**Recipes For The Cookshops of the Future?**

**1. A Marxist Dilemma**

Karl Marx is well-known for not wishing to write ‘recipes for the cook-shops of the future’.[[1]](#endnote-1) But what are we to make of this idea?

One well-known approach, is to link it to the idea that there is a teleology to history, which will lead up to socialism (and beyond). The idea is that rather than our simply trying to impose our (subjective) political and economic ideals onto history, a proper approach would be to articulate (and in the case of Marx, for the working-class to take further) tendencies which are implicit in the historical development of mankind itself.

Here, a thread runs from Hegel’s taking-over and re-interpreting teleological themes from the Christian tradition (and a teleological theme also to be found in Kant’s writings about history).[[2]](#endnote-2) In the Preface to his **Philosophy of Right**, Hegel also wrote:[[3]](#endnote-3)

Whatever happens, every individual is a child of his time; so philosophy too is its own time apprehended in thoughts. It is just as absurd to fancy that a philosophy can transcend its contemporary world as it is to fancy that an individual can overleap his own age… If his theory really goes beyond the world as it is and builds an ideal one as it ought to be, that world exists indeed, but only in his opinions, an unsubstantial element where anything you please may, in fancy, be built.

Marx’s relationship to Hegel has been much-discussed. But it is worth noting that a theme of historical teleology – in which, as against Hegel, Marx looks beyond what is suggested by the present[[4]](#endnote-4) – is to be found across his work. Consider, for example, a letter he sent to his friend Ruge in September 1843, in which Marx wrote that his concern was with:[[5]](#endnote-5)

making the world aware of its own consciousness,... awakening it out of its dream about itself,... explaining to it the meaning of its own actions

Those who emphasise this idea in Marx’s work, tend to stress that, from his ‘Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s **Philosophy of Right**: Introduction’, and **The German Ideology** onwards, ideas of this kind are interpreted by Marx in terms of his materialist view of history, and his economic writings.

Marx said a limited amount about his expectations for a future society.[[6]](#endnote-6) But it is striking that he says nothing about the character of economic laws – or constraints – to which a future society might be subject.

He had written, in **The German Ideology:**

[In existing society, man] is a hunter, a fisherman, a shepherd, or a critical critic, and must remain so if he does not want to lose his means of livelihood; whereas in communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, shepherd or critic.

However, there is a kind of climb-down concerning all this in **Capital volume III**, where Marx can be read as suggesting that there will remain some alienated labour, which can be shared around, while people can live a more fruitful life in their spare time.

There would seem to me a couple of obvious enough problems about this. It is undoubtedly the case that, over time, we have seen important changes in the kinds of work that people do, and recent developments in IT and robotics may pose some interesting problems for us.[[7]](#endnote-7) But while it is important to recognise the importance of the contributions that different people make, there would seem to be obvious differences between different people’s abilities to come up with ideas about what would best meet the needs of others. It is just not clear that a society would function adequately, and be able to adapt to changing circumstances, if ‘alienated’ labour were, indeed, shared right across the population.

Two recent books about Amazon.com are interesting, here.[[8]](#endnote-8) It is striking just how fertile Jeff Bezos’s imagination has proved to be, about directions in which Amazon might develop (although these were, also, extrapolations of ideas that he had developed with others, earlier on). At the same time, it is also notable how ruthless Bezos was at killing off ideas which did not work out. Further, if one tracks the development of Amazon, huge benefits came, on the one side, from hiring entire smaller companies which had good ideas and good people in them. While Amazon also regularly hired people who had worked in senior positions for its competitors, such as the massive and highly successful American retailers, Walmart.

There seem to me two important lessons from all this. First, while it is important that we don’t take one another for granted, and properly acknowledge the contributions that different people make, we should not let our concerns for this obscure the key role played by a combination of innovation and ruthless criticism in the development of effective organizations. In the face of this, it seems to me simply not to make sense to say that we should move towards a situation in which all alienated labour is shared around.

Second, while within Amazon, contributions made by other key figures are acknowledged, it seems in some ways striking how few people got the opportunity to make creative contributions. This is not a particular defect of Amazon, so much as a reflection that there is, on the one side, only a limited amount of capital and, on the other, that only a relatively few people have knowledge of key problems, and the sort of skills and knowledge to respond creatively to them. We might usefully explore what, at any period, could lead to improvements here. But it would seem to me that there is no reason whatever to suppose that there is a ‘logic to history’ such that things are, in some sense, naturally leading to a situation in which everyone’s abilities to contribute creatively will be realised. One can, thus, have a certain sympathy with the aspiration that Arthur Koestler attributes to Trotsky, while admitting that it is a wild exaggeration about anything that we can envisage as happening:[[9]](#endnote-9)

The average citizen of the classless society will be raised to the level of an Aristotle, a Goethe, a Marx.

As I have indicated, it seems to me that while one may be sceptical about the transformation of human nature to which Trotsky expected the achievement of a classless society would lead, there is, surely, an issue about the way in which people’s potentially useful ideas are currently utilized. Accordingly, a search for institutions which will better help us here would seem important.[[10]](#endnote-10)

Be this as it may, the underlying idea that historical developments should, somehow, intrinsically lead to the realization of human potential, runs deep among those who have been influenced by Marxism. In an exchange reported on in his fascinating **The Moral Economists**, Tim Rogan reports on the British Marxist historian E. P. Thompson as having written, in the course of a controversy with Leszek Kolakowski, that:[[11]](#endnote-11)

‘Marx’s partially-concealed notion of the “fully human” attaining towards realisation in his history’ was no longer credible

But Rogan reports that Thompson took the view that, rather than abandoning the idea, it was the job of the historian to (Rogan, p.175) ‘set about re-fashioning a concept which will stand a better chance of standing up to the scrutiny of [historical] evidence’.

There would seem to me no reason whatever to think that there should be any teleology of this kind to history. (See, for some important discussion of this, Karl Popper’s **The Poverty of Historicism**, and **The Open Society and Its Enemies.**)

If one accepts such a view then, it seems to me, one is back to the very thing that Marx did not want to be involved in: the explication and defence of values that one thinks that we should endorse,[[12]](#endnote-12) the critical discussion of how they might be realized by different alternative institutional arrangements that might be open to us to choose, and, thus an argument that they are something that is feasible. This will allow us to accept the realism in Hegel and in Marx, while at the same time dropping their ideas about teleology in history. And in that context, the kinds of issues raised by Marx in his discussions of the organization of capitalism, and also by Hayek (which I will discuss below) about limitations on what we can achieve seem to me important. If there is anything to them,[[13]](#endnote-13) we need to bear in mind that setting out for critical scrutiny their ideas about such things, seems to me a key role for anyone who is serious about politics and public policy.

It is, however, important to note that, in the material in which the ‘cookshops’ ideas occur, the ‘Afterword’ to the Second German Edition of **Capital, volume I**, Marx was reporting on a critic who had reproached him ‘for not writing recipes for the cook-shops of the future’. Marx, in response to this, quotes from a long description of his (Marx’s) own approach given by Maurice Bloch. During the course of this, Bloch refers to the historical character of Marx’s approach, but also to Marx’s view that

every historical period has laws of its own. ... As soon as society has outlived a given period of development, and is passing over from one given stage to another, it begins to be subject also to other laws.

It is all this, considered together, that seems to me to pose the dilemma for the Marxist to which the heading of this section refers. For there seem to be alternatives between which a choice has to be made.

On the one side, a Marxist may take Marx to be arguing that there is a telos to history, such that no explication of plans for the future is needed, just because all that is necessary is to fall in with tendencies becoming manifest in the development of capitalism, and to push them towards their full realization. God, or Nature or History will, in effect, have taken care of everything for us. But if this is the case, just what is the character of this telos? And what serves to explain the differences in Marx’s own expectations, between **The German Ideology**, and **Capital III**?

On the other side, one might stress the ‘each period has laws of its own’ theme, from **Capital** volume I.[[14]](#endnote-14) But if this is the case, we may surely ask: can we – prior to the realisation of post-capitalist arrangements – know anything about the character of what future laws will be, and about the character of the constraints that they will impose on people’s actions? After all, one might say, if we genuinely know **nothing** about them, how do we know that what is supposed to come after capitalism will, in fact, be an improvement over it for which good-hearted people ought to strive? Just what will the characteristics of such a future social order amount to? And what reason is there to suppose that it will fit the expectations that Marx, and other socialists, had for it?

That is to say, the material that Marx quoted from Bloch might suggest that when there is a move into a new historical period, what happens there will be characterized by new laws relating to that period. But if Marx thought that, he seems not to have said anything about their character. All that we get are various suggestions that tendencies already present within capitalism, and the fading away of the state, will make a distinctive form of rational decision-making possible, together with anticipations of some of the possibilities for human cooperation, growth and personal development which he believed that would then arise.

It might be suggested that there would be no economic constraints upon human action in the future. But this makes little sense. It might be suggested that there may, indeed, be new economic laws in the future, but we cannot say anything about their character from our present situation. But given that all kinds of claims are made by Marx about the character of life in a future society, it is not unreasonable for people to ask what kinds of things he had in mind, and how economic arrangements are supposed to work. There are, in effect, two different aspects to this. On the one side, there are the problems about the very idea that the products of a well-functioning economy would be available in a communist future, if markets were abolished.[[15]](#endnote-15) On the other, just what options for improvement will there actually be?

**2. A Problem**

Against all this, it might be objected: have I learnt nothing from the changes that have taken place recently in, especially, Western societies? These have occurred at two levels: the intellectual, and the popular.

At the intellectual level, a huge impact has been made by the concurrence of several different strands of thought, notably by a combination of influences from postmodernism and poststructuralism. To cut a very long story short,[[16]](#endnote-16) postmodernism – e.g. as argued for by Lyotard in his **The Postmodern Condition[[17]](#endnote-17)** – rejected Marxism as a kind grand theory of everything, and favoured, instead, ideas which drew on the work of Thomas Kuhn and the later Wittgenstein. This amounted to a (rather late) rejection of teleological ideas about history, but also the repudiation of realist ideas about the structure of the social world (something I will discuss shortly).

One has had, under the impact of this broad approach, work undertaken in history and the social sciences which often takes up, self-consciously, a particular perspective on its subject-matter, and is consciously written from a particular value-influenced point of view. Such approaches have been re-enforced by the influence of Foucault (and by the influence of French readings of Nietzsche, which I cannot discuss here for reasons of space). Foucault made almost endless programmatic claims about the character of knowledge and about influences operating upon the various kinds of subject-matter upon which he reported, the correctness of which it was not clear how we are supposed to assess.[[18]](#endnote-18) He also muddied the waters by making assertions about the constitution of claims to truth by power – which were typically impressive but unargued. (It is worth noting that one presumably had to read his own claims about history and everything else as aspiring to the status of truth, something to which he called into question in respect of what anyone else might write. If one did not take Foucault’s ideas as claiming this kind of privileged status, it is not clear what we are to make of them.)

Work influenced by these figures, and also a body of material that developed under the unspecific title ‘theory’ in literary studies, which drew eclectically on this work and on ideas developed within the Frankfurt School, has become increasingly influential. It tends to assume the objective correctness of various moral causes (although these causes are not always compatible with one another). Work written from these perspectives typically took issue with anything that was seen as a constraint on the realization of these values. This was done, not by treating some view opposed to this as a tentative theory which required critical discussion on its merits, but instead treating it as a power-constituted discourse illegitimately pretending to truth, the pretentions of which needed to be unmasked.

One had, in all this, an odd combination of moral self-righteousness,[[19]](#endnote-19) and the espousal of highly problematic relativistic ideas about epistemology. Anything which suggested that the approaches that the authors of this work favoured might be incorrect, was treated simply as a false perspective the underlying truth about which was that it just served to oppress.

Not only is this kind of approach to be found in increasing amounts of academic work (often, it seems to me, written by people who don’t fully appreciate the intellectually contentious character of the philosophical assumptions that they are making). But it has been re-enforced by social-media-stoked echoing of judgements about matters of truth and falsity, based simply on people’s like or dislike of some of their consequences. A striking example of this, was the hounding out of her academic position in Britain of the philosopher Kathleen Stock, as a consequence of her having written a book, **Material Girls**.[[20]](#endnote-20) In this, she took issue – in a sober manner, and with express sympathy for people who are transgender – with some of the philosophical writing which has influenced recent attitudes (and policies) concerning ‘gender identity’. Stock explicitly wrote as someone on the left, politically, and also as a lesbian. She made what seemed to me – as a specialist in philosophy and political theory - some telling criticisms of the work of Judith Butler (author, inter alia, of **Gender Trouble[[21]](#endnote-21)**), and others with similar views. Stock wrote in an excellent manner: in each case, starting by giving an account of her understanding of the views of the people with whom she was taking issue, and only then moving to criticism. Rather, however, than receiving academic criticism of her work, which she invited, she became the victim of a kind of political campaign conducted by students at her university who, she felt, ended up making her position intolerable.

The underlying intellectual character of these recent approaches seems to me, oddly, to amount to a form of idealism. Institutions, constraints, and their real-world consequences don’t really come into things. Everything is about what things or people are called. The situation calls to mind some of Karl Marx’s critical comments about his erstwhile intellectual allies in Germany:[[22]](#endnote-22)`

Once upon a time a valiant fellow had the idea that men were drowned in water only because they were possessed with the idea of gravity. If they were to knock this notion out of their heads, say by stating it to be a superstition, a religious concept, they would be sublimely proof against any danger from water. His whole life long he fought against the illusion of gravity, of whose harmful results all statistics brought him new and manifold evidence.

**3. In Praise of Criticisable Ideology**

One of the striking features of contemporary politics, is that the very idea of people having what are often described as ‘ideologies’ is regularly criticized. If by ‘ideology’, people mean contentious ideas which guide political life – and other spheres of human existence – but which are treated as if they are obviously correct and beyond critical scrutiny, this criticism is fair enough. But much of what people refer to as ‘ideology’ seems to me not only legitimate but in fact essential, if we are to have a sensibly conducted politics.

What I have in mind, is the idea that we need to spell out what our concerns about the operation of existing society are, but also to explicate (fallible) ideas about how existing institutions work. In addition, we need to spell out our ideas about how things might be done in alternative ways – and about what constraints these different institutional arrangements would impose on what else we can achieve. All this is important, just because we are typically going to be faced with choices between different kinds of institutions, and different ways in which various social functions which we need to have discharged can be discharged. Further, each set of institutions typically brings with it problems, in the sense that, if it is in place, then certain other things which we might otherwise like to happen, cannot be realized at the same time.

Friedrich Hayek, who was an enthusiastic proponent of the social role that in his view needed to be played by markets and the price system, went out of his way to say that if this was operating well, some other things to which we might be attracted (and to which, indeed, he was himself) – such as financial reward on the basis of ‘merit’, or equality between the incomes that people receive in markets – could not be achieved at the same time. One can match such ideas with comparable points made by Marxists about the operation of what they referred to as ‘capitalism’ (e.g. concerning the ‘relations of production’).

Clearly, there is room for argument about specific such claims, and, indeed, about whether we are in fact subject to constraints of this kind at all. In my view, ideas like Hayek’s, and also structural rather than teleological ideas from the Marxist tradition, as well as claims of similar kinds made by others, are important, and need to be spelled out and held open to critical scrutiny. But a wider issue raised by this sort of approach also seems to me important. It is that we need to be aware that we have to make choices about institutions, and the policies that we pursue within them. Different institutions may serve different social functions (and do so more or less effectively). If a choice is made for one institution or set of institutions, this may limit our ability to accomplish other things. Knowledge about these things, which is obviously fallible, is vital to our well-being, as is what might be called the social entrenchment of the best such knowledge that we have to date. Just because any such claim to knowledge is fallible, it is important that criticisms can be raised of such ideas. But this needs to be done in ways that fit our currently best ideas about how ideas and policy proposals can be critically evaluated.[[23]](#endnote-23) We need, particularly, to make sure that we do not proceed as if problems of the kind to which I have referred do not exist – unless, that is to say, we have confronted the arguments for them, and have shown that their claims are groundless.

The ideas that I have just referred to seem to me at odds with what might be called the spirit of the age in which we are living. They are obviously at odds with the postmodernist idealism, which I discussed in the previous section. But they are also at odds with the ideas of self-declared ‘pragmatists’, and also with a view that is to be found among some of those who favour ‘piecemeal social engineering’,[[24]](#endnote-24) or the science of ‘muddling through’.[[25]](#endnote-25) Let me deal with these ideas, in turn.

Political pragmatism seems to me a badly flawed approach. Clearly, we may come across situations which need to be responded to directly and urgently. But what pragmatists dismiss as ‘ideology’ may be the very ideas which tell us about what the unintended consequences, and thus the costs, may be of responding to problems in what seem to us the simplest and most practical of ways. Ideas about learning by trial and error, and ‘piecemeal social engineering’ are **really** important, as are related ideas about gradualism and ‘muddling through’. But a key problem about such approaches is that they seem to me to risk underplaying the significance of fallible theoretical knowledge about what will not work, or about the kinds of unintended consequences our ‘trials’ might have until we encounter them in practise.[[26]](#endnote-26) It is worth noting that Karl Popper, who is particularly identified with this approach, remarked, in the face of Hayek’s arguments about the problems of rational economic calculation in a socialist economy:[[27]](#endnote-27)

Hayek [has argued] that the typical engineering job involves the centralization of all relevant knowledge in a single head, whereas it is typical of all truly social problems that knowledge has to be used which cannot be so centralized… I admit that this fact is of fundamental importance. The engineer must use the technological knowledge embodied in these hypotheses [of Hayek’s] which inform him of the limitations of his own initiative as well as of his own knowledge.

This, however, leads to two problems. The first relates to what our best ideas in fact are about the institutional choices open to us, and about the kinds of constraints that they impose upon what else we can do. I will look at what this amounts to for both conservatives and socialists, in subsequent pieces. The second problem, however, is how our best (and obviously tentative) ideas about such things can be submitted to general critical scrutiny, and then socially entrenched. For if there is anything to the case that I have presented here, the contrast between what would be needed and our current political practises, is a striking one. Indeed, a recent study of British politics prior to the recent ascendancy of populism (Steve Richards, **The Prime Ministers[[28]](#endnote-28)**) brings the difficulties of doing this out in an impressive manner, and there is no reason to believe that things will be different in any Western democracies.

1. See, on this, the ‘Afterword’ to the Second German Edition of **Capita**l, volume 1, which I discuss later in this section. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Compare, for example, Kant’s ‘Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose’, e.g. in **Kant’s Political Writings**, ed. Hans Reiss, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. **Hegel’s Philosophy of Right**, tr. T. M. Knox, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1942, p. 11. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. It should be noted that Hegel’s discussions of institutional arrangements in **The Philosophy of Right** go beyond simply showing ‘how the state…is to be understood’ (‘Preface’, p. 11). While he emphasises that ‘The owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the falling of dusk.’ (p. 13) – i.e. that philosophy’s understanding is, in his view, retrospective – he offers a fair amount of idealization of and extrapolation from, the present. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. See K. Marx, 'Letters from Deutsch-Franzoesische Jarhbuecher', in **Karl Marx/ Frederick Engels, Collected Works**, volume 3, Moscow: Progress Publishers; London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1975; the quotation is from p. 144. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Material which is often referred to, includes his comments on Bakunin’s work, and his **Critique of the Gotha Programme**. A useful overview of this – and, indeed, of many of Marx’s more important ideas, along with short passages from a wide range of Marx’s texts – is provided in David McLellan’s **The Thought of Karl Marx**, second edition, London: Macmillan, 1980; see the section ‘Future Communist Society’. This work is obviously limited in the degree to which it can address different interpretations of Marx’s ideas, but seems to me invaluable as a reminder of what, in fact, his stated views were on a range of topics. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. I plan to address this issue in a future article. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Brad Stone’s **The Everything Store: Jeff Bezos and the Age of Amazon**, London: Corgi, 2014, and his **Amazon Unbound**, London: Simon & Schuster, 2021. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. See Arthur Koestler, **The Arrow in the Blue**, London: Hutchinson, [1952] 1983, p. 330. Koestler does not give a reference and I have been unable to corroborate this elsewhere. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. For the very un-Trotskyist direction in which I would be tempted to look, see my 'The Use of Knowledge in Organizations', **Knowledge Technology & Social Policy**, Fall 2000, 13, No. 3, pp.30-48. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. See Tim Rogan, **The Moral Economists**, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2017, p. 174. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. An important issue raised by Karl Popper here, is that one needs to be open to the fact that our ideas about what is right, or desirable, are fallible, and that one can expect them to be modified with the passing of time. See, on this, my ‘Lessons from Twentieth Century Political Philosophy Before Rawls’, in G. Delanty and Stephen P. Turner (eds) **Routledge International Handbook of Contemporary Social and Political Theory**, second edition, London & New York: Routledge, 2021, pp. 141-152. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. I am, here, assuming – pace Marx - that there is no prospect for us to be able to get away from operating under some such constraints. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. On this, Michael Evans’ **Karl Marx**, London: Allen & Unwin, 1975, is well worth consulting. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. It is to this that the issues raised by Mises and by Hayek about the problems of economic calculation in a future socialist society, are pertinent. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. See also my ‘Postmoderna politika’ [Postmodern Politics] in **Ideja**. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. J-F Lyotard, **The Postmodern Condition** (1979), Minneapolis, MN: Minnesota University Press, 1984. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. It is interesting that at one point he explicitly rules out that claims that he is making can be assessed against other material. See **The Archaeology of Knowledge**, Part 4, chapter 4, while it would seem to me that it is only by way of independent testing that we can evaluate whether or not a claim is any good. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Typically, from people who don’t seem to appreciate the intellectual problems involved in espousing any kind of objectivist moral theory, let alone that their own substantive views might be open to objection. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Kathleen Stock, **Material Girls: Why Reality Matters for Feminism**, London: Stock, 2021. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Judith Butler, **Gender Trouble**, London: Routledge, 1990. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. See **The German Ideology**, Preface; available at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/preface.htm> [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Obviously, issues can be raised about these, in their turn. But this can be done in an ad hoc way, when people claim that there are problems about them, and our task would be to evaluate the criticisms and if they are valid, to work, along with other people, at finding improved procedures and institutions. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. A view associated with my teacher, Karl Popper. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. See for example Charles Lindblom, ‘The Science of “Muddling Through”, **Public Administration Review**, 19, No. 2 (Spring, 1959), pp. 79-88. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. It is also worth noting that those who favour such an approach – which in itself is important – seem to me to owe us an account of how feedback from those adversely affected by trials which don’t work well, is actually to feed back into learning, and the revision of what we are trying out. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. See Karl Popper, **The Poverty of Historicism, III**, sections 20 and 21, London: Routledge, 1963. The quotation is from the first footnote in section 21. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Steve Richards, **The Prime Ministers**, London: Atlantic, 2019. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)