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RHETORICS, ECONOMICS AND MARXIAN THEORIES

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INTRODUCTION

Marxism has something distinctive to offer to the growing awareness among economists concerned with rhetorics, epistemology, discursive practices, and so forth. These issues have been intensively debated within the Marxian tradition generating some well-defined contending positions. We will outline several of these positions with special stress on the one to which we subscribe. It has marked affinities to the positions, for example, of Rorty in philosophy, McCloskey in economics and Gould in biology. Alongside the affinities there are also, as we shall show, significant differences, since our position emerges from the Marxian tradition while theirs do not.

EPISTEMOLOGY WITHIN THE MARXIAN TRADITION

Marx had to deal with the problem of the scientific status of different theories of economics. He understood that his critique of classical political economy - of Smith, Ricardo, Malthus, Mill and so on - was itself an alternative economic theory. Perhaps because he was trained as a philosopher and a close student in particular of Hegel, Marx recognized the problem of theorising the relations between two different theories of how capitalist economies work and change.

Marx, in short, entered the terrain of epistemology. The Marxian theoretical tradition has ever since debated epistemological issues, often with intense partisanship as both sides found support for their positions in Marx's writings. Is there one economic science to which classical, neoclassical and Marxists variously contribute? Is there a singular set of established economic truths which we may use as a standard or test for adjudicating the competing claims of alternative economic theories? Is there a singular logic or system of rules for linking propositions in economics which all theories must utilize if they are to be true? Or are some economic theories perhaps irreducibly different ways of conceiving, seeing, studying, and interpreting that part of reality called the economy? And if so, how do we theorise their coexistence and interrelationships?

Most Marxists, however, like most non-Marxists, have chosen either to ignore matters of epistemology or, when pressed, to take very conventional empiricist and/or rationalist positions. That is, they presumed that truth was singular, a matter of using the right logical rules ("the scientific method") to draw the correct inferences from data selected according to rationalist principles of reasoning. Whether Marxists or not, they pursued their investigations confident that their theory was the closest (then available) to the presumedly singular truth.

The Marxists among them looked upon the non-Marxists as at

best ignorant of the greater-proximity of Marxist theory to truth or as at worst practitioners of falsity whom they dubbed ideologues and apologists for capitalism. The non-Marxists played the same epistemological game more or less in reverse. Neither group had much choice given their shared epistemological positions: if truth, science and logic are singulars confronting plural theories, then one must be true or truer while the others are false.

The Marxian theoretical tradition has always contained a dissenting epistemological voice, one asserting itself now with more force than ever before. This voice appears in the writings of major figures of the tradition: Lenin, Lukacs, Gramsci, Mao, and most recently and powerfully in Althusser. It calls upon Marxists to abandon traditional epistemology in all its many empiricist and rationalist variants. It demands instead the acceptance of Marxist theory's irreducible difference from both classical and neoclassical theories. It projects the vision of a world in which alternative ways of thinking about economics challenge and contest with one another. In short it calls Marxists to recognize that alongside struggles over class and politics, the world contains as well struggles over how to think about everything including economics.

This position within Marxism rejects notions of truth as singular. It claims rather that its version of Marxian theory is no more true than other, very different theories both within and

without the Marxian tradition. It insists instead that it is different from them and that its specific differences have social consequences distinct from theirs. We are partisans of a Marxian theory upholding this position. We also believe that it may be useful to examine the Marxist epistemological debates for the unique contribution they can make to current discussions about what economists do and what scientific status their theories can claim.

The Marxian tradition: essentialist epistemologies

The epistemological standpoints of the majority within Marxism will strike most readers as very familiar. This is because they are identical to the majority standpoints outside Marxism. The first of these is empiricism. This perspective holds that we may adjudicate among contesting theories by appealing to the facts, empirical reality. Our senses provide us with independent, reliable access to factual reality which we can use to assess the truth of propositions. Alternative theories are to be tested for their "fits" with such facts; the best fitting wins the accolade of being labelled "truth" or "truest". Many Marxists in the past and the present affirm their commitments to Marxism on the grounds of its achieving such a best fit. Empiricism essentializes facts which become the independent standards for testing the truth-value of alternative

theories. In the last instance, one may appeal to such facts as the ultimate cause of true knowledge.

The favorite form of Marxist empiricism celebrates the "facts of history." Theories are seen as mere cerebral efforts at explanation which deserve no loyalty unless and until they are verified by actual "human practice" in the concreteness of "history." Marxist empiricists test theories by subjecting them to the measure of historical practice. Theories are judged to be realistic or not according to their conformity to "actual history." Their accession to the status of truth depends then on the extent of their realism - how fully, adequately, precisely they conform to the facts of history. Whether theories actually "work" in and on reality determines their truthfulness.

Empiricist work in economics, both Marxian and non-Marxian, currently stresses the "predictive power/accuracy" of theories as the ultimate test of their validity. Theories must predict facts; the facts we record in the future will then decide for us which theory was and so presumably is right.

Like other empiricisms, the Marxist variant implies a notion of the progression of theory asymptotically toward the truth. That is, successive Marxian theorists are understood to make ever more empirical tests of old and new propositions. Cumulatively, these tests build an edifice of progressively truer, more verified Marxian propositions. Marxian science grows in a continuing fashion as successive verifications and falsifications

purify it. Marxian theory today is necessarily truer than it ever was before and propositions falsified in the past need not detain anyone again.

The second broad sort of majority epistemological position is rationalism. It shares with empiricism the view that truth is the singular objective of all theories to capture. It also shares empiricism's view that there is an essential cause of true knowledge. However, it departs from empiricism in its designation of the essential standard or criterion by which we are to adjudicate among competing theories, Marxian or otherwise. Rationalists typically reject empiricism with derisive dismissals of their "fetishism of facts," their "essentialism of sensual factuality." The rationalists enjoy pointing out that "the facts" touching upon any object of investigation and theorisation are always infinite in number. No individual or group of investigators could possibly canvass all the facts and then test theories against them all: the very project is absurd.

Rationalists insist that all people select some among the infinite facts which they will consider pertinent for any purpose including the testing of alternative theories. Empiricists' "facts" are always and necessarily "selected facts," and empiricists are to be attacked whenever they claim otherwise. Hence what matters are the principles of selection used by different "fact gatherers" to compile their selections of facts.

Rationalists insist that pre-factual principles of reason are the actual guides ultimately governing fact gathering. Therefore, to be sure of the truth of any proposition requires attention not primarily to the selected facts gathered in support or refutation of the proposition, but rather to the underlying reasoning which produced both the proposition and the fact selection process.

Rationalists appeal to the long history of human inquiry about the world to find true pre-factual principles of reason. These are the underlying truths of human reason which have stood the test of time and of innumerable human efforts to find faults in them. Human reason (whether divinely guided or not is a debate between religious and non-religious rationalists) has critically purified certain principles of thought which can and should guide human efforts to understand their environment. This includes our efforts to gather the facts relevant to our theories. In a sense, then, the rationalists propose human reason as a test of facts (i.e. their relevance) rather than the other way round in the manner of the empiricists. They essentialize human reason as the independent standard to which we may appeal as the ultimate cause of true knowledge.

Both rationalists and empiricists presume an underlying order in the world about which they theorise. They both generally presume the human mind's capacity eventually to grasp and express that order. They differ over whether empirical facts can and do reveal this essential order or whether human (or

perhaps divine) reason is the faculty which will reveal it. They differ over whether factual reality ultimately determines the truths we reason or whether reason ultimately determines the truths we construct and facts we consider.

For Marxian rationalists, the highest achievement to date of human reason lies in Marx and those he has inspired since. Marxian theory supersedes - in the Hegelian sense of absorbing as it supersedes - all previous social theory, including economic theory. Marx is readily acknowledged, for example, to have saved while transforming all that was important in the theoretical discoveries of Smith, Ricardo, et al. Marx took it all further, thereby bequeathing to us the truest available principles for studying society.

The rationalists share with the empiricists the same continuist notion of truth with its comforting celebration of the comparative and chronological supremacy of current Marxian theory. Both epistemological positions - which often occur mixed together in individual Marxian works - rank Marxian theory's approximation to truth ahead of all other theories. Both can and traditionally have shared in the denunciation of devotees of such other theories as ignorant or ideological in the fullest negativity of the terms. Both tend to presume the underlying orderliness of the universe which their method can and does progressively "discover." Both are essentialist epistemological positions.

By contrast, the Marxist tradition has always contained a different epistemological position radically opposed to both empiricism and rationalism (Resnick and Wolff). It has been advanced by many Marxian theorists in many contexts. Here we propose to summarise this anti-essentialist Marxist position by emphasizing the terms which, we believe, make its case most persuasively.

Borrowing the term from Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis of dreams, Georg Lukacs and then Louis Althusser made "overdetermination" a central concept of this different epistemological position and indeed a central concept as well of Marxist social theory. Theories, this argument claims, are determined in different ways and simultaneously by each and every other aspect or process of society. Human beings think about their environments by conceiving particular relationships among whichever particular parts of those environments attract their reflections. Which parts are attractive and which relationships seem plausible depend on the totality of influences impacting particular human beings. Since individuals and groups live different lives, i.e. are impacted by different sets of social influences, they correspondingly invent and develop different theories.

In a word, theories are overdetermined by everything else; they are not determined by any one factor or subset of factors out of the social totality. Theories are not, for example,

determined by facts or by acts of reason any more or less than by climate, diet, cultural fashions, political confrontations or anything else occurring within society. Theories are stories people tell as one way to cope with their environments alongside other ways such as housing they build, love-relations they enter, and political systems they invent. Each of these is likewise overdetermined by everything else. As it makes no sense to ask which kind of housing, love or politics is true, so it makes no sense to ask that of theories either.

The truth or falsity of alternative theories is a non-issue for the overdeterminist epistemological position. For us it is like comparing different cuisines to determine which one is true. From this perspective, it makes perfect sense that the Marxian tradition encompasses multiple, different theories or stories, much as other traditions have always done. These theories differ because they have been overdetermined by different combinations of social influences.

This notion of overdetermination clashes profoundly with the conventional notions of essentialist causality both in matters of epistemology and in social theory generally. Overdetermination means something very different from complex interaction, systems of simultaneous equations, interdependence, mutual causality or any of the other variant forms of conventional cause and effect logic. It goes far beyond these conventional concepts to propose a basically different approach to cause and effect. The key word

to express the uniqueness of overdetermination is "constitutivity."

Any possible aspect or process in society is understood as totally constituted by all the influences emanating from every other aspect or process in that society. Nothing is self-created; nothing can exist independent of these influences. Autonomous objects do not influence each other, as in the variant forms of cause and effect logic. Rather, objects only exist as effects of and by virtue of influences from all the other similarly constituted objects in a society.

Overdetermination transforms the idea of causality. It suggests the utter futility of seeking to explain the cause of A by searching for the B and/or C and/or D which best or most explain it. It rejects that search as in principle unacceptable and ineffective, rather like setting out to determine the colors of numbers. Overdetermination begins instead with the presumption that the event A is caused by innumerable influences emanating from the innumerable other events in the social totality. In principle, then, the explanation of A's causes is impossible. All theories, therefore, cannot and do not provide explanations of events in the sense of the true, adequate, comprehensive and complete account of their causes. This includes Marxian theories, of course.

Since theories cannot do what conventional epistemologies insist they can and must do, it follows that the overdeterminist

standpoint must formulate an alternative concept of thinking and theories. It does this as follows. Theories are inherently partial, distinct stories or rhetorics about portions of social reality. None grasp the totality, however shrill their claims to do so. All are stories built around particular emphases on aspects of society deemed worthy of theoretical attention. Theories differ partly according to what they focus upon. They also differ in the rules or logics that they follow in linking their various propositions together into the sets of statements comprising the knowledges, sciences, truths, etc. which they produce. Finally, they also differ in the criteria they erect - definitions of truth - which they use to decide whether to accept, reject or change propositions invented by theorists. Indeed, such criteria include the epistemological notions we have been discussing: whether truth is singular or plural and whether it inheres in facts, reason or is a discardable fantasy.

One difference, then, between an overdeterminist Marxian theory and alternative theories inside and outside the Marxian tradition is a difference over epistemology. Empiricism and rationalism are essentialist epistemologies: they agree that theories all share an essential goal (telos) of uncovering the singular truth of the world and they agree that truth has an essential component. They only disagree on what the singular truth is and on what the essence of truth is. Overdetermination, in contrast, specifies a strictly anti-essentialist

epistemology. Truths are plural, not singular; and they have no essences since facts and reason are but two of the infinite social influences that quite literally produce them.

This difference over epistemology is linked to many other distinguishing marks of an overdeterminist Marxism. These too fall conveniently under the heading of anti-essentialism. For example, it follows from this approach that another way to distinguish theories is by noticing the particular partiality of each. We have called this the issue of entry points. Different theories all confront the chaos of the infinite diversity of aspects, processes, factors making up any possible object of thinking. Faced with this enormity, all theories focus their attention initially on some particular aspect or process. It is quite literally their entry point into the web of interactions among many aspects which their theory will eventually articulate.

Theories differ in their entry point concepts. For example, as we shall argue below, different Marxian theories enter into their analyses of economies by focusing on class, power and consciousness, whereas neoclassical theory focuses on individuals' preferences and productive capabilities. Theories also differ in the logics they use to link their propositions. For example, the Marxian theory we use favors an overdeterminist logic whereas the other Marxian and neoclassical theories surveyed are determinist. An overdeterminist logic in social

theory means that no social events are presumed to have an essential determinant and hence no effort is made to reduce events to essential causes. By contrast, these other Marxian and neoclassical economics seek to reduce whatever social events they focus upon to favored essential determinants. Simply put, the Marxian theory we have been discussing is anti-essentialist in the logical structure of its propositions, while the others are strictly essentialist (what is sometimes also called "reductionist").

After World War Two particularly, essentialist and anti-essentialist (overdeterminist) positions battled within Marxism. The terrains of these battles have been both epistemology and ontology: how to think about what theories are and how to think about what societies are. A growing voice has articulated inside Marxism something akin to the anti-essentialism and anti-reductionism which have agitated literary theory (the works of Jameson, Eagleton and Macherey), philosophy (the works of Foucault and Lyotard as well as Rorty), and biology (the works of Levins and Lewontin as well as Gould).

However, there are also unique aspects of overdeterminist Marxian theory, ways in which it resolves dilemmas which continue to beset even those similar anti-essentialist positions taken by others outside of Marxism including economists drawn to a conference of this sort. We believe that these may be highlighted by turning (1) to a more focused examination of the

differences between this overdeterminist Marxism and these other determinist Marxian and neoclassical theories, and (2) a discussion of why and how the theoretical differences matter.

A MARXIAN UNDERSTANDING OF DIFFERENT ECONOMIC THEORIES

Despite their otherwise striking differences, much of the Marxian and non-Marxian economic traditions share a common methodological theme: they take some aspect(s) of society to be the essential cause or origin of effects which determine the behavior of all other aspects of society. Such determining aspects deserve the label of essences in both traditions because they are thought to cause the existence of other social aspects, while they are never thought to be constituted by effects of those other aspects. These determining aspects represent objects like those sought in some physicists' dreams: the ultimate building blocks of the universe. The vast majority of economic theorizing about society already has turned this natural scientists' dream into reality: the ultimate particles which cause economic life have been discovered, named and observed.

From the perspective of the overdeterminist Marxian theory presented above, we would like to explore the reality of this dream. We will consider its presence first within the broadly conceived Marxian economics tradition and then within one predominant part of the non-Marxian economics tradition, namely

neoclassical economic theory.

The Marxian tradition: the struggle over different essences

In the hundred years since Marx's death, individuals thinking within this tradition have often debated and at times fought violently over the issue of how to connect the economic with the non-economic aspects of society. Three broad positions have been defined and continue to be redefined. The first is a so-called traditional position, sometimes referred to pejoratively by critics as economistic, in which economic govern non-economic aspects. The second position reacts to the first by reversing the order of governance: instead of economism, this position espouses the view that non-economic parts of society shape and determine the economic. A third and middle position allows economic and non-economic aspects to affect each other, but affirms what it thinks to be Marx's insight into the ultimately determining influence of the economic upon the interaction between economic and non-economic. Proponents of all three positions have found ample texts from Marx's writings to support each position. In so doing, essentialist epistemological standpoints - rationalist notions of the status of Marx's texts - match essentialist social theories.

Much of the debate has been expressed in terms of the relation between the base of society (its economics) and the

superstructure (its politics, culture and ideology). The first position claims that two economic aspects, the forces of production (read technology) and the relations of production (read class), combine together as the base. So combined, they determine the forms and development of the superstructure. The latter includes laws passed and enforced, music created and performed, economic theorising written and taught, and so on. Called the mode of production, the basic combination of forces and relations of production comprises what is thought to be a self-reproducing totality. The mode of production contains within itself the power to determine those superstructural laws, cultural processes, etc., within society which are necessary for that mode's survival. In effect, non-economic aspects of society are relegated to a clearly secondary role. They become phenomena of and functional to the reproduction of a governing economic essence: the economic base or mode of production.

Of course, some of these Marxian economic determinists proceed to ask the next logical question for any essentialist: of the forces and relations of production, which is the ultimate or last instance determinant of the other and a fortiori of the rest of the superstructure? In answer, some would essentialize the forces (Cohen) while others favor the relations (Dobb). They too struggle over which is the true essence.

Non-economic determinists essentialize some aspect(s) of the superstructure taking it (them) to be the most powerful governing

force in society. Two broad approaches of this sort may be identified. The first treats power over individuals and/or property as the source of effects which directly and indirectly control the behaviors of classes, technology and culture (Poulantzas, Bowles and Gintis). The second focuses instead on human consciousness as the ultimate determinant of economic and social behavior (Thompson). In stark contrast to economic determinism, these approaches proclaim either a power or a consciousness determinism and a tendency to relegate economics to a secondary or derivative position in society and history.

The middle position allows the mode of production and the superstructure both to affect one another and variously to dominate one another. Distinguishing the historically conditioned dominance of now this and now that aspect from what ultimately determines such dominance, this middle position remains loyal to a notion of last-instance economic determinism. The mode of production determines whether and when economic and non-economic aspects variously dominate one another across history (Hirst and Hindess). For example, in a non-capitalist society, politics or religion may dominate in the sense of shaping and guaranteeing economic exploitation, but that dominating role is itself determined by the particular mode of production present in such a society. This middle position represents the most sophisticated variant of economic determinism yet devised within Marxism.

An idea common to these three Marxian positions is that the preferred governing aspect of society is always a cause and never itself an effect of the other aspects of society. The mutual overdetermination of these aspects - the idea that the existence of each is the combined effect of all the others - is ruled out of inquiry and out of their debates. Instead, each orders the aspects of society according to its ranking of causal importance, reducing them to its preferred final, ultimate cause.

Essentialism in Marxian social theory parallels the essentialisms in traditional epistemologies. All insist that we can point and say: this is what finally determines the nature of society or this is what ultimately determines the truth of knowledge. Essentialist Marxian social theories, of course, hold no monopoly on such views. Neoclassical economic theory affirms its determining essence(s) with every bit as much confidence and bravado as do any Marxists.

Neoclassical theory: the discovered essences

Parallel to the Marxian tradition, neoclassical social scientists have attempted to think the relation of the economy to the rest of society. They too are given to formulations in which the economy determines society. However, they also tend to limit themselves to economics as a discipline. Thus it is within economics that their essentialist theorizing is clearly

pronounced. Indeed a good deal of the history of classical and neoclassical economic thought since Adam Smith can be understood as a concerted effort to discover the minimum set of driving forces, essences, which determine economic events.

These essences are three: the inherent preferences we possess as human beings, the given endowments of productive resources we may privately own, and the given technology available to us to produce that which we may desire. These essential attributes of human beings are used first to construct market phenomena (individuals' supply and demand behaviors). The markets are then used to construct patterns of prices and incomes. In the last instance, then, the interaction between human beings' preferences and productive capabilities determines the wealth of a modern society and how it is distributed among its citizens.

Paradoxically, neoclassical economic theory bears striking resemblances to that Marxian approach which affirms the determining influence of a human being's power or consciousness on economic events. Both essentialize the struggle of people to realize an either God-given or innately human potential in the face of societal or natural constraints. Of course, they assume different essential characteristics of human beings: power or consciousness in the Marxian approaches vs preferences and productive capabilities in neoclassical theory. Yet their common essentialization of human nature stands out. For that reason we

may call both of them humanist approaches in contrast to the economic determinism of the traditional Marxist approach. Indeed, a remarkable convergence of Marxist and non-Marxist humanists has recently been expressed by writers who marry the kind of Marxist theory which essentializes power to the neoclassical essentialization of individual utility or profit maximization (Roemer, Bowles, and Elster).

Essentialist vs non-essentialist theories of society

Our understanding of Marx is decidedly anti-essentialist in its approach both to socio-economic analyses and to knowledge. It dissents both from the Marxist determinist debates and from the contending neoclassical theory. This Marxian understanding rejects the notion that any one or more of society's aspects, chosen from the infinite set of class, culture, power, technology, preferences, resources, etc., could be the governing essence of the rest. Thus it rejects the notion of any essence in society from which the behaviors of all other social aspects can be derived as necessary effects.

As noted in our earlier discussion of epistemologies, the concept of overdetermination deployed in Marxian theory ensures that each aspect of society is understood to exist as a site of the combined influences emanating from all the others. It follows for Marxian social analysis that each aspect of society,

the economic as well as the non-economic, exists only in and by its interrelations with all the other aspects; it has no independent existence. From such an overdeterminist perspective, neither the base nor the superstructure nor any element within them can be rank ordered such that one exists prior to any other as its cause without being simultaneously its effect. (The metaphors of "base" and "superstructure" become inappropriate or would at least require basic and anti-essentialist redefinition.) Likewise, from the overdeterminist perspective, the preferences and productive capabilities of neoclassical theory are not conceived to be immune from being the effects of incomes, prices and all the other aspects of society.

The approach we have outlined to this point suggests a new way to differentiate one theory from another. Our differentiation focuses on each theory's relational logic (determinist vs over-determinist) and on its focal concepts which we call its entry-point. Using this taxonomy we may diagram differences among the economic theories surveyed here as follows:

THEORY	POINT OF ENTRY		OBJECT
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	Mode of production	Relations Forces	-----> society #1
Marxian	Human power	Over people Over property	-----> society #2
	Human consciousness		-----> society #3
	Class (Production/appropriation of surplus labor)		<-----> society #4
Neoclassical	Human nature	Preferences Technology Endowments	-----> society #5

Practitioners of each theory depicted in this diagram posit their respective conceptual entry points and logics to construct their distinct stories of society (their objects of knowledge). Unidirectional arrows indicate determinist logics while the bidirectional arrow indicates overdetermination. Each theory's object, society, is given a different number to underscore that the knowledges of society produced are as different as the entry points and logics used to construct those knowledges. Of course, this diagram is itself but one story constructed by one theory about the structures of different theories including itself.

Each of the theories in the diagram, except the Marxist class theory, embraces an essentialism in its story. Each except the Marxist class theory offers its entry point not only as the focus of its knowledge production but also as the determinant of

the structure and dynamic of society. (Of course, any theory could offer its unique entry point concept while rejecting an essentialist logic. For example, a Marxian theory whose entry point was power could subscribe to overdetermination. Such a theory would differ from any of those indicated in the diagram.)

Let us focus briefly on some of the differences between the Marxian class theory offered here and neoclassical theory. First consider their different positions on the nature of society. For the Marxian class approach, the notion of class as the production and appropriation of surplus labor is its unique conceptual entry point which focuses its story or rhetoric. Marxists stress class by focusing their theory on it because they believe it to be a repressed element in the modern consciousness, especially in the consciousness of actual or potential social reformers. As Freud conceptualizes a human unconscious as a repressed aspect of individual life, so Marxists see class as a repressed aspect of social life. Thus it needs to be admitted, recognized, studied and changed in order to realize urgently needed social progress and well-being. Again the parallel with Freudian psychoanalysis and psychotherapy is suggestive in as much as the latter seek to aid the individual self-reformer to admit, recognize, study and change his/her unconscious.

By theorising with class as entry point, Marxists hope to change that class aspect and hence society in particular ways. For the neoclassical approach, the notions of human preferences

and productive capabilities are the proper focus of a theory that can enable society to change (its institutions, laws, etc.) so as to optimize socially the wealth-seeking interactions of individuals. These two radically different theories produce different understandings of the same society; there is a Marxian capitalism and a neoclassical capitalism in the United States. Moreover, these two different stories shape our economic and non-economic lives in different ways. Our politics, culture and economy are all influenced by the complex effects of these different ways of making sense of our lives.

From the perspective of the neoclassical view, the Marxian organizing concept of class is a non-issue in society and hence in social analysis; it does not exist. From the overdeterminist Marxian perspective, the neoclassical entry point concepts of preferences and productive capabilities are understood to exist, but they, like all other aspects of society, are overdetermined by class - that focal Marxian idea which is completely absent from the neoclassical view. Given such differences, is it any wonder that practitioners of the two theories have been at one another for the last hundred years?

The two logics deployed are different too. Neoclassical theory reduces virtually all economic events to the ultimately determining preferences, technology and endowments. Overdeterminist Marxian theory makes its entry point concept of class into merely one of the infinite aspects of society which

mutually and collectively constitute one another. Class, human preferences, productive capabilities, music, economic theories, and so on: all interact, mutually shaping and thereby changing the existence of each.

Radically different consequences follow from these two different approaches which, as noted, shape our lives in different ways. For example, in the neoclassical view, wealth and poverty result in the last instance from human preferences (and their derived choices), initial resource endowments, technological possibilities, and whatever barriers may exist in society to the proper working of these essential determinants of economic life. The neoclassical notion of optimum solutions to each individual's struggle for wealth and happiness recognizes that barriers may arise to block such solutions, e.g., power-seeking individuals, irrational behaviors, and extra-market phenomena interfering with markets.

In the Marxian theory emphasized here, wealth and poverty are explained in terms of, but never reduced to, class. So Marxian theory stresses how class and non-class aspects of life combine to distribute incomes across society. Its approach emphasizes the overdetermination of income distribution versus the neoclassicals' reduction of distribution to but three of what Marxian theory sees as its many determinants. Its approach emphasizes class while neoclassical theory ignores it.

These different understandings of the wealth and poverty of

our society help to shape our attitudes toward one another, toward politics, state programs to aid the rich and those to aid the poor, U.S. foreign policy in third world nations, and our notions of justice. Different theories matter tangibly and practically in terms of their consequences for our thinking and our actions.

Consequences of rejecting essentialisms

Rejecting both empiricist and rationalist searches for the truth (essentialist epistemologies) and the related yet distinct searches for essences in social theory (essentialist ontologies) carries serious consequences. It seems to open a door to a discursive field that few want opened. That open door would invite some most unwelcome guests to civilized discourse: certain despised social theories. In addition, to reject the essentialisms implies that we treat these unwelcome guests as no doubt different, but also as in some sense equivalent to the theories already counted within civilized discourse.

The open door admits some of the most outrageous conceptualizations in the history of social theories as simply other rhetorics affirming their particularly produced stories. All theories are now to be considered as alternative, socially contrived stories typically displaying not only distinctive knowledges of social life (ontologies) but also distinctive claims about truth (epistemologies). With the door opened in this

way, does it then become less clear on which side of the door each of us stands? Is there a danger that power rather than truth will determine which alternative rhetoric prevails?

For Marxists and non-Marxists alike this is a door few ever want to open. Most practitioners of both sets of theories seem much more comfortable affirming that their particular rhetoric is the right one, and that therefore it is not merely rhetoric at all. It is other theories which are wrong or misguided and thus merely rhetorics or ideologies: tales to convince the unwary and naive. Essentialists in all camps seem much more comfortable proving time and again that their respective essences in social theory are warranted by the facts and/or by the wisdom of Marx or Smith depending on which tradition holds their loyalty.

Therefore, we do not have inter-theoretic conversations in which alternative stories offering their different entry points, logics and objects cross-fertilize one another. Rather we have the vain trumpeting at cross purposes of theories which each claim to hold privileged communion with the truth and which denounce other theories as dogmatic, logically invalid, not warranted by the facts, and so on.

Indeed, we often find that even those who approvingly recognise theories to be alternative rhetorics or idea systems or language games, fall back in their own work to positions of epistemological essentialism vis-a-vis their rhetoric. We wonder why. Perhaps the reason is the aforementioned conscious or

unconscious fear that if all we have are but rhetorics, do we lose the boundaries between ideology and science, Marxism and neoclassical theory, fantasy and reality, physics and poetry? Scientific order would then give way at best to discursive anarchy and at worst to the tyranny of ideology or nonsense. One way to close this door is to privilege one particular discourse or its logic or its point of entry. One or all of them can then serve as the barrier to those unwelcome theoretical guests.

Perhaps another part of the reason lies in particular historical events. For example, for non-Marxists there is the problem of viewing whatever Marx and Marxists have to offer theoretically through the lens of what is thought to be the Soviet experience. Put simply, Marxism is equated to Stalinism, which generates significant consequences. The Marxian tradition is then often collapsed into what is only one of the many theories contesting within that tradition, usually into economic determinism. Now equating Marxism to Stalinism makes about as much sense as equating Catholicism to the Spanish Inquisition or neoclassical theory to the Vietnam war. Nonetheless, what is acceptable as an idea at any moment is influenced partly by the very theories we deploy to make our senses of historic events. One way to close the discursive door is to conflate a disliked historical event with a theory or set of theories.

Perhaps still another part of the reason involves our clinging to the notion that it is possible to prove that other

theories are logically flawed and hence necessarily rejected. Surely there must be some way to establish, to agree upon, some minimum set of intertheoretic ideas which could serve as a standard of truth and falsehood. If not, how could we ever be convinced that our own is better than alternative theories? We would be left with whatever we find convincing or satisfying at that moment because of our own personal politics, culture, and economics.

We are all products in part of the historic influence of religions that proclaim the existence and power of absolutes. The deity of science and the language of mathematics have become the new religion and its holy script. They give subtle aid and comfort to those who discover God-like essences in social theory and in knowledge theory. To ask individuals to give up their beliefs in absolutes and in specific methods/rituals which capture such absolutes has always been one of the most dramatic, difficult and personal requests that can be made of them.

Suppose however that these ontological and epistemological rejections were widely accepted. Suppose that the implications of Rorty's and other like works were convincing and lead us to embrace finally a democracy of theoretical differences. We would then treat every theory as a story about the nature of society - never complete, never more or less true than other stories, merely different from them. Does this mean that thinking no longer really matters as we lapse into indifference about the

different stories? Does this door-opening lead inevitably into a retreat to Nietzsche?

We think not. Different social theories matter enormously. They do not matter in terms of the futile and fetishistic game of which one is closer to some absolute truth. They do matter in the different ways they affect our lives. Neoclassical theory affects the ways we do and do not see things in society, the ways we view recessions, wealth, poverty and in general the complex interrelations of daily life. In other words, neoclassical theory shapes our existence. It matters. Each of the Marxian theories discussed in this paper has changed our lives in still different ways. Those theories matter too.

Therefore we cannot remain indifferent before this onslaught of different theorizings, each offering its own knowledge, truth-claim, standards of proof, and distinctive social consequences. We choose among them not on the basis of a discovered essence, the truth, but rather because of the different consequences each produces in and on our lives. Because those different social consequences matter, so too must the theories linked to them.

We find some theories horrific, others magnificent and still others at various points in between. We form close theoretical alliances with some theorists while we fear or ignore others. We do this through our theory's assessment of the conjunctural connections between all theories and the rest of the society in

which we live. We are not lost in a relativist limbo, but are rather partisans of some theories as against others.

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