

The Politics of Encyclopaedias

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Abstract

The paper assesses the political credibility of three encyclopaedias (Encyclopaedia Britannica, Encyclopedia of Marxism and Wikipedia) in relation to three chosen topics (Friedrich Engels's biography; the political philosophy of fascism; and, the discipline of social psychology). I was interested in discerning how entries are represented and critically evaluated within each encyclopaedia. What epistemological foundations are at work? What type of information is privileged and what is marginalised? And, most importantly, how effective are the descriptions in terms of demystifying capitalist social relations? My findings suggest that the political narratives of Encyclopaedia Britannica are the least intellectually credible of the three. Whilst all three possess weaknesses, a combination of Encyclopedia of Marxism and Wikipedia should provide a thorough and, by and large, trustworthy starting point for any analyst investigating social phenomena.

Key words: Encyclopaedias; Engels; Fascism; Marxism; Social Psychology

Introduction

This paper came about as a result of three non-related occurrences during the course of my academic teaching in 2010: the first was an innocuous question from a student who wished to know where I stood in relation to the use of *Wikipedia* as reference; a few weeks later, I stumbled upon a written comment in the margin of a student essay by a fellow academic denouncing *Wikipedia* in scornful terms, "... really problematic, never, never use Wikipedia in any academic essay"; and, finally, a request by a colleague from Loughborough University to contribute an entry for a sports

encyclopaedia (Fozooni, 2012a), and the protracted editorial negotiations over content and style that ensued. The cumulative impact of these three episodes compelled me to launch a belated investigation into the politics and story-telling mechanisms of ‘knowledge trees’.

My initial reading had yielded a series of dualities that I found helpful for circumnavigating the often-hazardous terrain of compendium wars. The distinction between printed and online encyclopaedias, the antagonism between political and objective reference books, individual and collective authorship, and the difference between modernist and postmodernist epistemologies were all subjects that required careful investigation. To facilitate this, I selected three works: the printed version of *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (henceforth, *EB*) was chosen as representative of academically reputable referencing; the online version of the *Encyclopedia of Marxism* (*EM*) as exemplar of no-holds-barred political referencing; and, lastly, *Wikipedia* (*WP*), the postmodernist, academically derided, project of collective knowledge-making.

The paper begins by underlining the relationship between epistemology and ideology. I justify my focus on the political credibility of encyclopaedias in contrast to most previous researchers who dwell on issues of accuracy and academic respectability (Giles, 2005; Nature, 2006). I then analyse three distinct entries: the historical biography of Friedrich Engels; the political interpretation of fascism as a movement and ideology; and, the genesis and development of Social Psychology as a distinct discipline within the social sciences. These entries were chosen in order to provide the analysis with a variety of narrative styles to draw upon. The final part of the paper evaluates the strengths and weaknesses of encyclopaedias in dealing with complex political issues and draws some general lessons.

Epistemology and ideology in encyclopaedias

Encyclopaedic sorting, pruning and describing are tasks with a dual-purpose. Their stated aim is to clarify the world we live in through the incremental accumulation of ‘objective units of facts’. However, pigeon-holing is at the same time an exercise in ideological domination. The traditional encyclopaedists exercised this power by either ignoring a subject, or relegating it to the *trivium* (which in medieval universities

consisted of grammar, logic and rhetoric) rather than the more prestigious *quadrivium* (arithmetic, geometry, music and astronomy), or by interpreting it in a way that foreclosed alternative explanations.

In his *Discours préliminaire* (1751), the French thinker d'Alembert would heap faint praise on the proto-empiricism of Bacon, whilst subordinating Bacon's trees of knowledge (the revealed and natural branches of theology) to reason. The political implications of this re-classification were lost on no-one. But as if to underscore the boldness of the break, the last section of *Discours préliminaire* presented Bacon as the great but flawed progenitor of philosophy. Here d'Alembert narrates "history as the triumph of civilization and civilization as the work of men of letters" (Darnton, 1988: 199). Thus Bacon's residual scholasticism was burst asunder by "Descartes the doubter", and "Newton the modest" provided the perfect model of inquiry by restricting "philosophy to the study of observed phenomena" (Darnton, 1988: 200).

This unilinear narrative of progress is also a tale of moral uplift, with heroes and villains meeting on battlefields to storm rival citadels. The philosopher-warriors of the Enlightenment enjoyed a cult status as exalted as anything the contemporary era has to offer Wiki-warriors. Perhaps one could also speculate that both sets of elites had disdain for the unwashed masses equal to their faith in the emancipatory virtues of truth. Here is d'Alembert displaying his class prejudices: "Doubtless the common people is a stupid animal which lets itself be led into the shadows when nothing better is offered to it. But offer it the truth; if this truth is simple ... it will definitely seize on it and will want none other" (d'Alembert, 1770, quoted in Hyland et al., 2003: 49).

When d'Alembert and Diderot teamed up to produce the *Encyclopédie* (1751-71), they further shifted the balance of power toward secularism. As Darnton makes clear the "Encyclopedists conveyed a message merely by positing things ... [and] ... by subjecting religion to philosophy, they effectively dechristianized it" (Darnton, 1988: 194). They also supplemented Bacon's inductivism through the use of deductivism (Wernick, 2006: 33). What the sociologist Comte would later call *encyclopédisme* (a project of secular-scientific synthesis ranging from the 17th century to the 19th) was imbued with a political and moral mission. Bacon's motives were material progress and social peace. The *philosophes* desired on top of that to "place the polity itself on a

rational basis”, whilst Comte wished to complete the arc in order to facilitate the preconditions of the new industrial order (Wernick, 2006: 28-29).

In retrospect, d’Alembert’s account can be viewed as semi-conscious capitalist triumphalism, a triumphalism representing a series of epistemological attempts to bring bourgeois order to disorder: Bacon’s scholastic proto-empiricism and its boost for primitive capital accumulation was an early landmark; Locke’s more consistent empiricism which laid the grounds for liberalism (Caffentzis, 2008) as well as cognitive psychology and behaviourism (Billig, 2008) followed suit; Diderot and d’Alembert’s project cemented bourgeois individualism; and Comte’s *Scheisspositivismus* (Marx) inaugurated the industrial phase of capitalist development.

The narrative so far has aimed to sensitise the reader to the dualities present in the construction of encyclopaedias. Most contemporary encyclopaedias present themselves as objective, factual, permanent and certain, the *summa* of consensual expert opinion. In reality, however, I will be arguing that the preparation, production and reception of these texts are thoroughly imbued with subjective, political, contingent and moral intent.

Ironically this mythical mind-map is strategically deployed in the construction of another fiction- that of the ‘nation’ - which as Anderson (1990) has demonstrated must be imagined as a community and reinforced through *banal* actions daily (Billig, 1995). Nadine Kavanagh (2010) has described how the *Australian Encyclopaedia* (1925-26) was instrumental in the construction of national identity. This project quite deliberately skirted round any subject deemed negative or problematic: “A simple strategy for glossing over Australia’s undesired past therefore was to exclude all references to convicts or to call them *early settlers* or *pioneers*” (Kavanagh, 2010: 244). When a discussion of convictism was unavoidable, the cross-referencing system was deftly employed to reduce the definition of convict to one particular type: the political prisoner (Kavanagh, 2010: 245). Avoiding undesirable convicts and the native Other were preconditions for the creation of a mythic sense of national identity revolving around ‘white Australia’.

Method

A qualitative approach is essential for studying entries embedded in multi-layered discourses of knowledge. These texts have to be analysed for explicit meaning as well as hidden scripts. I combine a historical analysis of encyclopaedias with a ‘close reading’ of entries. The historical analysis has foregrounded the ontology, epistemology and political positions of encyclopaedias. Closed reading is a notion borrowed from the works of Moss and Shank (2002), Maingueneau & Angermüller (2007), and DuBois (2003).

Moss and Shank (2002) employ close reading to investigate computer mediated teaching and research interactions that occur online. Closed reading is preferred to coding strategies based on the following logic, “One sense of close reading is the idea that crucial nuggets of insight are often infrequent, so there is a need to sift through the text looking for these sorts of nuggets. Relying solely on coding strategies, and especially coding software, tends to bury these infrequent responses, rather than bringing them to the surface where they can be studied” (Moss and Shank, 2002). The tradition of close reading expounded by Maingueneau & Angermüller (2007) emphasises the relation between discourse as text (intradiscursive) and discourse as activity (extradiscursive). A close reading allows us to better understand the relationship between the encyclopaedic genre and the emergent narrative. DuBois (2003) describes how close reading is critical and evaluative but it also takes chances when reading a text, since it uses creative imagination to forge linkage. This chance taking enhances its political efficacy. Close reading with its mix of modernist and postmodernist critical devices, thus, seems to be an appropriate method for assessing the intricacies of the text, its attributes as a genre and the extradiscursive factors shaping it.

My approach focuses on political credibility rather than accuracy. Francke and Sundin (2010) provide a useful definition of ‘credibility’ which I have adopted. It is a notion related to “quality, trust, authority, and persuasion” (Francke and Sundin, 2010). Credibility is further divided into three components, all of which were being assessed here: *source* credibility (i.e., our three chosen encyclopaedias); *message* credibility

(the structure, style and content of entries); and, *media* credibility (here the credibility associated with either print or online publications).

A number of obstacles and complications had to be addressed before data gathering could begin. For instance, a series of interesting choices had to be abandoned when it became obvious they were not equally regarded by the three encyclopaedias. *EB* does not seem to have an entry on Sylvia Pankhurst or Lev Vygotsky. *EM* does not warrant the Zanj slaves' rebellion worthy of investigation.

A related problem was structural. Two of my encyclopaedias are organised around a small and a larger section. *EB* has Micro and Macro sections and the Marxist archive has a similar divide between *EM* and the rest of *MIA* (Marxist Internet Archive). By contrast each entry in *WP* is whole but containing numerous hyperlinks, making the number of words for each topic uneven. I have dealt with this problem to the best of my ability, choosing appropriate topics with roughly similar word counts.

Analysis

1) Historical analysis

Encyclopaedia Britannica (EB)

Encyclopaedia Britannica was preceded by Chamber's *Cyclopaedia* (1728) and the *Biographia Britannica* (1747-66). Most Enlightenment encyclopaedias were written in the vernacular rather than Latin (Hartelius, 2010: 508). The publication of *EB* in 1768 was a conscious political act. Born amidst the Scottish Enlightenment, *EB* was a conservative, pro-monarchist reaction against the perceived radicalism of the French *Encyclopédie*. This may explain why "in the biographical entries, there is far less emphasis on criticism" (Tankard, 2009: 58). The chief editor of the 3rd edition, George Gleig, is rather forthright about *EB*'s political mission: "The French *Encyclopédie* had been accused, and justly accused, of having disseminated far and wide the seeds of anarchy and atheism. If the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* shall in any degree counteract the tendency of that pestiferous work, even these two volumes will not be wholly unworthy of your Majesty's attention" (Gleig in Wikipedia, 'History of the Encyclopædia Britannica').

The tradition of dedicating *EB* to the reigning monarch persists to this day despite the fact that ownership was transferred from Scottish to American proprietors in 1901 and later still to a Swiss billionaire. However, it is now jointly dedicated to the British monarch and United States president, with the words “Dedicated by Permission to the Heads of the Two English-Speaking Peoples ...” The *Americanisation* of *EB* was considered an act of impertinence by some British scholars who continue to criticise the emphasis on parochial American concerns. This despite the fact that an institution as British as *The Times* sanctioned the sale. This relationship between *EB* and *The Times* became a source of amusement to *EB*’s critics: “*The Times* is behind the *Encyclopædia Britannica* and the *Encyclopædia Britannica* is behind the times” (ibid.).

In keeping with tradition, the 1st edition of *EB* did not include biographies of living people. When it was decided to include biographies, William Smellie resigned the editorship in protest. What was inventive about *EB* was the combination of alphabetic and thematic organisation. An alphabetic organisation, although a very egalitarian method of organisation because it reduced subjects to the same ontological level, was considered “dismembering the sciences”. Although commercially successful, *EB* was derided by scholars for a few decades (Tankard, 2009: 42), in a vein very similar to the attacks on *WP* today. Smellie had to apologise for *EB*’s shortcomings in the same defensive manner current *WP* editors justify inadequacies: “With regard to errors in general, whether falling under the denomination of mental, typographical or accidental, we are conscious of being able to point out a greater number than any critic whatever” (ibid.). Today, in addition to errors *WP* also has to contend with cyber-vandalism and mischievous alterations (Giles, 2007).

Indeed some of the errors in early editions of *EB* were far more preposterous than any that can be attributed to in *EM* or *WP*. The 2nd edition fixed the origins of earth as 23 October 4004 B.C. and the 3rd edition imprudently rejects Newton’s theory of gravity (ibid.). Gradually most of these errors were corrected. Contributions from leading scholars only began in 1815-24. Unlike *EM* and *WP* which disallow original research, some of these *EB* contributions were genuinely original such as Thomas Young’s translation of the hieroglyphics on the Rosetta Stone (5th edition). By the 20th century the likes of Freud, Trotsky and Einstein were further enhancing *EB*’s reputation as a

site of academic excellence, although the overall style had become less scholarly and more popular.

The 11th edition (1910-11) included an article by Baden-Powell on kite-flying which is interesting in view of the criticisms levelled at *WP* for containing ‘banal subjects’. At this stage *EB* employed 35 female contributors out of 1500 (2.3%). Marie Curie (despite having won Noble Prizes in Chemistry and Physics) did not merit an entry although she is briefly mentioned under her husband Pierre Curie. I encountered a similar problem when looking up Sylvia Pankhurst. Sylvia is not deemed important enough to have a separate entry although she is briefly mentioned under her mother, Emmeline Pankhurst. This is despite the fact that Sylvia Pankhurst’s politics are far more radical and relevant to our times than the bourgeois contributions of her mother or sisters (Fozooni, 2007).

The 14th edition deleted information “unflattering to the catholic church” (Wikipedia, ‘History of the Encyclopædia Britannica’). The Great Depression caused a dangerous slump in sales. In 1933 it was decided to continuously update *EB* on a schedule in order to keep it timely and maintain profit margins. Spin-offs were produced for children, historians and cartographers in order to maximise niche markets. However, it has been estimated that less than 40% of *EB* has changed from 1985 to 2007 and the size (at approximately 40 million words) has remained nearly constant since 1954.

Roughly 25% of both the *Macropædia* (long essay section) and *Micropædia* (shorter entries) are devoted to geography, with biographies, science and social science occupying the following categories. *EB* has found it difficult to keep the *Macropædia* and *Micropædia* contributions consistent. *EB* has been marketed as the most ‘non-western’ of western encyclopaedias, although it is no stranger to overt promotion of racist and sexist views. Virginia Woolf called its art and literature entries ‘bourgeois’ and *EB*’s 11th edition promoted the Ku Klux Klan as protectors of the white race against the negro threat. This was mild compared to views expressed in 1898: “No negro has ever been distinguished as a man of science, a poet or an artist ... By the nearly unanimous consent of anthropologists this type occupies ... the lowest position in the evolutionary scale ... the inherent mental inferiority [is] even more marked than their physical differences” (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1898: 316-318).

In March 2012, after 244 years of publication, a combination of technological advances in digital archiving and negligible sales finally forced *EB* to end its 32-volume print edition (The Guardian, 2012).

Encyclopedia of Marxism (EM)

EM is in many ways the exact opposite of *EB*, since it lays no claim to naïve objectivity. *EM* is an openly political reference guide to Marxism which operates as a volunteer based non-profit organisation. Within this self-imposed political remit, it also claims to be an “open” encyclopedia: “Our aim has been to present how a word has been used by Marxists, and to reflect the range of views found amongst Marxists of various hues, especially the views of the founders of Marxist theory” (<http://www.marxists.org/glossary/about/index.htm>). Much of the material is scanned from old Progress Publishers books (Empson, 2005).

Since 2002, *EM* has been attributing an article to the individual who wrote it, although the majority of entries remain the collective work of the editorial board. This board consists, as far as I can tell, of Leninists (mostly Leninist-Trotskyites). The secretary of *EM* is Andy Blunden, an Australian Trotskyite and an ex-member of the Workers Revolutionary Party whose leader was (the infamous) Gerry Healy.

The relationship between *EM* and the Marxist Internet Archive (*MIA*) resembles the division of labor between *Micropædia* and *Macropædia* in *EB*. *EM* is mostly biographies and glossary of terms and *MIA* is a more comprehensive archival support. *EM/MIA* rely on the voluntary work of many sympathisers (around 62 active volunteers in 2007 most of whom, it is claimed, are not academics) to research, transcribe, translate, proof-read, index and update its entries. Thanks to these volunteers material are translated into an impressive number of languages (45 different languages by the end of 2007). *EM/MIA* have a charter with seven fundamental tenets including a promise to remain free and politically independent and to provide archival information in an easy and understandable way (<http://www.marxists.org/admin/intro/index.htm>).

Very early on the editors had to address the thorny problem of ‘distasteful views’ such as racist or sexist ideas being expressed by some Marxist writers. It was decided to archive these works without filtering them. *EM* has an uneasy relationship with ‘bourgeois law’. Another leading member explains, “We believe that neither the prohibition incurred by any cost nor any right of intellectual ownership should restrict Marxist education” (Basgen quoted in Empson, 2005). On the one hand *EM* exists in a capitalist world, and subjected to intellectual property rights and on the other hand it wishes to be a prefiguring of a post-capitalist world where private property and bourgeois law have been superseded. *EM* is now licensed under the Creative Commons License. However, good intentions have not prevented a conflict developing between the original archivist of *EM/MIA* (internet nickname: Zodiac) and volunteers for control of content and direction.

In 2007 a series of cyber-attacks were organised against *EM/MIA*, allegedly from China. A leading member of the steering committee, Brian Basgen, explained the ‘irony’ of a communist state attacking a communist archive: “It is ironic for people who don’t know what is going on in China ... The Chinese so-called Communist government has nothing to do with communism. It has been going toward capitalism for a long time” (Cohen, *The New York Times*, 2007). The *EM* (being a largely Trotskyite-oriented archive) does not even consider Mao himself to have been a ‘true Marxist’. According to Cohen, “[Mao] is considered a *reference writer*, along with other authors like Adam Smith, Stalin and Jean-Jacques Rousseau”. To be included as a ‘true Marxist’ writer, the individual must fulfil the basic criteria of serving to “liberate working people” (Cohen, 2007).

EM/MIA thus constitute a Trotskyite project with the following self-proclaimed rationale, “[In 1990] ... Marxism needed a cocoon, an archive—to measure its validity in totality, and to give it rebirth amid the shattering of the Soviet style Marxism-Leninism ... We didn’t have answers; we had information ... We weren’t doing this just to understand the world, but also to create a new level of consciousness in people the world over” (<http://www.marxists.org/admin/intro/history/index.htm>).

Wikipedia (WP)

Vugt (2010: 64) believes that the spirit of the *Encyclopédie* has returned in the shape of Wikipedia. Kant's motto for Enlightenment, 'dare to know' has transformed into 'dare to edit'. Even the *Encyclopédie*'s system of cross-referencing is seen in this light as a precursor of the modern hypertext. However, if the *Encyclopédie* kept "the hierarchy between authority and the reader in place", *WP* actively encourages a new type of collaboration based on equality and horizontalisation (ibid., p. 66). Jandric (2010: 48) even claims that "Wikipedia creates a virtual anarchist society".

The distinction between *writerly* and *readerly* texts, popularised by Barthes, is very relevant here (Barthes, 1974). *EB* is a readerly text which safeguards the authority of the author as the final signifier and leaves little room for alternative interpretations. In contrast, *WP* actively encourages the reader to join in the process of editing. In a discursive twist to this Barthesian analysis of authorship, Foucault was to prefigure projects such as *WP* in these terms: "We can easily imagine a culture where discourse would circulate without any need for an author. Discourses, whatever their status, form, or value, and regardless of our manner of handling them, would unfold in a pervasive anonymity" (Foucault, 1969: 16). The historical author who supposedly brought stylistic uniformity and theoretical coherence has been replaced with something altogether more complex.

Baytiyeh and Pfaffman (2010: 128) using a mixture of surveys, open ended questions and Likert scale questionnaires analysed 115 Wikipedians. Their study shows that Wikipedians "are largely driven by motivations to learn and create [...] altruism- the desire to create a public repository for all knowledge- is one of the most important factors". Hartelius (2010: 516) reports that a majority of Wikipedians are "intellectuals in their late twenties and thirties ... typically male and English-speaking". Their fundamental guiding principle in this endeavour is a "neutral point of view" (Al Jazeera, 2011). This knowledge community is characterised by members who begin their work at the margins of *WP* (e.g., uploading images and proof reading) and move on to more complex tasks (e.g., maintenance of the website and writing), with the help of more experienced Wikipedians. The virtual space created is remarkably similar to Vygotsky's *zone of proximal development* through the

application of Bakhtin's *dialogic interaction*. Hartelius shows how *WP* by promoting a chain of utterances challenges monologic, individualistic 'expertise' (Hartelius, 2010: 505). *WP* encourages us to see 'truth' as forming through dialogue and rhetoric, that is rhetoric in the positive sense used by ancient Greeks and recently revived by Billig (1996). It also attempts to render superfluous the distinction between formal knowledge and everyday knowledge. It is these aspects of *WP* that set it apart from *EB* and perhaps even *EM*.

However, it would be naïve to suggest that collective authorship, anonymity, dialogic interaction and constant editing have overcome issues of power imbalance. As Vugt has observed, "Essentially, what is going on on the *pages* of Wikipedia in terms of politics is a struggle over voice, a struggle which only becomes visible when one decides to delve further into the wiki structure, i.e. the discussion and history pages" (Vugt, 2010: 70). This struggle between and within the 75,000 Wikipedians who contribute to *WP*, the sixty-plus staff who run its day-to-day administration and Jimmy Wales who as founder shapes its evolution strategically, is not always visible but nevertheless a defining feature of the project. For example, *WP* decided to construct a 'social contract' for its Wikipedians in order to control editing. Some features of the software are "available only to administrators, who are experienced and trusted members of the community" (Wikipedia, 'Wikipedia: Policies and Guidelines'). Some articles are blocked from public access when they become the site of ferocious editing wars. For example, the US president Barack Obama's page was blocked when 'birthers' (those who insist Obama is not a US citizen) changed Obama's birthplace from Hawaii to Kenya (Al Jazeera, 15 January 2011).

2) Close reading of selected entries

Friedrich Engels's biography

The *EB* entry on Engels (approx. 1980 words) is structured chronologically with a short 'factual' opening paragraph followed by four major subheadings (*Early life*, 1820-42; *Conversion to Communism*, 1842-45; *Partnership with Marx*, 1845-83; *Last years*, 1883-95), and a short bibliography with recommendations for further reading.

The ‘factual’ paragraph refers to Engels simultaneously as “German Socialist philosopher” and (with Marx) as the founder of “modern Communism” (p. 494). No indication is given as to whether the reader should treat socialism and communism as identical or two related aspects of the same movement (for a discussion of these issues see chapters 2 and 3 of Rubel and Crump, 1987). The early life section focuses on Engels’s “capacity for living a double life”, a curious choice of words that portrays Engels as shadowy and suspect. A view confirmed when Engels begins to publish journalistic articles under a pseudonym. His growing interest in “liberal and revolutionary works” put him at odds with his family’s traditional values (p. 494). The Young Hegelians helped turn an agnostic Engels into a “militant atheist”, a key phrase that is left unexplained. Engels was ripe for this transformation since “his revolutionary convictions made him ready *to strike out in almost any direction*” (p. 404, emphasis added).

The next section employs the religious term ‘conversion’ to describe Engels’s break with the Young Hegelians and the adoption of communism. Ironically, Engels is portrayed as both over-sensitive in relation to Marx’s casual response to the news of the death of Mary Burns (Engels’s partner) and heartless for resisting marriage to Mary’s sister, Lizzy Burns, until a deathbed “concession” (p. 494). In fact, as Tristram Hunt (2010: 229) makes clear Marx showed staggering callousness on hearing of Mary Burns’s death and Engels had every right to feel aggrieved. Hunt also describes Engels touchingly rushing to collect a priest in order to fulfil Lizzy’s wish to die married.

The section on his partnership with Marx depicts Engels as a man of substance but, nonetheless, a sidekick of the great Marx who also doubled-up on occasions as the “hatchetman of the *partnership*” (p. 495). The shadowy and religious themes are developed further. Marx and Engels are mentioned as editors of a newspaper that “[appeared] in a democratic guise” during the Revolution of 1848 but was furnishing “daily guidelines and incitements” (p. 495). The aim of Engels’s correspondence with social democrats was to “foster some degree of conformity among the *faithful*” and to sell *Das Kapital*- their “Bible” (p. 405). One final point is the blurring of difference between ‘economic’ and ‘material’ interpretations of history, which is reminiscent of the blurring of distinction between ‘socialism’ and ‘communism’ mentioned above:

“Upon joining Marx in Brussels in 1845, Engels endorsed his newly formulated economic, or materialistic, interpretation of history, which assumed an eventual communist triumph” (p. 495).

The section on Engels’s *Last Years* is noteworthy for its last sentence. Regarding some unmentioned critics of Engels who blame him for “deviations” from “true Marxism”, *EB* refers the reader to the Marx-Engels correspondence as a way of dismissing the whole episode as a storm in a teacup (p. 495). This closing of a very productive avenue of research is to my mind the weakest aspect of *EB*’s entry on Engels.

WP’s entry for Engels at approximately 2500 words is slightly longer than *EB*’s. The chronology is less linear although just like *EB* it begins with a factual opening paragraph and ends with bibliography and further reading recommendations. *WP* chooses to segmentalise Engels’s life based on geography with the following cities emphasised in his life’s journey: Barmen, Manchester, Paris, Brussels, Cologne and London. The text includes 5 pictures (*EB* included only one). The existence of incomplete sub-headings and ‘stubs’ give the whole piece an impression of unfinalizability. The opening paragraph is more informative than *EB*. For instance, Engels is introduced with more descriptive ‘tags’. These tags or framing devices depict him as entrepreneur, social scientist, author, political theorist and philosopher.

The main body evaluates Engels in more positive terms than the preceding *EB* entry. Anonymous publishing by Engels is not explained as shadowy or underhanded. Rather anonymity is justified as a legitimate ethnographic method of analysis for someone investigating child labor and extreme impoverishment. Mary Burns is also described more warmly as “a fierce young working woman with radical opinions ... who guided Engels through Manchester and Salford”. Quotes from Engels or Marx are utilised to provide a flavour of the ideas being discussed. *WP* provides information about Engels’s military experiences as a volunteer during the 1849 uprising in South Germany missing from *EB*.

Engel’s re-entry into Manchester business circles is described as an act of sacrifice which allowed Marx to live in relative comfort and complete *Das Kapital*. In *WP*’s

estimation, Engels was not a mere sidekick of Marx but an original thinker in his own right, who contributed to our understanding of the rise of religion and family, the relationship between dialectical and historical materialism, and peasant uprisings in medieval Europe. Moreover, his relationship with atheism and religion is more fully elaborated and his latter day pantheistic inclinations are alluded to. A number of his books are introduced and briefly contextualised. Hunt (2010) and Carver (1981) are again employed liberally to back up arguments but *WP* uses fresher sources compared to *EB*. Crucially, Thomas (1980) is employed to introduce a critical note regarding Engels's possible misinterpretations of Marx.

EM's treatment of Engels is arranged very differently from the preceding encyclopaedias. *EM* has chosen not to have a short article on Engels presumably since it already possesses a huge archive of works by and on Engels at *MIA* (<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/bio/index.htm>). The archive is subdivided into four sections:

1. *Fredrick Engels*: containing a number of short biographies by Marx, Lenin and 19th century encyclopaedias. The contribution by Marx (1880) reads like a friendly roll call of Engel's greatest theoretical and practical accomplishments. Lenin's piece is an obituary written in 1895. It begins with Engel's own eulogy of Marx on occasion of the latter's funeral (*What a torch of reason ceased to burn/What a heart has ceased to beat!*). Like most obituaries it skews historical accuracy for a degree of myth-making. For instance, it claims "From the time that fate brought Karl Marx and Frederick Engels together, the two friends devoted their life's work to a common cause". Of course, we know that the first encounter was decidedly icy and that they warmed to each other gradually. Lenin's text is peppered with dogmatic assertions and economic determinism: "Marx and Engels were the first to show that the working class and its demands are a necessary outcome of the present economic system ...". These assertions are mixed in with moments of wishful thinking: "These views of Marx and Engels have now been adopted by all proletarians who are fighting for their emancipation". In a paternalistic style Lenin continues, "[Marx and Engels] taught the working class to know itself and be conscious of itself, and they substituted science for dreams". He even claims somewhat fancifully that during the 1848 revolution, "The two friends were the heart and soul of all revolutionary-democratic aspirations

in Rhenish Prussia”. The sombre tone is offset by Engels’s own *Confession*- a series of humorous responses to a questionnaire. Thanks to the *Confession* we discover that Engels’s idea of happiness was a bottle of Château Margaux 1848 and his idea of misery, going to the dentist!

2. *Recollections of Engel’s Literary Interests*: comprising of two reminiscences by acquaintances of Engels, namely, Rusanov and Kravchinskaya. These are brief sketches that aim to portray Engels as a learned and wise father-figure to political refugees. They add little to our knowledge of the man or his ideas and seem to be included as a concession to leftist nostalgia.

3. *Collections*: begins with various media interviews between 1871-93. Again Engels is portrayed as the all-knowing, all-seeing sage providing advice to the European proletariat, battling misinterpretations by the likes of Giovanni Bovio (an Italian parliamentarian), glorying in the success of German social democrats in the 1893 elections in a discourse eerily similar to contemporary post-election media analysis: “We have gained 10 seats, said [Engels] ... On the first ballot we obtained 24 seats, and out of 85 of our men left in the second ballots, 20 were returned. We gained 16 seats and lost 6, leaving us with a net gain of 10 seats. We hold 5 out of the 6 seats in Berlin”. This segment ends with Bakunin’s impressions of Engels which is worth quoting since it represents a rare instance of critical commentary of Engels, “While [Marx’s] devoted friend Engels was just as intelligent as he, he was not as erudite. Nevertheless, Engels was more practical, and no less adept at political calumny, lying, and intrigue”.

4. *Family of Marx & Engels*: an odd addition to the above sections with its selection of short biographies of various family members, showing for me once again that *EM/MIA* do not employ hyperlinks as astutely and organically as *WP*. The list includes references to Marx’s wife, daughters and various son-in-laws but very little about Engels’s lineage.

Fascism

Let us begin once more with *EB*'s Micropaedia entry, which at approximately 600 words is the shortest and least satisfying of the three entries. The opening sentence confines the geographical boundaries of fascism controversially as, “*fascism*, a political movement that governed parts of central and eastern Europe during 1922-45” (*EB*, Micropaedia, ‘Fascism’, p. 691). Yet of the three classical examples that are further elaborated, Italy, Japan and Germany, only the latter can fit the elusive tag ‘central European’. *EB* follows this by characterising fascism as “extreme right-wing nationalism”, “[contemptuous of] liberalism” and signifying a clear “[rejection] of Marxism and all left-wing ideologies” (p. 691).

The text then focuses briefly on the evolution of fascism within the three abovementioned national identities, without explaining its socio-cultural and economic preconditions. Finally, the term ‘neo-fascism’ is introduced rather confusingly as every manifestation of fascism since World War II. They are distinguished from fascists proper because “unlike the fascists, [neo-fascists] tended to place more blame for their countries’ problems on foreign immigrants rather than on leftists and Jews”. They were also less interested in territorial conquests and more “obliged [to] portray their movements as democratic” (p. 691).

What is most fascinating about *EB*'s take on fascism is not what it says but what it leaves unsaid. Nowhere in the entry is the reader informed of the anti-working class, anti-women and homophobic tendencies of fascism. The sine quo non of fascism seems to be extreme nationalism with many forms of fascism also displaying “virulent racism”. The examples of fascism and neo-fascism furnished do not include any Anglo-Saxon country. It is as if *EB* is telling us fascism is the Other’s doing, which occasionally becomes ‘our’ problem.

At 1120 words the *EM* entry on fascism is more rigorous and informative (<http://www.marxists.org/glossary/terms/f/a.htm>). It is also pitched at a higher theoretical level. *EM* does not ignore the fact that fascism “is an extreme form of capitalism” or that it comes to power “through the sponsorship and funding of massive capitalists”. *EM* informs us that the social composition of fascism have

historically “been small capitalists, low-level bureaucrats of all stripes ... with great success in rural areas, especially among farmers, peasants, and in the city, slum workers”. *EM* draws attention to the support liberal countries gave nascent fascist movements as a bulwark against the USSR, “until Germany’s tanks were on the borders of England and France”. *EM* also distinguishes between fascists and neo-fascist, claiming that the former use working class discourse rhetorically in order to gain the masses support but the latter “disdain any trace of Socialist/Communist terminology”. A cursory perusal through neo-fascist literature demonstrates the invalidity of this assertion since many still employ *plebeian* language to win the sympathy of workers. In provocative (and I would argue confused) terms *EM* refers to fascism’s corporatism as a form of anarcho-syndicalism in reverse: “Fascism championed corporate economics, which operated on an anarcho-syndicalist model in reverse: associations of bosses in particular industries determine working conditions, prices, etc. In this form of corporatism, bosses dictate everything from working hours to minimum wages, without government interference”.

EM concludes with a list of traits that add to *EB*’s rather limited characterisation of fascism. Here the hierarchal and religious tendencies of fascism are alluded to. However, the description of fascism as “anti-modern” is more problematic. Even if we limit the definition of modernism to the art world, this ignores the rather ambivalent relationship of individuals like Goebbels with Jazz, Riefenstahl with modern filmmaking and Speer with modern architecture. If we employ a more expansive definition of modernism which including its economic aspects, then many fascists might be categorised as pro-modern. This conceptual slippage between ‘modern’, ‘modernity’ and ‘modernism’ detracts from what is a superior characterisation of fascism compared to *EB*.

At 18,500 words, the *WP* contribution on fascism is by far the longest of the three entries. I will focus on a small section of this essay (around 2,000 words) which includes an introduction, etymology and various definitions of fascism (Wikipedia, ‘Fascism’).

The first paragraph contains two characterisations that many readers may disagree with. Fascism is defined as “a *radical* and authoritarian *nationalist* political ideology”

(my emphasis). The term ‘radical’ is hyperlinked to another webpage where it is correctly stated that “historically, radicalism has referred exclusively to the radical left ... rarely incorporating far-right politics ...”

(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Political_radicalism). The opening paragraph also informs us that “fascists seek to organize *a nation*” (my emphasis). This analysis may chime with both *EB* and *EM* but it fails to recognise that most forms of fascism are simultaneously nationalist and ‘internationalist’.

On a more positive note, *WP* is sophisticated enough to distinguish between different varieties of fascism. Nazism, for instance, is hyperlinked as “the ideology and practice of the Nazi party ... It was a unique variety of fascism that involved biological racism and anti-Semitism” (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nazism>). We are also introduced to two fascist claims that to my knowledge are not mentioned by either *EB* or *EM*, namely, its claim to seek an “organic community” and a “trans-class economics”. Their mere inclusion provides the analysis with added gravitas. Likewise, *WP* possesses enough space to not only discuss the etymology of the term ‘fascist’ but also to elaborate on its symbolism: “The symbolism of the fasces suggested *strength through unity*: a single rod is easily broken, while the bundle is difficult to break” (Wikipedia, ‘Fascism’, ‘Etymology’).

The next sub-section is concerned with various interpretations of fascism. It aims to give the impression that “Since the 1990s, scholars including Stanley Payne, Roger Eatwell, Roger Griffin and Robert O. Paxton have been gathering a rough consensus on the ideology’s core tenets” (Wikipedia, ‘Fascism’, ‘Definitions’). I find this statement problematic on two grounds: first, for an encyclopaedia with an anti-academic predilection, this section seems far too generous towards academia; and, more worryingly, it advocates a consensus that simply does not exist. In fact, many academic and non-academic theoreticians of fascism would consider the contributions of the abovementioned scholars atavistic (for a number of alternative interpretations of fascism see De Grand, 1995; Guerin, 1973; Ridley, 1988; Sohn-Rethel, 1987; Traverso, 1999; Vajda, 1976).

Social Psychology

EB's narrative structure on 'social psychology' is quite straight-forward: definition → subjects of study → methods of investigation → applications (see *EB Micropaedia*, 'Social Psychology', p. 922-23, approximately 600 words). The perennial conflict between mainstream and critical forms of social psychology (cf. Billig, 2008) is completely absent from *EB*'s account. Social psychology is restrictively defined as the "scientific study of human *behaviour* in its social and cultural setting" (p. 922, my emphasis). However, there is no hint that 'science' has both a narrow, positivist, experimental-oriented definition and a more expansive, complex and qualitative dimension (cf. Conner, 2005).

The validation of the model derived from the 'hard sciences' is further underlined through focus on 'empirical methods'. *EB* claims that "the pioneering [empirical] work in social psychology was done in the United States" (p. 922, italics added). This is problematic since it ignores parallel work in Europe and elsewhere (Hollway et al., 2007: 14). When it comes to categorising social psychology's subjects of study, *EB* reduces the range to mainstream topics such as 'social status', 'group membership', 'attitudes', and 'personality' (p. 922). The section explaining social psychology's approach to data gathering conflates methodology with method – a common error. Disconcertingly, it also avoids linking methodology with epistemology or ontology, thus giving the impression that choosing one's data gathering approach is merely a matter of practicality. Social psychology's current applications are cited as: social work, employee relations and advertising. Ominously social psychologists "may be used to advise companies how to choose, train, and reward workers and how to organise production processes to lessen worker dissatisfaction" (p. 923).

The *WP* entry on social psychology follows *EB*'s practice of separating an introductory 'Micropaedia' section (approx. 300 words) from a historical 'Macropaedia' one (approx. 4,700 words). I will be focusing on the former but a few aspects of the latter will also be examined
[[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_psychology_\(psychology\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_psychology_(psychology))].

The text certainly begins more promisingly than *EB*: “Social psychology is the scientific study of how people’s thoughts, feelings and behaviours are influenced by the actual, imagined or implied presence of others”. This is already an improvement on *EB*’s over-emphasis on behaviour. True *WP* then goes on to define scientific as the “empirical method of investigation” and behaviour, thoughts and feelings as “measurable” psychological variables but at least *WP* problematises this by implying there are alternative perspectives.

Societal normalisation and its possible adverse effects are alluded to and the interdisciplinary nature of social psychology placed in the “gap between psychology and sociology”. *WP* even alludes to the historical distinction between American and European forms of social psychology with the former focusing on the individual and the latter paying more attention to group phenomena.

The ‘Macropaedia’ section inflicts a parental lineage on social psychology by referring to Kurt Lewin as “the father of social psychology” (Wikipedia, ‘Social Psychology’, ‘History’). We are informed that “By the 1970s, however, social psychology in America had reached a crisis. There was heated debate over the ethics of laboratory experimentation, whether or not attitudes really predicted behavior, and how much science could be done in a cultural context” (ibid.). This is based on the academically reputable work of Kenneth Gergen (1973). Unfortunately *WP*’s entry reinforces the false demarcation between *intrapersonal* and *interpersonal* aspects of psychological phenomena (cf. Brown, 2007). The final section is a rather nondescript account of research methodology and ethics. The disappointing thing about the treatment of ethical issues is how closely *WP* follows convention in assuming today’s researchers are more ethical thanks to rigorous checks conducted by ethical committees compared to the all-too-easily vilified Stanley Milgram and Philip Zimbardo.

EM does not have a specific entry on social psychology. Key psychology thinkers such as Pavlov, Freud, Mead, Jung, Vygotsky and Lacan are listed. The seminal schools of psychology that have shaped its internal dynamics are also expounded upon: Gestalt, behaviourism and psychoanalysis.

What I find impressive about the treatment of social psychology is the archives at *MIA* under the title ‘Psychology and Marxism’. The webpage begins with a framing quote by Vygotsky, “Psychology is in need of its own *Das Kapital* – its own concepts of class, basis, value etc. - in which it might express, describe, and study its object”. In order to explore the relationship between Marxism and Psychology the archives are subdivided into three sections: 1. Marxist Works (e.g., Luria, Fromm and Seve); 2. Classics of Psychology (e.g., Adler, Jung, Piaget and Chomsky); and, 3. Commentary (e.g., many of these are neo-Vygotskians such as Fred Newman, Lois Holzman and Michael Cole).

Discussion

Political credibility is projected very differently in encyclopaedias. *EB*, basing itself on positivist and empiricist epistemologies, pursues data in order to secure an abstract notion of bourgeois truth. *EB* conceals the chaotic, messy process of knowledge building and presents the reader with a seemingly unambiguous product consisting of ‘objective’ units of information. This view of knowledge creates “rigid facts, [fragmented] definitions and [abstract] classifications” (Pavlidis, 2010: 95). The tone is impersonal in keeping with this avowed objectivity and the structure tends toward the classical, with a clear demarcation between beginning, middle and ending. The final product is a *readerly* text (Barthes) with a *monologic* discourse (Bakhtin) which forecloses alternative interpretations.

EM by contrast nails its colours to the mast of proletarian struggle. It too seeks a mostly abstract notion of truth but one founded on historical materialism and the dialectical notion of class conflict. It represents a higher form of critical thinking (cf. Fozooni, 2012b) which enhances our ability to “perceive things as developing and changing ... [and] to perceive the interaction between opposite sides of the cognitive objects” (Pavlidis, 2010: 75). Like *EB*, it is a mostly *readerly* text privileging monologic interaction, although by employing thousands of volunteers *EM* could lay claim to a measure of *writerly* and *dialogic* success. The outsider gains some insight into the internal decision making processes deployed at *EM* but it is also clear that the editorial board privileges Trotskyite interpretations over other forms of Marxism.

The epistemological foundation of *WP* incorporates post-structuralist relativism to critically evaluate subjects. Of the three encyclopaedias discussed here, *WP* is the most writerly and dialogic source. It may use mostly academic knowledge, as do *EB* and *EM*, but *WP* does not shirk from everyday knowledge. Truth and political creditability become a matter of protracted negotiation between academic and everyday knowledge. *WP* seems to be equally interested in the product and process of knowledge generation.

Of the dualities we discussed in the introduction, some have proved more real than others. It is clear for instance that the claim for objective, apolitical encyclopaedic work does not stand close scrutiny. All encyclopaedias are political texts embedded in ideological presuppositions. Furthermore, these ideological underpinnings carry with them a moral imperative. In setting out the aims of his *encyclopédie* Diderot was clear on this point, "... that our children, by becoming more educated, may at the same time become more virtuous" (Diderot quoted in Wernick, 2006: 27). As with Grammarians of old, the new encyclopaedists make a play for our 'moral wisdom'. Encyclopaedias "anticipate future knowledge, and accommodate as well as inspire the ongoing quest for knowledge" (de Vugt, 2010: 65). The online encyclopaedia also undermines the authority of the 'big individual author' but instead of killing authorship, it has produced a more diffuse, ephemeral, anonymous, collective author.

Whilst the objective-political duality and the distinction between the individual-collective author have proved mostly fictive, other dualities are patently real. The demise of printed *EB* and the energetic efforts to create an on-line version are testimony to the many advantages of a virtual presence: lower costs; regular updates; more efficient editing, to name but few. The free website was launched in 1999 but "the appearance of the same information in a new medium, raised questions. The shift from printed to online encyclopaedias ... is not simply a relocation of content" (Hartelius, 2010: 509). Unlike *WP* which is organically related to online research, *EB*'s online version feels ponderous. It has also been useful throughout this text to distinguish the modernist attributes of *EB* from the postmodernist characteristics of *WP*, with *EM* falling somewhere in the middle of these two stools.

My close reading has shown *EB*'s political credibility to be questionable. Whether depicting Engels as engaged in cloak and dagger political machinations, his alleged insensitivity in relation to female partners, or his assumed side-kick intellectual status compared to Marx, *EB*'s assessment of Engels seems at best uncharitable and at worst misleading. On fascism, *EB* provides us with a deliberately restricted interpretation which conveniently fails to inform the reader of fascism's promotion of capitalism and its attacks on working class organisations. Instead we are introduced to a 'foreign' fascism with no ideological connections to liberalism and no political commonalities with Anglo-Saxon societies. The weakest *EB* entry, however, is its description of social psychology. We are given little indication of the '1970s crisis in social psychology' and the critical currents undermining confidence in experimentation and positivist interpretations ever since. The mainstream applications of social psychology as defenders of the status quo are normalised.

EM, in comparison to *EB*, displays a great deal of political nuance even though its overcomplicated organisation detracts somewhat from its achievements. Perhaps not surprisingly the entry on Engels is the least critical of the articles. *EM*'s political affinity for Engels as one of the 'fathers of Marxism' has prevented it from a balanced evaluation. The information vignettes on Engels are either propagandistic (e.g., Lenin's panegyric obituary), sycophantic (e.g., literary sketches by the likes of Rusanov), or simply uninformative (e.g., family reports). The few critical remarks interspersed between all these files from Bakunin strike the reader as vindictive skulduggery by a known enemy rather than an attempt to provide a balanced assessment. The entry on fascism, on the other hand, is a strong piece full of relevant information. *EM* provides us with a reasonably comprehensive account of fascism in the space provided. Fascist characteristics are thoughtfully listed and explained. My only quibble is the conceptual slippage involving the term 'modernism' and the false analogy between fascist corporatism and anarcho-syndicalist forms of organisation.

The combined contributions of *EM/MIA* on social psychology make available many hard to come by texts. As social scientists we owe the editors a debt of gratitude for their selfless endeavours. However, even as a fan of Vygotsky, I find the over-concentration on him and various neo-Vygotskians at the expense of other strands of Marxist Psychology a little disconcerting. There seems to be a marked preference for

Hegelian oriented interpretations as well as structuralist works. The indefatigable browser is left with the distinct impression that although *EM/MIA* welcomes a dialogue about Marxism and Psychology, it prefers the key parameters to be predetermined in rather restrictive terms. Some readers may feel overwhelmed by the historical baggage attached to various concepts, and one must be frank here, the sterility of parts of the archived material.

In many ways *WP* represents the most fascinating of the three encyclopaedias, not necessarily because of its actual level of development but because of its potential to exceed previous knowledge trees. The contribution on Engels is written with warmth and a sophisticated political understanding. This may be related to *WP*'s more frequent use of descriptive tags for sketching biographies. *WP* also uses more images than *EB* and *EM*, which makes research more entertaining- a rather undervalued aspect of research work (cf. Francke and Sundin, 2010). The fascist entry seems raw and incomplete. However, the greater space available to *WP* allows it to discuss aspects of fascism such as 'organic community' and a 'trans-class economics'. Unfortunately these opportunities are not always taken advantage of and a certain amount of conceptual confusion persists. At times the sheer number of hyperlinks becomes distracting. The social psychology entry has a number of advantages over *EB* including better definitions of core concepts and a fuller historical narrative of the evolution of the discipline. Although *WP* does not underscore Marxist contributions to social psychology, it still manages a more critical assessment than *EB*'s rather conventional account.

In conclusion, my preliminary study suggests a combined survey of *EM* and *WP* entries should provide the inquisitive social researcher with plenty of useful information as well as a critical orientation for demystifying capitalist social relations. The printed version of *EB* (now discontinued) seems to have lost the political credibility it once enjoyed. To put it another way, the dialectical method of *EM* and the dialogic approach of *WP* combined have proved far more instructive than the positivism of *EB*.

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