, each of these 'genres' is in itself heterogeneous.

Even if we limit ourselves to the novel, we must beware of giving it some simple, homogeneous and discrete essence. The novel is itself a very open-ended form. It ranges from plain-prose naturalism to *Finnegan's Wake* (Joyce 1959), and from naïve 'story' to Kundera's (1991) and Pirsig's (1976) hybrids (containing, quite recognizably, 'mixtures' of story, philosophy, literary theory, etc.).

I cannot see any area of reflection as excluded a priori from the scope of the novel. Bakhtin (1981) has argued persuasively that the novel is not so much a genre in itself, as a form in which a multiplicity of genres can be accommodated, reworked, satirized, and so on. (*Literary genres*: myth, Greek tragedy, romance, Mills and Boon, detective, spy, science fiction – and *non-literary genres*: the language of officialdom, the church, newspapers, commerce, philosophy.) As often as not this occurs with critical intent: the one-sidedness, the blindness, the self-deception or the cruelty involved in these genres, languages or points of view is exposed. This critical intent makes it hard to draw a boundary between philosophy and literature.

The foregoing considerations imply that it will be very difficult to draw a neat boundary between the novel and any discourse y, so that we can answer the question: 'can literature *be* y?' with a confident 'Yes' or 'No'. This picture of literature is another reason why I would rather avoid the question: 'Can literature be moral philosophy?', and why, if forced to answer, I would opt for a – bored – 'yes'.

## Philosophy

> Philosophy texts contain (*at their best*) reasoned argument, a setting
> out of premises leading to conclusions, they possess logical structure,
> proceed by valid inference and aim at unveiling truth. (p. 126 – my
> italics)

Works like Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* (1968),
Nietzsche's *Zarathustra* (1969) or *The Will to Power*[3] (1968),
Derrida's 'Restitutions' (1987) and Lao-Tzu's *Tao Te Ching* (1985)
do not comply with this description. Even if we concede, for the sake
of argument, that these do not represent 'philosophy at its best' –
does this mean that none of them are works of philosophy at all?
(Voice's account of 'philosophy at its best' does not actually bring us
closer to an answer to his title question, which was: 'Can literature be
moral philosophy?', and not 'Can it be moral philosophy *at its best*?')
If even one philosophical text can depart from Voice's paradigm for
philosophical texts and still 'be' philosophy, the fact that most or all
literary texts also depart from this paradigm is quite compatible with
their being works of philosophy. (A separate argument would then be
needed if one wanted to demonstrate that works of literature can be
works of philosophy, but not works of *moral* philosophy). Moreover,
if I am right in regarding at least *The Philosophical Investigations* as a
*great* work of philosophy, then even philosophy *at its best* need not
comply with Voice's description.

## Moral philosophy[4]

It is extremely difficult to define 'moral philosophy' in a satisfactory
way. Here there are a lot of snares awaiting the unwary, and Voice
gets caught in a number of them.

Voice's map of moral philosophy is meant as an aid to the question:
'Can literature be moral philosophy?' In this context, it won't do if an
account of moral philosophy reduces the plurality of its problems,
questions, tasks, aims, paradigms, moves, methods and objects to just
one or a handful of problems, questions, and so on. Unfortunately,
Voice's account does exactly this:

> The task of moral philosophy is . . . to speak in the language of reason
> (for what other language could it speak?), when our sensibilities are
> silent, or when prejudice threatens. This is the proper scope of moral
> philosophy and its proper object is interaction between strangers.
> (p. 132)

Here we hear the stern Voice of the Kantian legislator over territorial
boundaries. Moral philosophy is reduced to a monolith with un-
mistakable boundaries: *the* task, *the* language of reason, *the* proper

scope. (The 'its' in '*its* proper object' and the subsequent '*its* proper boundaries' paints an equally monolithic picture.) Would anything really be lost if these singulars became plurals, and if moral philosophy did not have any turf 'proper' to it?

## 'Friends' and 'Strangers'

Voice's account of the relation between literature and moral philosophy depends on his distinction between 'friends' and 'strangers'. Is there a clear, categorical distinction between 'strangers' and 'non-strangers'?

> 'My first others were the Arabs, the scarabei, the French, the Germans. My first familiars were the hens, the rabbits, the Arabs, the Germans, etc.' (Cixous 1989:2)

Dare I suggest that 'others' in our quote may also be read: 'strangers'?

Voice himself rejects the demand for 'a strict, up-front definition of 'stranger' and 'friend' as being linked with a 'frightening certainty' which is out of place in the moral domain (p. 133). Perhaps so, I would say; unfortunately, without such a definition his whole argument why literature cannot be moral philosophy falls flat. Whoever comes with dire warnings regarding the 'disastrous results' which occur when 'an ethic of detached reason *oversteps its proper boundaries*' (p. 132), or starts on a Kantian endeavour to determine 'the *proper scope* of moral philosophy, its concerns, its tasks and its methods of inquiry' (p. 123), thereby commits himself to the drawing of boundaries. It will then be impossible to refuse the demand for 'up-front definitions' of the concepts which regulate these boundaries.

Besides, since when is the opposite of *stranger* 'friend'? Are all non-strangers 'friends'? Is *friend* apt as a synecdoche for *friends, family, colleagues at the workplace, neighbours, countrymen,*[5] *people sharing a common moral code,* and so on? Aren't even our 'positive' relations with people belonging to other categories of 'non-stranger' typically very different from those between friends? The term 'friends' also suggests a *positive* relationship – whereas our relations with family, colleagues, neighbours, countrymen are often *extremely* conflictual: personality clashes, conflicts of interest, conflicts of belief. Our intuitions and sensibility toward them are often characterized by distrust, enmity or hate instead of (or in addition to)[6] 'love' or 'friendship'. Moreover, intimates and their interests can be as 'incomprehensible' (p. 131) to us as strangers. As such, it would be wrong to think that intuition or fine sensibility are automatically going to 'govern' (p. 130), 'regulate' (p. 131), or 'be the surest and best guide' (p. 130) to moral conduct regarding non-strangers, or that

reflection of the kind found in moral philosophy would be superfluous for relations between non-strangers.

Discussion with other philosophers shows that I am not the only one to be intrigued by Voice's suggestion that moral philosophy concerns itself only with relations between strangers. Although I think he is wrong, he may be groping towards a valuable idea – perhaps something like the following: 'In liberal democracies the law does not concern itself with people's private lives. A subdiscipline of moral philosophy which limits its scope to the non-private in a similar way will have a coherent object, concerning which powerful general theories can be developed – which is not the case with that part of moral philosophy which reflects on the private domain, even if such reflection is necessary and valid'. Perhaps Voice is led into the cul-de-sac of the stranger/friend distinction because he cannot accept that the best definition of 'private' in this context is an apparently circular one: '*Private* is that which the laws of a liberal democracy leave to the discretion of the individual'.

## 'A Graduated Scale'

I next examine an idea which plays an important role in Voice's argument: that of 'a graduated scale with almost pure emotional response at one end and almost pure impartiality at the other... moral philosophy conducts its business at the impartiality end of this scale and literature at the other' (p. 132). Although he admits that: 'This is, of course, too crude an image' (p. 132) he does not refine it himself. When we investigate various ways of refining it for him, we find that none of them makes Voice's picture credible.

Voice's position can be represented visually as follows:
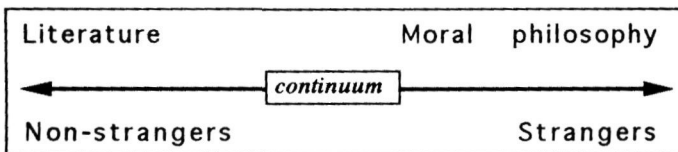


Here we have the picture of a continuum between literature and moral philosophy, linked to a continuum between strangers and non-strangers. What is above the line deals with what is below the line.

This picture raises a host of questions. We may well ask ourselves what happens between the ends of the continuum. (In this section we shall focus on what happens above the line.) The following options seem to present themselves:

**OPTION 1**

```
┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│  Literature        │            │ Moral philosophy       │
│                    │  ┌──────────┐  │                     │
│  ◄─────────────────┤  │continuum │  ├───────────────────► │
│                    │  └──────────┘  │                     │
│  Non-strangerṣ     │            │        Strangers        │
│                    │            │                         │
│                    .            │                         │
│                 ▒▒▒▒          ▒▒▒▒                        │
│                  A              B                         │
└─────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
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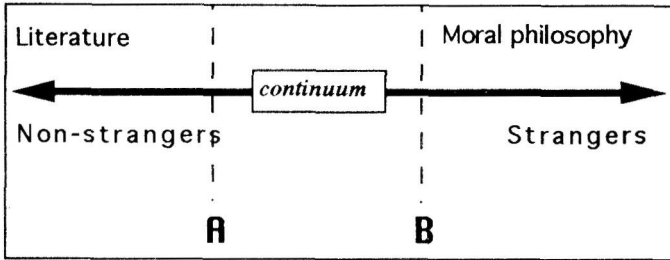
Voice says that 'moral philosophy conducts its business at the
impartiality end of this scale and literature at the other' (p. 132). This
suggests the interpretation that only the area near the ends of the
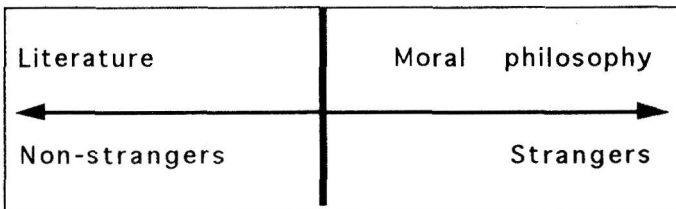continuum is covered, with an area (A – B) in the centre of the
*continuum* not being covered at all. This would fit Voice's claim that
literature cannot be moral philosophy: there is something like 'empty
conceptual space' between them. Under what discourse would this
area then fall? Would there be no 'guide' to moral action at all in this
area, no discipline (or other human endeavour) in which reflection
about this domain takes place? Or would there indeed be one, but one
which is neither literature nor moral philosophy? (In the same way in
which 'yellow' falls between violet and red in the colour spectrum for
visible light, without however being something like 'both violet *and*
red', nor something like 'qualitatively a mix of violet and red').
Although such a possibility need not be ruled out a priori, nothing
seems to plead for it, nor does anything in Voice's argument indicate
such a view.

Another possibility would be that there is a sharp boundary
between literature and moral philosophy:

**OPTION 2**

```
┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│  Literature              ▌      Moral    philosophy       │
│                          ▌                                │
│  ◄───────────────────────▌──────────────────────────────►│
│                          ▌                                │
│  Non-strangers           ▌              Strangers         │
│                          ▌                                │
└─────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
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This picture would secure Voice's claim that 'literature cannot be
moral philosophy' (cf. his title), but would be incompatible with his
picture of a *continuum* ('graduated scale'). And then we might well
demand of him the up-front definition of 'strangers' and 'friends' (or:
'non-strangers') which he has declined to give.

A further possibility would be that there is an *overlap* (be it ever so

small) between literature and moral philosophy. Literature would then extend all the way from 'its' end of the continuum to A, and moral philosophy all the way from 'its' end of the continuum to B, resulting in an area of overlap (B – A):

### OPTION 3
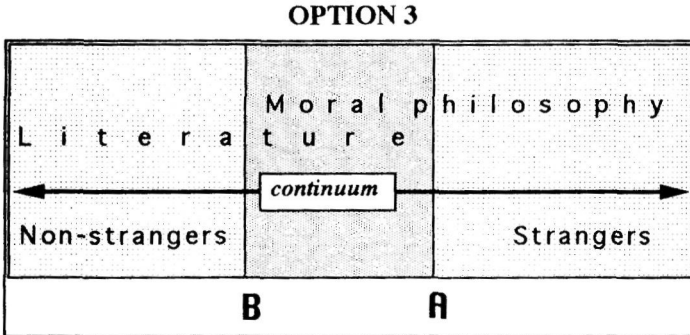


The question which would immediately arise here would be whether this picture means that literature 'can be' moral philosophy, or whether both discourses can, while maintaining their categorical distinctness, deal with the same domain of relations: an intermediate domain between absolute strangers and absolute non-strangers. One way in which this categorical distinctness can be maintained is by presupposing, as Voice seems to do, that there is a clear and evident distinction between literature *using* moral philosophy and literature *being* moral philosophy (p. 125). This would mean that when a novelist-philosopher like Murdoch or Sartre writes, (s)he will sometimes be wearing a philosophical cap, and sometimes a literary one, but never both simultaneously. Moreover, we will always be able to tell which is which. 'This is a philosophical idea? Well, then Sartre/Murdoch could not have formulated it as a *novelist*, (s)he *must* be just *using* an idea which (s)he formulated previously, *as a philosopher and not as a novelist*. It is as clearly something extraneous intruding into the novel as it would have been had it been someone else's idea'. (And conversely for the philosopher's use of literature.) This argument assumes the rigid distinction it is supposed to prove. Moreover, it does not seem to fit the facts.

But be that as it may, whichever way we articulate it, Voice's picture is undermined and all the questions he tried to lay to rest return to haunt us; the distinction stranger/non-stranger does not give us a general criterion for distinguishing between literature and moral philosophy.

## What May We Expect of Moral Philosophy?

According to Voice, 'four of the most widely read and influential recent books on moral philosophy claim that moral philosophy has failed in two respects', one of which is that it 'has failed to deliver a unique, defensible and recognized decision procedure for addressing and resolving moral dilemmas'. He then paraphrases this as: 'moral theory has failed . . . to provide a rational foundation for our moral judgements' (p. 124).

To introduce and defend my own view, I shall challenge the assumptions contained in this statement of failure. It is not clear that this quote reflects Voice's own views, but even if it doesn't, my criticism of it will show why I cannot agree with those views which I *do* attribute to Voice with some confidence.

If moral philosophy has failed according to this criterion, then this does not reflect a shortcoming in moral philosophy. If this be failure, failure is inevitable. The demands being made of moral philosophy are unrealistic.

Voice makes of moral philosophy an autonomous or discrete entity (discipline, activity), rather than one embedded in the rest of human reality, and having countless forms of overlap, overflow, exchanges, etc. with other disciplines, activities, aspects of culture. He seems to assume that moral philosophers must address all moral issues in a monologue from which non-philosophers are excluded (or in which the contributions of non-philosophers will be fully *aufgehoben*), and successfully resolve them, so that a correct approach to moral problems (practical and theoretical) will henceforth base itself only on 'moral philosophy' as a distinct discipline. This seems wrong in a variety of ways, one of which is that moral philosophers are unlikely ever to reach this type of agreement, even among themselves.

### The Diversity of the Moves which Can be Made in Moral Philosophy

Most contributions to moral philosophy do not have the ambition of delivering 'a unique, defensible and recognized decision procedure for resolving moral dilemmas', but have far more limited aims. If this ambition is taken to define moral philosophy, then most texts by what are generally called 'moral philosophers' will appear not to belong to moral philosophy. To discover that according to the same criteria *literature* cannot be moral philosophy will then not be very informative.

Moral philosophers do not have a single method, either – they do their work by carrying out *any of a huge variety* of possible moves, some of which are ambitious, but most of which are not. Think of moves such as the following:

(a) *Amplifying* on any of the beliefs, principles or texts which have been seen as important at some point in the tradition of Western moral philosophy.

(b) *Criticising* any of the above. This is also found in literature. Two examples: Schiller and Owen.

Friedrich Schiller satirizes Kant's ethics:

> Pangs of conscience
> I help my friends willingly, but do so from 'inclination'
> My conscience thus lies heavy on me, since I am without virtue.
> Resolution
> The only remedy: despise 'inclination', if you can
> And do grudgingly what duty commands.
> (Quoted in Störig 1974:57; my translation)

In Wilfred Owen's 'Dulce et Decorum Est' a description of a soldier dying from poison gas is pitted against the idea that it is good to die for one's country.[7] This is comparable to the moral philosopher criticizing a received moral opinion by discussing a counter-example.

(c) *Providing a foundation for morality.* Moral philosophy is not the only discourse which attempts this; we find similar attempts by religion, (moral) theology, etc. Conversely, many moral philosophers do not see this as a task for moral philosophy at all.

(d) *Mapping the field of moral problems*, or 'moral philosophy' as a discipline. Voice's definition seems to exclude this, and therewith his own article, from moral philosophy.

(e) *Asking a good question.* 'We have all the answers. It is the questions we do not know.' I would consider a text which formulates just one 'deep' moral question ('deep' because the question is new, or because it is formulated in a way geared to stimulate moral reflection) to be far superior, as moral philosophy, to this article of mine (which I nevertheless see as a text in moral philosophy). An example from literature here would be the question Ivan poses to utilitarianism in *The Brothers Karamazov*.[8] I can now also reveal that the 'philosophical' quote with which this paragraph starts, is itself from Dostoyevsky! (Quoted in Felman & Laub 1992:xiii)

(f) *All sorts of other moves*: (re-)interpreting existing moral texts; formalizing, codifying or reconstructing an existing approach to morals; defending existing moral positions; showing inconsistencies; trying to solve a problem in 'applied ethics'; using a problem in applied ethics to criticize an ethical theory such as contractarianism or utilitarianism; and so forth.

Such a long, open-ended list suggests a picture of 'moral philosophy' which is very different from one which talks of moral philosophy's 'method of inquiry' (p. 123) in the singular, or focuses on an attempt to deliver 'a unique, defensible decision procedure'. If one wants to move from this list to some restrictive account of moral philosophy, one is faced with a problem: how many of these moves must be made before something counts as (good, intellectually respectable) 'moral philosophy'? I would suggest that there is no lower limit. If this is the case, it becomes hard to imagine a demarcation criterion which would tell us why some texts qualify as moral philosophy, and others don't, even if the same moves occur in both.[9]

## An Alternative View of the Field of Moral Reflection

> What is most difficult here is to put this indefiniteness, correctly and unfalsified, into words. (Wittgenstein 1968:227)

Having argued that Voice's basic picture is unconvincing, let me sketch the outlines of an alternative view. (Knowing that I, too, am now a fool rushing in where angels fear to tread).

We will never find a procedure which will resolve our moral dilemmas in any unqualified sense. Our existing stock of decision procedures for moral problems will be supplemented and modified by new ones. None of them will be 'unique', 'defensible' or 'recognized'. Each decision procedure will contend with conflicting ones (and therefore won't be 'unique'), will be imperfectly justifiable (and therefore not 'defensible' in any absolute or even 'strong' sense[10]) and will be contentious (and therefore not 'recognized'). All these points regarding moral decision procedures also apply to moral beliefs, generally. We will have to make do with less than 'a unique, defensible and recognized decision procedure for addressing and resolving moral dilemmas', and have to live with countless unresolved moral dilemmas. As we do today. If there is no prospect of changing our current situation in any fundamental way, then it is misleading to see it as a situation of 'crisis' (p. 124).

What is the situation today? Moral philosophy is not delivering on the demand for a unique decision procedure. Nothing is delivering the goods, as far as this demand is concerned. But moral philosophy is delivering other goods, and a host of other sources are delivering goods.

Most of our moral reflection and action proceeds from what I shall call 'moral readymades': the moral beliefs and procedures which we happen to find available in the world into which we happen to be born at a particular place and time. These derive only partly from

philosophy. Inasmuch as their derivation is traceable, they also – and probably more importantly – derive from social custom, religious scriptures and practice, law, and the like. (None of which is discrete from the others and from philosophy.)

To a certain extent these 'dictate' clear and unproblematic guidelines for behaviour in a wide variety of situations: Don't drive on the wrong side of the road. (Paraphraseable as: it is immoral to drive on the wrong side of the road). Don't lie. Don't steal. Thou shalt not kill. Obviously the world did not need philosophers to formulate such maxims. They are unproblematic inasmuch and as long as we don't see a need to question them or deliberate about them or their application. The fact that moral theory has 'failed' to 'provide a rational foundation for our moral judgements' (p. 124) does not bother us in the least. This is clearly not a case of '[m]oral philosophy fail[ing] to address those pressing and practical concerns which we ordinarily think of as moral concerns' (p. 124).

In other cases these dictates are (or seem) unclear, contradictory, or questionable in some other way, and deliberation becomes necessary, with its two typical aspects of 'reflection' (which can occur monologically) and 'debate' or 'discussion' (which is generally not a monologue, even if it occurs within the confines of one person's head).

Even here moral philosophy is by no means indispensable, though it can often help. But not by giving 'a unique, defensible and recognized decision procedure for addressing and resolving moral dilemmas'. People will sometimes resolve problems quite well, and sometimes just muddle through *without* the help of philosophy. Philosophy will occasionally do wonders, sometimes make things a bit better, and sometimes make things worse. Yes, I don't seem to be saying much. But that is exactly the point: there is no grand role waiting to be played by philosophy. There are a host of sophisticated and unsophisticated strategies of reflection which generally are not 'philosophical' in any special sense of the word. 'Moral reflection' and 'moral deliberation' do not equal 'moral philosophy'.

To this one could object: But surely the moral philosopher must define clearly the difference between what he is doing and the common or garden variety of moral reflection? Well, much of what the moral philosopher is doing *is* just a common or garden variety of moral reflection. (Ideally applied in a more systematic, self-reflexive and critical way than usual.) On the other hand, non-philosophical reflection is not always of a 'common or garden variety' either: what is done by intelligent and morally sensitive doctors, judges, legal scholars, political leaders, priests, administrators, educators and parents regarding the dilemmas they face on a daily basis. Now,

although these people will probably benefit from moral philosophy, we must not presume that it will allow them to trade in their moral Model T for a moral Ferrari. If there is something like moral expertise, this is not the sole prerogative of philosophers. Inasmuch as the moral philosopher can teach others something useful, that will partly be thanks to what she and her philosophical predecessors have learnt by *listening* to non-philosophical voices in this moral conversation.

As far as literature is concerned: it is true that it cannot dictate the correct moral action – but moral philosophy cannot do so, either. None of the parties in the moral conversation should be seen as the authority, the one with the right or even duty to dictate. (In fact, the very act of dictating moral truths to others can be seen as a moral defect.[11]) Any answer which could be read as an answer to the question: 'In which domain is moral philosophy the final authority, and in which literature?' is therefore suspect.

Many of the readymades which shape our moral decisions come from literature. The Iliad and the Odyssey formed the mainstay of Greek moral education, and many religious agnostics would see the sacred scriptures of the world religions as forms of literature (even according to Voice's restrictive account of 'literature'), while still acknowledging their importance for moral deliberation and decision.

Moreover, 'moral philosophy' is not only a set of finished texts, but also (and more importantly) an ongoing process of reflection and debate. Voice does not give us any arguments why the process of writing literature cannot be a process of moral reflection, and to me all my other arguments would indicate that this can indeed be the case.

Let us, with Voice, assume that literature can reflect upon intimate relationships. What about relations between strangers? *Brave New World* (Huxley 1950), *Animal Farm* (Orwell 1951), *1984* (Orwell 1984), *Darkness at Noon* (Koestler 1946), Solzhenitsyn's novels and 'literary investigations' (Solzhenitsyn 1973), Kundera's novels (e.g. Kundera 1991), *Poppie Nongena* (Joubert 1987), can all be read as reflections upon the dangers of utopian politics; *Amy Foster* (Conrad 1926) shows how a village's xenophobia destroys a 'stranger' and the one who loves him. *Lord of the Flies* (Golding 1992) shows what a breakdown of 'local law and custom' can lead to. Considering even this very limited sample is enough to rid me of any tendency to think that the novel is incapable of illuminating the relations between strangers. So in one sense the novel is capable of more than Voice allows. But nowhere is literature (or 'an ethics of fine sensibility', for that matter) enough to make further deliberation superfluous.

It will remain one voice in the moral conversation. It not only offers us truths (and criticisms of moral falsehoods) – it also propagates falsehoods (cf. Davis 1987). So in another sense the novel is capable of *less* than Voice would have us think when he cedes the whole domain of relations between non-strangers to literature.

I have argued that where in the past moral philosophy 'failed to deliver a unique, defensible and recognized decision procedure for addressing and resolving moral dilemmas' (p. 124), it will also fail in the future. The moral Ferrari will forever remain confined to the realm of science fiction.

Instead of 'moral philosophy' being *the* source of moral ready-mades, *the* site of moral reflection, giving *the* decision procedure to address and resolve moral dilemmas, it is 'a voice in the conversation of mankind' (to quote a stock phrase from Rorty, who is not my favourite philosopher).

Moral philosophy is not master of its own house. But neither is 'literature' or 'an ethic of fine sensibility' mistress of any house.[12] They do not have houses. They are nomads, living now here, now there. Wherever they live, they share the space with a variety of other inhabitants: 'intuition', 'fine sensibility', religion, theology, politics, psychology, feminism, psychoanalysis, cultural anthropology, history, natural science. None of the inhabitants is master, none of them 'regulates', 'governs' or is 'the surest and best guide' to moral conduct. From time to time one or the other has delusions of grandeur, and claims that he is king or she is queen: philosophy, science, religion, intuition. Being king can mean various things: everybody but I should shut up; everybody may speak, but in the end I decide; *I* regulate moral decisions; *I* speak in 'the voice of reason' (p. 132); others, like the novelist, may perhaps 'put us in the way of an idea' (p. 132), but when it comes to really thinking, *I* wear the pants, etc.

Things go best when no-one tries to be king, when discussions are conducted in a civilized manner and decisions are taken only in the light of a variety of inputs from a variety of individuals. When none of the voices in the conversation is taken to be '*the* voice of reason', but reason is seen to lie in the never-ending give and take of conversation. (Even if God – mysterious are His ways! – has seen fit not to create all the conversation partners in the image of British analytical philosophers.) The moral philosopher often has interesting contributions to make to these discussions, but he sometimes blunders as badly as the others. Ever since he stopped trying to be king, this is not seen as a disaster.

From time to time a Voice is heard, suggesting that the commonage be transformed into well-defined smallholdings, so that each person

has a turf on which he is boss. The Voice never quite makes us understand just why a certain piece of terrain should be seen as 'really' belonging to a particular party. It is always possible to show why the person to whom any particular smallholding is assigned will never cope on his own (not even in the management of the smallholding), and is needed to contribute to managerial tasks and manual labour in other areas.

But let me stop before I get carried away by my metaphors and fall foul of 'the language of reason'. This is, after all, a piece of moral philosophy, not a piece of literature.

## NOTES

1. Thanks to Julia Clare, Douglas Farland, Lynn Matisonn, Jean Power, Koos Stofberg and Lettie Viljoen for their comments on previous drafts of this article, and to Inger Raubenheimer for her typing.
2. That is, what I *consider* to be counter-examples − in this domain nothing is obvious. First counter-example:

> PRIVILEGED STATES OF AFFAIRS
>
> It is forbidden to set fire to persons.
> It is forbidden to set fire to persons in possession of a valid residence permit.
> It is forbidden to set fire to persons who adhere to legal regulations and are in possession of a valid residence permit.
> It is forbidden to set fire to persons of whom it is not to be expected that they endanger the existence and the security of the Federal Republic of Germany.
> It is forbidden to set fire to persons if their behaviour provides no occasion for that.
> Young people in particular, psychologically endangered through lack of leisure facilities and awareness of the relevant regulations as well as through orientational difficulties, are not allowed to set fire to persons indiscriminately.
> Citizens are strongly advised to desist from such behaviour, bearing in mind the Federal Republic of Germany's reputation abroad.
> This is not done.
> It is not usual.
> It should not become the rule.
> It must not be.
> No-one should be reproached for refraining from setting fire to persons.
> Everyone enjoys a fundamental right to refusal.
> Applications should be directed to the appropriate municipal authority.
> (Enzensberger 1994:9)

I for one do not see the plot, narrative, fictional characters or fictional worlds in this example. A text can therefore be literary without fitting Voice's model of literature. Conversely, a piece of philosophy can show all the features of literature:

> Jim finds himself in the central square of a small South American town. Tied up against the wall is a row of twenty Indians, most terrified, a few defiant, in front of them several armed men in uniform. A heavy man in sweat-stained khaki shirt turns out to be the captain in charge and, after a good deal of questioning of Jim which establishes that he got there by accident while on a botanical expedition, explains that the Indians are a

random group of the inhabitants who, after recent acts of protest against the government, are just about to be killed to remind other possible protestors of the advantages of not protesting. However, since Jim is an honoured visitor from another land, the captain is happy to offer him a guest's privilege of killing one of the Indians himself. If Jim accepts, then as a special mark of the occasion, the other Indians will be let off. Of course, if Jim refuses, then there is no special occasion, and Pedro here will do what he was about to do when Jim arrived, and kill them all. Jim, with some desperate recollection of schoolboy fiction, wonders whether if he got hold of a gun, he could hold the captain, Pedro and the rest of the soldiers to threat, but it is quite clear from the set-up that nothing of that kind is going to work: any attempt at that sort of thing will mean that all the Indians will be killed, and himself. The men against the wall, and the other villagers, understand the situation, and are obviously begging him to accept. What should he do? (Williams 1994:339–340)

Admittedly, this is just a fragment of a philosophical text. But is this essential? If we had omitted the 'What should he do?' at the end, could it not have been a fragment from a novel – even if it were a *bad* novel? (It is not told in a very riveting way.) How do we distinguish between the 'thought experiment' which *is* integral to philosophy, and the 'fiction' which is not? When is something a 'complete philosophical text'? Would this story have completely lost its status as moral philosophy had it been written by a novelist? Would we have been able to discern, neatly, whether the novelist was using philosophy or whether she was philosophising?

3. That the 'authorship' of this work should arguably be divided between Nietzsche and Walter Kaufmann, as editor, is immaterial to our point.
4. I shall not go into all the problems connected with Voice's cavalier identification of a certain range of texts as 'traditional moral philosophy'. Suffice it to say that he sees no reason to motivate his restrictive (and surprisingly precise!) delineation of 'traditional moral philosophy' in time (1874–1952) and space (the English-speaking world, apparently).
5. Voice apparently sees the members of our 'nation state' as non-strangers (p. 131), thereby severely limiting the scope of our relations with strangers and, thereby, the scope of moral philosophy.
6. As literature and psychoanalysis never tire of telling us, and as Voice himself would otherwise doubtless be the first to admit.
7. The last lines of this poem read:

> In all my dreams before my helpless sight
> He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.
> If in some smothering dreams, you too could pace
> Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
> And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
> His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;
> If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
> Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
> Bitter as the cud
> Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues, –
> My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
> To children ardent for some desperate glory,
> The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est
> Pro patria mori.
> (Quoted in Bennett 1994:304)

8. Tell me honestly, I challenge you – answer me: imagine that you are charged with building the edifice of human destiny, the ultimate aim of which is to bring people happiness, to give them peace and contentment at last, but that in order to achieve this it is essential and unavoidable to torture just one little speck of creation, that same little child beating her chest with her little fists, and imagine that this edifice has to be erected on her unexpiated tears. Would you agree to be the architect under those conditions? Tell me honestly! (Dostoyevsky 1994:308)

9. This is linked to the question: Can we make a rigorous distinction between that part of moral debate (or reflection) which '*is*' and that part which '*is not*' moral philosophy? Between that part of our cultural heritage which is and which is not part of moral philosophy?

10. If 'defensible' just means 'weakly defensible', all our moral beliefs are defensible, and moral theory will not have failed, because whatever beliefs it has led to will also be 'defensible' in the weak sense.

11. I owe this point to Douglas Farland.

12. I use this gendered terminology advisedly. In Voice's article all the features which are ascribed to moral philosophy coincide with stereotypically 'male' virtues (vices):

> reason, impartiality, universality, impersonality;

while the features which he associates with 'an ethic of fine sensibility' coincide with stereotypically 'female' virtues (vices):

> fine sensibility, sentiments, emotionality, special duties
> and personal commitments, particularity, prejudice.

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# In the Absence of Certainty
## Between Gulliver and Necklaces

*Mark Devenney*

Listening to a radio talk show recently, I heard a call which struck me as a remarkable allegory for much of what I wish to argue in this paper. The caller was angry. Her anger referred not to political events in the country, as has become commonplace, but rather to the social denotation which a word has come to assume in the past ten years. The word was *necklace*. In the view of the caller necklaces are beautiful things, objects traditionally associated with all that is good. Why was it that society had allowed this word to assume reference to a 'barbaric practice' which all 'civilized people' would reject. More importantly she believed that the producers of necklaces should sue those responsible for this change in the denotation of the word. After all, the negative association was doing damage to the sale of necklaces. Clearly there was prima facie evidence for the prosecution in such a case. The DJ would not allow her to get away with this: 'But surely, surely you know that it's impossible to place blame now? I mean who would you prosecute?', he asked. She admitted that this was a problem but before signing off insisted: 'Well at least we could begin a movement to have *that practice* renamed as something else, something which properly suggests the horror of it'. In that case necklace would assume its original prim meaning, and her world at least would be restored in its innocent beauty. Naturally the said DJ was somewhat dubious about the prospects of such a campaign.

There are any number of tacks which could be followed in the analysis of this call. However I wish to relate it to the title of my essay – the absence of certainty. To the great Russian novelist Dostoyevsky, if there was no God then anything was permissible, as there could be no universal norm according to which all people could be held up for judgement. Modern political and literary theory finds itself in a similar position, though it is no longer God who is in danger of being dethroned. Rather it is rationality, that last instance of certainty, positivist knowledge, in all its forms. And rationality has been unseated due to a revolution in the analysis of language, the realization that language does not simply denote reality, but in fact participates in the constitution thereof. The call discussed above admirably connotes these debates. Firstly the caller is worried about the changed denotation of a word. Her system of signification has been disturbed, or in other terms denaturalized, as she has been forced

to recognize the historical arbitrariness of meaning. This criminal shift in meaning can however be rectified, or at least be compensated for, by holding up the changes to a rational court of appeal where criminal liability for what amounts in essence to a creation of a negative association with that which was previously pristine, may be ascertained. The naïve belief that it is possible to simply apportion blame, that the facts of the matter will be so simply available to legal proceedings, allegorizes the positivist belief that reality is a given, which the knowing subject merely labels with language, and ascertains without difficulty.

Of course as the change in the denotation of the word necklace over so short a period indicates, words and their meanings are not given but socially produced. Much modern theory engages in loosening the glue of these social creations to reveal their historical nature as productions. The caller ends off with an 'if you can't beat them join them' cry, which reveals the fallacy of a simple extension of epistemological constructivism to the politics of activism. Her demand is impossible to heed due to the metaphoric condensation of meaning around the term 'necklace' which renders the possibility of change slight. The fact that signs designate arbitrarily (i.e. that this designation is historical/ institutional and no more) should not be equated with the rather different claim that a politics of signification or articulation will simply change society for the better. The social effectivity of condensed meaning, the social power with which discourses are invested and invest subjects, cannot be wished away in a utopian vision of fluidity which a simplistic discursive analytic framework would wish to offer. By the same token, as I shall argue below, this does not imply a return to what Michele Barrett has termed the Politics of Truth (Barrett 1991).

There is a last connotation of the word necklace to which I would like to refer. One of the criticisms made of those theories which draw upon Derrida's critique of the metaphysics of presence (Derrida 1976) is that they are neo-conservative in offering no direct guidance for immediate political action. Indeed there are a number of opportunistic academic marketeers who have (ab)utilised the narrative of liberation struggle in South Africa to justify their criticism of Derrida (I am thinking particularly of Russel Berman's articles in *Telos*). The horror of a social practice such as necklacing forces one to address concretely the question of political action, practice and moral discourse in the context of a world where there are no markers of certainty.[1]

The radio caller then leaves us with a number of questions (there are of course others): adopting a framework in which it is acknowledged that all meaning is constructed, not given; that fixity represents the repression of historical construction; that discourses (or particular

language games) do not simply denote a pre-given objectivity but participate in the production thereof – how do we account for the relative fixity of meaning which is characteristic of most social life? More importantly, is it possible to offer an account which is politically effective (I shall explain more precisely what I imply by this shortly) and yet epistemologically uncertain? Of course this question is particularly pertinent in the context of South Africa where discourses of knowledge play a crucial role in the politics of reconstruction. Knowledge production is expected to be practical – in a sense it is invested with a social use value – and thus to offer definitive solutions, truths to the many social grievances. I begin the unravelling of these questions in what may initially seem a somewhat abstruse methodology – a brief discussion of the nexus of the post-modern and post-colonial. What I hope to argue is that South African society offers a useful base from which to offer a critique of those knowledge practices associated with modernity.

## Knowledge Production and Resistance to Colonial Rule

Until recently, and perhaps even today, knowledge production on the left (and here I refer to those who for the most part aligned themselves with the politics of socialism), drew upon the narrative theories (theorems) of Marxism. Of course Marxism is no one unified and homogenous body of theory. In the South African situation it ranged between a 'workerist' emphasis upon the primacy of the working classes regardless of the play of forces, to a more pragmatic (and dominant) stance which analysed the interplay between race and class in the production of apartheid. Little or no independent causality was however granted to discourses of race – rather race was reduced to an internal moment in the endogenous development of the forces of production. Legitimized by the politics of the third international, this stance provided a justificatory narrative for the mass-based politics of alliance in the United Democratic Front and the National Democratic Movement. It was not very long ago that this politics resulted in the insistence by the ANC upon a 'radically dichotomous' approach to politics in which negotiations would be about the transfer of power to the people. They would take place at a square table – those supporting the liberation movement sitting on one side, the regime and its lackeys on the other.

This radical dichotomization of the social – a result of a specific political articulation linked to the politics of national democracy – put many intellectuals in the position of having to align their work to the struggle. As Muller and Cloete note, this implied that for whites, membership of small highly politicized groupings was a prerequisite

for the production of legitimate intellectual knowledge, whilst most black academics were drawn away from academic production into a position of direct political allegiance to the struggle. The politics of academic production demanded the allegiance of academics to the building of the new nation through a process of reconstruction (Muller & Cloete 1991). A moment crucial to the politics of reconstruction is one which I shall term (for want of a better term at present) that of ideology. My use of the term here should not however be confused with its more traditional denotation: i.e. misrepresentation (implying that there is a final and true representation of the facts.) Rather what I wish to emphasize is the productive nature of discourses – the fact that they invest with power certain subjects who from within this discourse claim privileged access to the analysis of reality. Now this is not mere academic trendiness. If discourses of liberation are forced to admit to themselves that they are merely another representation, not the true representation, to admit the impossibility of ending the productivity of the real via a final representation thereof, the radically dichotomous notion of liberation which their discourse relies upon must be questioned. Further, the productive power of this discourse in the creation of subjects who believe that liberation will mean the ending of exploitation, sadness, power, violence, and indeed the productivity of this power in contribution to violence would have to be acknowledged. Of course this relates back to my opening discussion, to the investive power of statements such as: 'With our matches, our necklaces and our petrol . . .'

At stake here is an epistemological claim, a claim which Marxism, for the most part, holds in common with traditional political and historical studies: a belief in an objectivity external to the speaking subject which is simply represented by the subject using a neutral language. The behaviouralist credo of American academics such as David Easton (1953) insisted that empirical political science represented the facts in the development of verifiable and reliable political theories. The insistence on political neutrality as well as the neutrality of language resulted in the reduction of normative inquiry, and political philosophy, to an interesting but rather useless phenomenon.[2] Systems-theoretical frameworks were adopted by many South African academics (primarily in the Afrikaans universities) precisely because they allowed a dispassionate and uncommitted analysis of politics. Positivist science thus focused on pragmatic change linked to state institutions, without questioning either its own discourse or that which it served to legitimate. Similar perspectives were adopted in other disciplines such as psychology (analysing the behavioural subject) as well as anthropology, sociology and even English studies which assumed the integrity of the literary text as a formally

constituted literary object which demanded a literary studies limited to the analysis of the thing in itself. The assumed neutrality of language is echoed by the caller spoken of above who had her world disoriented by a change in the denotative functioning of a term.

Marxist analysis of the colonial polity in South Africa relies upon similar though perhaps more sophisticated epistemological assumptions. In this case it is argued that those theories which do not recognize the primacy of class in and of itself are suffering from ideological mis-recognition. Marxism may admit that ideologies are 'true' to the extent that they interpellate subjects and place them in the world providing justification for the *status quo*. However these localized truths are retemporalised within a framework which claims that they are secondary to a more important historical truth, a being which is located within either the relations,[3] or the forces of production.[4] Most crudely, Lukács argued that the knowledge of the proletariat has epistemological warrant, and solves the Kantian distinction of the thing in and for itself which bourgeois science cannot. This due to their privileged position as the bearers of historical truth within the relations of production.[5] Underlying this discourse is a positivist assumption that truth is ultimately redeemable, that the subject and subjects will realize a truth resolving all internal and external antagonisms. There will thus be no further need for a logic of mediation: society and the subject will be fully present unto themselves. As is true of behaviouralist sciences this discourse depended for its social effectivity upon its institutionalization within the South African polity. Political parties, trade unions, academics, and journals all provided sites from which a liberatory discourse could articulate various organized aspects of society to its overarching assumptions about reality. The politics of mis-recognition receives its articulatory power from a politics of truth which assumes axiomatically the epistemological privileging of class-based knowledge; the ontological and the political privileging of the working class follow logically.

Marxism today however finds itself in a position similar to the unfortunate Gulliver when he awakes in the land of Lilliput at the beginning of Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. There Gulliver has escaped near death after being thrown up on a beach from a shipwreck. He finds himself tied down but capable, if he so wishes, of moving. When he does move the Lilliputians, whom he now sees standing around him ('creatures not more than six inches high'), shoot numerous small arrows which cannot kill but do sting him. Further, if one pierces his eye he may lose his eyesight. Marxism has assumed the role of a social imaginary which justified the actions of the left in those societies still struggling to achieve socialism, and in those where 'socialists' were

already in power. In spite of the overthrow of these regimes Marxism still provides the primary political orientation from which those on the left depart. However if it attempts to move and assert its power, a number of arrows are shot at it, warning it '. . . you are no longer the social imaginary you once were . . . we do not believe you any more'. Even in cases where the end of Marxism is proclaimed by those on the left, the launching pad for their arguments is the history of Marxism as it has been institutionalized. It must be invoked before being dispelled. However, like the space shuttle Challenger, Marxism may be intact on the launching pad, but once in the air it is wont to fragment into a number of pieces, all of which combine to severely undermine its claims. The economy of the production of these discourses of ending thus vacillates between claims to presence and absence, claims which point to Derrida's critique of the metaphysics of presence. Marxism as a social practice is neither fully present to itself, nor fully absent; it receives its contradictory being from an interregnum – an interregnum which institutionalizes uncertainty, and points to the need for the left to reconsider many of its own premises. Let me now relate this to the politics of modernity and enlightenment in the context of South Africa.

## Enlightenment and Politics

The ravages of colonialism and apartheid should provide more than enough justification, if any is necessary, for a critical evaluation of those knowledge practices which had their origin in the metropole. Instead the reverse has been true. A number of critics argue that apartheid reveals the necessity for a defence of modernity – it is only the politics of modernity and representation that will result in a 'better society'. The epistemological assumptions implied are similar to those I have outlined above: the possibility of establishing an objective truth via the neutral representation of reality using language. Even a critic such as Jürgen Habermas[6] insists that via reconstructive critique a science of normal language may be established.

A brief summary of this paradigm of representation suffices: it is assumed that language is rational insofar as it either accurately represents reality now, or suggests the possibility of a universal truth in its structure. Thus the rational reconstruction of this structure points to the possibility of a utopian politics which has epistemological warrant in equating a transcendental claim to truth with an empirically verifiable claim about the nature of language. The defence of modernity follows Kant in supporting '. . . the emergence of man from his self-imposed minority'. This minority is his '. . . incapacity to make use of his own understanding without the guidance of

another' (Kant 1963). It thus points to the 'historical production of a self-legislating humanity'. The project of modernity has been criticized upon a number of fronts, which are of particular relevance to knowledge practices in countries such as South Africa.

Adorno argued that in the process of liberation from external nature (suggested by Kant) the classic epistemological problematic of subject and object points to the false clarity of scientific fact. Identity thinking presupposes the adequacy of thought to its object, but in so doing liquidates the object. In Adorno's view this false clarity echoes the false reduction of different objects' use value to a general concept: exchange value. The 'liquidation of the object' has its most ominous overtones in those societies, and in those practices, where human beings are reduced to the objects of this imperial knowledge, and if they do not fit into the matrices of colonial knowledge, they are literally liquidated.

More recent defences of enlightenment insist that rationalism repudiates substantive revelations as absolute, but absolutises certain formal and procedural principles of knowledge and moral valuation (Gellner 1991). Methodological enquiry accordingly proceeds in a transcultural and absolutist manner. Knowledge as such, Gellner claims, is like this in all worlds and across all cultures and the method is not merely the cognitive aspect of this or that culture. While nature is subject to the laws of causation, moral and cognizing agents, exempt from ties to nature, legislate the world for themselves. Kantian ethics thus entails an obligation to be rational; it accepts belief in the existence of a unique truth, but repudiates the possibility of a substantive final truth ever being claimed.[7]

In colonial and post-colonial societies it is this privileging of a specific conception of knowledge and thus truth which is of interest. Its effect is to establish a differential between modernity's time and that which precedes it. This differential, Osborne argues, allows for the transformation in the meaning of concepts such as progress and development in the late eighteenth century, that makes them precursors of twentieth century modernization. The non-contemporaneousness of geographically diverse but chronologically simultaneous times in the context of colonial experience becomes the basis for a universal history with cosmopolitan intent. Results of synchronic comparison are ordered diachronically to produce a scale of development that defines progress as the projection of certain people's presents as others futures. Thus the philosophical discourse of modernity unifies and legitimates the geotemporal enquiry within a single practical definition of the modern. This of course has significant consequences for those knowledge practices relating to change and development in these societies.[8]

If we accept Foucault's argument (in *The Order of Things*), that epistemological contexts are crucial conditions of possibility in accounting for the occurrence of discourses, then an analysis of a western epistemological framework in the context of post-colonial societies may reveal the unwitting participation of supposedly anti-colonial movements in precisely the narrative which they claim to challenge. Mudimbe argues that most analyses of colonization[9] emphasize the exploitation of land, the colonization of consciousness, and the implementation of new modes of production in the process of modernization. Within this framework two construals of the colonial situation are made possible: (1) that it is an irrational system which excludes the majority from making a productive intervention in the economy – witness for example liberal accounts of apartheid in South Africa; or (2) that colonialism is rational on its own terms (the Marxist hypothesis). The suggested path forward then for under-developed post-colonial states is one which privileges the industrial revolution over agricultural development, and emphasizes tertiary and service activity in the urban centres of the country. The colonizing structure creates margins and centres, leaving many people caught in zones of transition between agriculturally and industrially based economies. Analytical studies create various paradigmatic opposites to explain this: tradition versus modernity, the oral versus the written, the agrarian versus the industrial. Marginality is construed as a result of the interstitial space which is created in the city between the modern and the traditional. These arguments rely upon the modern epistemological configuration for their validity.

A closer consideration of Foucault's argument suggests that there are other explanations for marginality, explanations which relate to hypotheses regarding the possibility of the classification of beings and of societies. The rise of the modern episteme initially implied the 'arrangement of differences and identities into ordered tables', resulting ultimately in an epistemological ethnocentrism linked to the enlightenment notion of a chain of being. From the fifteenth century onwards explorers tended to confirm these hypotheses. The separation out of various value spheres during the eighteenth century saw the de-aesthetification of everyday life. The beginning of an aesthetic discourse contributes to the development of specific spheres of art, delinked from any necessary relation to traditional power structures such as the monarchy. In many colonized societies this separation out had not taken place. Anthropological ethnocentrism was necessarily built into the position of the western ratio which is constituted in this history. It 'provides a foundation for a relation with all other societies which the historical sovereignty of European thought makes possible'. The enlightenment thus saw the imperialist

anthropological reification of the primitive. This reification, from the end of the eighteenth century onward, depended upon a History with a capital H, a form of social Darwinism, which insisted upon the inherent superiority of whites. European expansion to virgin areas was a logical extension of this premise. In linking social fact to physical phenomena in a scientific paradigm the social sciences contribute to this colonizing structure.[10] This argument suggests what Osborne makes explicit: the preservation of the heritage of *Aufklärung* could imply the suppression of the historicity and specificity, of the thought of the universal.

A last point: many critics have noted that the critique of modernity from a post-modern viewpoint implies a crisis of representation. I have suggested above that one should analyse conditions of possibility of a discourse, not merely accept it as ahistoric and given. This immediately implies that the pristine idea of a perfect match between reality and our representations thereof is impossible. It suggests a second point. Every-day language is not neutral; it is, Derrida has argued, the language of Western Metaphysics, which is both ethnocentric and logocentric. Traditional semiology had insisted upon the rigorous distinction of the signifier and that which it signified, thus assuming the possibility of a concept signified in and of itself, which language has immediate access to. Derrida, however, argues that any signifier depends for its identity upon the differential play of elements in the construction of identity. This implies that there can be no self identity of words, thoughts, things or events. Any theories which claim to have discovered the 'essence' thus repress their own historical creation and relationality as organized discourses in the world. The critique of representation however does not imply that representation may somehow be overcome, or that we can ever live beyond metaphysics. This becomes of particular relevance in South Africa today. In summary, then: knowledges which rely upon developmental models of society model the colony on what the metropole offers – the colony is not yet rational and thus does not qualify to be part of the 'true league of nations'; as the geographic past of a temporal present the colony is destined to tramp doggedly in the fading footsteps of its future.

## South Africa and the Politics of Modernity

South African politics today may be related to the debate between the defenders of modernity, and post-modern critics who argue that its assumptions are now mere empty rhetoric.[11] For a long time 'socio-political conditions limited [the analysis of] the construction of traditions and counter traditions, to a search for identity and political

struggle' (Nethersole 1990). Today however the apocalyptic certainty of self and other, which the radical antagonism of apartheid South Africa fixed as a nodal point, is catapulted into a fragmented socio-political spectrum which new social imaginaries find increasingly difficult to stabilize. The allure of a self-contained and certain political identity is threatened where the historical promise of liberation chokes on the blood of its own birth; and on the coming to full life of the puppets of the past: apartheid's frightening mutations in whatever form – mass poverty, homeland governments, crime rates higher than in any other country in the world, corruption in all political parties.[12]

At a moment when the politics of representation seem so important it is almost impossible to project as a given the universal promise of the liberation of the people. In addition the dependence of apartheid on precisely the narrative of modernity, the fact that the organizing principles of apartheid society come from this, suggests that in the nexus of the post-colonial, post-modern and indeed the modern our society should be groping towards new forms of knowledge, new practices of knowledge, which do not uncritically extend the assumptions of representability, rationality, and modernity. South Africa, rather than being a test case for modernity, is a space where modernity should be, and indeed is, dislocated. It is not then only the colonial subject, the colonial structure of exploitation, which should be challenged but also its structure of knowledge, an unconscious which is reinscribed into the discourse of liberation. What both discourses share is a repression of their own historicity, a belief that they, ultimately, embody full representability, and rationality.[13] The importance of a society in which the modern is disarmed in its inability to represent others, except as mirror images of its baby self (now an adult guiding the less fortunate forward) places the 'margins at the centre'. South Africa is not merely a CNN television show which the west watches as if watching its own infancy, every now and then deigning to throw a few shekels the way of development, whilst warning against premature adulthood. Rather, the detribalized western ratio experiences its own limits when challenged by post-colonial subjects, who seek to 'outwit modernity' (Muller & Cloete 1991).

What are the consequences of this for my subject: the production of knowledges of reconstruction? Firstly it should be noted that this view does not represent a myopia which argues: 'well, boys and girls we've discovered that there are no certainties; God's had a heart attack, and rationality sucks: let's jump into the affirmative pool of mass culture and enjoy the post-modern spectacle of total plasticity'. As indicated above the claim that there is no ultimate truth does not imply that we can simply escape the politics of truth, and of identity which in

processes of metaphoric condensation fix whole cultures, institutions, subjects, etc. Truths are negotiated, fixed, and changed as my initial example suggested. Politics, in other words, takes place in the space between certainty and meaninglessness. The politics of struggle, of contested identities (not certain futures) prevails; with due attention being paid to the already sutured nature of much of social reality.

For the social theorist linking him/herself to certain struggles, what does this imply? Firstly: a politics of respect, directly linked to the absence of any finally determining identity. For a long time academics and activists at the universities justified the articulation of political struggle along either/or lines. The organic intellectual can no longer preach certainty. A politics, then, of multiple identities, of uncertainty, of plural political democracies. Secondly, and on this point I am less certain, a pragmatic politics which pays due respect to the play of forces. Now the problem with this conclusion is that it may too easily result in a Rortian pragmatist position, similar to that of Karl Popper, which suggests 'piecemeal social engineering', ultimately defending the *status quo*. The dimension of social revolution, as I have suggested above, has to rely for its success upon the suppression of difference among a number of different social identities, in order to establish a social imaginary which creates a chain of equivalence. This can only occur in a relation of negativity: an emphasis upon the antagonism of all these actors to one common element (in the case of South Africa: the regime, apartheid) (Laclau & Mouffe 1985). Further, these differential identities, once fixed, cannot be wished away once the politics of compromise comes to the fore. Their claims and promises seep over into the present, providing ripe ground for new articulations, new positivities, which challenge the now pragmatic liberation movement. However, our only conclusion can be that the promise of a final liberation resulting in a reconciled and self present subject writ large is an impossibility. Thirdly, a form of critique which analyses the interplay between representation and repression – already the ground for this analysis has been constituted as the 'New South Africa' attempts to repress its past so that the present may appear all the more new. Unfortunately, to play on an analogy Gordimer lifted from Gramsci, the morbid symptoms of this interregnum refuse to die down. Lastly, it is time South Africa stopped viewing itself as the late developer after the image of a first world society, which those in the 'second and third world' must imitate, as if playing follow-my-leader. A critical re-evaluation of the assumptions we make in 'constructing', 'developing', may cut a path which acknowledges the limitations of our possible futures, while allowing the development of critical but pragmatic knowledges bereft of the sterility of certainty. The talk show caller who demands change reminds us of the difficulty of

negotiating what the past has fixed. The *double entendre* of the word necklace suggests that society may be changed – both in talk shows, and active struggle. However, if this possibility is to be realized, the Gullivers of Marxism and modernity will have to be brought down to size.

## NOTES

1. In the words of Claude Lefort.
2. In American institutions this resulted in the development of a systems-theoretical approach to the study of reality which aspired to theoretical objectivity and neutrality.
3. As was, in the last instance, the case for Althusser.
4. As in G. A. Cohen's *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence*.
5. I am aware that the thought of all three of these Marxists is radically different. What I am identifying however is a common positivist core.
6. Who under the early Frankfurt school critics Adorno and Horkheimer learnt the lessons of their critique of an objectifying attitude to reality by the subject in search of knowledge.
7. Many post-modern critics assume an agonistic stance in a direct repudiation of this attempt of the moral agent to escape nature. They thus emphasize societies' slippage, our attempts to make refuse of all that contradicts culture: the unconscious, burping, farting, cleanliness, madness, literature, death – all of which point to our natural proclivities, proclivities which are only controlled by exclusion.
8. It could perhaps be argued that when confronted with a society which does not conform to these procedural norms the defender of enlightenment is forced to admit that norms s/he claimed as universal and procedural are in fact culturally specific and thus substantive.
9. It is interesting to note that colonization has the Latin root colere, meaning to cultivate.
10. I have relied heavily on Mudimbe's argument (1988:6–16) in this paragraph.
11. Lyotard in *The Post-modern Condition*, Habermas' *Theory of Communicative Action*, Richard Rorty's pragmatist response to both Lyotard and Habermas.
12. A feature not specific to South Africa, of course. Witness for example the de-legitimation of all forms of political life in Italy, Japan, Nigeria, and Germany. The ending of the cold war has not signified the end of history (in a liberal consensus about what values should be institutionalized in society) as Francis Fukuyama would have us believe. Rather it has resulted in the emergence of new surfaces of cleavage and antagonism, antagonisms which the liberal democracies find difficult to deal with in the absence of an other – communism – which may so easily be called upon to unite those who differ.
13. As Ernesto Laclau has stated it: 'Contemporary social struggles are bringing to the fore this contradictory movement that the emancipatory discourses of both religious and modern secularized eschatologies had concealed and repressed. We are today coming to terms with our own finitude and with the political possibilities that it opens' (Public lecture delivered at the University of the Witwatersrand: April 1993).

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# From Insight to Ideology

*Robert Klitgaard*

The other day I came across an exuberant advertisement for financial software. It described the reactions of the software's user as raw data from the stock market were instantly transformed into insights.

> This is what we call the 'Ah-hah! Factor'.
> As in 'Ah-hah! That stock is way undervalued'.
> Or, 'Ah-hah! We've got a terrible portfolio balance here'.
> Or, 'Ah-hah! The trend suggests a trend in XYZ company's stock prices by late spring'.
> Or, 'Ah-hah! We better get out of this while we still have our shirts'.
> Ah-hah! is the sudden glow of insight. The hair on the back of your neck that tells you you're on to something that no one else has seen yet.
> It's the difference between a very informed buy-sell decision and a not-so-hot one.

One dictionary definition of 'insight' is 'a clear understanding of the inner nature of some specific thing'. But the 'ah-hah!' of the software ad captures an important nuance. An insight surprises us, grabs us, satisfies us. Arthur Koestler went so far as to characterize three of mankind's most basic reactions as

> 'Ah!' – That feels good!
> 'Aha!' – That makes sense!
> 'Haha!' – That's funny!

Which itself may or may not be an insight.

As I am now writing a book, I find myself in the business of trying to convey insights. This has led me to reflect, in stray moments looking away from the keyboard out the window, about where insights came from. Also about what insights become. Some insights are so small they are hardly worth the name, whereas others are huge. The big insights mean more to us, and they are more widely shared. Some insights become approaches to entire fields of study: think of Darwin's big insight, for example, or Freud's. A few insights become ideologies.

And so I have been wondering about 'big aha's' – to use Koestler's economical spelling with a colloquial apostrophe. My subject is those insights that suddenly make sense of a range of puzzles or paradoxes and generate for us new ways of thinking about the world. I think they

have some common features. And without proper management on our parts, I wonder whether the big 'aha's' may cease to be playful and useful, and start to be counterproductive.

What follows is exploratory rather than systematic, selective rather than exhaustive, and highly provisional. I examine four big insights from four fields (economics, sociology, religion, and clinical psychology). In the spirit of playful insight-enjoyment, I condense into each 'big aha' packages of insights, even populations of insights, and I will pretend that only one albeit large insight resides in each category. This simplification is nowhere more apparent than in my discussion of *the* economic insight.

## The Economic Insight

The movie mogul Samuel Goldwyn once discussed making a film with George Bernard Shaw. Goldwyn elaborated on the joys of pure art, the timelessness of creation, the rewards of doing things right. After this had gone on for some time, Shaw became impatient.

'Mr. Goldwyn', he said, 'the problem with our conversation is that you care only about art and I care only about money'.

What ensued is not recorded. Perhaps Samuel Goldwyn had an insight. Shaw's remark may have made him see that he, Goldwyn, was being pretentious and untrue – not a happy 'aha!' On the other hand, maybe Goldwyn saw nothing more than rudeness and responded with something unprintable.

Or maybe Goldwyn later had a big insight. Maybe Shaw's joke had a serious point. Maybe Shaw really did only care about money, and for that matter, Goldwyn may have been prodded to think, maybe that's all anyone cared about. To dress the point, maybe all everybody did was maximize his or her income.

If Goldwyn entertained such a notion, he was close to what might be called the economic insight. Each person has a bunch of tastes and capabilities. Each invests his or her effort in one or another activity. What the person decides to do is determined by the relative profitability of the various activities. The person maximizes profits (as assessed according to his or her own tastes) given his or her capabilities and the rewards for each available activity.

If you have the insight, you calculate at the margin, for that is where economics shows that maximizing calculations should take place. You draw implications for people, firms, and governments. For example, prices should be set equal to marginal costs: otherwise, prices are 'inefficient' and aggregate output will not be 'optimal'. You say that exchange rates and tariffs and taxes and tolls should be set in a similar way: the marginal cost should equal the marginal benefit. Along with each person's endowments and tastes, the incentives he or

she faces take centre stage. How a maximizer behaves is importantly explained by the incentive structure.

As abstract and simple as this insight may be, once you have it, it flies everywhere. Someone may talk about how redistributing incomes or opportunities may be 'fairer' than what we have now. If you have the economic insight you can't help but ask how this will affect incentives. How will the fairer system affect the relative profitability of various activities and therefore affect, after people maximize away, the resulting total amount of income and its distribution?

Or suppose someone else says that rents should be controlled so that poor people have affordable housing. As a person with the economic insight you will wonder about the resulting incentives for landlords – and you may forecast for the long term less and poorer quality housing.

The economist's insight may creep, or indeed sprint, into domains beyond economics. If you are fond of insects you may find that the behaviour of ants or bees can be understood as maximizing the colony's or hive's chances of survival. Closer to home, it may seem to you that calculations of marginal costs and benefits serve to summarize your child's decision to obey you without whining or your own decision to watch the baseball game on TV tonight instead of reading that book you've been meaning to. You may even start to think of altruism with the economic insight. Isn't there an optimal degree of altruism where one should do something that increases the profits of another only provided that it doesn't cost 'too much' in foregone profits of one's own?

The economic insight has psychological side-effects. Your predictions about rent control can be advanced without knowing the details of a particular housing system, and you don't need to study philosophy to make some good points about fairness and altruism. You may come to think that having the insight excuses you from the burdensome study of many details and of other big insights. Your insight may appear self-sufficient.

And you may become frustrated with those who don't share the economic insight. As Joan Robinson said about microeconomics, 'You only realize that it's not common sense when you start to argue with someone who doesn't have it'.

On the other hand, that's precisely what makes it an *insight*. Others – the uninitiated, including you until you have the insight – don't grasp it. It's not common sense, it's even counterintuitive. You may be excused for feeling proud of having the insight, if not for what often goes along with that feeling, disdain for those who do not have it.

There is a fairly standard method for transferring this insight to

others. It takes about a semester in a classroom, though this is not always successful. You need to put the initiates in the mood to think abstractly, get them to make some assumptions such as there are these markets with identical people and products and everyone knows everything, and suddenly the price goes up and . . . then they too may say 'aha!' If they do, it will make you happy.

Some people specialize in the economic insight. Academic economics has benefits but its practical relevance is often disappointing. Sometimes proving the insight's simplest 'aha's' becomes an end in itself. For example, research papers by professional economists strive mightily to prove that the sign of the relationship between price and supply is positive in industry X, just like the good old insight says it should be. This result is a long way from prescriptive relevance; but fellow holders of the insight, be heartened!

Nonetheless, the economic insight has practical applications, or gets applied. True, many academic economists may be so delighted to show that the theory has some qualitative consonance with the real world that they fall short in providing practical guidance. British economist David Henderson has argued that policies are influenced by economic ideas, not the ideas of academicians or specialists but those of 'do-it-yourself economists'.[1]

In this handyman sense, the economic insight slides easily into the free market ideology of public and social policy. As in other ideologies, there are villains and promised lands. Here the enemies are those that distort prices from the optimal marginal equivalencies or that interfere with individual maximizing in the marketplace. These villains include bureaucratic controls, monopolies, big business, big labour and big media, and all intrusions on individualism. To be promoted are competition and incentives; to be avoided are government interference and shirking. Utopia is attained when individuals maximize their self-interests. Distrust those who say that people will work hard for the state or ideology or art. Remember, all George Bernard Shaw cared about was money.

The economic insight has degenerate forms. From an astonishingly simple recasting of reality that helps one to see what one did not see before, the insight may come to replace reality. Remember the assumptions needed to convey the insight to the uninitiated? They are often poor approximations of reality. People and products are not identical, and people are not perfectly informed. In such circumstances we cannot count on pure competition to deliver the right incentives. (Some of the best economists have proved that statement.) And remember those preferences we said people had: Where did they come from? Are they all equally worthy? Do values enter here? Might those values be non-individualistic?

Plausible answers to these questions leave the simplest version of the economic insight in the dust. Moreover, what seem to be implications of the simplest economic insight can often be shown by more careful thinking to be wrong. The economic insight can become a pernicious ideology.[2]

## A Morphology of Insights?

As I reflected on these points about the economic insight, I began to wonder if other big aha's followed a similar pattern.

What pattern? First, a sudden insight – in the sense of 'immediate and clear learning that takes place without recourse to overt trial-and-error behaviour' (one of the definitions in *Webster's Unabridged Dictionary*) – clarifies a puzzle and causes delight. Then one sees that the insight applies over a surprising range. The scope of a big insight comes to seem boundless, in the sense of leading to partial, qualitative, non-obvious understanding of many phenomena.

The insight then has psychological side-effects. One tends to forget the 'partial' and 'qualitative' aspects of the understanding attained and instead tends to glory in what is 'non-obvious' to others. Reductionism lurks: one may think it unnecessary to learn the specifics of a situation or to master other insights. One may become exasperated with those who do not have the insight. This frustration may coexist with a sense of superiority and with a feeling of solidarity with fellow insight-holders. A big insight breeds a community of believers, abetted by standard methods for conveying the 'aha!'. The methods should be standard but exacting: possessing a big insight is exclusive but not unique.

Big insights are taken up academically. This leads to complicated studies which qualitatively reinforce the most basic lesson of the insight but which have little practical value. For insight-holders, however, the studies are existentially satisfying.

Big insights are applied, often far afield. Usually the appliers are not distinguished academicians but purveyors of simplification. Often their applications can be shown by masters of the insight to be invalid.

In the course of all this, what began as a playful and helpful illuminator of reality may turn out, in certain hands, to hide reality. Insight ends up as ideology.

How well does this morphology apply to other big insights? Consider a sociological antidote to the economic insight.

## The Marxist Insight

Behind the appearances of economic and political life are the interests of groups, especially of economic classes. These interests are the

ultimate forces of social reality. If someone says 'We are doing this because it is right or just or socially optimal or the will of Allah', the person with the Marxist insight knows better: they are doing it because it is in the interest of their class. Because whatever class is in power will make all policy choices on its own behalf, the only way to have change is to change the class in power.

If you have this insight, you gain a sudden sophistication, even cynicism. Take the current debate over public schools. Others debate the pros and cons of various programs to improve learning in schools. You see things differently. Schools are not primarily about cognitive skills but about class warfare: they are designed to teach future workers to be punctual, to accept the current social system, and to obey authority. You see the real issue as the socialization of the next generation of workers.

Or take foreign aid policy. The bourgeois debate deals with such questions as the effectiveness of aid strategies in promoting growth. You realize the real question in the background must be one of classes, both across and within nations. So the real purpose of foreign aid must be to support the ruling classes' domination of international and domestic markets. The debate is really over how alternative aid strategies fulfil that objective.

Class interests have their own dynamic. Depending on the state of technology and the level of 'development', certain classes will come to the fore in a predictable dialectic. (The time of the proletariat is coming.) Class interests dominate even science. Sure, scientists talk about pursuing truth. But if you have the Marxist insight, you know that 'truth' is not absolute but can be defined only in terms of class interests. The history of science shows that the 'paradigms' that guided scientists like so many mice in a maze were those imposed by the prevailing class-dominated ideology.

The purveyor of the Marxist insight distrusts positivism, individualism, and any static theory of preferences and capabilities. Positivism says that there is a truth out there in value-free, empirical space and time. Nonsense. According to the Marxist insight, nothing is value-free because nothing in this world exists except in a world of classes. Individualism is a charade. As a description it is simply inaccurate, and as a goal it is a reactionary bourgeois trick to keep the exploited classes' minds off their real problems. Static theories – that is, theories that ignore dialectics – miss the heart of the problem, the class-based generation of preferences and capabilities. (The economic insight, especially, is attacked on this score.)

The Marxist insight conveys other benefits. It undercuts the usual debates – also, therefore, the importance of many of the usual facts and tools of analysis. It may consequently seem to you unnecessary to

master the facts. Don't miss the forest for the trees. Raise conscious-
ness and later we can worry about Robert Dahl's question, 'After the
revolution?'[3] And there's no need to master the usual analytical tools,
except to uncover their hidden, nefarious, class-based assumptions.
Having this big insight is intellectually economical.

You may also feel superior. Those who do not have the Marxist
insight are naïve believers in appearances. Or they are reactionaries,
the selfish upholders of the existing order and perpetrators of the
systematic bourgeois campaign to cast everything in other terms than
it really is. You may tend to apply terms like 'deep', 'radical', and
'systematic' to your own way of thinking and analysing social issues,
saving for those without your insight such terms as 'ephemeral',
'superficial', and 'reformist'. You may alternatively feel proud of
emphasizing the value dimensions of seemingly neutral approaches
(thereby undercutting the technocrats) and of being a thorough-going
materialist (thereby undercutting the moralists).

You may be frustrated with non-Marxists, but the fact that not
everyone shares the insight, perhaps not even all Marxists, also sets
your world-view apart. It is a bond between you and your fellow
insight-holders, creating solidarity despite your different class
backgrounds.

The Marxist insight can be conveyed. A main device is to show
people that things are not what they appear to be. History is the main
tool. (Marxist sociologists and economists incline toward the histo-
rical wings of their disciplines.) 'You have been taught that the reason
for the American revolution was this, but look how this version of the
story makes more sense'. Particularly subject to the insight's
persuasion are those not doing well in the bourgeois world. It may be
refreshing to know that the reason one is not succeeding is ultimately
someone else's fault – more precisely, one's unjust exploitation by
the class that is succeeding.

If you are bitten by the Marxist insight, you may become an
academic Marxist. Often this involves research to demonstrate that a
historical event or a current process is qualitatively consistent with the
idea that classes matter or that ruling classes tend to perpetuate their
own interests. Usually this finding is a long way from prescriptive
relevance and practical application, even in a Marxist nation.

But the Marxist insight gets applied. Class interests (workers,
farmers, the poor) are the interests deserving attention. Their interests
are served by 'structural changes': controlling markets, inculcating
(particular sorts of) values in education, and redistributing income and
opportunity. The enemies are *laissez-faire*, individualism, religion
(an opiate), and the bourgeois social order.

The Marxist insight has its degenerate forms, its *lumpen*-Marxists.

It sometimes stimulates a sophomoric negativism. 'You can't separate facts from values . . . You can't talk about this problem without talking about the whole system . . . You can't talk about a tool of analysis without analysing how it will be used and misused.' It is not that such declarations are wrong but that they can become excuses for nihilism and an escape from details, subtlety, and hard work. The Marxist insight can slide into paranoia. Nothing is what it seems, someone else is always to blame for your problems or society's, there is always a conflict of interests. If a minority group is disadvantaged, it must be because a majority group benefits from this.

The Marxist insight in its degenerate forms collapses people into classes. It ignores individual differences and underemphasizes individual incentives. In its emphasis on conflict and the heavy swishing of a Hegelian dialectic, it seems to leave little room for compassion, co-operation, or love.

## The Christian Insight

Let us next examine a very different sort of insight and see how well the pattern holds.

The key elements of Christian insight are the presence of God as the creator of the world and of man in his image; the presence of evil in the world and in each of us; and the presence of love as the principle of redemption. If you have this insight, it may have come in this way: 'God loves me, awful me, evil me!' This 'aha' can make you reframe your world.

It is a simple and abstract insight. Worldly striving for fame and fortune has been condemned by all the philosophers, even pagans; the Christian insight says that it is equally fruitless to strive to achieve your salvation by doing good. No matter how much good you do, it is infinitely short of God's perfect good. 'Sinfulness' and 'evil' – to use two old-fashioned words – are fundamental in every person and fundamental to you. According to the Christian insight, you need to remake the *how* and the *why* you live, going beyond the *what* you do. In this remaking, that God loves you is your joy, as well as your example of how and why.

You may apply the insight more broadly. Just as your own evil will not be overcome by getting that job, writing that book, helping that person, or trying harder, so the world's evil will not be overcome by democracy or communism, by free markets or social welfare, by better education or better health care or better prisons. Evil in the world and in each of us can only be transcended through love – God's love and, thank God, sometimes our love as well.

If you have this insight, what seems important to others may seem

trivial to you. Their preoccupations, their fields of study, the details of a question at hand: all may seem devoid of meaning compared with your infinite concerns. You may therefore feel safe in ignoring their worries, fields, and details. Indeed, these other people may exasperate you. What seems obvious to you – what really matters and what is superficial – evades them. They don't 'get' the insight – they ask how you know God created the world, why the world is evil, indeed what it *means* to say 'God loves you'. Those without the insight find Christianity's great mysteries – such as God becoming man, the virgin birth, the Trinity, revelations – to be grounds for disbelief. 'Sure, love's great', they may say, 'but not all the rest of that stuff'.

But then again, if everyone had it, it wouldn't be an *insight*. You may subconsciously feel even luckier because you have been blessed with the insight in a world of non-believers. If you are aware of this pride, you probably hope that you avoid its frequent companion, a disparaging attitude toward those who aren't insight-holders. You hope to recall that we are equally sinners.

There are ways of conveying the Christian insight to others. Sometimes a religious service can get the ball rolling. Christians of various stripes have developed methodologies for the inculcation and refurbishment of Christian insight such as St. Francis' retreats. More often the insight is conveyed by example (as Christ conveyed it), which sparks curiosity in others and then leads to the personal relationship in the context of which another person may understand the insight and give it a try. Studies show that the lower classes are overrepresented among the true believers: most prone to adopt an other-worldly insight are those who in this world fare less well.

Some people become academic Christians. Many theologians are so fascinated by the insight that they want to trace its origins, explicate its parables, venerate its saints. Theirs is not the task of applying the insight to present problems.

Yet the Christian insight gets applied, often in surprising and sometimes in distressing ways. One of its glories is that it enables people to believe that life is not meaningless or random as some scientists seem to imply, nor ultimately materialist as the mass media seem to want us to profess. But this belief leads some of those with the Christian insight to find enemies that need defeating: scientists who posit evolutionary doctrines or television stations that 'publicize humanist perspectives'. The view may be taken further. If one is only saved from evil by having the insight, then we had better make sure everyone has the insight, like it or not. Those who do have it should be in charge of the state. They should decide what its schools teach, whether abortions should be allowed, and whether South Africa should be sanctioned.

The Christian insight can degenerate into its own dogmatism. The enemy of the instrumental view of life, it can become instrumental: believe this and you will be saved, don't and you will spend eternity in uncomfortable surroundings. From the source of joy and grace in God's love, the Christian insight can become the smug and loveless conviction that we are right and they, those Godless ones, are wrong.

## The Process Insight

A fourth big insight is perhaps less familiar and more diffuse. I will call it 'the process insight'. The basic idea here is this: Most real problems, involving as they do idiosyncratic situations and real human beings, have no 'solutions' or 'right answers'. The most one can hope for is to bring people together, organize a *process* for the resolution of the problem, and enable them to *solve the problem for themselves*.

This insight is pervasive in American business schools, where the case method of teaching is used. The original idea behind the case method was pedagogical. Professors had some answers, some models, some theories. Busy students in professional schools – students not particularly oriented toward theory – needed to get what was relevant from those answers, models, and theories. Cases were a way of rendering the professors' answers real to the students and thus to motivate the students to learn what the professors wanted.

But a funny thing happened. Students often discovered difficulties with the application of professors' answers; professors began to see new problems in what the students and the cases taught them. Soon the case method changed. Instead of being a motivator to apply and to learn what the professor knew, it became a process for students (with the professor's help, less help as students become more adept) to generate and debate alternative solutions, with no pretense that what they eventually chose would be 'the right answer'. The professor created through the case method a process wherein students teach themselves.

Psychiatry has witnessed a similar transition. The meeting between analyst and patient was originally a device for eliciting from the patient the deep background of his or her problem. The analyst would then make a diagnosis and 'tell' the patient the correct answer, perhaps doing the telling indirectly through further meetings. The analogy was medical, although the cure might have to be administered in a little trickier fashion.

Many psychiatrists today, however, view the process differently. The analyst meets with the patient to help the latter solve his or her

own problem. The analyst seldom presumes to get the right answer and tell it to the patient. Rather, the analyst's job is to create a process for the patient's unique case to be worked through by the unique patient. The 'cure' is in the process.

It is a simple idea, but once it's yours you tend to apply it well beyond the classroom or the clinic. You tend to downplay the substance of constitutional negotiations and worry about whether the process allowed all parties to feel they were heard and honourably represented. Sitting down at the negotiating table, keeping the lines open, 'wandering around' as a manager — these are always good. For a marriage or any other relationship to prosper, the key is communication — not so much what they say but that they talk. In general you aver that how things are decided is the key to how good the decision is.

With process elevated to such heights, substance may be demoted. As a master of process, you may begin to think you can be a novice of substance. Your job is to ask questions, not give answers. Indeed, you may get frustrated with all those so-called 'substantive experts'. You may think they are naïve to think that a 'theory' would be applicable to human beings and social situations in all their infinite variety. You may find all talk about 'absolute truth' and 'substantive justice' a bit unreal. Best, you say, to leave truth to a jury or a peer review, and justice to an elected parliament. Experts and theories won't help.

You may be pleased that others do not share this view. Curiously, you may be valued as a consultant or therapist or teacher even by those who don't have the case method insight, precisely because you never say they are wrong and you put them in the position of making the decision.

There are ways to convey the insight to others. The most effective method is to force someone to lead a class or a therapeutic session according to the insight's assumptions that they will not provide the answers but those in the session will. It often turns out to be easier to facilitate an absorbing discussion than to give an absorbing lecture. (Most people would rather talk than listen.) Particularly prone to adopt the insight are people in fields where answers are few or people in fields with answers who don't themselves happen to have them.

Academics with the process insight tend toward relativism. Methodologists study the cases and the patients and the processes and tend to conclude that it all depends on the particular circumstances which combinations work best. This relativistic conclusion carries little practical weight, except as a general reinforcement for the big aha.

Though academic studies of the process insight yield little of prescriptive value, some practical fields are thick with the holders of

this insight: consider, for example, *aficionados* of case law (with their emphasis on 'reasonable men and women' as the arbiters) and negotiators. When applied to economic and social policy, the insight is above all anti-theoretical. Things simply cannot be decided deductively or statistically. It all depends and should depend on the process of getting people together to solve the problem.

The process insight can degenerate. In its emphasis on specifics, it may lose the general and theoretical – even when they might help us to understand the specifics. The insight invites charlatans and encourages vagueness: this is what happens when process and context are elevated above all. Decision making may be left to anarchy or to the sheet exercise of personal magnetism on a group. Theory disappears, and with it rigour, science, and moral rules that cut across cases.

## Implications

There are many other big 'aha's' around, insights that go beyond resolving a particular puzzle to help us make sense of a range of problems and paradoxes. It is perilous to generalize from a sample of four, and even with these four I have engaged in considerable playful simplification. But is it possible that big aha's share a pattern?

*Abstract and simple.* It is not, of course, that the four discussed above are not full of elaborations, tangents, and science. They go well beyond a paragraph or two's summary. But all of the big insights have an *obvious* quality, at least once you possess them. As they resolve paradox, they are at once nonobvious and simple. They generate an 'aha!'

*Wide applicability.* Big insights have a number of fruitful applications within the fields from which they emerge. More importantly, they have suggestive applications ranging from our personal relationships to the state of the world. They help us look at life differently.

*Psychological side-effects.* Having a big insight that costs something to attain and then effortlessly provides lots of points that surprise those who do not have the insight: this has predictable and lamentable human consequences. One may become so proud of one's insight as to avoid or even denigrate details, tools, and other big insights. To those who hold it, the big insight's truth and relevance is obvious. Those without the insight may be deemed ignorant, naïve, unworthy, or unrealistic.

*A process of transferral.* Each insight has a somewhat costly methodology for conveying it to another. Optimally difficult transferability may be a condition for a big insight to become an ideology.

*The erosion of insight.* What struck me most about these insights

was that each had degenerate versions. These had common features. An insight that began as a remarkably helpful simplification and clarification of the world could become a remarkably unhelpful complete view of the world.

This is the extent of my insight on insights, but not of my curiosity about them.

For example, what is known about the generation of large insights? How do insights grow, spread, become academic, degenerate?

And how can we *manage* insights in ourselves and others? By 'managing' I mean controlling insights, playing with them, using them without oversimplifying or overamplifying, avoiding unintentional ideology. An insight should open our eyes, not narrow our perspective. Managing big insights may entail keeping more than one of them around – being exposed to lots of big 'aha's' and keeping them close at hand as we work on our practical problems.

## NOTES

1. David Henderson, *Innocence and Design*, London: The Economist Publications, 1986.
2. I use 'ideology' here in the negative senses of 'theorizing of a visionary or impractical nature' (one definition in *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language*) and 'an extremist sociopolitical program or philosophy constructed wholly or in part on factitious or hypothetical ideational bases' (one definition in *Webster's Unabridged Dictionary*).
3. Robert A. Dahl, *After the Revolution? Authority in the Just Society*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970.

# Reconstructing Marxism?
## A Review Essay*
### *R. Aronson*

*Reconstructing Marxism*, by Erik Olin Wright, Andrew Levine and Elliott Sober. Verso, 1992.

Analytical Marxism's moment of public breakthrough took place in 1978 with the appearance of G. A. Cohen's *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence*. It grew in strength and influence among Anglo-American academics throughout the 1980s, in an inter-disciplinary current that includes Allen Wood, Richard Miller, John Roemer, Jon Elster, and Adam Przeworski. Influenced by analytical philosophy and mainstream 'bourgeois' social science, analytical Marxists have been unapologetic in their 'wholesale embrace of conventional scientific and philosophical norms' and have prided themselves on their 'no-bullshit Marxism'. Their aggressive effort to free historical materialism from theoretical imprecision and obsolete baggage has also self-consciously sought to inject Marxist thinking into mainstream academic discussions. From this point of view, they might be seen as Marxist modernizers, bent on freeing Marxism from the 'vague programmatic schemes of an all-encompassing sort and . . . views that elude precise formulation'. Committed to contemporary standards of clarity and rigour, they have defended a more precise, more modest, less sweeping, less reductive version of historical materialism, hoping that 'a reconstructed Marxism, less grandiose but also far sounder than any of its ancestors, will emerge from this period of theoretical transformation'.

As Marxism and analytic philosophy became mutually congenial, new standards of rigour and clarity were introduced into Marxist theorizing, making it possible not simply to present and defend Marxism's conceptual structure – as Cohen did in his first book – but, in Alan Carling's words, to subject every one of Marxism's distinct claims to 'its own interrogation for meaning, coherence, plausibility and truth' (*New Left Review*, no. 160, November/December, 1986, p. 25). The reach of analytical Marxism expanded further into philosophy, and into economics and sociology as well,

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* (Author's Note: This review is drawn from my *After Marxism*, to be published in September by Guilford Press.)

seriously contesting the validity of the labour theory of value, scrutinizing the theory and social reality of classes, exploring the nature of exploitation under capitalism, and developing models for an alternative, socialist organization of the process of production.

Analytical Marxism insists that radical theory must always defend itself before the bar of argument, must demand good reasons, must rigorously scrutinize itself for illusions, fuzzy thought, and un-clarified assumptions. Only in this way can a politics claiming to base itself on a scientific understanding of the real world avoid becoming trapped in its own illusions, or worse, pushing its adherents as well as innocent people into catastrophe. This commitment suggests, more-over, that argument, whether at Oxford or on the shop floor, is a necessary dimension of any effective politics. Understanding just how capitalism exploits its workers, and being able to explain and justify this, is obviously a vital undertaking. So is clarifying and being able to explain the moral bases of political judgement and action. The widespread academic interest in analytical Marxism testifies to the importance of such questions, especially at a time when there are no Marxist movements. Certainly it can be argued that, in the absence of movements, any and all Marxisms are theories cut off from the practice that would make them historically true. Still, analytical Marxist thinkers have managed to generate new centres of debate and discussion where otherwise there might be none.

*Reconstructing Marxism*, by Erik O. Wright, Andrew Levine and Elliott Sober, deserves attention because it is not a general defence of Marxism but rather an effort to take the measure of Marxism in the light of its waning as a project of societal transformation, and with a critical eye turned towards removing its obsolescent features. In short, it is a systematic effort 'to clarify rigorously foundational concepts and assumptions and the logic of theoretical arguments built on those foundations'.

Written at a time when 'programs for social reform inspired by Marxist understandings of the social world and Marxist visions of ideal social arrangements no longer shape Left political practice', it concludes that Marxism remains 'surprisingly plausible' in the contemporary world. If Cohen's defence, written a decade and a half earlier, argues for a time-honoured position, Wright, Levine and Sober sort through the arguments of Cohen and Anthony Giddens[1] and self-critically subject their own position to rigorous logical and scientific scrutiny – in order to determine what parts of the edifice may be said to remain standing.

Closely criticizing orthodox Marxism, they remove its theoretical weaknesses, leaving a Marxism that has been freed from all teleology and inevitability, and that has been pared back just to those claims that

can be reasonably supported by a contemporary scientific conscious-
ness. It can best be understood in terms of what it absorbs from Cohen
and what it rejects. It is centred around Cohen's 'developmental
thesis': there is a clear and endogenous historical tendency towards
technological development, and such change is 'sticky downward' –
that is, it is usually retained and not reversed. This is because 'there is
a permanent, human impulse to try to improve humanity's ability to
transform nature to realize human wants', and because each improve-
ment develops interests seeking to retain its advantages.

This 'development thesis' combines with Cohen's 'compatibility
thesis': 'A given level of productive power is compatible only with a
certain type, or certain types, of economic structure'. These two
combine, in turn, with the 'contradiction thesis', which argues that
over time 'the productive forces will develop to a point where they are
no longer compatible with the relations of production under which
they had previously developed'. But to these Cohen had added three
further theses, the 'capacity', 'tranformation', and 'optimality' theses.
These maintained that an objective interest in transforming the
production relations will bring about the capacity to do so; that
compatibility thereby will be restored; and that the new relations will
be optimal. In short, the objective trend of history moves towards
socialism. Cohen further insisted that it is precisely the development
of the productive forces that brings about such a process of
change.[2]

In rejecting Cohen's last three theses after close examination,
Wright, Levine and Sober formulate what they call a 'weak, restricted
historical materialism'. This insists that Marxism has grasped:

(1) The necessary material conditions for epochal historical change
    (productive forces develop within a given set of production
    relations until conditions of instability and conflict appear);
(2) The direction of this change (the continued growth of the
    productive forces); and
(3) The means by which this change is to take place (class struggle
    leading to new production relations).

But they abandon the further claim of 'strong' historical materialism,
like Cohen's, that:

(4) A class interest in epochal change implies that the class has the
    capacity to bring about that change (see pp. 89–93).

This Marxism is 'weak', in other words, because it abandons all
claims to either necessity or likelihood, and sees 'the possiblity of
multiple routes to the future' (p. 90). It is 'restricted' because it
accepts Cohen's more recent narrowing of the traditional Marxist

claim that the socio-economic base determines the shape and character of the legal, cultural, and political superstructure, namely that not *all* non-economic phenomena are determined by the base but *only those that serve to stabilize the base.*

Weak historical materialism is thus the orthodox theory without the unlikely and unwarranted claim that what is necessary for epochal historical change is ultimately also sufficient. Yet, in spite of this difference, both orthodox and weak historical materialism hold that there is a law-like tendency for relations of production to correspond to forces of production in ways that facilitate the continuous development of productive forces. Orthodox and weak historical materialism are therefore historical theories in the same way.

The considered tone reflects how tentative are Wright, Levine and Sober's claims: they say only that 'if a defensible Marxist theory of history can be maintained, it will have to be along such lines. We have already suggested that the jury is still out and is likely to remain out for some time' (p. 97).

Is this perhaps the beginning of a reconstructed, sceptical, and humble Marxism – one that fits the contemporary world? In fact, in the name of 'reconstructing' Marxism, Wright, Levine and Sober create something altogether different. The problem is that they seem only half-aware of this, or in any case make it only partially clear to the reader. First, after having reassembled the most enduring themes of the Marxian project's theoretical component into guidelines for a new programme of research, they then acknowledge that their entire undertaking has been premised on the collapse of that project. But they do not *say* this until the very last pages of the last chapter. Only there do they make clear the starting points that have half-framed their analytical Marxism: *Marxism is over* as a 'unity of class analysis and scientific socialism, forged around a general emancipatory project' (p. 190). We are left, at best, with Marxism as 'a more restricted account of particular social processes and tendencies' (p. 191). In this very limited and specialized sense Marxism may be reconstructed, but 'it is clear that a retreat to earlier Marxist aspirations is no longer possible. The world has changed and those earlier forms are irretrievable' (p. 191).

The Marxian project is over. Does this mean that Wright, Levine and Sober conclude by explicitly acknowledging the *post*-Marxist character of their enterprise, for example seeking to find a way in which their still-vital insights can be absorbed into new theoretical and political projects? Not quite. I say that their awareness of Marxism's end only half-frames their work – first, because it comes at the end, and second, because even then it remains ambivalent. To the very end they describe this effort to rescue from Marxism's

general disintegration those *ideas* that may still be valid as 'reconstructing Marxism'. If, from the beginning, they have been 'agnostic, although optimistic' about clarifying 'an agenda for future work on the problem' (p. 12), at the end they remain optimistic 'that a reconstructed Marxism, even if less integrated, is feasible and . . . what is now experienced as a crisis will come to be seen as unavoidable growing pains' (p. 191). But what does 'less integrated' mean, if not that they have accepted, and even furthered, the dismantling of the original, integrated project I describe in *After Marxism*?

Certainly it is difficult to disagree with Levine: 'Marxian positions do need to be rethought'.[3] At the nadir of Marxism's existence, it is better late than never that a school of Marxists has finally gotten around to this. An implied question behind all analytical Marxism is: 'Where did we go wrong?' A related one is: 'What illusions and distortions were bound up with the Communist movement?'[4] Whatever else may be needed to reconstitute the Left, surely it is necessary to seriously and tough-mindedly clarify what can and cannot convincingly be claimed for a theory which, as a revolutionary outlook, entails a commitment to struggle and conflict.

Nevertheless, we should not deceive ourselves: in the process, the world-historical project known as Marxism is most certainly *not* being reconstructed. Rather, certain of its key theoretical underpinnings are being rethought so as to pose a new set of intellectual parameters and tasks. In the process, Wright, Levine and Sober have changed the goal of their Marxism from transforming reality to understanding it. Their 'less integrated Marxism' has been articulated not only as completely cut off from a political movement, but also from the awareness that it in some profound sense *needs* a political movement to make it true. Marxism has subtly and perhaps even unconsciously been transmuted from a theoretical/practical project of social transformation into something far more abstract and ahistorical – a 'theoretical project', an 'explanatory program', and a 'program of research'. Characteristically, the *political* question of Marxism's fate as a movement appears on *Reconstructing Marxism*'s first and last pages, but scarcely anywhere in between. Indeed, like much contemporary debate about Marxism the book begins by focusing on the historical movement and its 'crisis', and soon winds up defending and exploring Marxism not as a project, but as a mode of *understanding and analysis*, never pausing to clarify the decisive shift it has quietly carried out.

A point is reached in the career of any movement or system of thought when the thoughts and actions of its current protagonists (their own statements aside) diverge so from the original starting

points that they cease any longer to be definable in the original terms. This would be the moment when sufficient and essential features have so changed that we find ourselves stretching to use the same name for an essentially changed phenomenon. It is possible to pose this as a philosophical question, about the *structure and essential features* of Marxian theory. But the question – What *is* Marxism? – is not a philosophical question about a system of ideas, but an historical one, which includes but is not limited to the Marxian structure of ideas. At what point, we may ask, has the *project* claiming to be Marxism changed to the point that, whatever its proponents call it, it can no longer be characterized as Marxism? Recall that the project *as such* contained a series of anticipations about history that saw the socialist revolution coming, and that these were essential to Marx's unity of theory and practice. Recall also the powerful eschatological thrust of Marxism, the prophetic sense derided for example by Kolakowski, which I argue in *After Marxism* was essential to the project of social tranformation. And recall that Marxism's purchase on history was intimately bound up with proletarian struggles.

Although certain ideas may be regarded as Marxist and others not, Marxism itself is most definitely not equivalent to a *structure of ideas*. There is no question that we can define a certain *set of ideas* as capturing the essence of Marxist *thought*, another as deviating from it.[5] Wright, Levine and Sober's thought must certainly be classified as Marxist thought. It certainly makes good sense to modernize Marxist thought by removing the problematic dimensions I critique in *After Marxism* – its eschatological character, its objectivism and scientism, and its tendency towards authoritarianism – and Wright, Levine and Sober try to do this. But as I say there, these weaknesses happened to be Marxism's strengths as an integrated theoretical/practical project. What will be substituted, for example, for its vision of universal liberation stemming from proletarian emancipation, to give a reconstructed Marxism the same galvanizing power, the same wide appeal? Would a Marxism that might be modernized by minimizing or removing such central elements still be Marxism as a *project*? Similarly, it makes good sense to remove all of Marxism's unverifiable claims, so that we are left defending a more modest, more scientifically solid, less grandiose theory. But if we are left with *only* a theory, it is no longer Marxism.

It may be necessary, and even desirable, to honestly face the separation of theory from practice, and to study social change without the pressures and demands of relating to a movement or project of social transformation. And it may be wise to abandon the absolute centrality of labour and the working class in a vision of social change for a more nuanced and subtle understanding that these dimensions

are extremely important, even central, but not definitive. It may be realistic and honest to face squarely the fragmentation of the Marxian project, admit that its components may never be recombined, and accept the diminished task of developing one of its fragments as a mode of explanation. But whatever it is that we have when we are finished, it is no longer what was once meant by Marxism.

What we wind up with is useful as a philosophy and mode of analysis. But, by comparison with what Marxism was, it has become so eviscerated, so fragmented, so divorced from practice, that it no longer resembles the once-great world-historical project of transformation. That whole has been shattered by history, and we are left to debate over which of the potsherds deserves the original name. But what we possess are no better than scraps, none of which retain the sweep, the vision, the political purpose and strength, of the whole. They may claim the name, as does analytical Marxism, but they do so as so many Marxisms without Marxism. They have become so transformed, so limited, that even when their words and commitments ring true, they invoke Marxism's aura, but no more. However evocative, the ideas cannot conjure the fading reality.

By recasting Marxism as rigorous explanation and argument analytical Marxism has created a home for itself in the world of explanation and argument. This is a significant achievement. And, after the decline of the Marxian project, it has given us plausible arguments for believing that capitalism will remain unstable, as well as tools for understanding and criticizing our situation. But where do these arguments take place? And to whom are they addressed? In conclusion, what is the *standpoint* of analytical Marxism? Certainly all analytical Marxists may be personally committed to a classless society, and write from deep personal convictions. More important than motivation, however, is where in the world of thought and discourse a project locates itself. Wright, Levine and Sober are explicit: as I indicated earlier, rejecting Marxism's methodological distinctiveness, they begin with a 'wholesale embrace of conventional scientific and philosophical norms'.

Does radical thought differ in any significant way from 'mainstream philosophy and social science'? Marxism has always assailed the false neutrality and bird's-eye view of prevailing concepts and methods, insisting both that scientists are socially situated and that their projects, objects of study, and tools are socially constructed. This has always made Marxism's scientific dimension distinctively different from mainstream conceptions. But analytical Marxists, absorbing the approaches of contemporary science, unreflectively reproduce key aspects of the logic of contemporary social domination: its false

objectivity and neutrality, its disconnection from its agents and objects.

This is no error of perception: it stems from analytical Marxism's nature and goals. After all, it is no longer located within, nor reaches towards, any process and project of transforming the world. Because of its standpoint, it does not see its task as illuminating its protagonists and providing them with tools, or of asking itself what it means to be *without* protagonists.

Sartre describes analytical reason as the intellectual principle and ideological reflection of a society that separates individuals and views them from the outside, in order to dominate them. In this same sense, paradoxical as it may sound, analytical Marxism unconsciously situates itself *outside of* Marxism as we know it. Its thought-processes no longer represent a beacon from within the now-eclipsed project, but instead contemporary scientific reason, detached and neutral, free of any particular project, evaluating Marxism from the outside just as it evaluates capitalism from the outside.

In this sense also analytical Marxism is no longer Marxist. Sober, modest, stringent, its goal, admirable enough, is no less but no more than to *get clear*. The historical condition for its flowering was precisely the fatal decay of Marxism as a project, the fading that enabled Marxism to be tested and embraced as explanation and argument. In this sense, analytical Marxism is a post-Marxism that has not yet acknowledged itself.

## NOTES

1. See Anthony Giddens, *A Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism*, Berkeley, 1981.
2. G. A. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History*, Princeton, 1978, pp. 158–65; see also his *History, Labour, and Freedom*, Oxford, 1988.
3. Andrew Levine, 'What is a Marxist Today?', in Robert Ware & Kai Nielsen, *Analyzing Marxism: New Essays on Analytical Marxism*, Calgary, 1989, p. 55.
4. The fate of the Soviet Union provides the most glaring example. Cohen and the authors of *Reconstructing Marxism* agree that historical materialism insists on a high degree of economic development as an indispensable prerequisite for realizing socialism. Thus 'premature attempts at revolution, whatever their immediate outcome, will eventuate in a restoration of capitalist society' (Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History*, p. 206; *Reconstructing Marxism*, p. 32).
5. Wright, Levine and Sober raise this same question when trying to ascertain the differences between 'strong' and 'weak' historical materialism as well as between orthodox, neo-Marxist, and post-Marxist class analysis. See pp. 183–85.

# Book Review

*The European Intellectual Background to Hitler's Racial Policy,* by Edward Gulbekian. Surrey: Harq, 1994. ISBN 0 90043 002 8.

*The European Intellectual Background to Hitler's Racial Policy* is a curious document. But fourteen pages long, it is published in monograph form. Indeed, the copyright page characterizes it as a book, it is distributed much as a book might be (at an inflated price), though it was initially produced as a conference paper. Its pretensions in form cloud also its content. Though it is about an important topic, it purports to say more than it does and to offer novel insights that nevertheless have been better, more extensively, and more deeply covered elsewhere. A decade or so ago it may have been true that there was little knowledge about or focus on the intellectual tradition that made it possible, in a conceptual sense, for Hitler's racial policy to be articulated. But that is now far from the case. Seminal books like George Mosse's *The Final Solution* or Zygmunt Bauman's *Modernity and the Holocaust*, and Leon Poliakov's even earlier classic, *The Aryan Myth*, have furnished a rich and powerful body of work mapping the implication of European (and particularly German) intellectual modernity in producing the possibility of Hitler's racial policy. Thus, Gulbekian's little monograph serves at best as a quick introduction to the field.

It should be pointed out, nevertheless, that a fairly widespread misconception frames Gulbekian's analysis. He traces the set of ideas out of which Hitler's racial policy emerged to the second half of the nineteenth century, in particular to the intellectual influences of eugenics and social darwinism on racial theorizing. This widely held view makes it seem that the 'racial science' of the time appeared as an aberration, unrelated to modernity's intellectual tradition stretching back to the sixteenth century. But racial differentiation and what I have elsewhere called 'racist culture' are not only coterminous with modernity; not only did they serve to rationalize colonialism and exploitation; they also structured social relations, expectations, and possibilities throughout the modern, defining what people are, what they could do, and where they could be. In this sense, Hitler's racial policy is as much a product of the whole modern European intellectual tradition as apartheid. About this, however, Gulbekian is silent. Thus,

while he offers an introduction to an important aspect of modernity and the concern with modernization, it is one that is partial in more ways than one.

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