**The Necessity of Normativity in Marxism:
Callinicos, Holloway and the Fact-Value Distinction**

This paper will consider two different approaches to the possibility of a joint theoretical framework which draws on Marxism and liberal egalitarianism; with both theorists considered viewing normativity as important to their respective conceptions of Marxism. The first position I’ll look at is that of Alex Callinicos. Callinicos states that Marxism requires normative theory in order to provide it with the value set necessary for a comprehensive critique of capitalism, with liberal egalitarianism being the starting point for this theory. The second position is articulated by John Holloway whose theoretical approach offers an alternative to Callinicos and a basis to question the compatibility of Marxism and liberal egalitarianism by interrogating the status of normative theory more generally, while still seeing the normative thought of the subject as key to social change.

In discussing this debate I’ll also be considering the relationship between Marxism and normative theory as a whole. This is itself a subset of a more fundamental question relating to the place of more general normative values within a Marxist critique of capitalism, and again this level of inquiry will be discussed as well. With all this in mind it may be helpful to briefly sketch out the concepts and conceptions relevant to these three levels of inquiry.

Fundamentally, normative values refer to our beliefs about how something *ought* to be or how somebody *ought* to act. They can be conveyed in statements such as ‘one ought to wash one’s hands before dinner’, or ‘the state ought to adhere to Rawlsian principles of justice’ or ‘capitalism is wrong... (So we ought to abolish it)’. Trivial or of significant social or historical importance, they all involve a value-judgement, based on our understanding of what is right and wrong and/or good and bad.

Values can be further clarified by distinguishing them from facts. While the former refers to what we feel ought to be, the latter refers to what actually is. Factual statements discuss what is and how it functions. There are two significant ways of understanding this distinction. The first is to see it as a purely heuristic device which helps us understand what we mean by normative values and what we mean by facts, without also accepting that it entails any particular epistemological assumptions. The second perspective is premised on the assumption that the fact-value distinction also entails the existence of two separable realms of knowledge, i.e. one of facts and one of values. As facts and values can be separated it then generally becomes possible to gain objective knowledge of both, i.e. empirical theories which are value-free, that is that are not influenced by any of the values of the researcher, and normative theories which provide truths which are not contingent on the real world. This second approach is the sort of normative theory[[1]](#footnote-1) that I want to discuss here.

Normative theory is concerned with conceptualising and justifying sets of fact-independent values, in order to tell us how individuals or institutions ought to behave. The methodological tools it employs reflect the assumptions of the approach, that is to say that as facts and values are seen as (at least potentially) independent, then the goals of methodology is to abstract away from reality. One way of doing this is through thought experiments designed to chime with or challenge intuitive ideas about a given concept.

Political philosophy falls into the broader category of normative theory. Shelly Kagan for example writes that ‘the entire field of political philosophy can legitimately be viewed […] as one (vitally important) branch of applied ethics’ (Kagan, 2008: 3). G.A. Cohen also gives a clear account of what such an understanding of political philosophy entails. He writes that his

conception of moral and political philosophy was, and is, a standard academic one: they are ahistorical disciplines which use abstract philosophical reflection to study the nature of truth and of normative judgement.

(Cohen, 1995: 1)

Note the ahistoricity and abstraction; the idea that the ‘truth of normative judgement’ is not to be found in the study of real historical societies or our experience of living in these societies but instead in distancing oneself from these things[[2]](#footnote-2). The other side to this intellectual division of labour is a conception of Marxist theory which is ‘comparable in status to, for example, nineteenth-century historical geology’. For Cohen explanatory theory such as Marxism ‘is not entirely without implications for normative philosophy, but is substantially value-free.’ (ibid.)

Liberal egalitarian political philosophy (or just ‘liberal-egalitarianism’) is a particular subset of normative theory committed to conceptualising and defending models of distributive justice. Typically this involves a rejection of some of the assumptions of classical liberalism, and the idea, which runs through the work of say Robert Nozick, that the justness of a distribution is determined by the justness of an exchange (i.e. it is just if it does not violate the formal rights of the individuals involved) (Nozick, 1973: 47). John Rawls ‘difference principle’, perhaps the most widely debated egalitarian principle, argues that justice dictates that material inequalities should only be tolerated when they benefit the least well off (Rawls, 2005: 78). The specifics of the difference principle aren’t particularly relevant to this discussion, what is relevant is the method he uses to arrive at this conclusion. Rawls’ original position is likely the most widely-discussed thought experiment in recent political philosophy. Rawls asks us to imagine what sort of principles of social justice would be selected by individuals who are behind ‘a veil of ignorance’ where they are unaware of their social and natural characteristics (ibid. 118). So this is an example of the type of reasoning employed by normative theory, whereby theorists attempt to abstract from reality in order to gain a universal perspective on a particular issue.

So we have the basic level of normative values, and then the more particular conception of normativity as something which is distinct from social reality, which is the general subject matter of normative theory, and then liberal-egalitarianism which entails doing political philosophy with certain left-leaning commitments. So what would be the appeal of liberal egalitarianism to Marxists?

As should be clear from what I’ve discussed thus far, for Marxists to fully accept normative theory their approach would have to entail the same acceptance of the fact-value distinction. If their form of Marxism is compatible with normative theory, and they see some utility in discussing values (something which would certainly seem to have at the very least political worth) then liberal egalitarianism would perhaps be the best starting point. The conceptual framework of liberal egalitarians, with its focus on social justice, redistribution of wealth, equality and so on would appear to chime well with concerns of a Marxist or at least socialist normative theory as well. Moreover liberal-egalitarianism offers methodological models as well as conceptual ones, and the combination of these provides the essentials for a Marxist interested in ‘doing’ normative theory.

Alex Callinicos takes up a position similar to this in some of his more recent work. He draws on Norman Geras’ earlier research on the role of normativity in Marx’s writings (see Geras, 1983), suggesting that aspects of Marx’s theory rely on ‘half-articulated normative concepts and principles.’ (Callinicos, 2006: 220) Marx’s lack of clear normative theorising is problematic for Callinicos, as, for him, a strong critique of capitalism requires both clear explanatory work, and sound normative theory: the former to help us understand how things are, and the latter to provide the principles which we ought to realise. The former can be provided by Marxism, as such explanatory work ‘has been Marxism’s great intellectual strength’ (ibid. 221). As suggested above he relies on the conceptual work of liberal egalitarian theorists as an entry point for developing a normative theory which can accompany his explanatory critique of capitalism. The notion of objectively true normative concepts comes across when he writes of the ‘immense progress in our understanding of what justice is’ which has come about through the debates between scholars such as Rawls, Ronald Dworkin, Amartya Sen and (the post-Marxist) writings of G.A. Cohen. Callinicos, in rejecting the notion present in the later work of Cohen that one must do either explanatory theory or normative theory, sums up his approach as ‘having his cake and eating it.’ (Callinicos, 2001: 170)

This is not to suggest that Callinicos advocates a complete separation of the two theoretical enterprises. Rather, he wants to ‘open up a space in which Marxists can, in a relaxed and open-minded (though not uncritical) way, respond to the arguments and findings of egalitarian liberalism.’ (ibid. 183) This would appear to involve two things, firstly to show how social power structures may limit the realisation of the models of just societies which are theorised by liberal egalitarian scholars, and secondly, and relatedly to identify and supersede the main defect in liberal egalitarianism, namely the latter approach’s belief that its conceptions of justice can be realised within capitalist society. As Callinicos ‘egalitarian justice can be achieved only *against* capitalism.’ (Callinicos, 2000: 132)

For John Holloway on the other hand, one cannot make this distinction between factual and value-based inquiry. Rather capitalist social relations involve ‘a tension between that which exists and which might conceivably exist’. (Holloway, 2005a: 6) The separation of what is and what ought to be entails, as we have seen, the separation in turn of normative ideals from reality. However for Holloway this is based on flawed premises and instead he posits ‘the scream’ as the starting point for theoretical inquiry. The scream entails that one reject the idea of thought as a rational, reality independent exercise, beginning instead with theory as ‘opposition, negativity and struggle’ against the world as it is at a given time. (ibid.)

The role of theory is to elaborate that scream, to express its strength and to contribute to its power, to show how the scream resonates through society and to contribute to that resonance.

(Holloway, 2003: 15)

Holloway’s approach benefits from the fact that it takes seriously the Marxian notion that what *appear* as objective structures, be they philosophies of history, gods, human nature or the capitalist commodity market, are in fact products of human social relations (Holloway, 1991: 96 & Holloway, 2002: 199).

This understanding of social relations ties into a model of historical change which places the emphasis on the decisions and actions of human beings (Holloway, 2005b: 274-274). This is in contrast to theories which make social change the product of developments in objective structures. Connected to this is Holloways conception of human labour which takes as its starting point, the distinction Marx makes between the ‘worst of architects’ and ‘the best of bees’, where the former is distinguished from the latter due to the architect having ‘raised a structure in her imagination before erecting it in reality.’ (Marx, 1976: 284) Holloway’s conception of humanity focuses on the way in which human beings are able to think creatively about the world around them, and to change, or ‘negate’, what already exists (Holloway, 2005a: 25).

For Holloway, this negation is not found through reflection or abstract reasoning but rather ‘from the situation in which we find ourselves.’ (Holloway, 2005a: 25) Combined with his conceptualisation of capitalism as a set of social relations which exists due to their reproduction, the creative and negating character of humanity allow people to change the social relations which they form a part of. Normativity develops through one’s concrete experience of capitalist social relations, and the form that this normative thought takes shapes future social relations.

This is in sharp contrast to Callinicos’ idea of normativity coming from abstraction from reality. Indeed Callinicos stresses that the very strength of the works of Rawls *et al* is that they assume a distance from the real world.

[I]t is its very remoteness from what counts as feasible in the debased currency of contemporary liberal-democratic politics’ which makes Rawls’ difference principle stand in such stark contrast to a world where ‘inequalities are plainly arranged to benefit the best-off’, not as Rawls would have, the worst-off.

(Callinicos, 2006: 221-2)

I would not dispute that Rawls’ principles of justice outline a society which is far more decent and fair than perhaps any real society today. However in abstracting from reality the subjectivity which would lead to a truly just society is obscured. A better world may not be the product of noble ideas fortified by good explanatory theory, but rather the creative, negation of thinking and acting human beings in concrete circumstances.

This might mean that Callinicos’ dialogue between Marxism and liberal egalitarianism is misplaced. He does well to highlight some of the limitations of the normative theories that he wants to draw on; firstly by showing how the structural forces of capitalist society limit available political options and secondly by arguing that their conceptions of social justice are incompatible with capitalism. However, the philosophical assumption that accompanies this position, i.e. the separation of facts and values, is incompatible with the strong notion of subjectivity which is at the heart of John Holloway’s theory, whereby our normative values are shaped by, but also shape, our concrete social relations. This conception not only sits well with the anthropocentric aspects of Marx’s work but more importantly understands normativity as an aspect of social praxis and class struggle, where experience of social relations propels one to alter those same social relations, and thus society more broadly. As such it would seem that Callinicos’ dialogue with liberal egalitarianism may be unsustainable given more fundamental issues with normative theory more generally. However in spite of the possible incompatibility of Marxism and normative theory, a concrete, rather than abstract, conception of normativity, as intimated by Holloway, is certainly a necessary component in a Marxist critique of capitalism.

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1. Subsequent usages of ‘normative theory’ refer exclusively to conceptions of normative theory which are premised on the epistemological distinction between fact and value. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Cohen’s later work defends an approach which asserts that moral principles can exist completely independently of facts (Cohen, 2008: 229) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)