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Title: Justice, Ideology, and Struggle

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Abstract: Marx's approach to questions of justice and morality are captured by this metaphilosophical position, whereby Marx rejects an understanding of philosophical inquiry as the pursuit of foundations and universality. Philosophical justifications are, in the last instance, products of a particular form of society and production. Rather than abandoning the basic idea of human moral equality, the radical historicist approach allows the philosopher to make the Marxist progression from merely understanding the world toward changing it and moving it closer toward a moral horizon.

Young Americans increasingly view capitalism as not only wrong but also temporary (Ehrenfreund 2016; Goldberg 2017; Steverman 2017). A recent survey finds 51-percent of 18- to 29-year-olds do not support capitalism (Harvard University 2016). According to the survey's polling director, millennials think capitalism is unfair and leaves people out despite hard work. What, if anything, can restore their sense of fairness?

The Marxist metaphilosophical critique of justice offers a compelling approach to restore this. After explaining what this approach is, I argue that Leninist thought constitutes an application and extension of Marx's metaphilosophy. Leninism embraces the relationship between norm and critique, which produces a successful synthesis of normative militancy and ruthless critique.

Furthermore, I think the contemporary moment necessitates such a militant critique. The radical historicist critique represents an approach to deriving what *ought to be* from *what is* without either deconstructing our entire normative foundation (i.e. *what ought to be*) or unreflectively projecting bourgeois ideology (i.e. *what is*). Lenin's synthesis of normative commitment and empirical critique, I argue, is what makes his analysis so trenchant.

Marxist Metaphilosophy

Karl Marx's critique of capitalism is both empirical and normative. Empirically, it shows capitalism results in crisis; normatively, it argues capitalism is an unjust and immoral system of exploitation and domination. The inevitability of the proletarian revolution, however, does not rely on these normative considerations. Instead, it is the social and material contradictions of capitalism, the observable considerations, which are decisive in its rupture.

Although capitalism inevitably ends, we must question if the next historical step is normatively preferable. Indeed, the roles of justice and morality in Marx's normative critique of capitalism constitute anything but a consensus (c.f. Brenkert 1980; Greaves 1994; Lukacs 1972; Lukes 2012; Tucker, 1969; Veer 1973; Wood 1972). Marxism's normative ambiguity is an expression of a more fundamental ambiguity — that is, the relationship between norm and critique.

Marxist metaphilosophy, I suggest, permits us to understand this ambiguity. This metaphilosophical position represents a shift in framework from philosophical justification to theoretical inquiry. Theoretical inquiry focuses upon the extent to which society is or is not just/moral based upon some normative principle (West 1991). The radical historicist approach is to, “stop doing philosophy and to begin to describe, explain, and ultimately change the world” (West 1991, 170). Marx's metaphilosophy shifts our focus from philosophic justification (i.e. what is right or wrong) to theoretical inquiry (i.e. what is real, what is not, and what we can do to struggle based on that analysis).

By acknowledging the historical situatedness and social specificity of socialist normative demands, Marxism can also maintain a militant critique that our cause is correct. When Marx's interpreters attempt to reconcile his historicism with universal moral notions, they fall prey to very precise mode of philosophical inquiry that Marxist metaphilosophy avoids. Marx is far less

interested in the content and justification of moral norms and notions of justice than he is with their social origin and function. By empirically evaluating the unfolding history of class struggle, Marxism argues the struggle to free workers from the subjection of the ruling class advances real conditions of universality. In this way, Marxist metaphilosophy combines empirical observations and normative ideals by utilizing theoretical inquiry instead of philosophical justification.

Lenin and Marxist Metaphilosophy

Lenin applies and extends Marxist metaphilosophy in his works. His thought uses this approach to produce possible real-world mechanisms to achieve Marxist ideals. For example, Lenin aptly expresses a Marxist metaphilosophy during a discussion of the Social Democrats in *What is to be Done?*:

He who does not deliberately close his eyes cannot fail to see that the new “critical” tendency in socialism is nothing more nor less than a new species of *opportunism*. And if we judge the people not by the brilliant uniforms they deck themselves in, not by the imposing appellations they give themselves, but by their actions, and by what they actually advocate, it will be clear that “freedom of criticism” means freedom for an opportunistic tendency in Social-Democracy, the freedom to convert Social-Democracy into a democratic reformist party, the freedom to introduce bourgeois ideas and bourgeois elements into socialism (Lenin 1966, 56)

Lenin evaluates the principle of “freedom” in light of its opportunistic and bourgeois implications. The argument is not a philosophic justification of *true* freedom. Rather, the argument is that “freedom of criticism” is harmful to the advancement of socialism and conducive to bourgeois ideology. The argument leaves aside the normative justificatory questions to focus on how to effectively critique the contemporary moment to advance the struggle for socialism.

One of Lenin’s most radical and subversive critiques is in *The State and Revolution*. This work rejects capitalism and all Western forms of politics. His denunciation of “the state,” however, is only of the *bourgeois* state. Class domination will always rule a state. As capitalism constitutes a dictatorship of the bourgeoisie, the socialist state constitutes a dictatorship of the proletariat. Lenin does not reject this normative foundation of the state. Instead, he supports the proletarian state because it serves the struggle for what is real.

In these examples, Lenin’s uses the metaphilosophical approach to unite objective scientific inquiry with historically situated partisanship. The subjectivity and transferability of human knowledge are fundamental and persistent issues. How one approaches this epistemological question holds implications for how they approach politics. On the one hand, politics understood as a fundamentally subjective and non-transferrable form of knowledge is likely to turn to decentralized, deliberative, and communicative paths of transformation. On the other hand, an understanding of politics as, at least partially, an objective transferrable enterprise is more likely to embrace a decisive militant posture that sees value in centralization. By applying and extending a Marxist metaphilosophy, Lenin falls into the latter of these two camps.

Lenin’s Insight for the Contemporary Moment

Lenin unites a scientific perspective (implying universality and impartiality) with a partisan class-based perspective (implying particularity and partiality). In merging these dichotomies, he embodies the quintessential radical historicist move that Cornel West identifies — that is, the rejection of the *opposition* between the universal and particular (1991). Lenin offers an application and extension of Marxist metaphilosophy by establishing a substantive politics from Marxism.

Lenin's militant partisanship, however, presents a paradox within the modern/postmodern and critical/normative dichotomies. Its militancy is due to his objective scientific approach. Free of the bourgeois ideology, he examines what actually *is* at this moment and *why* it is. Leninism, however, is equally ideological and partisan. To smash capitalism requires that we know *what ought to be*. Holding both positions appears paradoxical. Unraveling this paradox, however, allows us to see how Leninism overcomes issues facing postmodern thought.

A postmodern democratic theorist may agree with the ideals of Leninism (e.g. equality), but reject the political project; this is because the way to achieve these ideals amounts to an anti-democratic government due to the vanguard party. Postmodernism, however, struggles to achieve the ideals of Leninism. This is because its principled commitments to subjectivity and moral equality eventually conflict with one another. If knowledge and norms are an indeterminate web of intersubjectivity, whatever arises out of this indeterminacy has normative value — even a Nazi resurgence.

Iris Marion Young's postmodern critique of unifying discourse, however, does not intend such implications. Young (1981) has a strong substantive sense of justice and injustice. I think she rejects Nazism as a valid subjective orientation. Young's assumption is that democracy will somehow play out to generate and sustain conditions conducive to universal human flourishing; in his time, Lenin argued that this is not the case. Eagleton (2007) shows that Leninism consistently expresses, rather than vulgarizes, democratic sensibilities. Given the historical context (*what is*), how to achieve these normative ideals (*what ought to be*) require treatments (e.g. the vanguard party) that may appear to violate these ideals. Lenin's argument has the principled commitment, however, that is lacking in Young's (1981) thought. Thus, he is able to reject Nazism and other injustices that do not empirically serve the normative goal.

Eagleton's (2007) critique of postmodernism, via Lenin, informs my radical historicist critique of Young. The basic moral ideal of human equality — and the normative orientation that follows from this ideal — is, if not incontestable, a widely accepted ideal. While equality is part of the ideological fabric of capitalism, ideological invocations of it do not suggest a universal rejection of human equality. As the radical historicist approach suggests, the proper response to such ideological invocations does not lie in a counter-assertion of a more enlightened, less ideological, and greater universal normative formulation (as Young offers despite her reluctance to invoke the universal).

Rather, the proper and effective theoretical treatment of ideology lies in its rigorous analysis of ideology itself. How does the idea of human equality factor into capitalist ideology? How is it that hollow allusions to liberty and equality effectively veil the evils of capitalism in the eyes of many people? How can theorists bring to light how hollow and empty such ideological

pronouncements actually are? What are the practical steps needed to transcend this narrow horizon of bourgeois morality? The radical historicist approach allows us to leave behind the philosophical quibbles over whether or not elements of bourgeois ideology are philosophically justifiable.

Far from implying specific techniques, the radical historicist approach implies the basic — yet profound — orientation toward *struggle*. The contemporary Marxist must cut through capitalism's disorienting ideological fog. It is precisely the radical historicist approach, which sharpens the blade of its critique. Marxist metaphilosophy and praxis synthesizes ruthless critique with principled moral commitment. As Mao Tse Tung (1964) famously put it: "Dare to Struggle and Dare to Win."

Conclusion

The relationship between critique and norm, and the fundamental epistemological ambiguities which underlie it, remain central points of tension and debate. The conversation around the Marxist critique of justice is instructive because its radical historicist approach to the topic can strengthen a modern and postmodern approach. It necessitates an ideological reflection that is missing in modern approaches. The radical historicist approach is likely to steer one away from merely reproducing capitalist subjectivity and ideology. Furthermore, this approach is compelling due to its rooting of theoretical inquiry, which is missing in postmodern approaches. The radical historicist approach, therefore, avoids the pitfalls of embracing either premature social reconciliation, on the one hand, or a defeatist attitude toward the idea of a common good, on the other. Marxist metaphilosophy allows us to justify anti-capitalist socialist norms without either blind amoral acceptance or appealing to highly abstracted notions of justice and morality as the final court of appeal.

The radical historicist approach offers a compelling conceptual apparatus for addressing the problem of justice in the context of deep class divisions and socio-political polarization. It addresses millennials' concern of the unfairness within capitalism. Fairness (and therefore justice) may not exist in this system. Through a combination of ripe historical conditions and revolutionary theory and practice, global capitalism is subject to challenge and change. This approach suggests and supports the need for a militant *and* ruthlessly critical fight against capitalism and all the violations of human equality. Today — with the resurgence of white supremacist terrorism, capitalism at a dead end, racist lynching by police, our environment in irreversible degradation, our prisons filled, and schools abandoned — such militant struggle is not only needed but needed urgently.

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