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Ideology and Creation in Marx's Historical Materialism: A Problem of Justification

Facundo Rodríguez, London *School of Economics and Political Science*

Abstract

In this article, I evaluate the historicistic foundations of Marx's Historical Materialism by looking at his argument for rejecting both the Young Hegelian's idealistic conception of history and a religious conception of history based on a Creator. I claim that none of these conceptions of history can be true if Historical Materialism is true. I finally argue that, while Marx's theory of history accurately justifies its rejection of ideology by proving the historical dependence of consciousness on material conditions, it fails to provide an adequate answer to the origin of humanity that makes material conditions historically independent of a Creator. To reach this conclusion, I, first, consider three interpretations of Marx's claim that the materialist answer to the question of Creation will be clear under communism, but argue that all fail because Marx does not give any independent reasons for believing that people's beliefs under communism enjoy any epistemic superiority to the ones that are held now.

Keywords: Historical Materialism, Analytic Marxism, Cosmological Argument, Christianity, Justification.

Introduction

Marx's argument against any theological reply to the question of Creation in *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* has rarely been considered in analytic Marxism for its own sake. Authors such as Daniel Brudney (Brudney 1998), Cyril Smith (Smith 2002) or Allen Wood (Wood 1981) refer to Marx's argument against Creationism only as an illustration of either his rejection of philosophical thinking (Brudney 1998) or of the interdependence of human nature, nature and labour (Smith 2002) (Wood 1981) but an evaluation of the soundness of the argument and its central role in Marx's theory of history is still to be done. In this brief commentary I suggest that Marx's argument against Creationism can be a serious weakness in the historicistic foundation of his historical materialism. I claim that, while Marx's historical materialism rightly justifies its rejection of ideology by proving that consciousness was historically caused by relations of production, it fails to provide equal justification of its rejection of religion as it offers no satisfactory explanation of the origins of humanity that does not make material conditions historically dependent on a Creator. In order to put forward this claim, I will divide the piece in three short sections.

Section I will briefly interpret Marx's historical materialism so as to argue that, in order to develop his materialistic account of history, Marx needed to reject both idealistic and religious understandings of history. Section II will present Marx's argument against Young Hegelian's idealism as, first, rejecting Young Hegelian's division of history and pre-history as arbitrary and circular and, second, as providing a Rousseauian history of the origin of consciousness. In Section III, I present Marx's counter to Creationism and provide three possible interpretations of his argument. I finally show that the three interpretations fail to provide a materialistic alternative account of the genesis of material life.

Marx's Historical Materialism

In order to put forward the claim that Marx's theory of history has a weakness in the *unjustified* neglect of religion, it is methodologically necessary to prove that it is in fact a central tenet of this theory that God plays no role as an essential drive in history. Still, in so doing I do not intend to put forward a full interpretation of historical materialism.

Following G.A Cohen (Cohen 1988), I understand historical materialism as having four variables:

Forces of production: Is the general capacity for production which is available at a given moment composed by objective capacities – or *means of production* – and subjective capacities – or *labour power*.

Relations of Production: Relations of economic power, that is the economic power people have or lack over forces of production. These relations *and only* these relations conform the *Economic Structure*.

Superstructure: Legal and Political institutions.

Ideology: Ideas that provide intellectual support to the Economic Structure. (e.g. religious, moral or metaphysical ideas.)

Historical Materialism is here understood as the thesis that:

Historical change of the *economic structure*, the *superstructure* or *ideology* occurs *only if* the *forces of production* develop sufficiently so as to come into contradiction with the present *economic structure*.

I take this to be a somehow systematic formulation of Marx's statement that "if theory, theology, philosophy, ethics, etc. comes into contradiction with the existing relations [of production], this can *only* occur because existing social relations have come into contradiction with existing forces of production." [emphasis added] (Marx 2000, 182) I think that the thesis, so stated, even if impossible to fully defend here, is in harmony not only with G.A Cohen's (Cohen 1988) understanding of historical materialism as providing functional explanation, but also with Marx's position against the Young Hegelians as expressed in the German ideology and against Feuerbach as expressed in the Theses on Feuerbach. If "the point is to change" (Marx 2000, 178) the world, for Marx, this can *only* be done by changing "the material conditions determining human production" (Marx 2000, 184) on which ideology is dependent "as the direct efflux of their material behaviour" (Marx 2000, 180).

It is logically implied by the definition of historical materialism that a change in the material conditions is a *necessary* condition for *any* other change to occur and so that philosophical argumentation, praying or any other "immaterial" mean is *insufficient* to cause historical change. Consequently, it is *necessary* for Marx to reject the Young Hegelian's conception of history in which "the relationships of men, all their doings, their chains and their limitations are products of their consciousness" (Marx 1846). Section II will lay out and defend Marx's reasons for considering that the Young Hegelian's conception of history is a "distorted conception" (Marx 1846).

Secondly, if the material conditions in which humans labour are to be the factor driving history forward, then Creation¹ *ex nihilo* cannot be the first historical event from which all the other follow. First, because in that case there would be an unexplainable event in history for historical materialism, but secondly because if Marx's theory of history was unable to reject Creation as the first historical event, it would also be unable to reject *in principle* a religious explanation of every subsequent event in history.

This second reasoning can be tracked back to Feuerbach. Feuerbach says, "the creation of the world out of nothing imports simply the non-essentiality (...) of the world" (Feuerbach 1957). Even if metaphorically, Feuerbach then soundly argues that what makes a miracle a miracle is that it happens *ex nihilo*, meaning with no sufficient previous material causes, and so takes Creation to be the first miracle. It follows that allowing for Creation *ex nihilo* as an explanation implies allowing for miraculous explanations as possible *in principle*, and hence considering non-material explanations as *possible* explanations of subsequent historical events. Such explanations would be consistent with – and indeed conform the basis of – a Christian theory of history but would be inconsistent with historical materialism. Christian theories of history have Providence – which miraculously sustains Creation – and not material conditions – which are in turn continuously sustained by Providence – as the determinant drive in History. Human action, and so human labour also, is only secondarily caused by the agent, while God is always the first cause of everything: "apart from me you can do nothing." (John 15:5). Metaphysics aside: "God willing".

For these two reasons I claim that it is a *necessary* condition for historical materialism to be true that Creationism is not true.

Next section will set out and defend Marx rejection of Idealism before moving on to his discussion on Creation.

Against the Young Hegelians: The Rejection of Idealism

Marx portrayal of the argument justifying the Young Hegelian's conception of history could be non-formally set out as follow:

P1. "the relationships of men, all their doings, their chains and their limitations are products of their consciousness" (Marx 1846)

P2. Consciousness has an independent existence. (Marx 1846)

P3. if P2, then consciousness can *only* be changed through consciousness itself by "interpreting reality in another way". (Marx 1846)

C. Men can *only* be liberated from their chains and limitations by "interpreting reality in another way" (Marx 1846)

Marx famously counters that "life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life" (Marx 1846), negating the conclusion and premise P2 of the Young Hegelian's argument. Marx understands, in line with his historicism, that P2 arises from "a distorted conception of history" which is unable to explain the origin of consciousness itself. According to Marx, when the "German idealist" get to the moment in history when no consciousness can be attributed to humans, they trace an ad hoc line between what they call history proper and a "nonsensical prehistory" (Marx 2000, 182).

In the first place, it must be noted that if the Young Hegelians are making this distinction with no *other* reason than the emergence of consciousness in man, then they are using the same theory being tested, that history is the history of human consciousness, as a criterion for accommodating historical evidence so as to confirm that theory, and so incurring in circular reasoning. In the second place, Marx claims that a successful conception of history would need to provide an account of this first historical act and that the Young Hegelians "...do not enlighten us as to how we proceed from this nonsensical 'prehistory' to history proper" (Marx 2000, 182).

Marx offers an alternative account of how we proceed from pre-history to history that simultaneously refutes P2 and corroborates historical materialism. Similar to Rousseau's account of the emergence of language and consciousness in *The Discourse on Inequality*, Marx argues that consciousness "only arises from the need, the necessity, of intercourse with other men" (Marx 2000, 183) and so is a result of a given *economic structure* of cooperation to which the increased population, and so the increase in needs as well as *forces of production*, have lead us to. His explanation can be schematised as follows (Marx 2000, 183-184):

First Stage: Consciousness is nothing more than consciousness of the "immediate sensuous environment" and of the "limited connection with other persons".

Second Stage: This limited connection with other persons is further developed through an increase in the *forces of production*, brought about by an increase in population.

Third Stage: This increase in the *forces of production* generates a change in the *economic structure* or *relations of productions* through spontaneous division of labour as a consequence of the natural predispositions of the enlarging population (e.g. particular strength, capacities, needs.)

Fourth Stage: With this initial "natural" division of labour there comes a further development of language. Only when language becomes sufficiently abstract is that division of labour becomes "truly such" and the division between material and mental – abstract – labour appears.

Marx concludes that, when history is correctly understood, consciousness "no longer retain the semblance of independence." (Marx 2000, 182)

I believe, first, that Marx's account does in fact avoid the criticism he puts forward to the Young Hegelians by providing *some* explanation of the emergence of consciousness that is coherent with his historical materialism. Secondly, I also believe that the explanation that Marx proposes, even if lacking some causal precision, is not just plausible, but it also comes close to contemporary explanations provided by evolutionary neuroscience, especially to the recently developed Attention Schema Theory (AST)ⁱⁱ – which recognize a social model through which we got to build our own self-model of consciousness.

Aside from the similarities with Marx's account of the emergence of consciousness, Rousseau's relies on a benevolent creator to explain the existence of the initial material conditions which enabled humans to produce "material life itself", as Marx puts it. Nevertheless, if we take Marx's criticism to the Young Hegelians and ask Marx for the historical causes of *his* first stage, he will, in order to avoid being subject to his own objection, *need* to provide an answer and, given the conclusions of Section I, his answer, contrary to Rousseau's, should not rely on – and even reject the existence of – a benevolent Creator. Section III argues that Marx fails to provide such answer.

Against Creation: A Problem of Justification

Once historical materialism has been proven to account for the emergence of consciousness in man by reference to forces and relations of productions, one could still, as Marx does regarding consciousness, ask: What explains the biological existence of beings that can labour and of the material on which they labour in the first place? As McIntyre puts it: "how where once there were only particles and fields of force, there came to be cabbages, spiders, and scientific naturalists?" (McIntyre 2012)

Marx is conscious that if history is explained through human's forces of production, then humans' productive capacity must have an independent existence, i.e. P2 from the Young Hegelian's argument must hold for human's productive capacity, and this is only possible "as long as [humanity] owes its existence to itself" (Marx 2000, 103). Marx considers that "the idea of creation is thus one that is very difficult to drive out of the minds of people" (Marx 2000, 103) and so provides two answers to this idea, one preliminary and one definite. I reject the first and consider several interpretations of the second to finally argue that none succeed.

The first answer provided by Marx is that the question "who created the first man and the world as a whole?" (Marx 2000, 103) is self-defeating because "when you inquire about the creation of the world and man, then you (...) suppose them non-existent and yet require me to prove to you that they exist." (Marx 2000, 103) Even if I do not see this argument as having "the air of a half-clever undergraduate" (Brudney 1998, 214) as Daniel Brudney does, I still think it is an unconvincing rejection of the question on the origin of the material existence of humanity. Firstly, because it is not clear how claiming that a thing that *is* at time *t* and *was not* at time *t₁* violates the law of non-contradiction. Even if an explanation of this change that posits that the thing *simultaneously* was and was not at time *t_{0.5}* would come at odds with the law of non-contradiction, claiming that such a change in the thing's existence has happened and asking for the cause of this change does not. In fact, it is the impossibility of such an explanation and not of the question which led to the pre-Socratic paradox of change that Aristotle thought himself as solving through the introduction of an hylomorphic ontology. Secondly, how would any historical account which relies on causation avoid this problem? Why would asking for the origin of consciousness be less self-defeating than asking for the origin of matter? Marx himself recognizes this point and makes his opponent say "I do not want to posit the nothingness of nature, etc. I ask you about its genesis, just as I ask the anatomist about the formation of bones, etc." (Marx 2000, 103)

To this objection Marx responds by saying:

[F]or the socialist man the *entire so-called history of the world* is nothing but the creation of man through human labour, nothing but the emergence of nature for man, so he has the visible, irrefutable proof of his *birth* through himself, of his *genesis*. Since the *real existence* of man and nature has become evident in practice, through sense experience, because man has thus become evident for man as the being of nature, and nature for man as the being of man, the question about an *alien* being, about a being above nature and man –

a question which implies the admission of the unreality of nature and of man – has become impossible in practice. (Marx 2000, 104)

I will propose three interpretations of this argument and claim that the three fail to provide both an adequate rejection of Creationism and a plausible alternative explanation of the origin of humanity.

The first – and weakest – way of understanding this argument is that the socialist man understands that history is only history from the moment human labour arises. Therefore, he understands not that every event that has ever occurred can be reduced to the creation of man through human labour, but that those which cannot, including Creation, are not history. If this is Marx's argument, which I do not think it is, it is as hopelessly circular as the argument examined in Section II.

Daniel Brudney provides two additional interpretations of Marx's argument, which he wrongfully takes for a unique interpretation. The first way in which Brudney understands Marx's claim is that "under communism, one's daily experience of the human interaction with nature would genuinely *answer* the question of the creation." (Brudney 1998, 216) Communism will provide an answer to the question by generating cognitive changes, as, for Marx, the "forming of the five senses is a labour of the entire previous world history" (Brudney 1998, 216). I understand this interpretation of Marx's argument as stating that the belief in Creation is what Brudney calls "a subjective illusion". Subjective illusions are illusions that can *in principle* be overcome, contrary to objective illusions which we can only know of their existence but that we cannot avoid suffering. Being drunk, for example, generates subjective illusions, while our organs' structures (while unchanged) generate objective illusions like the apparent homogeneity of air (Brudney 1998). So interpreted, Marx argument is that communism will provide a better standpoint from where the socialist men will know the *true answer* to the question of Creation and get rid of the subjective illusion of "a being above nature and man".

Brudney – correctly – argues that the claim that someone was under a subjective illusion at a given time requires that:

- i) a change of cognitive "standpoint" actually changes the appearances.
- ii) there are independent reasons for believing that the new "standpoint" is epistemically superior to the previous. (Brudney 1998, 197-199)

Therefore, under this interpretation, the soundness of Marx's answer to the question on Creation will depend on the corroboration of a sociological hypothesis fulfilling condition i) and on the provision of independent reason for the epistemic superiority of communism fulfilling condition ii). The sociological hypothesis is that, under communism, people will abandon their belief in a Creator. Nevertheless, this would be insufficient to confirm Marx's claim that people under communism are getting rid of the *false* belief that there is a Creator. This will depend on the *reasons* Marx gives for believing that communism provides humanity with *better* cognitive capacities rather than with worse. However, Marx's argument does not provide these independent reasons and could only take the question a step backwards by arguing that these reasons will also be clear under communism.

A third interpretation is that under communism "the question would lose its bite." (Brudney 1998, 215) Under communism the socialist man will not feel the *need to ask* the question on the origin of humanity. It must be noted that saying that under communism "human interaction with nature would genuinely *answer* the question" is different from saying that it "would adequately scratch the metaphysical itch" (Brudney 1998, 215). In the former, communism discards the question by providing the *true* answer, in the latter, it does so by removing the psychological *need* to ask the question. In the previous interpretation, the belief on Creation would disappear in communism because humanity better tracks reality, in this last interpretation humanity would not bother tracking reality at all and would stop believing in Creation *independently* of whether Creation happened or did not happen.

If this is, as Brudny thinks, the argument Marx puts forward, I think it fails to support historical materialism. The fact that people under certain material conditions will not feel the need of asking the question that historical materialism cannot answer does not make historical materialism less incapable of answering it. Additionally, it is not entirely clear why should providing the material comfort to scratch the metaphysical itch be less alienating than providing the metaphysical comfort of religion to scratch the material itch. Saying that religion and not communism is the opium of the people requires

some reference to the *truthiness* of these beliefs and so, inevitably, needs some justification that goes *beyond* the *fact* that people lose the need to ask certain questions in certain material conditions, even if the justification makes use of this factⁱⁱⁱ. Marx not only fails to provide this justification but seems, due to his rejection of theoretical thinking, to be incapable in principle – on pain of logical inconsistency – of providing it.

Conclusion

Drawing the above strands of argument together, it can be concluded that, while Marx's theory of history accurately justifies its rejection of ideology by proving the historical dependence of consciousness on material conditions, it fails to provide an adequate answer to the origin of humanity that makes material conditions historically independent of a Creator. To reach this conclusion, I first provided a brief account of historical materialism that made evident the incompatibility of historical materialism with idealism and Creationism. In section II, I defended Marx's argument that historical idealism relies on circular argumentation and that it is unable to explain the emergence of consciousness. In Section III, I considered three interpretations of Marx's claim that the materialist answer to the question of Creation will be clear under communism. I then concluded that his argument primarily fails because it does not give any independent reasons for believing that people's beliefs under communism have any epistemic superiority to the ones they hold now. I finally suggested, in line with Daniel Brudney, that this might be indicative of Marx's general incapacity to provide justification due to his rejection of philosophy.

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Short-Bio

I have graduated from the London School of Economics' BSc. In Politics and Philosophy with a first-class honour in 2019. My undergraduate dissertation "A Theological Response to a Theological Problem: Saint Thomas Aquinas's take on The Problem of Evil" received the prize for Best Undergraduate Dissertation in Philosophy. I am currently reading the London School of Economics' MSc. in Political Theory where I have focused on the study of key figures in the history of political thought (Marx, Kant, Hobbes, etc.). I am particularly interested in questions regarding the metaethics behind political philosophies – specially Kant and virtue ethics –, arguments against and for the existence of God and, more recently, the normative issues surrounding work and work ethics. I have always had an auxiliary interest in Philosophy of Science, Logic and Aesthetics.

i I capitalize Creation when referring to God's creation.

ii For more on AST see (Graziano 2019).

iii By arguing for some sort of epistemic superiority that needs could enjoy under communism, as suggested in the second interpretation.