

Kant After Marx

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Abstract

While there are many points of opposition between the political philosophies of Marx and Kant, the two can greatly benefit from one another in various ways. Bringing the ideas of Marx and Kant together thus offers a promising way forward for each view. Most significantly, a powerful critique of capitalism can be developed from their combined thought: Kant's political philosophy offers a robust idea of freedom to ground this critique, while Marx provides the nuanced understanding of social and political power structures under capitalism that allows this idea of freedom to be properly applied.

Keywords: Kant, Marx, capitalism, freedom

The political philosophies of Karl Marx and Immanuel Kant are in many ways strongly opposed. Kant's political philosophy is built on the foundation of the one innate right to freedom, from which, Kant argues, all other rights are derived (*MM*, 6: 237-38).¹ ² Marx, in contrast, severely criticizes moral theories that make arguments based on ideals such as liberty and equality, arguing that these ideas merely represent the interests of the

¹ I am very grateful for the many helpful comments I received on this article. I would especially like to thank Howard Williams, Allen Wood, Lea Ypi, Japa Pallikkathayil, Michael Thompson, and the participants at the workshop for this special edition held at LSE.

² References to Kant's work follow the standard Akademie pagination. I use the following abbreviations and translations: *LE* = Lectures on Ethics (Kant 1997) (these are students' notes from Kant's courses in ethics); *MM* = *The Metaphysics of Morals* (Kant 1996).

bourgeoisie ruling class and serve to reinforce their hold over society.³ Furthermore, this criticism may plausibly appear to be well founded in the case of Kant's discussion of property and economic systems. Kant's discussion of these systems is brief, and what little he does say seems to take for granted a system of private ownership and free exchange. Kantian principles are even invoked by F.A. Hayek to justify his laissez-faire capitalist criticism of the welfare state.⁴ Certainly, Kant's discussion of economic and property systems stands in sharp contrast to Marx's rich and developed account of such social institutions as well as his thorough critique of capitalism.

Possibly as a result of this opposition, and possibly as a result of the lack of attention Kant's *Metaphysics of Morals* has received until recently, when scholars do draw connections between Marx and Kant, often they draw inspiration from Kant's ethical or aesthetic philosophy to enhance Marx's social critique. Over the years, a number of scholars have drawn on Kant's ethics to supplement Marx's socialism. From Karl Vorländer and other neo-Kantians in the late 1800s to early 1900s to Harry van der Linden's revival of Hermann Cohen's neo-Kantianism in 1988, scholars have argued that Kantian ethics give us good ethical reasons to transition to a socialist productive system (Vorländer 1911; van der Linden 1988). Scholars have also drawn on Kantian aesthetics in arguing for socialism; recently, for example, Mike Wayne developed a Marxist reading of Kant's third *Critique*, arguing that in this work, Kant was 'reaching towards the

³ As Marx puts it, 'each new class which puts itself in the place of the one ruling before it, is compelled, merely in order to carry through its aim, to represent its interest as the common interest of all the members of society, that is, expressed in ideal form: it has to give its ideas the form of universality, and represent them as the only rational, universally valid ones' (1978b: 174).

⁴ Hayek interprets Kant as holding that 'juridical laws [must] abstract altogether from our ends, they are essentially negative and limiting principles which merely restrict our exercise of freedom,' which in turn inspires Hayek's criticism of the welfare state (1976: 43).

category of the social that was missing from Kant's earlier philosophical architecture' (2014: 6). Scholars have even connected Kant's theoretical philosophy with Marx—Kojin Karatani, for example, draws on Kant's method in the first *Critique* to develop a new reconstruction of Marx's critique of capital (Karatani 2003). Lucien Goldmann, a French Marxist of the mid-twentieth century, focused on almost every aspect of Kant's philosophy other than his political philosophy in arguing that the philosophies of Kant and Marx are not so opposed as many would have us believe.⁵

Some scholars do draw connections between the political philosophies of Marx and Kant despite the large points of opposition between the two sets of views. Allen Wood, for example, has emphasized the similarity between Kant and Marx's notions of equality (2014), while Lea Ypi has emphasized important points of continuity between Kant and Marx's accounts of revolution (2014a). Still, a more comprehensive account of the relationship between the political philosophies of the two has not been undertaken. In this volume, Howard Williams makes a more general study of the relationship between the political philosophies of Marx and Kant.

Here, I argue that bringing together the political philosophies of Kant and Marx can greatly enrich them both. As I will argue, the strengths of each view are complementary and can ameliorate the weaknesses of the other. In this way, bringing the ideas of Marx and Kant together offers a promising way forward for each view. Most significantly, bringing these ideas together offers a robust framework for developing powerful and nuanced critiques of capitalism and economic injustice. Kant's political philosophy offers

⁵ Throughout his *Immanuel Kant*, Goldmann emphasized the theme of 'totality' throughout Kant's work, emphasizing the importance of this concept as a precursor to Hegel and Marx (2011).

a robust idea of freedom to ground such critiques, while Marx provides the nuanced understanding of social and political power structures under capitalism that allows this idea of freedom to be properly applied.

I. KANT AND MARX ON OWNERSHIP AND EXCHANGE: KEY WEAKNESSES

Before I can explain how each view's strengths offset the other's weaknesses, it is necessary to explicate what I take those weaknesses to be. My goal here, though, is not to develop a full account of the deficiencies of each. Rather, it is to give an account of what I take to be the most important deficiencies that can be ameliorated by drawing on the other's work, as I will argue in subsequent sections.

i. Kant

Kant's account of ownership and exchange seems to take for granted private ownership and market exchange, opening him up to criticism that his work on the subject merely serves to bolster the authority of the capitalist productive system. In discussing ownership in his *Doctrine of Right*, which constitutes the bulk of his discussion of the topic, Kant focuses almost exclusively on private ownership. Much of his discussion seems to take private ownership for granted. For example, he repeatedly describes objects 'as something which could be objectively *mine or yours*,' (*MM*, 6: 246, emphasis added), or in similar terms. His account of original acquisition also seems to be focused on the private acquisition of objects.⁶ While he does occasionally seem to acknowledge the

⁶ Kant's account of original acquisition has three aspects: first, a person must apprehend an object (take physical possession of it); second, that person must give a sign that she has taken control of that object and of her 'act of choice to exclude everyone else from it'; third, the general will must give a law that appropriates that object to that individual (*MM*, 6: 258-59).

rightful possibility of other systems of ownership, as for example when he briefly discusses the communal ownership of land in Mongolia (*MM*, 6: 265), such examples are few and far between. Furthermore, although he barely discusses exchange, what little he does write on the subject seems to take for granted a corresponding system of market exchange—his account of contract, for example, suggests that individuals will be freely deciding between themselves what goods they will exchange (*MM*, 6:271-77).

Kant's arguments concerning socioeconomic justice are similarly limited. He does offer a brief argument for the state being authorized to tax the wealthy to support the poor, but this argument is brief and obscure (*MM*, 6: 326). Though Kantians have tried to fill in the blanks in providing enhanced interpretations of Kant's account⁷ or by developing their own Kantian accounts,⁸ Kant's expressed thoughts on the subject provide a meager foundation for building a Kantian theory of socioeconomic justice.

Given the time in which he lived, it is unsurprising that Kant did not have a fully formed concept of capitalism and could not fully anticipate the complex social realities that would develop under capitalism.⁹ The failure to account for these complex social realities, though, leaves Kant open to the Marxist critique that Kant is merely providing ideological support for the capitalist productive system. On this view, declaring citizens formally free obscures the way in which these citizens are bound to comply with the dictates of the capitalist system.

⁷ See, for example, Murphy 1970: 146; Gregor 1985; and most recently, Ripstein 2009: 267-299.

⁸ See, for example, Allen Wood's fecund Fichte-inspired Kantian account (Wood 2008: 193-205). See also Kaufman 1999, Holtman 2004, and Varden 2006.

⁹ For a developed discussion of Kant's account of commercial society, see Ypi 2014b.

ii. Marx

While Marx's thought has already provided an invaluable contribution to the understanding and critique of economic institutions, the further development of Marxian social critique is impeded by key deficiencies of Marx's work.

First, the further development of Marx's thought has been and still is hampered by some Marxists' fervent and dogmatic adherence to Marx's own arguments regardless of their strength. As Allen Wood explains, Marx himself 'consistently urged the movement to practice the most ruthless self-criticism' and stressed 'learning from its own mistakes as its only hope in fulfilling its mission of universal human emancipation' (2004: xiv). Despite this, throughout its history, the movement that developed from Marx's thought has often been beset with dogmatism. As Wood puts it, 'mind-numbing devotion was regarded as the solitary touchstone of proletarian solidarity and questioning the truth of what Marx wrote was equated with betrayal of the movement' (2004: xiv).

With an intellectual environment often so ill-suited for growth, it is unsurprising that this deficiency has led to another: parts of the Marxist tradition have stubbornly held on to Marx's most dubious views in spite of considerable evidence against them. According to Wood, Marx's historical materialism holds as its 'central claim' that 'people's economic behavior, their 'mode of production in material life,' is the 'basis' of their social life generally, that this 'economic basis' generally 'conditions' or 'determines' both the society's remaining institutions, and the prevalent ideas or forms of social consciousness' (2004: 63). The inevitable tendency for growth of the productive forces of society made the transition from feudal to capitalist social relations necessary and inevitable, and was

supposed to have made the transition from capitalist to communist social relations necessary and inevitable.¹⁰ As G.A. Cohen puts it, though, ‘history has shredded’ these predictions (1995: 7). Though the revolution still may come, it certainly did not arrive as predicted. The reluctance of some to abandon Marx’s declared views even when they are proven false has greatly inhibited the development of Marxian thought.

If the revolution is not imminent as Marx predicted it would be, Marxism is left with a further problem: it is powerless to claim that we *should* bring the revolution about. Marx criticizes morality as ideology reinforcing the productive system of society. He attempts to make it clear that the claims of historical materialism are, as Cohen puts it, empirical and ‘substantially value-free’ (1995: 1). History has shown that a transition to communist society was neither immanent nor inevitable. If we want social change to happen, we have to convince people that they should make it happen. Without the aid of morality, this will be a very difficult task.

II. BRINGING KANT TO MARX

I argue in this section that drawing on Kant’s philosophy can help to offset these weaknesses of Marx’s views. First, I will argue that the Kantian critical method can combat the dogmatism of the Marxist tradition, and so help weed out those of Marx’s views that cannot survive critical inquiry. Second, I argue that Kant’s theory of right and the innate right to freedom which serves as its foundation can provide a robust ground for much of Marx’s critique of capital.

¹⁰ Allen Wood gives a very helpful explication of historical materialism and its predictions. See 2004: 61-124, esp. 75-81.

i. Drawing on the Kantian Critical Method

The first weakness discussed above was the dogmatism of Marxism. While Marx himself disavowed dogmatism and endorsed the critical method, his language throughout his works makes it clear that he, at least, was convinced of the truth of his views. Furthermore, insofar as the purpose of Marx's writings was to create social change, this purpose was opposed to subjecting those writings themselves to critical inquiry. Marx intended through his writings to bring the revolution about—what better way to do this than to convince people that they have no choice but to bring the revolution about? The tone of his writings meant for popular consumption makes this purpose clear—Marx intended to create a working-class movement with his work. The impassioned rhetoric of the *Communist Manifesto*, for example, is written so as to convince and agitate the workers of the world, not to encourage them to subject the *Manifesto* itself to dispassionate rational critique.¹¹

As stated above, contemporary Marx scholars such as Wood and Cohen acknowledge the dogmatism that has plagued Marxism throughout its history. But that this dogmatism posed a significant problem for the real growth of Marxian thought was apparent shortly after the inception of Marxism. Eduard Bernstein was once a committed Marxist, even editing *Der Sozialdemokrat*, the official publication of the German Social Democratic party, and becoming a personal friend of Engels (Bernstein 1993: xvii). However, Bernstein fell out of favor with devout Marxists, such as Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Kautsky, when he began to develop a critique of Marxism that rejected some of its key doctrines (Bernstein 1993: xxi).

¹¹ For criticism along these lines, see Karl Popper's criticism of historicism (2002).

In *The Preconditions of Socialism*, Bernstein recognizes the strong tendency of Marxists to preserve traditional doctrine to the greatest extent possible. As he puts it, ‘people are rarely prepared to take full account of the significance of the changes that have taken place in the preconditions of their traditions. Usually they prefer to take into account only changes vouched for by undeniable facts and then to bring them as far as possible into harmony with traditional slogans’ (1993: 190). Despite the immense pressure from Marxists to conform, Bernstein continued to argue that this problem was prevalent amongst them. In *The Preconditions*, he argues that Marxists should rid themselves of the mistakes of Marx and Engels: ‘The fact that Marx and Engels once subscribed to an error does not justify continuing to maintain it; and a truth does not lose its force because it was first discovered or expounded by an anti-socialist or not completely socialist economist’ (1993: 194).

In arguing that the advent of socialism can and should be attained democratically, Bernstein argues that Marxists should not cling to the belief that the revolution is imminent, nor should they let the movement’s tactics or direction be dictated by this assumed forthcoming collapse of capitalism (1993: 1). In addition, Marxists should beware of ‘arbitrary deduction’ following from Marx’s Hegelian dialectical method, where pleasingly symmetrical principles such as thesis being followed necessarily by antithesis and ‘the negation of the negation’ become increasingly unwieldy deductive tools as the concepts they are applied to become more complex (1993: 31).

That some followers of Marx still believe the revolution to be necessarily forthcoming, although they must now admit that it will be somewhat slower to arrive than Marx originally thought, shows that this critique is still relevant today. Perhaps it is more

relevant than it was then, given the even longer tradition of dogged adherence to Marxist doctrine. These words are still just as true as when Bernstein wrote them: ‘the *further development and elaboration of Marxist doctrine must begin with criticism of it*’ (1993: 28).

To rid Marxism of dogmatism and its consequent false doctrine, Bernstein suggests a ‘return to Kant’ (1993: 209). For Bernstein, a return to Kant represents a ‘return not to the letter of what the Königsberg philosopher wrote but only to the fundamental principles of his criticism’ (1993: 210). Bernstein expresses the conviction that ‘Social Democracy needs a Kant to judge the received judgement and subject it to the most trenchant criticism’ (1993: 209). In a lecture with the Kantian title ‘How is Scientific Socialism Possible?’, Bernstein draws on his Kantian inspiration in further questioning Marxist doctrine, arguing that the downfall of capitalism and the rise of socialism cannot be scientifically proven to be inevitable (1996).

Of course, that this problem of dogmatism in the Marxist tradition should be resolved is obvious—certainly, we should all subject our beliefs to real scrutiny and be ready to abandon them when they deserve to be abandoned. However, the obviousness of this truth does not obviate the need to remind ourselves of it continually, nor has it prevented dogmatism from plaguing the Marxist tradition since its inception. Consciously drawing on the Kantian critical tradition can help to resolve this persistent problem. In order for the Marxian tradition to have a future, those of us who wish to see it must openly and sincerely determine which of Marx’s ‘scientific’ claims can or should be held onto.

ii. Drawing on The Kantian Framework of Rights

If the transition from capitalism to socialism is not necessary, then Marxism does face the further quandary introduced above: if the transition away from capitalism is not inevitable, then people have to choose to make that transition happen. Traditional Marxist doctrine, insofar as it eschews moral argumentation,¹² seems powerless to recommend that people *should* do any such thing. In order to argue that we have an obligation to bring this transition about, Marx's theory must be supplemented with moral theory.

A number of scholars have drawn on Kant's ethical theory to provide just such a supplement to Marx's claims. Lucien Goldmann, for example, developed in 1945 a reading of Kant's ethics as containing an implicit critique of capital (2011). According to Goldmann, Kant's key insight was human beings' inevitable pursuit of what Goldmann refers to as 'totality': for Kant, as well as for other philosophers and poets, 'the meaning of human life lies in aspiration towards the absolute, towards totality' (2011: 51). According to Goldman, rather than being prevented from attaining this ideal by the limits of human nature, as Kant suggests, we are limited instead by our place in capitalist society.¹³ Capitalist society prevents our achieving the true human community that would allow us to attain these ideals, in part because in this society 'men are treated as means with a view to creating profits' (2011: 176). For this reason, according to Goldmann, Kant's formula of humanity, which commands us to treat people as ends in themselves

¹² Of course, some Marxists argue that this nonmoral reading of Marx is mistaken, and argue instead for an ethical interpretation of Marx. See, for example, Wilde 1998.

¹³ As Howard Williams puts it, in Goldmann's view our 'animal inclinations get the better of us not because of a flaw inherent in our make-up as human beings, they get the better of us because of a flaw in our makeup as members of capitalist society' (1983: 224).

and never merely as means, and ethics in general constitute ‘a radical rejection of existing society’ (2011: 176).

Goldmann’s argument, of course, is in great tension with Kant’s philosophy. To accept Goldmann’s reading, one would have to reject Kant’s fundamental views on the nature of human existence and the limits of human knowledge. Furthermore, his argument that the formula of humanity condemns market transactions requires a good deal more to show that treating others as means to profits consists in treating them *merely* as means. Still, Goldmann’s emphasis on Kant’s hope for a true human community does strike on an important point of continuity between Kant and Marx. According to Goldmann, ‘nothing deserves the name of philosophy which is not aimed at the liberation of man and the realization of a true community’ (2001: 228-29) a sentiment, one could argue, also shared by both Kant and Marx.

For another example, Harry van der Linden draws on different aspects of Kant’s ethics to support Marx’s critique of capital.¹⁴ In *Kantian Ethics and Socialism*, he builds on the work of earlier neo-Kantian Hermann Cohen, drawing out what he takes to be the fundamental socialist insights of Kant’s ethical theory (1988). He also takes himself to be following Cohen in criticizing Marxism ‘on the grounds that a morally defensible socialism is an ethical socialism and that the philosophical foundations of a tenable socialism are to be sought in Kant, not Hegel’ (1988: vii). According to van der Linden, the categorical imperative commands us to seek the highest good of Kant’s ethical theory, which van der Linden characterizes as a society of legislators, understood as ‘a society

¹⁴ Similar to Harry van der Linden, Karl Vorländer also sought to provide Kantian ethical foundations for socialism (1911).

thoroughly democratic on all its institutional levels' (1988: 37). He further draws on Kant's philosophy of history, including his take on the French Revolution (1988: 165-194), to argue that there is reason to hope that human beings can make the progress needed to achieve this highest good (1988: 91-133).

Van der Linden's insights here are important—our ethical lives must cohere with socialism in order for this form of social organization to be a morally desirable alternative to capitalism. Van der Linden's socialized account of the highest good helps to show that this coherence obtains within the Kantian system. Furthermore, struggling to attain socialism will require a great deal of rational hope, and van der Linden's account helps to give us this. But while this account of an ethical foundation for socialism is intriguing and ethically valuable, it does not take the further step of drawing a connection between socialism and Kant's theory of right.

In contrast with Kant's ethical theory, Kant's political philosophy is an as-yet virtually untapped resource for supplementing Marx's critique. And it has even more to offer. Kant's ethical theory can only ground moral claims of the sort that conclude that we have ethical duties to change our productive system. Kant's theory of right, though, can ground stronger conclusions: within Kant's theory of right, one can argue that having a capitalist system in place violates the rights of all citizens within that system, and that we as a society have a corresponding duty change that system.

The foundation of Kant's theory of right is the innate right to freedom: '[f]reedom (independence from being constrained by another's choice), insofar as it can coexist with the freedom of every other in accordance with a universal law, is the only original right

belonging to every man by virtue of his humanity' (*MM*, 6: 237). The innate right to freedom is a right to direct one's own will in the external world, consistently with others' rights to do the same. As Allen Wood argues, despite Marx's distaste for moral arguments, Marx makes use of a conception of freedom as 'self-determination, the subjection of one's self and its essential functions to one's own conscious, rational choice,' a notion of freedom which resonates with the Kantian emphasis on self-direction (2004: 51).

Since the Marxian notion of freedom is so similar to the Kantian notion, Kant's theory of right is in this way at least a natural complement to Marx's critique of capital. If, as Marx argues, the capitalist system denies citizens this form of freedom, one can argue from there that this system violates those citizens' Kantian innate right to freedom.

For example, one can argue that insofar as a worker's labour is appropriated by the capitalist by means of the capitalist productive system, her right to freedom is violated. Under capitalism, the capitalist extracts surplus labour from workers by making this surplus labour a condition of these workers' receipt of the basic means of subsistence. What rightfully belongs to the worker is taken from her, and her freedom to direct what is hers to control as she chooses is usurped. The framework of Kant's theory of right allows us to go beyond merely stating as a matter of fact that the worker is being exploited—it allows us to declare that this condition is unacceptable and so must be changed.

Of course, this argument and others like it depend on the soundness of certain aspects of Marx's economic thought. Those who would reject Marx's so-called labour theory of

value¹⁵ might reject any such argument, disputing whether the surplus extracted from the worker in the capitalist system properly belongs to that worker. Furthermore, Wood would reject this argument for other reasons, as he disputes this characterization of Marx's economic theory: according to Wood, the transaction between labourer and capitalist is an exchange of equal values, and so will not be an unjust transaction for this reason (2004: 136). Still, according to Wood, the capitalist wage relation is problematically exploitative for other reasons (2004: 245-46). One might argue, for example, that one has a right to certain basic resources, and forcing someone to work under extreme conditions to gain access to those resources violates this right. Kant's theory, insofar as it lacks any sophisticated economic analysis, cannot adjudicate between different interpretations of Marx's economic theory. Still, whatever claims can be salvaged will be able to ground claims of right within the Kantian framework.

Furthermore, the Kantian framework offers the opportunity to build a robust Marxian critique of capital that does not depend at all on the so-called labour theory of value or other disputed aspects of Marx's economic thought. Much of the discussion of Marx's critique of capital has focused on capitalist exploitation, and this phenomenon surely deserves the attention that it has received. Beyond this, though, lies another critique of capital. I will first briefly sketch the critique as found in Marx's work, and then explain how it can be supplemented by Kant's theory of right.

According to Marx, a capitalist system has a built-in end: its own valorization and reproduction. Insofar as a capitalist system of exchange is more than a system of simple

¹⁵ Jon Elster, for example, provides a lengthy interpretation and detailed rejection of Marx's labour theory of value (1985).

exchange, a transaction takes place for the purpose of obtaining value greater than the value one began with. The accumulation of surplus value, value over and above the original value possessed, is capital's '*destiny*, its inner law, its tendency:' a quantity of money, x , should be transformed into $x + \Delta x$, where Δx is the addition of surplus value (Marx 1990: 976). Since capitalist exchange is not tied to human needs or any other finite standard, 'the circulation of money as capital is an end in itself, for the valorization of value takes place only within this constantly renewed movement. The movement of capital is therefore limitless' (Marx 1990: 253). Since any particular quantity of money necessarily has a limited purchasing power, capital continually drives towards 'the Sisyphian task: accumulation' (Marx 1990: 231). The perpetual accumulation of wealth, then, is by definition the end of capitalism.

In a society with a capitalist productive system, capital will dictate the ends of society unless it is precluded from doing so. Within a capitalist system, human production occurs for the sake of increasing capital. This human production is subsumed within the process of transforming a quantity of money into a greater quantity of money. The expansion of capital organizes and distributes labour according to its needs. In dictating human production, capital will take into account neither the health nor the well-being of the worker unless it is forced to do so.¹⁶ Instead of human production being directed at serving the needs and well-being of these human beings, it is directed toward the growth of capital.¹⁷ Significantly, even capitalists are directed by the whims of capital. The

¹⁶ 'Capital therefore takes no account of the health and the length of life of the worker, unless society forces it to do so' (Marx 1990: 381).

¹⁷ 'It is no longer the worker who employs the means of production, but the means of production which employ the worker. Instead of being consumed by him as material elements of his productive activity, they consume him as the ferment necessary to their own life-process, and the

capitalist must obey capital's categorical command: 'Accumulate, accumulate!' (Marx 1990: 742). If she does not, she will be unable to withstand the competition she must face. Since this is so, 'the capitalist is just as enslaved by the relationships of capitalism as is his opposite pole, the worker, albeit in quite a different manner' (Marx 1990: 990).

In his earlier work, Marx argues that this self-directed nature of capital makes the capitalist system inconsistent with what he referred to as our species being, our natural constitution as members of the human species. Importantly, he identifies 'free, conscious activity' as the species character of human beings (Marx 1978a: 76). Marx's account of the essential character of the human species is most familiarly bound up with his account of capitalist alienation: since labour within a capitalist system is directed and controlled by the needs of capital, the worker is alienated from her work.¹⁸ If the revolution is not inevitable, though, then the fact that workers are alienated from their work in a capitalist system is merely an unfortunate reality on Marx's picture. While we may want to change it, we have no obligation to.

The Kantian framework offers a way to further develop this critique of capital. Marx gives a full account of the way in which the needs of capital come to dictate the ends of society. This account can be incorporated into the framework of Kant's theory of right. As Marx explains, the productive activities of workers and capitalists alike are directed by the whims of capital. Within a truly capitalist system, capital will dictate what we do as individuals and what ends we set and pursue together as a society. As stated above, the Kantian innate right to freedom is a right to direct our own wills in the world consistently

life-process of capital consists solely in its own motion as self-valorizing value' (Marx 1990: 425).

¹⁸ See, for example, Marx 1978a: 76.

with others rights to do the same. This involves the right to self-government: if we are to direct our own wills, then we cannot be controlled unilaterally by others. Instead, we must govern ourselves together with others in a general united will.¹⁹ If we are to truly set the ends of our society together, then we cannot have a productive system in place that determines these ends for us. Our right to self-government is violated when what we do is determined by capital's built-in end of its own valorization and reproduction.

A truly capitalist system, then, violates the right to freedom of all who are controlled by it. Even if we choose democratically to put in place a capitalist system to dictate what we do, this amounts to choosing to subjugate ourselves to this system. The right to self-government, though, is inalienable, and thus a choice to subjugate ourselves to such a system is illegitimate. If this is so, then we as a society are obligated to replace our capitalist system of production with a system that is compatible with this innate right to freedom.

Of course, this is merely a brief sketch of a hybrid Marxian-Kantian critique of capital that requires a great deal more to be fully spelled out. Furthermore, this view is only one among many possible such Marxian-Kantian critiques that could be developed. My aim here is merely to draw attention to the great potential such a hybrid view has for moving the development of Marxian thought in a new direction and adding rightful force to Marx's critique of capital. On this view, we are obligated to change the system we have,

¹⁹As Kant argues, 'the legislative authority can belong only to the united will of the people,' as 'since all right is to proceed from it, it *cannot* do anyone wrong by its law. Now when someone makes arrangements about *another*, it is always possible for him to do the other wrong; but he can never do wrong in what he decides upon with regard to himself (for *volenti non fit iniuria*). Therefore only the concurring and united will of all, insofar as each decides the same thing for all and all for each, and so only the general united will of the people, can be legislative' (*MM*, 6: 313-14).

and perhaps even more importantly, we are obligated to find a system to replace it with that is consistent with our innate right to freedom.

III. DOES MARX REALLY NEED RIGHTS?

Many proponents of Marx's critique of capital might be resistant to Marxian philosophy heading in the Kantian direction just articulated. Brian Leiter, for example, argues passionately against incorporating normative theory into Marxism. Here, I will present and respond to Leiter's argument for the conclusion that Marxism has no need of normative theory, as well as his renewed Marxist criticism of bourgeois moral philosophy.

According to Leiter, Marx's 'primary concern is to offer a sound causal-explanatory theory of socio-economic change' (2015: 24). If Marx's factual account is true, then the revolution will happen when certain economic circumstances obtain, and normative theory is irrelevant to this process. As Leiter puts it, '[i]nstrumental rationality and some assumptions about human desires are all one needs by way of a psychology of revolution' (2015: 28). If the conditions of people's lives are so dire that their self-interest weighs heavily in favor of revolutionizing their productive system, then they will do so. While Leiter concedes that 'Marx was spectacularly wrong about questions of timing' (2015: 39), he asserts that the economic preconditions of the revolution will still obtain, if a little bit later than Marx claimed they would—in the United States, for example, he asserts that 'we are probably a century or more away' (2015 27n).

I agree with Leiter that in this sense Marxism may not have need of normative theory. The revolution may indeed come as Marx predicted (if not when he predicted), and

instrumental rational self-interest may be all that is needed to bring that revolution about. Furthermore, much of Marx's criticism of capital can stand without the support of practical philosophy, as this criticism consists largely in factual claims about the effects of capitalism on individuals and society. But, if the revolution is really a hundred or more years off, we may not have time to wait for it. Marx seems to have greatly underestimated the destructive power of capital: rather than setting the stage for a better human future and collapsing, capitalism and the rampant consumption it generates may doom the planet before the long-awaited revolution can arrive.

There is also good reason to question whether it can really be said to be in the rational self-interest of those who are oppressed by the capitalist system to overthrow it.²⁰ When people have been socialized and propagandized to fervently believe that respecting freedom requires maintaining capitalist institutions, it may be in their self-interest to act consistently with this belief, even if these institutions will deny them access to basic resources required for their well-being, such as health care, education, and even potable water. If we are to convince these individuals that their objective rational self-interest lies in rejecting this system and the beliefs that commit them to it, we will need to convince them of this via normative arguments. Marx attempted to do this with an ideology of class-consciousness by which he intended to foment a working class movement to overthrow the capitalist system. This attempt failed. If a new social movement is to be created, new normative beliefs, or at least a new adaptation of Marx's views of class-consciousness, must be set out to support this movement. Kant's theory of right offers rich ground for developing such new normative beliefs.

²⁰ I am indebted to discussions with Allen Wood for the ideas developed in this paragraph.

Cutting Marxism off from practical philosophy, then, contributes to rendering it inert. On Leiter's view, if Marx's empirical claims are actually demonstrated to be false, then Marxism is indeed dead (2015: 28-29). Connecting Marx's critique of capital with normative theory gives Marxian theory a future, even if his predictions concerning the inevitability of communism are shown to be false. Marx famously criticizes philosophy, asserting that '[t]he philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to *change* it' (1978c: 145). In the present world, it will be quite difficult to change the world as Marx tried to, by convincing people that the revolution will happen and that they are determined to be a part of it. Adding moral force to Marx's critique of capital gives Marxian theory a new path toward changing the world.

Leiter, though, would reject any such addition to Marxism as a betrayal of fundamental Marxist principles. Leiter renews Marx's rejection of moral philosophy with his criticism of 'bourgeois practical philosophy,' which is, 'broadly speaking, philosophizing about 'what ought to be done' that poses no threat to capitalist relations of production or to prerequisites of the capitalist class' (2015: 29). Leiter identifies three characteristics of bourgeois practical philosophy that give it its unthreatening character. First, such philosophizing focuses on the actions of individuals rather than on systemic problems (2015: 32). Individual acts of charity, for example, have the tendency to 'encourage moral complacency about systemic harms to well-being among charitable givers' (2015: 33). Second, such philosophizing focused on what we ought to believe about what is right or wrong rather than what we ought to actually do—as Leiter puts it, its 'main aim is to revise belief, not practice' (2015: 35). Third, such philosophizing tends to investigate

moral trivialities by means of intuition pumping, which serves to do little more than reflect the norms of that particular society at that time.

Beyond these specific criticisms of bourgeois practical philosophy, Leiter claims that all practical philosophy aimed at changing the behavior of others is destined to fail, as human beings simply are not motivated by moral arguments. He argues that the view that human beings are not motivated by reason alone, which he refers to as Humean sentimentalism, has been strongly supported by empirical psychology of the past century (2015: 25). To support his claim, he gives the example of Thomas Nagel, who despite admitting that he could find nothing wrong with an argument offered by G.A. Cohen, admitted that this argument would not change his behavior at all (2015: 42).

The questionable moral commitment of moral philosophers²¹ aside, Leiter's claim here flies in the face of the everyday experience of so many of us who struggle to act in accordance with what we rationally determine to be our moral obligations. Furthermore, this picture of moral motivation where moral action is motivated by reason alone completely isolated from sensibility is a gross caricature of the Kantian view of moral motivation. Kant was of course aware of the Humean account of moral motivation and anxious to respond to it.²²

Beyond this, though, there is much to be learned from Leiter's criticism of bourgeois practical philosophy. Too often, we take capitalist norms for granted as background conditions without critically examining them, and too often we ignore the influence of

²¹ We certainly have plenty of reason to believe (and hope!) that moral philosophers are not among the best of us in terms of behaving morally.

²² For an illuminating account of the Kantian picture of moral motivation and how it responds to Hume's account, see Engstrom 2010.

class interests in determining what we study and what we view as the success conditions of academic philosophy. Kantian-Marxian philosophy must aspire to be more than just inert social criticism, directed towards other academics alone and without social impact or value. Even if Marxism does not need practical philosophy, practical philosophy needs Marxism: we must begin to understand the social significance of what we do and strive to create more than ‘bourgeois practical philosophy.’ Practical philosophy must come to have a real social impact.

III. BRINGING MARX TO KANT

Kant’s theory of right can and should take a great deal from Marx. Again, Kant’s theory of right is built on the one innate right to freedom: all have the right to direct their wills in the external world as they choose, consistently with others’ right to do the same. The foundational principle of Kant’s theory of right, the universal principle of right, protects this innate right to freedom: ‘Any action is *right* if it can coexist with everyone’s freedom in accordance with a universal law, or if on its maxim the freedom of choice of each can coexist with everyone’s freedom in accordance with a universal law’ (*MM*, 6: 230). All and only those actions that violate the freedom of others must be prohibited by the state.

Without a complex understanding of the capitalist productive system, it is easy for Kantian socioeconomic theory to become a prototypical example of bourgeois ideology reinforcing the capitalist productive system. If the capitalist productive system is taken on board as a background condition within the Kantian framework, then Kantian freedom can be constrained to the political sphere. Each citizen can be convinced that she is free and equal to all others, and be convinced that this right of self-direction does not extend

to control of the market. Here, she must conform to the demands of the market and those who happen to be favored by it. The capitalist system is accepted as a fact of nature, as are the socioeconomic consequences generated by this system. In this way, the capitalist productive system is reinforced: citizens are assured that their right to freedom is secured, while this right to freedom is simply confined to the sphere where it does not interfere with the capitalist productive system.

To start with, Kantian socioeconomic theory can gain from Marx a sophisticated understanding of the capitalist productive system. Political freedom and equality must always be an essential element of Kant's theory of right. Understanding the workings of capitalist systems, though, allows us to recognize the extent to which the market and those who are favored by it control our society. Absence of solely political subjugation cannot guarantee an absence of true subjugation. When we recognize this, we can begin to articulate what it will take for there to be a true absence of subjugation within the Kantian system.

This process of transforming socioeconomic theory within Kant's theory of right begins with recognizing and rejecting the capitalist ideology that encourages us to accept the free market and the consequences it generates as natural. When we do this, we open up space to consider within the Kantian framework the rightfulness of a wide range of alternative systems of ownership and exchange. Many Kantians have begun to do just this, and though they rarely explicitly draw on Marx in doing so, they clearly have benefitted from Marx's wisdom. Christine Korsgaard, for example, gestures toward a non-capitalist system of ownership using the public library system as a model:

library books are reserved to particular patrons for specified amounts of time. Your right to the exclusive use of a book, for reading only, and for a certain length of time, still counts as a form of ‘property’ in Kant’s sense. In the same way, the means of production might be communally owned and ‘lent out’ to particular users (2009: 238 fn 7).

Other scholars, such as Louis-Phillipe Hodgson, Barbara Herman, and Howard Williams have also suggested that Kant’s theory of right is compatible with alternative systems of ownership and exchange (Hodgson 2010: 62, Herman 2007: 43, and Williams 1983: 193-94). Most recently, David James, starting with many of Kant’s own stated views, argues that Kantian principles of right do not necessitate private ownership (2016). John Rawls also understands his Kantian-inspired account to be compatible with alternatives to capitalism: in his *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*, he outlines a system of property-owning democracy as a non-capitalistic alternative (2001).

Furthermore, when we recognize that our choice to institute and maintain a particular system of ownership and exchange is indeed a choice, we can begin to take responsibility for the consequences of this choice. The socioeconomic realities of life within a capitalist system need no longer be accepted as the result of natural law. Instead, these socioeconomic consequences are generated by the systems of ownership and exchange that we choose to institute and maintain. In situations where a society has the resources to eliminate extreme poverty, for example, that extreme poverty is not a natural fact that cannot rightfully be avoided. It is generated by our regime of ownership and exchange.²³

Recognizing this opens the door for arguing that the innate right to freedom prohibits

²³ There are indications that Kant thinks of poverty in a somewhat similar fashion. As Kant asserts, ‘one can participate in the general injustice even if one does no injustice according to the civil laws and institutions. Now if one shows beneficence to a wretch, then one has not given him anything gratuitously, but has given him only what one had earlier helped to take from him through the general injustice’ (*LE*, 27: 416). See also *MM*, 6:454.

maintaining a system of ownership and exchange that generates such socioeconomic consequences.

Beyond this, integrating into the Kantian framework a full Marxian critique of capital, such as that articulated above, can help Kant's theory of right to become a tool for dismantling rather than reinforcing the capitalist productive system. More than just giving Kantians the tools to make such moral arguments, though, Marx gives Kantians the change-orientated mindset needed to do more than bourgeois moral philosophizing. If Kantian-Marxian theory is to create actual change in the world, though, a great deal of uncomfortable and unfamiliar work must be done first. Beyond our usual task of arguing for what we take to be moral truth, we must think much more broadly about our place and the role of philosophy in society at large. We must figure out how moral philosophy could create change in our world. We might think philosophers should focus more on building and reinforcing social movements and on disrupting capitalist ideology. Should we focus on creating works of popular philosophy? Should we focus on critically engaging directly with the arguments made by advocates and ordinary citizens with regard to social policies and governmental actions? Perhaps in the United States, for example, much more of our time should be devoted to writing amicus briefs for key cases than to writing academic articles that only other academics will read. Furthermore, how can we focus on these tasks without being rejected by the academy that we depend on for our livelihoods? These questions of what philosophy can and should be, of course, are not new. Taking inspiration from Marx, though, reminds us that we must do better in finding answers to them.

Marx did not challenge moral philosophers to take up this task—he did not think moral philosophy could make positive change of this sort. By learning from Marx, though, Kantians can begin to prove him wrong.

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