

Ass 1

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For completion by the student: Student Name: Abhishek Sharma		
Module code: CSPH7041	Student University Number:	Educational support needs: YES OR NO
Module title: Self and Society		
Module tutor: Rebecca Humphries		
Assignment title: Can we defend Marxism against the charge of anti-humanism by allowing that it posits a form of methodological individualism?		
Assignment due date: 31/08/2019		
I confirm that this is my original work and that I have adhered to the University policy on plagiarism. Name: Abhishek Sharma		
Assignment Mark		
1 st Marker's Provisional mark	65.	
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For completion by Marker 1:

Comments:

This piece of work evinces a solid understanding of the subject, including knowledge of its wider philosophical dimensions. The introduction is interesting but needs to be related more explicitly to the essay task. There are some bits of the essay that could be further developed and there are some lapses in referencing. However, arguments are presented clearly & logically, with reference to the primary scholarship, and in general, these arguments are evaluated throughout. Secondary reading could assist in terms of developing this evaluative element.

Marker 1 signature:

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Date:

10.9.19

For completion by Marker 2 / Moderator:

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Date:

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External Examiner signature:

Date:

Summative Assessment:

Can we defend Marxism against the charge of anti-humanism by allowing that it posits a form of methodological individualism?

Abhishek Sharma (1807879)

1. Introduction

The rise of individualism and *the self* in recorded western literature spans back over two and a half millennia. In Babylonian cuneiform epics (circa 2000 BC), tales are recorded of Gods performing deeds more commonly attributed to mortal men (1). Whilst appearing modern in comparison to these ancient texts, similar characterisations of Gods are seen in the classical greek Homeric epics of The Iliad and The Odyssey (2; 3). In fact, such descriptions of God are present in eastern literature too, namely the ancient Indian epic, The Mahabharata (4). A common theme in all of these literary works is that human action is simply a surrogate for the will of Gods. In the 6th century BC however, a radical new concept is introduced by ancient thinkers. Thales of Miletus claims the soul from the will of the divine to arbiter of all earthly movement. Here human agency and rationality is born when "*the mythos became the logos*" (a Greek word often used in different contexts by different ancient philosophers, but commonly implying rationality)" (5). The concept of the soul in human agency is further developed by Plato's tripartite soul, in his dialogues the Phaedo, Timaeus and Republic (6). His student Aristotle further classifies parts of the soul and attributes the function of a higher rational soul or *nous soul* in human behaviour (7).

During the Greek Hellenistic period, the Stoic philosophical school once again elevate the soul to the divine, claiming its' manifest derivation from the divine *world-soul*. Additionally proposing an intelligent determinism, they allow human subjects to maintain their agency, whilst still being ultimately deterministically fated (8). The Stoic doctrine was subsequently amalgamated into Christian doctrine by the Church Fathers, including St. Augustine of Hippo, holding dominance for one and a half millennia until the arrival of the European Renaissance, with French philosopher, Rene Descartes' radically sceptic stance producing *the self* as the ultimate arbiter of *the truth* (9). In addition to the changing *self*, another critical change was produced by Descartes' contemporary; 16th century philosopher and subsequent statesman, Francis Bacon, cemented the dominance of empiricism in natural philosophy, and is famously attributed to having established *the scientific method*. With this, the transition into the "*Age of Reason*" and the cultural dominance of empiricism began.

Points to
an
objective
truth.

Good - But will you
explain how all this is
relevant to the
essay Q?

'its' - not a word

'it's' - it is

'Its' - possessive

It is upon this background that I wish to regard the writings of Karl Marx, a German Philosopher whose writings had a profound impact on the world, causing tremulous changes in many nations, that resonate to this day. In the following sections, I shall examine Marxist doctrine with regard to its seeming contradiction in terms of positing methodological individualism and anti-humanism upon the same theory. However, prior to this, I shall define my terms. The term methodological individualism in fact originates from the work of a much later German sociologist, Max Webber (10). In Methodological Individualism, social phenomena are described in terms of actions of individual agents; these actions in turn are motivated by a propositional mental state. The underlying motivations of these actions are the area of interest to Weber, as this provides a subjective analysis of why actions are carried out. It should be noted that this is a form of reductionist analysis.

Whilst this essay deals with anti-humanism, I shall provide a description of what humanism entails, rather than what anti-humanism lacks. Humanism regards a position where the human subject occupies the central value in a particular system, as opposed to other concepts like God or ideology. The conception of the human being as the epistemic arbiter was perhaps first proposed by Descartes, in describing his *cogito* as the guarantor of truth (9). His commitment to mind-body substance dualism, however, detracts from this dividing the human being into the immaterial *cogito*, and the material body. Immanuel Kant is thus perhaps the first to provide a humanistic epistemology in his famous work, A Critique of Pure Reason (11). Here he provides a synthetic approach to the human being as both the subject and object of knowledge. A modern definition given by the Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy is "any philosophy concerned to emphasize human welfare and dignity, and either optimistic about the powers of human reason, or at least insistent that we have no alternative but to use it as best we can" (12). Humanism is not without its critics, with Michel Foucault demonstrating a critique of Humanism in his writings.

2. A Description of Marxism and Social Conflict Theory

As described in the above introduction, by the *Age of Reason*, empiricism assumed a culturally dominant position. Whilst Bacon had provided the impetus to such a change, natural philosophers following in his footsteps made significant advances on the basis of empirical science cementing its dominance over rationalism. Such empirical studies were extended into the domain of sociology by the early sociologists. Emil Durkheim's theory of Structural-Functionalism was one such empiricist theory that warrants mention. Durkheim's Structural-Functionalism is often considered in opposition to Marx's Social Conflict Theory.

Durkheim describes the structure of society arising from *social facts* (13). Such facts are regarded as "*real but immaterial*"; despite their immateriality however, these social facts act to constrain human agency to in order to produce a supreme social entity, more exalted than its formative individual human subjects. Here an individual subject's appetites that are at odds with social norms produce an *anomie*. In this theory, anomie is a disruptive force that retards the natural transformation of a society from *mechanical solidarity* (a society where individuals are homogenous in character, lack cohesiveness collectively) to *organic solidarity* (a society where individuals are diverse in character and yet demonstrate remarkable collective cohesiveness). Overall, in its traditional interpretation, Durkheim's Theory is described as a theory of methodological holism; unlike methodological individualism, this is an anti-reductionist analysis, where principles are derived at the systems level, rather than the component level (as with Marxist individualism).

I have presented the above in order to be able to dialectically contrast Marxism against another theory. Whilst Marxist theory is based on materialism, it is not quite the same as empiricism. At the surface, Marxist epistemology encompasses empiricism, relying on senses to determine the way things appear to be. However, Marx considers these appearances as mere apparition, a spectre of the underlying metaphysical reality. This is because, for Marx, all knowledge is limited by social context. This creates an illusion of social relations at the surface, and hence conceals the true nature of underlying social relations. Similar such dualities presented by the ancient rationalists, such as Plato's Allegory of the Cave (6), or

Could you provide reference here?

are

Parmenides' *the way of truth* and *the way of opinion* (14). Unlike Plato or Parmenides however, for Marx economic activity at the individualist level is what ultimately produces this duality. Marx regards *productive ability* and *social participation* as the two essential characteristics of all human beings. In his critique of Capitalist society, he describes the *bourgeoisie* class as controlling the means of production, whilst the *proletariat* class is exploited for labour (15). In this form of division of labour, unlike Durkheim, in whose theory, such division and diversity in fact creates unity, for Marx, this division of labour creates an underlying social tension.

As the bourgeoisie achieve economic and social dominance over the proletariat by ownership of the productive means, they fail to see their true social relation with the proletariat; One in which the proletariat in fact have the means to take control of the means of production, owing to their direct relationship with it. The bourgeoisie fail to see this precarious *real* relationship between the two social classes, owing to their belief in superficial appearances (in Platonic terms, the people inside the cave seeing shadows cast by the reality outside; in Parmenidean terms, *the way of opinion*). The proletariat on the other hand develop a true notion of the social reality of capitalist society, and the inter-class relation between the two groups (in Platonic terms, the philosopher who has seen the true nature of reality outside the cave, in Parmenidean terms, *the way of truth*). This inevitably is said to end in revolution, where society progresses to Socialism. Once again, the division of labour for Marx is an unstable social form, as opposed to Durkheim, who regards it as giving a society stability.

3. Arguments for Humanism in Marxism

I shall now present three arguments for Humanism in Marxism. In critique of Capitalism, Marx describes change arising from human perceptions of the proletariat, leading to revolution. Such a change is driven by the plight of the human subject being exploited. If this was not grounded in the human subject, and purely in determinism, Marxist theory would surely predict repeated cycles of capitalism, where the proletariat became bourgeoisie, and vice versa. Rather by suggesting a revolutionary uprising followed by a progressive change to Communism, Marx's proletariat subject must be granted not just agency but also conceptions

about human freedom and justice. This in my opinion supports a humanist nature to Marxism. An argument that may be presented against this is perhaps that any form of determinism, even the Marxist form of Socialism arising from Capitalism detracts from human agency and therefore is anti-humanist. My argument against this would be that certain events due to unchangeable underlying forces cannot be willed away by any element of human agency. For instance, no amount of human agency can grant a person immortality. This is pre-determined at birth. Similarly, upon jumping off a cliff, no amount of human agency can prevent the action of gravity from causing the person to accelerate into the ground.

Another area of humanism apparent in the theory is that of class conflict. A reading of history demonstrates that conflict is an unfortunate human characteristic. A contemporary and ideological adversary of Marx, the Prussian anarchist Michael Bakunin stated *"Until now all human history has been only a perpetual and bloody immolation of millions of poor human beings in honour of some pitiless abstraction -- God, country, power of state, national honour, historical rights, judicial rights, political liberty, public welfare"* (16). Thus the notion of class conflict is in fact a very human condition, arising from perhaps irrational emotions. Thus it can be stated that the very fact Marx considers conflict as a driving force for his theory, makes it a humanist theory (arguably though not befitting the modern definition). An argument to this may be raised by mind-body substance dualists. Albeit somewhat teleological, Descartes makes it clear that emotions arise from the body, in order to prepare the mind for a particular activity or bodily reaction. Of course, the contra-argument to this would be derived straight from the works of Wittgensteinian deconstruction, in order to refute substance dualism as a linguistic fallacy in the first place (17).

Could you develop this point?

A final argument I shall present in defence of Humanism in Marx is that even in the bourgeoisie, we see a human trait – self-preservation. Whilst their conception of reality, according to Marx, is shrouded in falsity, their behaviour in the Marxist system identifies them very much as human subjects. Whilst seemingly perverting justice by unequal distribution of goods, in the eyes of Marx, their described behaviour is firmly grounded in their perception of their reality. Thus despite an incomplete knowledge of social relations, the bourgeoisie are

still human actors, acting with agency upon their perceptions. A refutation to this would such invoke the contradiction in a normatively observed behaviour, such as a human trait, in the context of a Marxist epistemology. The counter-argument would entail that all descriptions of humanism rely on normative observations.

could you expand on this?

4. Arguments for anti-Humanism in Marxism

In this final section, I shall now examine some of the arguments for anti-Humanism in Marxism. Perhaps the most prominent appeal to this view would be the Marxist epistemology where a human subject is limited in their knowledge by their social reality. This is an immutable assumption of traditional Marxism. Here the human subject is no longer simply an agent; rather they are a slave to a social structure imposed upon them; their knowledge is subject to them being prisoner to this system. In essence this detracts from the agency of the subject and placing it in the domain of an exalted social system. Thus human freedom, freedom of thought and justice too are constrained by this system imposed upon the subject. An unfortunate fact of the matter is that all implementations of Marxism in the modern world, this trait of anti-humanism was not simply a theoretical fear, but rather a repetitive theme (for example Stalin's Gulags, Mao's Cultural Revolution or the modern day state of the Democratic People's Republic of North Korea). This alone is a rather damning demonstration of Marxist anti-Humanism. An argument may follow that such implementations were not truly Marxist, but rather perversions of his proposed system. Furthermore, it may be argued that it is only the bourgeoisie who are subject to limits on their knowledge in the Marxist system, as the proletariat by essence of their proximity to the means of production, are able to see the true underlying reality of social interactions. I would further argue that any system that de-humanises one group over another is anti-Humanist in its construction.

Could you (are you!) using the work of secondary authors?
No references here.

Perhaps the most compelling argument for anti-Humanism in Marxism, is the fact that defined Humanism, is derived from normative observation (i.e. empiricism), whereas Marxism rejects empiricism as a superficial representation of underlying reality. I touched on this argument very briefly in the above section. The incompatibility of Marxist epistemology with empiricism raises a number of problems when Marxism presents arguments in the style of an empirical

science (historical materialism). History exists in the empirical domain. More specifically it relies on credible testimony, to use Humean terminology (18). Marxism states that reality is only apparent to the proletariat due to their proximity to means of production. How are we then to infer a reality from empirically observed testimony? Is the Marxist only accepting of testimony written by the proletariat of history? Given the likelihood of the peoples of such backgrounds lacking literary skills (after all modern universal education was proposed by a bourgeoisie Philosopher, John Locke), who's testimony would the Marxist have available to provide them with a valid description of reality during historical times? Here, I think, the flaws of Marxist dualist epistemology lead to contradictions, which in my opinion are irrevocable.

5. Conclusion

In the above essay I have provided two sides to an argument for and against anti-Humanism in Marxism, despite its reliance on the methodological individualist mode of construction. I began (perhaps not unlike a Marxist) with a brief review of the historical philosophical context leading up to Marx. I defined my terms and described Marx's Social Conflict Theory contrasting it to Durkheim's Structural-Functionalism. I subsequently laid out arguments for humanism and anti-humanism in Marxism, however, my arguments for anti-Humanism provide more me with compelling grounds, and thus I must conclude that despite its methodological individualism, Marxism subjugates the individual subject to a degree that is in keeping with a rejection of Humanism.

✓ Good concise
yet informative
conclusion, renewing
all the main
arguments

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✓
Well Presented

