

A Pragmatic and pedagogically Minded Reevaluation of Historical Materialism

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Abstract

In this article the author uses the context of our contemporary social climate, with its various challenges to democratic vitality and social justice, to reconstruct a theory of social progress. Specifically, he attempts a pragmatic reconstruction of Marx's historical materialism, not as a totalizing ideology, but as a method of analysis for conducting critical inquiry into the normative structures that exist within our present modes of physical and cultural production. The author's aim is to examine the relationships among various social formations, and recommend remedies to the reified cycles that potentially stifle criticality, creativity, and human solidarity. His hope is that through the construction and application of a flexible yet critical theory of analysis as a lens for cultural investigation in pedagogical spaces, and through related ethical action, we may alter our circumstances toward more just, tolerable, and stable modes of existence within our social and physical world.

Introduction

Our present is marked by decreased equity in the distribution of material wealth as a global scramble for incrementally cheaper labor and ever increased production, and the expansion of consumption-based markets, stresses our social, economic, and natural systems. Political voice has also diminished as the means of communication fall to fewer and fewer corporate interests. Each of these issues portends different problems with regard to democratic vitality and social justice. With all of these aforementioned challenges to democracy the potential for social and environmental catastrophe is profound - exploitation of labor pursuant to perceived market needs and outcomes, the disappearance of the public space and of democratic communication and negotiation, and ecological disaster. This seems more pressing than ever as the current financial crisis has denuded the gross disparities between those who own the means of production and those who labor, and the fragility of the economic lives of the latter. Additionally, there has been a trend toward unilateralism and imperialism in U.S foreign policy, assaults on basic freedoms like speech, privacy, and due process, weakening of academic freedom in our institutions of higher education, and the increased co-opting of religion for purposes of political manipulation. With regard to the former and specific to institutions of education, we have seen the advent of rhetoric touting the necessity and benefits of increased educational "accountability" and related centralization of administrative power into even more rigid top-down hierarchies. All of what

precedes has extreme consequences regarding the way we teach, what we learn socially and academically, and how schools operate, either in congress with hegemonic forces, or possibly, if not hopefully, as ethical counterpoints.

What is perhaps most disturbing in the present K-12 institutional situation is a lack of accurate language to provide a sufficient understanding of what is happening to our human community, and especially to our children. In this regard, we lack meaning as much as we lack criticality. The pursuit of dialectical freedom and the realization of a universal and reciprocal human commitment with regard to dignity, that is, the mean necessities of life and the freedom of creation and association, seem chimerical notions within our contemporary social landscape. Presently, the ability to engage in the aforementioned activities is arrogated by the communicative monopolization of a powerful, yet democratically disproportional minority, resulting in the confusion and alienation of the majority. The placation provided by the welfare state in the world's former colonial powers is dwindling as global economic factors challenge and strain our social and natural structures. I contend that the theorists discussed in this piece offer important insight concerning how we both frame the present situation and proffer communicative vehicles toward a more liberated set of circumstances through rigorous interrogation of what we consume, what we truly value, how we interact, and what unites us.

This paper uses both Marxian critical theory and pragmatism to reconstruct a version of historical materialism that is rooted in, and malleable to, the present social context. It attempts a pragmatic reconstruction of Marx's historical materialism, not as a totalizing ideology, as in its more orthodox versions, but as a method of analysis, a heuristic medium, for determining ethical social action and judging social progress. Pursuant to this, Marxian theory will be examined and critiqued pragmatically insofar as it is relevant and immediately useful to the pedagogical pursuit of such abstract aspirations as love, justice, forgiveness, creativity, solidarity, and democracy. The desired end is that through this pursuit, in the process of teaching and learning, we can then work toward the creation of social and natural environments that reflect a priority on social, psychological, and physical health within our communal relationships.¹ The term *Marxian* will generally be used in place of *Marxist* to denote a departure, albeit not wholly original to this

work, from the position that only one viable interpretation of the theoretical traditions began by Karl Marx exists.

Much of the paper draws from selected works of Marx and Marxian philosophers Georg Lukacs. John Dewey is deployed as the primary pragmatist perspective with Jurgen Habermas serving as a conceptual bridge between critical theory and pragmatism when warranted and with specific regard to communicative action. Subsumed is that different theoretical orientations and devices are needed to facilitate a critical inquiry into the normative structures that exist within our present modes of physical and cultural production. These would include how gender, racial, and class-specific cultural norms and stereotypes, among other normative institutions like organized religion, the workplace, the family, and various other group entities, engender certain expectations and behaviors within our economic and social milieu in what Habermas (1975) has described as a “hypercomplex environment” (3). These would seek to examine the relationships among various social formations, and recommend remedies to the reified cycles that potentially stifle criticality, creativity, and human solidarity. Through this it may be possible to take the changing of specific social formations as a topical end of problem-solving, rather than a systematic pursuit of a preconceived social system, or simply an uncritical reproduction of oppressive social and natural relations. The question, which will be more thoroughly taken up later, is how institutions of education can expand what Habermas terms their “institutionally permitted learning capacity” (8) to assist in the social development of society. The hope is that through the construction of a flexible yet critical theory of analysis, the application of this theory as a lens for social and natural investigation in pedagogical spaces, and through related ethical action and economic inclusion, we may alter our circumstances toward a more tolerable and stable mode of living. Here I take a cue from Rorty (1989) and his belief that ethical progress comes through greater solidarity:

[it] is not thought of as recognition of a core self, the human essence, in all human beings. Rather, it is thought of as the ability to see more and more traditional differences (of tribe, religion, race, custom, and the like) as unimportant when compared with similarities wildly different from ourselves with respect to pain and humiliation the ability to think of people wildly different from ourselves as included in the range of >us.’ (p. 192).

What immediately follows is a pragmatic critique of Marxian theorist Lukacs' program for social analysis and action. The critique will then be folded, with the help of Habermas, into the relativizing pragmatic philosophy of Dewey with the result hopefully yielding a workable position of social analysis that retains the useful aspects of both traditions.

Some Brief Foundations of Historical Materialism

It is probably prudent from the offset to lay some of the theoretical groundwork for what follows, although there will be notes pointing to clarifying works through much of the piece. Specific philosophical definitions of historical materialism are few in Marx's writings and mostly found in his early work. The most familiar of these is probably the Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (Marx, 1978). Here he discussed the dialectic between the "relations of production of production . . . the economic structure of society, the real foundation [and] a legal and political superstructure" (4). It is this latter bit that becomes the "social consciousness" of people being defined by their "social being," the stuff of their material and relational experience. Marx then goes on to say that with changes in the "economic foundation the entire immense superstructure is more or less rapidly transformed" (5). The distinction is then made between the

material transformation of the economic conditions of production, which can be determined with the precision of natural science, and the legal, political, religious, aesthetic or philosophic—in short, ideological—forms. (5)

It is perhaps the aforementioned distinction that gives terrain for the critique to follow—the nature of the relationship between foundation, or base, and superstructure. Williams (1977), has noted that this definition may be insufficient to define "the whole of 'cultural' activity" (76), since Marx makes a distinction between material conditions and culture, writ large. In a slightly lesser known and earlier passage, Marx (1963) displays a slightly different conception of the materialist relationship, one that renders the former more subjective and interpretative but within a knowable framework. He states,

Upon the different forms of property, upon the social conditions of existence, rises an entire superstructure of distinct and peculiarly formed sentiments, illusions, modes of thought and views of life. The entire class creates and forms them out of its material foundations and out of the corresponding social relations. The single individual, who derives them through tradition and upbringing, may imagine that they form the real motives and the starting point of this activity. . . . And as in private life one differentiates between what a man thinks and says of himself and what he really is and does, so in historical struggles one must distinguish still more the phrases and fancies of parties from their real organism and their real interests, their conception of themselves, from their reality. (47)

It is this elucidation of historical materialism that I feel provides theoretically fertile ground for pragmatic application. As will be restated later, there is play between the base and the superstructure, especially regarding the cultural outcroppings of the material. However, the field of analysis provides a means by which we may examine these relationships and perhaps denude contradictions and false consciousness within class relations. It is communicative action toward some kind of economic liberations that is sought through, as Williams (1977) put it, “three senses [that] would direct our attention . . . (a) institutions; (b) forms of consciousness; (c) political and cultural practices” (77). In this sense we find some degree of harmony with Dewey (1927), that the interplay among the historically created material conditions, the individual consciousness, and that of cultural identity within a plurality of groups/classes. He states,

From the standpoint of the individual, it consists in having a responsible share according to capacity in forming and directing the activities of the group to which one belongs in participating according to need in the values with the groups sustain. From the standpoint of the groups, it demands liberation of the potentialities of members of a group in harmony with the interests and goods which are in common. Since every individual is a member of many groups, this specification cannot be fulfilled except when different groups interact flexibly and fully in connection with other groups. (147)

The flexibility interaction mentioned for Dewey is inevitable, unless there is to be complete obliteration of one or more of the constituent groups via some kind of class totalization, one that denies identity with multiple groups and the potential common interests among groups although

differently expressed, perhaps. The plurality of voices and the endeavor of multiple social analyses within a historical materialist framework may very well aid us in distinguishing “the phrases and fancies of parties from their real organism and their real interests” (47), aforementioned by Marx. This is the site of pedagogy in my view—where students of various ages and backgrounds might accurately discover their own cultural location and point it toward “liberation of the potentialities of members of a group in harmony with the interests and goods which are in common” (147), aforementioned by Dewey as the ethical outcome. Admitted, his interpretation may represent a bit of a break between a pragmatist’s view and more rigid versions of Marxian thought, one that will be given context in the next section.

Historical Materialists and Social Analysis

Marx (1978), by praising Ludwig Feuerbach for “the establishment of *true materialism* and real science” (108), perhaps set the stage for historical materialism’s interpretation and treatment as a deterministic and objective system for social change. Following this prescription, Lukacs (1971), in an essay entitled *The Changing Function of Historical Materialism*, posits a version of historical materialism that is a *scientific* method with clear objectives and methods to reach said objectives. He states:

It [historical materialism] is no doubt a scientific method by which to comprehend the events of the past and to grasp their true nature . . . it also permits us to view the present historically and hence scientifically so that we can penetrate beneath the surface and perceive the profounder historical forces which in reality control events . . . The most important function of historical materialism is to deliver a precise judgement on the capitalist social system[;] . . . it has been used to focus the cold rays of science upon these veils and to show how false and misleading they were and how far they were in conflict with the truth. (224)

Regardless of how sympathetic we may be to, or supportive of, the Marxian outcomes of more free, just, and authentic modes of life, or our beliefs concerning critical historical inquiry as potentially exposing causes of false consciousness, one is immediately struck with the determinism of the language. Phrases like “cold rays of science” and even concepts like *reality* and *truth* in their absolute sense, and the notion that we can somehow comprehend the *true*

nature of past events, may give us understandable pause when we consider the sheer scope of what constitutes historical analysis (an ersatz contemporary analogue might be the much philosophically thinner argument surrounding free market faiths). A more flexible reading might yield a narrower, but more topically accurate approach to the specific problems of bourgeois political economy, and other cultural formations and norms that impede progress toward greater degrees of human freedom and happiness and ecological sustainability. Indeed, when class struggle is “defined by its union of theory and practice so that knowledge leads to action without transition” (225), historical materialism takes on a flavor of automatic mechanical action rather than fostering thoughtfully reflective, and topically relevant, ethical acts.

It should be stated that as far as orthodox Marxists go, Lukacs was one of the most flexible and least dogmatic. His conception of historical materialism was malleable according to circumstance, and by and large a useful tool for social analysis. Our concerns here are not with historical materialism being posited as a useful dialectical method, which this paper certainly asserts, but with it being viewed as an unyielding method with set modes of deployment. Therefore, this admittedly pragmatic critique should not be seen to set up Lukacs as a straw man, or to gloss over the erudition of his cultural scholarship (specifically, his brilliant work concerning cultural and economic reification, class consciousness, and aesthetic theory). The aim is not to detract from the potential of historical materialism being applied as a method of analysis and a catalyst for critical edification and ethical social action contrary to persistent currents of capitalist exploitation and alienation. Rather, it will address the certainty and necessity with which it asserts knowledge and presupposes social action as flowing seamlessly from the former. Pursuant, I do not seek to denounce the possibility of effective praxis, but to question the validity of absolute praxiological accuracy and harmony. Related action, discussed later, comes from the material and cultural conditions we have, and not necessarily a set of priorities pre-formed in theory. That is not to say that we need no guiding theory, but that the end of liberation is just that, and not the actions taken that may support that end – they are means. The actions must come from knowledge on the ground. Dewey (1929) puts it thus,

Action, when directed by knowledge, is method and means, not an end. The aim and end is the securer, freer and more widely shared embodiment of values in

experience by means of that active control of objects which knowledge alone make possible. (37)

Lukacs and Dewey

In an essay entitled *What is Orthodox Marxism?*, Lukacs (1971) states “orthodox Marxism . . . does not imply the uncritical acceptance of the results of Marx’s investigations . . . orthodoxy refers exclusively to *method*” (1) Through the beginning of the essay he criticizes the positivists amongst Marx’s followers as a leading method to linear nomothetical determinations “impenetrable, fatalistic and immutable” (4), rather than to an understanding of the dialectical connections within the unity of the whole, that is, the production relations within capitalism. However, there still lies an undercurrent of absolute justification when Lukacs posits in a former breath his “scientific conviction that dialectical materialism is *the* [italics mine] road to truth and that its methods can be developed, expanded and deepened only along the lines laid down by its founders” (1). Once again, the dialectical method may indeed be an effective tool for social analysis and action, but we should acknowledge limits in epistemological certainty.

Another problem concerns the ability of dialectical analysis to contemplate and conceive of a whole where this analysis takes “the isolated facts of social life as aspects of the historical process and integrates them into a totality” (8). Finding the “intervening links which connect them [facts concerning reality] to the core” (8) may be a useful pursuit, but with what certainty can we elevate the facts above verifiable belief? In this it may be useful to assuage analytical or dialectical certainty in favor of pragmatic problem solving based on ethical intentions, observation, and attempts at consensus of interpretation toward a desired end.

It may seem contradictory, on the one hand, to affirm Dewey’s pragmatic belief in scientific method, and on the other critique that of Lukacs. However, differences exist. Dewey (1938) sees method as constantly shifting with social context as is evidenced by his views concerning epistemology.² So does Lukacs. Both would argue that accurate dialectical analysis of social conditions coupled with praxiologically corresponding action is how social reality is purposefully changed. Also similar is the conviction that a critical acquisition of facts can lead to a more complete picture of the circumstances in which we can act.

The question concerns the concept of *totality* being a useful conception on which to subjectively base corresponding social action, versus it representing truth denoting a corresponding reality and a corresponding series of necessary negations. This stated, if we emphasize Lukacs' (1971) acknowledgment that "the category of totality does not reduce its various elements to an undifferentiated uniformity, to identity" (12) our analysis retains flux of interpretative ground as an inherent component of historical materialism. The pragmatic critique can still be immediately applied in contrast to Lukacs' confidence in the *objective* application of historical materialism in the political realm. There is little doubt that Dewey (1963), for instance, believed that *scientific* inquiry, of some stripe, was the primary vehicle for performing organized and accurate social analysis and determining value. However, he decried the existence of one axiomatic method by which equality or freedom would be achieved. "We have to get away from the influence of belief in bald single forces," he states, "whether they are thought of as intrinsically psychological or sociological" (39).

Lukacs (1971) is convinced that a scientific version of historical materialism is the only correct method for combating the exploitative practices and alienating effects of capitalism. However, he does state that "the objective forms of all social phenomena change constantly in the course of their ceaseless dialectical interactions with each other" (230), and that the process of historical materialism "must be applied to itself" (228), for it is a reactive byproduct of capitalist society itself. But, he believes that it is the direct and corresponding theory by which the transgressions of bourgeois political economy will be exposed and challenged. The truths of historical materialism as a method may be relative "truths within a particular social order and system of production," but within that system, for Lukacs, "their claim to validity is absolute" (228).

Even through the deterministic language Lukacs is partially safe from Dewey's critique in so far as he realizes that truth is relative to circumstance. For Dewey (1963) the most palpable

harm comes from the fact that the theory [totalitarian Marxism] framed is stated in absolute terms, as one which applies at all places and times, instead of under the contemporary conditions and having definite limits. (75)

For Dewey and Lukacs method is relative to circumstances and the latter would most likely agree with the former's notion of "reality as a social process" (13). The difference lies in how each interprets the flexibility and uncertainty of its application. For Lukacs (1971) capitalism is almost monolithic in its relationship to the necessary "class struggle of the proletariat" (21), and thus can only be dealt with using a method that is its dialectical opposite in number, its antithesis. Dewey (1963), on the other hand, considers economic and cultural conditions to be more inchoate, multifarious, and multidirectional and thus his critique would be more local and topical. Through advocating method rather than prescription, he posits a malleable instrument for social analysis as embedded within a particular set of circumstances and mores.

This is not to suggest, however, that Dewey (1963) failed to see the systemic problems of economic inequity inherent to capitalism. In full recognition of how entrenched economic power vitiates and enervates democratic freedom and process, respectively, and with a tacit acknowledgment of what Marxists would call the economic base's primacy in the determination of superstructural social life, he states, "the economic-material phase of life, which belongs in the base ganglia of society, has usurped for more than a century the cortex of the social body" (59). The difference is that Dewey did not see the political struggle as a simple class conflict with monadic distinctions between bourgeois and proletariat, nor with a mechanical flow of power.³ He

view[ed] with considerable suspicion the erection of actual human beings into fixed entities called classes, having no overlapping interests and so internally unified and externally separated that they are made the protagonists of history[;] . . . this conversion of abstractions into entities smells more of a dialectic of concepts than of a realistic examination of facts (80).

Thus, for Dewey (1961), social action is more complicated than assigning people to class roles within a given economic conflict.⁴ He states,

the Marxist simplification . . . combines romantic idealism of earlier social revolutionaries with what it purports to be thoroughly ‘objective’ scientific analysis, expressed in formulation of a single all-embracing ‘law’, a law which moreover sets forth the proper method to be followed by the oppressed economic class in achieving its liberation. (78)

Dewey’s problem is with Marxist schools that presuppose certainty and rigidity of method, not that there should be conceptual methods employed in social change, a point that Dewey would certainly concede. This can be typified by what Hobsbawm (1972) terms “vulgar-Marxism” (270). One example of this is an over emphasis on the economic over the social. For Hobsbawm, “it is an essential characteristic of Marx’s historical thought that it is neither ‘sociological’ nor ‘economic’ but both simultaneously” (279). Other missteps include, but are not limited to, a mechanical and lopsided relationship privileging the economic base over the social superstructure, and a kind of historical inevitability on the part of some Marxist historians that proffered “a rigid and imposed regularity . . . in the succession of economic formations” (270).

Dewey (1961) questions the certainty with which economic conditions become the sole cultural determinate, a point hotly contested by Marx scholars and neo-Marxists alike. But for now, as he states,

the criticism is not aimed at denying the role of economic factors in society nor at denying the tendency of the present economic regime to produce consequences adverse to democratic freedom. Criticism aims to show what happens when this undeniable factor is isolated and treated as *the* cause of *all* social change. (76)

Lukacs’ (1971) insistence, like Marx’s, that the capitalist system is an ephemeral historical formation, is only realized through such a critical theory as can manifest its critique in application antithetical to present conditions.⁵ “The past only become transparent,” he writes, “when the present can practice self-criticism in an appropriate manner” (237). This seems congruent with the thoughts of most politically progressive pragmatists. However, it appears that his ideas concerning application reach more toward a totalizing abolition, or negation through

synthesis, of a universal reification in favor of *abstract* degrees of freedom imagined when the proletariat becomes the universal class.

Toward this end violence becomes, for Lukacs, an integral part in the “mechanical application” (*HCC*, 239) of historical materialism. Any attempt at “gradual transitions” (249) will ultimately fall prey to the irresistible power capitalism has, not only in reproducing the mode of production, but in the corresponding social relation as well. Thus violence is the logical step in breaking the chains of objective economic relations, “which envelops man [sic] with its fatalistic laws” (240). Violent strategic action on the part of a critically conscious proletariat concludes the “past which rules over the present” (248), and “the proletariat ceases to be merely the object of a crisis” (244), but rather now the collectively dominant force. Concerning Lukacs’ advocating necessary violence he states, “violence is nothing but the will of the proletariat which has become conscious and is bent on abolishing the enslaving hold of reified relations over man and the hold of economies over society” (252-253).

Lukacs (1971), like Marx, thinks in terms of a dramatic and totalizing shift in the nature of human relation “towards the comprehended totality of society . . . [and] the realm of freedom” (250).⁶ This totality concerns personal desires, collective associations, and goals that can arise and flourish once the abstract and objectively external dogmas and seemingly teleological prescribed laws of capitalism have been vanquished by “the constantly improving tool of historical materialism” (253). In many ways this is much congruent to Dewey’s inquiry-centered problem solving approach to democratic life and to his views concerning method as something evolving (see endnote two).

Although much of the preceding is useful in its idealism of economic and, in Marxian terms, social equality, the pragmatic critique does not share faith in one single method that will bring about a more free set of social arrangements. However, I would argue that it agrees that methods or processes like the “constantly improving tool” conceptions of historical materialism might be useful toward negating oppressive social systems. The obvious place Dewey departs from the preceding concerns the *necessity* of violence. Dewey (1961) acknowledges,

Force, rather than intelligence, is built into the procedures of the existing social system, regularly as coercion, in times of crisis as overt violence. The legal system, conspicuously in its penal aspects, more subtly in civil practice, rests upon coercion. (63)

The anti-democratic and coercive tendencies of violence are precisely why Dewey wishes to avoid it. Political action within the formulation should avoid resorting to violence, not at all costs, because in some circumstances the costs of subservience would negate ability to act freely, but with precisely the costs in mind as perpetuating that method over those of intelligence. Dewey (1963) states,

The argument drawn from history, that great social changes have been effected only by violent means, needs considerable qualification, in view of the vast scope of changes that are taking place without the use of violence. But even if it be admitted to hold of the past, the conclusion that violence is the method now to be depended upon does not follow - unless one is committed to a dogmatic philosophy of history. The radical who insists that the future method of change must be like that of the past has much in common with the hide-bound reactionary who holds to the past as an ultimate fact. Both overlook the *fact that history in being a process of change generates change not only in detail but also in the method of directing social change*. (82-83)

For Dewey, because violence has been a principle means in the past, it does not justify it as a moral, practical, or unavoidable choice for present action. Pragmatic application must be corollary to the problem at hand and the current social milieu, and determinations concerning action must be the result of topically and temporally appropriate social analysis. Dewey (1963) further asserts,

Insistence that the use of violent force is *inevitable* limits the use of available intelligence, for wherever the inevitable reigns intelligence cannot be used. Commitment to inevitability is always the fruit of dogma; intelligence does not pretend to *know* save as a result of experimentation, the opposite of preconceived dogma. (78)⁷

Hence, as has been previously discussed, certainty is precarious and situation-specific, not predestined nor ultimately predictable. What follows proffers a useful reconstruction of historical materialism, one that recognizes critical theories shared concerns with what Habermas (1987) terms an “*indissoluble* tension . . . between capitalism and democracy” (345) where the privatizing tendencies of capitalist production often vitiate the social goals of the democratic state.

Habermas, Dewey, and a Pragmatic Reconstruction of Historical Materialism

Toward a reconstruction of historical materialism, Habermas (1979) adopts many tenets of Marxian theory. Notably, he adopts a common belief that ethical social action can lead to progress, or what he, and Lukacs before him, term “social evolution” (130). Habermas, however, renders historical materialism less ideologically rigid and more interrelated to the pursuit of concepts like “moral-practical insight” (120), and the “moralization of motives for action [*italics omitted*]” (136). This can easily be described using the familiar terms of freedom to control one’s own production, freedom from oppressive economic dictates, freedom to one’s own cultural identity and from cultural violence being visited upon the former, etc. He views this reconstruction of historical materialism as making necessary revisions in a theory “whose potential for stimulation has still not been exhausted” (95). His revision is still materialist in that it concerns the Marxian categories of production and reproduction, and historical in that it seeks to identify causes of social change and potentially new and more complex forms of social organization toward “securing a normatively prescribed societal identity, a culturally interpreted ‘good’ or ‘tolerable’ life” (142).

Habermas (1979) posits historical materialism not simply as a heuristic, but, as aforementioned, a “theory of social evolution” (130) that can be used to solve many of the problems confronting the moral development of social life. Progress is, under this historical and materialist rubric, both social and physical; it represents advances in “empirical knowledge and moral-practical insight . . . the development of productive forces and the maturity of forms of social intercourse” (142).

Habermas (1979), however, warns against a retrogression of Marx’s general theory into “historical objectivism . . . [where] philosophical questions [are suppressed] in favor of a

scientific understanding” (96). Although suspicious of absolute narratives, he also takes a different stance from some on the postmodern left that the instability of social norms is *necessarily* beneficial to the moral development of a society. In neo-normative tenor he states, “a philosophical ethics not restricted to metaethical statements is possible today only if we can reconstruct general presuppositions of communication and procedures for justifying norms and values” (97).

These presuppositions set the boundaries for social change as the ability of the populace at large to analyze social circumstances and learn their intricacies: “a *developmental logic* [that may explain] the range of variations within which cultural values, moral representation - can be changed and can find different historical expression” (98). Put crudely, the social learning a given culture can accommodate, and the emotional capacity of consciousness to conflict with the underlying contradictions within a given society, is related to the quality and quantity of direct systemic social change.

This is in many ways akin to Marx’s belief in criticality as a major component in driving alterations in consciousness and social organization.⁸ However, Marx’s ideals were fixed toward surpassing the economic relations of capitalist production, and the necessarily corresponding and symbiotic, if not vaguely parasitic, sociocultural formations.⁹ Habermas (1979) retains the materialist stance that “culture remains a superstructural phenomenon” (98), although he elevates its prominence concerning the way in which it affects the progressive process, especially in the realm of human communication. He also recognizes that the superstructure is not entirely dependent on the base except when “a society moves into a new developmental stage” (143). As Terry Eagleton (1976) has noted, culture has free play within capitalist society, and, is not in a “*symmetrical* relationship” with the economic base, and therefore will assume many forms according to “its own tempo of development, its own internal evolution” (14). It will nonetheless, however, be altered by any significant change in the modes of production.

Dewey (1961), through his own twist on dialectical analysis, somewhat modifies the relationship as containing a constantly shifting contextual ground. He states,

In its [Marxism's] original formulation, there was an important qualification which later statements have tended to ignore. For it was admitted that when political relations, science, etc., are once produced, they operate as causes of subsequent events, and in this capacity are capable of modifying in some degree the operation of the forces which originally produced them. (77)

Dewey (1961), like Marx, sees a liberated economic base as a vehicle to higher aspirations outside of the mean necessities of life: "The ultimate place of economic organization in human life is to assure the secure basis for an ordered expression of individual capacity and for the satisfaction of the needs of man [sic] in non-economic directions" (88).

For Habermas (1979), alteration of the base generally causes a crisis when the "dominant forms of social integration" (144) cannot be reconciled with the problems that challenge aspects of the society's cultural identity formation. Accordingly, critical knowledge of productive structures represents "cognitive potential that can be used for solving crisis-inducing system problems" (147), providing such an aptitude exists among, and congruent pedagogies for, the denizens of a given system. He states,

The endogenous growth of knowledge is thus a necessary condition of social evolution (147), [and] the evolutionary learning process of societies is dependent on the competencies of the individuals that belong to them. The latter in turn acquire their competencies not as isolated monads but by growing into the symbolic structures of their life-worlds. (154)

The given complexity of the extant symbolic structure provides a foundation on which critical discursive examination and action can lend itself to efforts toward social evolution. An example of this symbolic life world in contemporary U.S. society could be extant, although not realized, ideas concerning democracy or simply economic fairness.

Dewey (1963) also brings connection between those extant social conditions and the ability to act toward social change. Moral concepts, plentiful in most cultures, must have systems that support them, or else become impotent, innocuous, and intangible. Shifts in consciousness are

not at root an individualistic affair, or one fostered by fiat, but must be supported in conversation with societal circumstances and mores as they are acted and experienced in life. He states,

The idea that disposition and attitudes can be altered by merely ‘moral’ means conceived of as something that goes on wholly inside the person is itself one of the old patterns that has to be changed. Thought, desire and purpose exist in a constant give and take of interaction with enviroing conditions. (62)

Pursuant, Habermas (1979) uses developmental psychology to trace the moral evolution of society, within the context of “linguistically established intersubjectivity” (99), among personal and group identities and world views, as it pertains to theories that hitherto have been used to gauge ontogenetic development. As with Marx, our subjective selves emerge in an objective world that becomes so through our perception and conception.¹⁰ Its manipulability is regulated, however, by the social norms that dictate the parameters of intersubjective language rules that assist us in identity and consciousness formation, interpretation, and communicative understanding. Roughly following the cognitive developmental stages of Jean Piaget, Habermas (1979) ends with a final and most mature stage termed “the universalistic stages of development” (100). This is where the internal self, or ego, ventures out into the world and finds itself reflected in the discourses we conduct with other knowing subjects. Individuals at this stage have the ability to question the validity of norms, and

transcend the objectivism of a given nature and, in the light of hypotheses explain the given from contingent boundary conditions[,] . . . can burst the sociocentrism of a traditional order and, in the light of principles, understand (and if necessary criticize) existing norms as mere conventions. . . . [T]he dogmatism of the given and existing is broken, the prescientifically constituted object domains can be relativized in relation to the system of ego-demarkations so that theories can be traced back to the cognitive accomplishments of investigating subjects and norm systems to the will-formation of subjects living together. (102)

Therefore, the individual can begin the process of reconstructing the world through critically engaging the origins of present norms and applying them to the pursuit of perceivable and desirable *oughts*. This cognitive stage, in its societal incarnation, represents a body politic that is

able to facilitate social change based on a more developed moral consciousness concerning the leveling of economic power to produce our social life more freely.¹¹

This pursuit of purposeful *oughts* finds parallel in Dewey's (1963) notion of moral development being inextricably embedded in the flux of social interactions. "Flux does not have to be created," Dewey writes, "but it does have to be directed. It has to be so controlled that it will move to some end in accordance with the principles of life, since life itself is development" (56).

Central to social evolution is how personal identity formation takes place through "repeated actualized self-identifications . . . in the intersubjective relations of its social life world" (Habermas 1979, 106). Habermas astutely points out that identities are not created *sui genesis*, and that ego formations are always the product of reciprocal (not equal) communicative actions between the self and others. These exchanges thus represent "intersubjectively recognized self-identification" (107). Consensus, or at least resignation, concerning identity on the part of the individual ego is determined in large part by others in society agreeing upon the given self-definition of the individual within the web of intersubjectively created self-group norms. The risk within this societal construct is the potential for those individuals or groups for whom the consented norms are anathema or sufficiently foreign to become, as Habermas puts it, "neuter" (108), and thus extra-social. Historically, those outside agreed upon value-norms became socially marginalized and/or stigmatized as abnormal humans. This ethically problematic bifurcation of society into *communal members* and *others* was partially remedied by the seemingly universal ideological and structural constructs of liberal political economy and civil law (114). Citizenship, under these conditions, posited that the individual was free to trade and associate under the umbrella of certain accepted forms of economic organization, with corresponding protection of legal recourse, and varying degrees of access to the election of governmental representatives. From the foundation of classical political economy and the liberal social contract, historical materialism emerged under Marx and emerges with theorists like Habermas and others as a potential approach to transcend, *reflectively*, to new modes of living through our dialectical efforts, as deemed to be appropriate by a collective identity of social actors. It represents the chance to socially experiment with "a collective identity no longer tied retrospectively to specific doctrines and forms of life but prospectively to programs and rules for bringing about

something” (115). Pedagogical efforts under this versatile method could, freed from fetters of ideological prescription, move progressively with an eye toward problem-solving through shared and non-violent *communicative action*. Habermas, however, rightly points out that the consensual ideal is only possible when “the universal validity claims (truth, rightness, truthfulness)” (118) are tacitly recognized by the participants. In contrast, he describes other modes of social action, like *purposive-rational action*, where consensus is circumvented in favor of *strategic action*. This is grounded in institutional precepts, like those of a legal system where the norms and structures are preestablished.

Communicative action requires conscious rationalization of “truthfulness of intentional expressions and with the rightness of norms” (Habermas 1979, 119). Its authority comes from active consensus building; it is active for it relies on the intersubjective activity of public discourse; it is a political form of a socially pragmatic theory of moral utility. Rationalization is the means by which individuals come together (for instance, in formal pedagogical spaces) in ways that require moral-practical discussions of intentions and means, of desires and aspirations, toward solving any immediate disagreement, social conflict, or crisis outside of the potential constraints of retrospective institutional tenets. Regarding this, Habermas (1979) is worth quoting at length:

Rationalization here means extirpating those relations of force that are inconspicuously set in the very structures of communication and that prevent conscious settlement of conflicts[;] . . . progress cannot be measured against the choice of correct strategies, but rather against the intersubjectivity of understanding achieved without force, that is, against the expansion of the domain of consensual action together with the re-establishment of undistorted communication. (119-120)

Through attempts at communicative action, we potentially circumvent institutional hegemonies that may contribute to the distortion of communication, or at least cognition, and raise the public discourse regarding social conflicts to the level of immediate consciousness through more rigorous problem-solving capabilities. Habermas is quick to point out, however, that the structural norms may preclude attempts at communicative action, and that not all social

cooperation is communicative in the rational sense, but rather that much is procedurally bound up in the dominant modes of production and corresponding social life. But, the potential of engaging in discourse, and the fact that communicative action can exist at all, renders consensus possible concerning what constitutes progress in modes of production and in moral social life.

Similar sentiments can be found with Dewey (1963) in terms of the democratic process being a perpetually unfolding endeavor. Questions concerning democratic progress, and breaks from the absolutism of orthodoxy or of reified cultural formations can be described as follows:

The problem under discussion is precisely *how* conflicting claims are to be settled in the interest of all - or at least the great majority. The method of democracy - insofar as it is that of organized intelligence - is to bring these conflicts out into the open where their special claims can be seen and appraised, where they can be discussed and judged in the light of more inclusive interests than are represented by either of them separately (79).

These inclusive interests find shape in the application of pragmatic methods to the justice related synthetic problems embedded within historical materialism; this will be discussed in what follows.

Pursuing Pragmatic Pedagogical Praxis

What begins with possible grand ideological prescription, finds its most poignant application in the alleviation of negative sites of human emotional and physical existence perhaps following the premise of Marx (1978) in the *Theses on Feuerbach* that “social life is essentially practical” (145). One could also argue that practical life, as envisioned by Marx and Dewey, is essentially moral in addressing unnecessary human suffering by seeking to lessen inequalities of social and economic power. Fruitful analysis and positive change toward the former, as previously alluded to by Habermas (1975), necessitates the development of our educational structures concerning “whether theoretical-technical and practical questions are differentiated, and whether discursive learning processes can take place” (8).

As a vehicle, Habermas (1989) posits that while inquiry can be socially useful and beneficial, in many cases it may require engaging memories and texts engendered by unpleasant and traumatic, often immoral past deeds. Social evolution, as previously positioned, would also require the development of an aptitude for the cultivation of this type of memory possession, introduction, or reclamation, and critically oriented affect and social action. Part of its practical application is the examination of those things desired to be forgotten - practical because it seeks to thwart legacy or repetition in another context yet equally pernicious form.

In pedagogical circles, dialectical inquiry previously discussed should not avoid the past's less pleasant features such as slavery, genocide, and other forms of severe and overt oppression caused by either social or physical (environmental) privation. By way of example, and regarding the German holocaust, Habermas (1989) states that:

Our own life is linked to the life context in which Auschwitz was possible not by contingent circumstances but intrinsically. Our form of life is connected with that of our parents and grandparents through a web of familial, local, political, and intellectual traditions that is difficult to disentangle – that is through a historical milieu that has made us what we are today. None of us can escape this milieu, because our identities, both as individuals and as Germans, are indissolubly interwoven with it. (223)

Germans, according to Habermas, have an “obligation incumbent . . . to keep alive, without distortion and not only in an intellectual form, the memory of the sufferings of those who were murdered by German hands” (223). He proposes a version of historical inquiry that resides in political life, one that finds its vision in the “abstract idea of the universalization of democracy and human rights” (214). It becomes evident that historical inquiry cannot avoid trauma, but finds its use in the formation and projection of a common vision. This vision, although far from deterministic, seeks to critically penetrate cultural reifications and lessen alienation and oppression through a liberated consciousness and ethical action. I posit here that educational spaces are one of the most obvious and advantageous places for forging this kind of consciousness through discursive activities.

As stated, these represent potentialities that reside within a pragmatic pedagogical application of historical materialism rather than inevitable eventualities should these methods be deployed. However, both pursue a noble myth or ethic common to both Marxian dialectical materialism and Deweyan pragmatism - the salient belief that the quality of human civilization is determined by ethically defensible conjoined living, interpersonally and within our shared physical environment. The inquiry and action suggested here is distinctly pragmatic in tenor, and thus does not necessarily reference an *a priori* version of democracy, but rather a commitment to realizing what a given culture might decide to be the best potentials of negating obstacles to harmonious and just social life. This is where deploying a pragmatic version of historical materialism becomes topically useful, but also hopeful in terms of commitment. Pursuant, Dewey's (1963) conception of democratic effort

does not tell us to 're-arm morally' and all social problems will be solved. It says, Find out how all the constituents of our existing culture are operating and then see to it that whenever and wherever needed the be modified in order that their workings may release and fulfill the possibilities of human nature. (125-126)

The course of social intelligence, and the task for critical educators, is to determine the social circumstance in which we have choice and act accurately according to what is practical on the one hand and moral on the other.

The pursuit of dialectical freedom, of the kind spoke of by Marx, and the realization of a universal human context with regard to dignity, the aforementioned mean necessities of life, and the freedom of creation and association, cannot be realized when the ability to engage in the aforementioned activities is arrogated by a powerful and democratically disproportional minority that results in the alienation of the majority.¹² Rather than take either the current circumstance, or Marxian analyses and predictions as historicized and predestined, or *requiring* violence, we could choose to interpret it as providing *enough* wiggle room for moral choice within what historical circumstances we have been left. Indeed, in our decision making and actions, it may be more useful to have aspirations such as love, justice, forgiveness, respect, creativity, solidarity, reciprocity, and democracy serve as inspiration for our pedagogical attempts at communication

and political activities. It is socially useful for the pragmatic use of historical materialism in educational spaces to favor an organic, critical, and active philosophical approach to cultural change in order to cut through what binds social justice. A more equitable democratic life, Dewey (1961) states,

can be won only by extending the application of democratic methods, methods of consultation, persuasion, negotiation, communication, co-operative intelligence, in the task of making our own politics, industry, education, our culture generally, as servant and an evolving manifestation of democratic ideas [and] can be served only by the slow day by day adoption and contagious diffusion in every phase of our common life of methods that are identical with the ends to be reached. (175-176)

It can only be won with close attention to accurate cultural analysis, systemic problem-solving, and reparative strategies that address both the physical and emotional wounds left us by past context and past action. It is for this reason, and pursuant to the goals already discussed, that a pragmatic interpretation of historical materialism is justified. It is also warranted for use in institutions of education to positively affect the problem solving capabilities of the young toward a greater understanding of our global context and those cultural and physical structures that have led to our current conflicts and ethically indefensible social arrangements.

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Notes

¹ This piece is primarily concerned with a discussion of the social application of historical materialism. This is not to downplay the importance of deploying similar methods to the humanly created issues of ecological derogation and how to foster environmental choices that place a premium on health and sustainability.

² Dewey states in *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*, (New York: Holt: Rinehart, and Winston: 1938), 8, that “inquiry is a *continuing* process in every field[,] . . . that the ‘settlement’ of a particular situation by a particular inquiry is no guarantee that *that* settled conclusion will always remain settled . . . [and that] it is the convergent and cumulative effect of continuing inquiry that defines knowledge in its general meaning.” He also states that “all special conclusions of special inquiries are parts of an enterprise that is continually renewed, or is a going concern” (9).

³ It should be stated that Lukacs (1971) in *History and Class Consciousness* was vehemently opposed to the idea of “supra-historical” (14) essential natural law concerning the dynamics of social functions (4, 7, 13-14).

⁴ It needs to be stated that this concept does not apply summarily to Lukacs’ (1971) version of historical materialism with its disinclination toward natural law and “vulgar” materialism where analysis renders “time less law valid for every human society” (9).

⁵ As example see section H of Marx’s *The Grundrisse*, entitled “The End of Capitalism” in *The Marx-Engles Reader*, 191-192.

⁶ For an example of Marx’s perspective see the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* in *MER*, specifically page 86.

⁷ It should be acknowledged that Dewey mentioned in a footnote In *Freedom and Culture* (1963) the flexibility in Marx’s work concerning the topical application of his method as relative to the social climate: “It should be noted that Marx himself was not completely committed to the dogma of the inevitability of force as the means of effecting revolutionary changes in the system of ‘social relations’” (85).

⁸ See Marx’s *For a Ruthless Criticism of Everything Existing* in *The Marx-Engles Reader*, specifically page 14.

⁹ See the preface to Marx’s *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* in *The Marx-Engles Reader*, specifically page 4.

¹⁰ See the preface to Karl Marx. *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. (New York: International Publishers, 1963): 15-19.

¹¹ Habermas (1979), however, does recognize that this type of development represents a trend not an absolute condition. Some members of the society are bound never to reach this stage in the manner postulated, and “the points of reference from which the same structures of consciousness are embodied are different in the history of the individual and in that of the species” (102).

¹² See Marx’s discussion of “human” and “political emancipation” in his essay *On the Jewish Question* in *The Marx-Engles Reader*, specifically pages 44-46. Simply put, and as but one example, he draws a distinction between being at “liberty to engage in business” as the granting of a political right, and being “liberated from the egoism of business” (45). Human emancipation represents a return to existence on its own terms toward harmony between one’s social and productive forces, and outside the boundaries of abstracting people into individualistic economic competitors and yet somehow moral citizens necessitated by liberal political economy.

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