

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

The above question contains three problematic technical terms: 'Marxism', 'methodological individualism' and 'anti-humanism'. In the philosophical literature the meaning of each one seems to be subject to different interpretations, thereby precluding a single argument for the defence. In this essay I will show that Marxism is not a single intellectual entity and that some forms cannot be defended against the charge but that others can be, providing that 'anti-humanism' is used to mean that it denies the possibility of any human intentionality influencing the way that history has unfolded. According to the Merriam Webster Dictionary, *anti-humanism* was not used in any sense before 1873 so was not available to the first readers of *Capital* when it was published in 1867. As will be argued, subsequent interpretations of Marx are ultimately divergences in beliefs about both human nature and the nature of the social world.

The analysis is complicated by the fact that the young Marx himself was an advocate of 'Humanism': the name given in the 1840s to Feuerbach's philosophy (a criticism of Hegel) describing human nature as a combination of both a sensuous and a rational being which Radical Hegelians (like Marx) took as suggesting a synthesis between the proletariat and philosophy, or, as a more concrete political reality (which I think betrays a belief about particular kinds of spirit being attributable to different nations), between France and Germany.¹ The essential idea of this humanism was that it was a 'struggle against all forms of abstraction' - abstraction being 'the assumption that concepts possessed an objective existence outside humanity.'² In his third thesis on Feuerbach (1845), Marx actually writes that 'the materialist doctrine concerning the changing of circumstances and upbringing forgets that circumstances are changed by men'.³ Anti-humanism for the young Marx would therefore be the result of abstraction or alienation in which 'Man makes himself the victim of the abstractions which he has created'.⁴ Marx's idea of a return to freedom is the 'back to nature' endeavour found in Feuerbach regarding religion which Marx applied to politics.⁵ Taking back control of the abstractions by having a social world arranged to provide the economic materials of life (food and shelter, at its most basic) must require either actively overcoming alienation, or being obliged to wait for the dialectical process of history to do it for us. There is no doubt that in 1873 Marx endorsed a very anti-humanist position, allowing Engels to state in the second edition of *Capital* (originally only in German) 'Marx treats the social movement as a process of natural history, governed by laws not only independent of human will, consciousness and intelligence, but rather, on the contrary, determining that will, consciousness and intelligence'.⁶ It should be

¹ Stedman Jones G., *Karl Marx* (Clays: Penquin, 2017) p143.

² Stedman Jones, pp159-160.

³ Ibid, p197.

⁴ Ibid, p199.

⁵ Ibid, p129.

⁶ Marx K., 'Afterword to the Second German Edition', in *Capital*, vol 1: *A Critique of Political Economy* (*Karl Marx/Friedrich Engels Collected Works*, Moscow, London, and New York: 1975-2005) vol.35, pp18-19.

noted that there is another understanding of anti-humanism which is Foucault's use of the term to mean his critique of modernism in which all knowledge is sifted through the knowledge of human beings, succinctly expressed when (with a nod to Kant) he accused philosophy of 'having fallen into new slumbers; no longer that of dogmatism, but that of anthropology.'⁷

Traditional Marxism (beginning with *The Anti-Duhring* written by Engels in 1878⁸) is associated with explanations in which consequences are used to explain causes.⁹ These favour economic circumstances as controlling what sort of social institutions arise, determining which human needs are met and how this will happen. On the other hand, according to Steven Lukes, methodological individualism 'is a doctrine about explanation which asserts that all attempts to explain social (or individual) phenomena are to be rejected.....unless they are couched wholly in terms of facts about individuals'.¹⁰ Opponents of Marxism have also viewed good social science as being the rigorous hunt for explanations in terms of the actions of individuals:

'The idea is that for any event which the collectivist holds to be inexplicable except by reference to groups or practices, the orthodox conception will suppose that there is a perfectly individualistic explanation by reference to the beliefs and desires of the appropriate agents.'¹¹

The general idea of explaining large scale social events by reference to individual agents implies that it is possible, in principle, to derive social science from psychology:

'we shall not have arrived at rock-bottom explanations of such large scale phenomena until we have deduced an account of them from statements about the dispositions, beliefs, (physical) resources, and interrelations of individuals.'¹²

Stedman Jones gives an account of how Marx's own economic dependence on Engels after 1867 caused him to acquiesce in Engels' more deterministic ideas about the inevitable collapse of Capitalism. Marx did contribute a chapter to the book which outlined Engels' views in detail. This book, which has come to be known as the *Anti-Duhring*, was said by Kautsky to be the real influence on himself and rising young activists like Plekhanov and Lenin. Engels also became editor of Marx's unpublished work after his death and this included volume 2 and the unfinished

⁷ Foucault, M., *Les mots et les choses*, (Paris: Edition Gallimard, 1966) p352.

⁸ Stedman Jones, p559.

Engels attacked Duhring, a blind untenured lecturer in Berlin, for his belief in the ultimate harmony of capital and labour.

⁹ Cohen G.A. 'Reply to Elster', in *Debates in Contemporary Political Philosophy* eds. Derek Matravers and Jon Pike (Abingdon: Routledge, 2003) p41.

¹⁰ Lukes S., 'Methodological individualism', in *Debates in Contemporary Political Philosophy* eds. Derek Matravers and Jon Pike (Abingdon: Routledge, 2003) p12.

¹¹ Macdonald G., and Pettit P., *Semantics and Social Science*, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981) p125.

¹² Watkins J.W.N., 'Historical explanation in the social sciences', in J.O'Neill (ed) *Modes of Individualism and Collectivism* (London: Heinemann, 1973) p168

volume 3 (which had lain untouched since 1864) of *Capital*. Marx had been unable to rationally show that his 'Law of the Tendency of Profit to Fall' must be the death-knell of the capitalist system. The most his research suggested was that other factors would intervene and limit the effects to a shaking of the system rather than allow a total failure. For his standing in the Party, Engels needed a punchline to match his determinist rhetoric and in the published volume 3, he substituted the word 'collapse' for Marx's 'shake'.¹³ It seems ironic that this was an intentional individual act interfering to create 'scientific proof' of a supposed anti-humanist doctrine.

Whatever the power dynamics between the elder Marx and his wealthy benefactor, it has been widely assumed that the later Marx changed his views entirely from his Young Hegelian beginnings. Burrell and Morgan characterise this as an 'epistemological break' in his development¹⁴ in which he underwent a 'paradigm shift' in his views from those of a 'radical humanist' to those of a 'radical structuralist'. Burrell and Morgan were writing as theorists about the behaviour of people working in organisations, in which social relations such as those that engender loyalty and commitment (or otherwise) can be explained in different ways according to whichever sociological paradigm one applies. For Marx, the conditions in which the proletariat had to sell their labour was a crucial point of interest:

'the mass of misery, oppression, slavery, degradation and exploitation grows, but with this there also grows the revolt of the working class, a class constantly increasing in numbers, and trained, united, and organised by the very mechanism of the capitalist process of production'¹⁵

The process of production has a controlling function, inevitably impinging on the types of social institutions making up civil society.

Burrell and Morgan's sociological paradigms are formed from the different theories and assumptions (frameworks) about whether society is ontologically a hard reality, or else an interpretive enterprise primarily in the minds of the subjects within it. Ontological views are cross referenced with the writer's position on whether society is fundamentally stable or subject to radical change (the order-conflict debate). Burrell and Morgan identify four incommensurable paradigms making industrial settings seething cauldrons of different understandings about any situation. Similarly, the analyses of sociologists depend on how they see the 'facts' of the situation, fitting observations about the views of workers and management into their own particular theoretical frameworks (Anthony Giddens calls this interaction between actors the 'double hermeneutic' of social life¹⁶). The quote from *Capital* fits a radical structuralist interpretation that power relationships in the factories are just part of the regulative structures of society in general - the contradictions of which are generating conflict and inevitable social

¹³ Steadman Jones G., pp564-568.

¹⁴ Burrell G., and Morgan G., *Sociological Paradigms and Organisational Analysis* (Aldershot: Gower, 1979) p25.

¹⁵ Marx K., *Capital*, vol 1, trans B.Fowkes (New York: Penguin, 1976) p929.

¹⁶ Giddens A., *New Rules of Sociological Method*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993) pp85-86

change. In contrast, in the *Communist Manifesto* (1848), Marx implies the importance of subjective understandings and action by the workers themselves: 'the free development of each is the free development of all'¹⁷

Another example of a radical humanist Marxism would be that of Gramsci, who considered that the working class possessed voluntarist, practical capacities. Gramsci's 'philosophical praxis' ('praxis' being the unification of theory and practice) identifies part of the problem of capitalist domination as being within men's own consciousness and seeks a solution by actively weakening the ideological hegemony (in the workplace, in the schools, and in the family) created by the ruling class.¹⁸ Gramsci was active in forming workers' councils in Italian factories after World War One and stressed that social reality is not a concrete entity of itself but really exists in a historical relationship with the men who modify it. Such an approach chimes with the later example of Paulo Freire, who as the Brazilian Minister of Education in the early 1960s, operated his method of praxis, described in *Education as the Practice of Freedom* (1967) justified by his treatise on the philosophy of education *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1972).

Jon Elster, in his *Making Sense of Marx*, defines methodological individualism as a doctrine about social phenomena being explicable in terms of the properties, goals, beliefs, and actions of individuals.¹⁹ However, his individuals perform social actions for many reasons extending beyond the psychology of the individual. As Wright, Levine, and Sober point out,²⁰ Elster does not claim that relational properties are reducible to the internal machinations of individuals alone - there are also irreducible social reasons such as power differentials between social actors which include institutions as well as individuals. In his later work *Marxism, Functionalism, and Game Theory*, Elster contrasts rational choice theory (game theory) with functionalist sociology and proposes that the former is the most valuable in terms of 'any analysis of the historical process that centres on exploitation, struggle, alliances, and revolution.'²¹

An important point of clarification is that Elster's 'functionalist' Marxism has a different meaning from the 'functionalist' paradigm in Burrell and Morgan which covers orthodox Systems Theory, drawing on the biological analogies suggested by Comte and Durkheim. In this context, the term 'structural functionalism' was introduced by Radcliffe-Brown to emphasise that the continuity of structure is maintained by social life and 'The social life of the community is here defined as the *functioning* of the social structure.'²²

¹⁷ Stedman Jones G., (ed) *Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels: The Communist Manifesto* (London: Penguin, 2002) p244.

¹⁸ Gramsci A., *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, eds Quinton Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971).

¹⁹ Elster J., *Making Sense of Marx* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

²⁰ Wright E., Levine A., and Sober E., 'Marxism and Methodological Individualism', in *Debates in Contemporary Political Philosophy* eds. Derek Matravers and Jon Pike (Abingdon: Routledge, 2003) pp54-64.

²¹ Elster J., 'Marxism, Functionalism, and Game Theory', in *Debates in Contemporary Political Philosophy* eds. Derek Matravers and Jon Pike (Abingdon: Routledge, 2003) p22.

²² Radcliffe-Brown A., *Structure and Function in Primitive Society* (London: Cohen and West, 1952) p180.

Elster describes three kinds of functional paradigm: firstly there is that suggested by Mandeville in which institutions or behavioural patterns of individuals often have unintended beneficial consequences unrecognised by their recipients. This is the 'Weak Functional Paradigm', otherwise known as the invisible-hand paradigm which, he says, is ubiquitous in the social sciences. It does not explain how the institution or behaviour works the magic, especially over the long term when the attributed beneficial effect is termed a 'latent function'. Such latent functions of an institution or behaviour *by themselves* explain the presence of the institution or behaviour and this is the 'Main Functional Paradigm'. And finally there is the 'Strong Functional Paradigm' which contends that 'all institutions or behavioural patterns have a function that explains their presence.' Elster accuses both the main and the strong versions as postulating a purpose without a purposive actor - or putting it grammatically, 'a predicate without a subject'.²³ Cohen, in his *Reply to Elster*, defended the necessity of functionalism for historical materialism, saying that 'Marxism is *fundamentally* concerned not with behaviour, but with the forces and relations constraining and directing it.'²⁴ And if the empirical statement 'whenever A would be functional for B, A appears' can be supported empirically, then that is sufficient plausibility to take a functional explanation seriously. Cohen does acknowledge that 'actions are prominent proximate causes of social effects.' Further, 'if the question of *how* the functional explanations of historical materialism explain cannot even in principle be answered, then that would have lethal significance for historical materialism.'²⁵

There is a practical problem with reducing large scale social phenomena (such as industrial unrest) simply to the actions of individuals. There may be a very simple localised issue which triggers the shop steward to call out the Union members but it is impossible to deny that those members will have individually different reasons for lending the strike their support, or opposing it, against a backdrop of many other social facts influencing each worker's decision, quite apart from the economic circumstances of the region/country/world which impinged on whatever management decision irritated the shop steward. In other words, there are a multiplicity of causes for the highlighted social action, and different strikes will have different sets of causes just as there will be different sets of individuals involved. Multiple realisations of the same phenomenon entail that generalising any reductionist explanation in terms of what this or that set of individuals did, wanted, or believed to cause the social event is impossible because each occasion of the phenomenon has a unique combination of causes. This is the nub of Wright, Levine, and Sober's objection to Elster while accepting his point that the social world is the product of flesh and blood actors. However, a point missed by Wright et al., is that simply naming something a 'strike' doesn't ensure that it is the same social phenomenon as every other (or even *any* other) strike. Structuralist assumptions about the nature of the social world - that there are real enduring entities like the thing we call a strike over here, or the aggregate of misery called an economic depression over there - mean that methodological individualists might be being asked to explain things which don't actually exist (as would be argued, I think, by

²³ Elster, *ibid*, p23.

²⁴ Cohen G.A., p47.

²⁵ *Ibid*, p48.

a phenomenologist from the interpretative sociological paradigm such as Silverman or Sartre²⁶). One specific social phenomenon may look similar to another but that doesn't necessarily justify them being described as two tokens of a single stable type. Matravers and Pike²⁷ make the same point and assert that methodological individualism is 'trivially true' because nobody doubts that societies are really made up of individuals.

Nevertheless, poststructuralist Marxists such as Althusser do indeed deny the possibility of the individual influencing events in the social world. He rejects the possibility of voluntarism and subjectivity, in complete contrast to Gramsci or the young Marx. According to Burrell and Morgan, Althusser is ontologically a realist but the real world can only be understood through theory. He rejects empiricism and says scientific knowledge is only to be obtained by case study analysis of each significant historical conjunction.²⁸ Individuals are not free subjects but agents in the mode of production. Radical change apparently can only come about through the conjunction of deep, hidden social structures (about which it is difficult to see how one can know very much at all, let alone do anything practical about them). In Althusser's own words: 'We must completely reorganise the idea we have of knowledge, we must abandon the mirror myths of immediate vision and reading and conceive knowledge as production.'²⁹ Cohen's comment on 'lethal significance' comes to mind!

In conclusion, this essay has presented outlines of the main variety of Marxisms which have arisen since Engels met Marx in Paris in 1844 and began the long gestation of *Capital*. A necessary qualification for the title 'Marxist' is a belief that historical materialism creates essential social structures. Writers sharing that view of social ontology are differentiated by their position on human nature; the extremes of which are whether we are completely free and autonomous or just hopelessly buffeted by the currents and eddies of the social situation. Methodological individualists are, by definition, in the autonomy camp and it is difficult to see how any explanation about society can ignore individual contributions, making methodological individualism a constant, if only partial, explanatory procedure. Nevertheless, those Marxists stubbornly sticking to the Engels-Lenin line, or going off the structuralist scale with Althusser are indeed anti-humanist. Gramsci, Freire, and Karl Marx himself (until 1867) can expect to be acquitted of the charge.

²⁶ Burrell and Morgan, pp240-259.

²⁷ Matravers D., and Pike J., 'The Philosophy of Social Explanation' in *Debates in Contemporary Political Philosophy* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2003) pp10-11.

²⁸ Burrell and Morgan, pp345-346.

²⁹ Althusser L., *Reading Capital*, (New York: Verso, 2009) p24.

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