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Marx in Miami: Reflections on Teaching and the Confrontation with Ideology

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Marx in Miami: Reflections on Teaching and the Confrontation with Ideology

Abstract

In composing this piece we hope to detail some of our strategies and pedagogical experiences teaching Marx and Marxism in Miami, Florida. Although Miami is certainly a special case regarding the intensity and character of ideological fervor against Leftist political and social theory, we believe the lessons adapted to this specific environment can be generalized for instructors regardless of geography. Teaching Marx in the United States often poses unique challenges. In Miami, those obstacles feel frequently amplified.

Keywords

Teaching Marx; Political Theory Pedagogy, Political Theory; Marx; Marxism

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Cover Page Footnote

The authors wish to gratefully acknowledge Joaquin Pedroso and Rudy Leal-McCormack for their efforts and commentary on early versions of this essay. We would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers at CRCP for their insights and highly constructive suggestions. Finally, we are grateful to our students who tolerate our corny jokes and our well-intentioned if very imperfect pedagogical experiments. They have challenged us to improve our teaching, and ourselves, every semester.

I. Exile and Dislocation

In composing this piece we hope to detail some of our strategies and pedagogical experiences teaching Marx and Marxism in Miami, Florida.¹ Although Miami is certainly a special case regarding the intensity and character of ideological fervor against Leftist political and social theory, we believe the lessons adapted to this specific environment can be generalized for instructors regardless of geography. Teaching Marx in the United States often poses unique challenges. In Miami, those obstacles feel frequently amplified.²

Perhaps like no other place in this country is teaching a particular theorist or theoretical tradition as resisted and as taxing on a teacher's patience and even self-esteem as is teaching Marx and Marxism in Miami. Likewise, the experience of learning Marx can be acutely distressing for students who have been raised to accept him as the personification of evil. Miami is the hub of the Cuban exile community in the United States, and thus semester after semester, year after year, we encounter groups of students who have basically formed their identities against the name "Marx." A sizeable fraction of our students were either born in Cuba or were raised by parents who fled the authoritarian regime of Fidel Castro. An even larger part of the population, though not ethnic Cubans, were raised in a fiercely anti-Castro and anti-Marxist environment. Though we have found the younger generation of Cuban-Americans are sometimes more socially liberal than their parents and grandparents, there is still vociferous, yet uninformed and thus unfounded opposition to just about anything associated with Marx or Marxism.³

From our experiences, the resistances we have faced as instructors can be categorized into three groups (1) those that conflate Marx's ideas with the actions and policies of Fidel Castro, Che, Mao, or figures from the Soviet Union (2) those that dismiss Marxism by reference to vague notions of human nature, and (3) those that argue Marx's conception of communism looks great on paper, but is impractical and unworkable in real political practice. We describe each of these, along with our pedagogical strategies, developed through dialogue in the classroom.

It may be useful to note that we teach Marx according to an orthodox (but still self-critical) Marxian assumption: some historical ideas are accurate and others false. This principle is also applicable to ideas about Marxism, especially preconceived ideas. As Friedrich Engels (1978, 766) remarked, the adversaries of Marxism used every opportunity to generate "misunderstandings and distortions." Accordingly, in order to teach Marx fairly, we have found it important to dislocate these prejudices in advance. In that respect, we do approach the discussion of Marx and Marxism from the perspective that some views, while held by students for understandable reasons, are wrong.⁴

Our hope is that what follows here, organized in pairs of related but distinct narratives will encourage more instructors to find ways for occupying their classrooms with embodied,

¹ These reflections are drawn from political theory courses in which we teach Marx and Marxism. They include Modern Political Theory, Political Ideologies, Contemporary Political Theory, Humanist Marxism, Structural Marxism, and Critical Aesthetic Theory.

² One student casually informed me that his cousin wanted to physically attack me for teaching Marx, specifically saying, "He said he's going to kick your ass."

³ Indeed, there is often intense opposition to anything that even remotely resembles socialism (or the color red, unless it indicates the hue of Marco Rubio's tie that day).

⁴ Again, Engels (1978, 766) remarks, "Ideology is a process accomplished by the so-called thinker consciously....but with a false consciousness."

radical potential, critique, and imagination—the forces of conservatism and liberal capitalism have succeeded in doing the exact opposite for decades, every time the oppression, exploitation, and hypocrisy of the status quo has been ignored in their classrooms.⁵ Each narrative sub-section represents commentary on the respective strategies we have used in confronting these shared experiences. We have found that, while manifold techniques are useful, the most effective strategies for teaching Marx in Miami include reflexive confrontations with the anti-Marxist ideological presupposition of our students.

II. Fidel Castro: Intellectual Heir of Karl Marx?

Perhaps the most serious obstacle to teaching Marx is getting students to take him seriously in the first place. Without some kind of impetus to do otherwise, most simply reject in advance the possibility that he might have something to offer them. Of course, there are some reasons for this. Firstly, there is often an inclination by undergraduates to resist reading seriously texts that might challenge their tidy vision of reality, whether those ideas originate with Marx, Plato, Nietzsche, or Thomas Paine. College students are recovering teenagers, and most teenagers have already convinced themselves that political disputes are only the result of old people who were probably born cranky curmudgeons. Secondly, despite their flirtations with rebelliousness, most undergraduates arrive in college as products of their local ideological apparatuses. Parents, religious affiliations, friends, and other influences often serve to reinforce the view that a special place in Hell is reserved for Marx and all of his apparently mindless followers who wake up in the morning and hate freedom. If the idea of ‘America’ is depicted as an unqualified good, then Marx and Marxism are obviously the antithesis of that moral purity.⁶ Why? Because the greatest enemy faced by the United States was supposedly the Soviet Union, a nation built in Marx’s image and which would have undoubtedly received his nodding approval, just as the United States is presently the country that George Washington, James Madison, and Thomas Jefferson clearly wanted. In order to teach Marx, it has been helpful to displace students from this sort of ingrained error.⁷ This challenge of exposing our students to a world of heterodox ideas is tremendously rewarding. As they are compelled to reflect on their ideological baggage in order to learn, we have to do the same in order to teach.

In Miami, however, there is the further, and very entrenched, difficulty of Cuba. While most students, even now, can vaguely identify the Soviet Union as an adversary, they often do so in the most impersonal terms. I have yet to meet a student whose parents spent time in a gulag. The Russian students I have had bear only a vague memory of life under “communism.” In Miami, the animus toward Marxism is often rooted in far more personal experiences. Practically

⁵ A superb text for those interested in a lucid exposition of several of the arguments we will be exploring in this essay is Terry Eagleton’s *Why Marx Was Right* (2011).

⁶ The idea that capitalism and America are synonymous is certainly not peculiar to Miami. I have found that a very effective remedy to this misconception is to ask my students the following questions:

- a. Which part of the Declaration of Independence or Constitution forbids socialism? Of course, the answer is that no such provision exists.
- b. If we cannot find a prohibition against socialism, then surely some part of our nation’s fundamental documents must endorse capitalism. If socialism is “un-American,” and capitalism is so essential to American life, it must be there. Which part of those documents gives countenance to capitalism? The look on their faces as they realize that there is no constitutional basis for capitalism is quite refreshing.

⁷ The same is true for many other historical thinkers, such as the authors of *The Federalist Papers* or other figures from the American founding, whose views are frequently distorted to serve as proxies in contemporary controversies.

all of my students hailed from families who fled what they described to us as the genuine misery of Fidel Castro's poorly named "revolution." Many directly observed the censorship and repression, or had family members who experienced it firsthand. Some had family who were political prisoners. And Fidel Castro, infamously, declared some kind of allegiance to the Soviet sphere of influence, and communism, despite admitting to have read no more than a fraction from the first volume of *Das Capital*.⁸ Because of the history they normally receive, the idea of impartially discussing Marxism is generally a non-starter for most students, but Cuban-American students, quite understandably, have a heightened degree of obstinacy against this subject.

While those resistances are understandable, the problem is that they are clearly misplaced. Castro is not the fault of Karl Marx. Stalin's murderous purges are completely unsupported by anything Marx or Engels wrote. The pedagogical challenge, then, is to dislocate prejudice from the text while conveying respect for the very real experiences many of the Cuban émigrés have suffered.

Bryant Sculos: I say the word Marx and students immediately look nauseated or worse, angry. I expect this. I offer them a challenge from the outset. If you find specific textual evidence for the horrible atrocities committed by Stalin, Mao, Che Guevara or Fidel Castro in the writings of Marx, show them to me, we will discuss them and you will receive ten points on your final grade. Some students seem intimidated by the challenge, but others have seemed quite eager to attempt to prove me wrong. I have offered that challenge many times, and I haven't had a single student able to provide text-based arguments for such a connection. Weirdly, Marx never actually advocates the mass killing or imprisoning of political opponents. He never suggests that industrialization should proceed under authoritarian guidelines. In fact for Marx, industrial capitalism is a necessary stage in our human progress towards socialism and communism. Agrarian societies are not prepared for socialism according to Marx.⁹ I tell them, in the next class we will discuss the concept of post-scarcity, but until then let us look at why you all think that Cuba—their principal "counter-example" to the viability, seriousness, or democratic core of Marxism—is a Marxist state.¹⁰

"Is it because Castro told you that is where he got his ideas? Is it because that is what he told your parents? And maybe he did get some ideas from Marx, and maybe he initially meant well towards those ideas." I present them the positive accomplishments of the Castro regime compared to the Batista regime and its predecessors: increased literacy, decreased poverty, increase in the quality and availability of basic health care, and increased agricultural production.¹¹ We look at the dark side as well. That is not enough to placate them. They seemingly hate me at this moment. I expect this. What I tell them next is what earns me a bit of their trust again: "What we will be doing over the next several classes will not prevent you from criticizing the ills and atrocities of the Castro regime. I promise. You can end up agreeing with everything Marx says, and you will actually be in a better position to criticize that regime. After all, there was a reason Marx said towards the end of his life, 'I do not know what I am, but I am not a Marxist'. He saw people were already perverting his arguments and theories."

"Now then why do we accept Castro's claim that his policies and practices represent the ideals of Marx? Many of your parents and friends have told you their own horror stories of the Castro

⁸ Cameron 1964

⁹ Marx 1998, 44

¹⁰ On the problem of the entire idea of a "Marxist state" see Narrative #2.

¹¹ Glennie 2011

regime (or similarly “socialist” regimes) or you yourself experienced them; you “know” how terrible Castro is, so why is it that you all seem to accept his platitude that he and his regime are simply applying Marx’s theories? Let us think about what I believe to be an apt analogy.” I write on the white board:

KU KLUX KLAN : _____ :: ISIS : _____ :: CUBA/USSR : _____

I call on students to fill in the blanks one at a time. Most pick up on the point I am trying to make with this analogy rather quickly, even if many disagree with the validity of the comparisons at first.

KU KLUX KLAN : **CHRISTIANITY**:: ISIS : **ISLAM**:: CUBA/USSR : **MARXISM**¹²

I ask them, “Do most Christians accept that the Klan has the correct interpretation of Christianity?” A student blurts out, “I didn’t know they were even Christian...” I tell him, “That is because of how warped and ignored their interpretation is by any respectable Christian.” Another student calls out, “But ISIS does actually represent Islam.” I reply sharply, “Are you Muslim? Or more relevantly, are you a scholar of the Koran or the Hadith?” He asks what the Hadith is. I reply, “This is precisely why we need to be a bit more humble and skeptical about how much or how little we actually know about the things we hear on the news, especially if for some terrible reason your chosen channel happens to be named after an orange canine.” It takes them a moment or two, then I get the laugh I was hoping for. The laughter dies down, and I bring us back to the analogy. “But honestly, do most Muslims agree with ISIS’s interpretation of Islam?” A few students assert that they do. “Look at all the support they have! Of course, maybe it’s not all Muslims, but it sure seems like most.” “Why does it seem that way?” I push back. No response. I ask the whole class now, “Which country is home to the largest percentage of Muslims worldwide?” They begin guessing, Pakistan, India, Saudi Arabia. Then someone finally gets it: Indonesia. “Yes, it is actually Indonesia, and there is barely statistically measurable support for ISIS in Indonesia. Additionally though, statistics globally including the Middle East, show that most Muslims oppose ISIS. So just as with the KKK, we should not accept ISIS’s interpretation of Islam.” I call on a student, “So what you’re saying is that Castro and Stalin and people like them have perverted Marxism and we believe them?” “That is exactly what I am saying to you.”¹³

Sean Walsh: My strategy has been a sort of dialectical exorcism: let’s begin with what we all “know.” I begin the first class on Marx, almost always pertaining to “On the Jewish Question,” by asking the students to list any so-called “Marxist states” that have ever existed. The first round of responses are immediate: the Soviet Union, China, Cuba. With some prodding, the list

¹² This analogy is adapted from the one I have heard religious scholar and public intellectual Reza Aslan make on many occasions. His analogy only includes the KKK and ISIS, but I am deeply indebted to his pedagogical attempts on Fox News and CNN. Luckily, my students handed my altered challenge better than the anchors Prof. Aslan has had to deal with (especially most recently over the publication of his 2013 book *Zealot*)

¹³ Another analogy I have occasionally used is: “If I prance about your home wearing a red suit, place a present for you underneath a tree near your house while you sleep, and I attach antlers to my cat, would you believe me if I told you I was Santa Claus? No? Why? Because you know the myth of Santa Claus includes so much more than these superficial characteristics. Why is then that so many people, without ever actually reading Marx, accept the claims of dictators that they embody Marx’s (or even Lenin’s) theories?”

usually grows to include former Eastern Bloc nations: Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, Albania, East Germany, Hungary. If I ask emphasize the term “ever,” students with some knowledge of history might suggest Spain during the Civil War era. At this point, I will normally jab the students by pointing out how Eurocentric the list appears. This leads to a flood of African, Asian, and South American nations: Mozambique, Eritrea, Angola, Nicaragua, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos. Some will hesitantly offer Venezuela under the regime of Hugo Chavez, or Evo Morales’ Bolivia. Frankly, I will include whatever they want, as long as the list does not include something like Thatcher’s England or de Gaulle’s France.

Depending on how frenetic my handwriting appears, the chalkboard is generally consumed by the list. It is at this point that, starting with the Soviet Union, I cross out every nation listed and explain what every serious reader of Marx knows: there has never been a genuine “Marxist state.” Further, I admit to the students that I have asked them to do the impossible because there can be *no such thing* as a Marxist state. Starting with the latter point, my normal approach is to explain first the impossibility of a Marxist state by offering preliminary comments on how Marxism, in total opposition to what they have heard, is incompatible with the state. The point is never to take my word for it, but to read what Marx actually had to say on the subject. As we delve further, and read *The Communist Manifesto*, they see for themselves how Marx and Engels insist the state exists for no other purpose than managing the common affairs of the ruling class.¹⁴ They see for themselves how, once class antagonisms are resolved through revolution, the state has no further use, and withers into nothing.¹⁵

I have found, for a fair reading of Marx, it becomes useful to demonstrate that not only were the nations listed “not Marxist,” but they also represent merely another kind of capitalism. As I explain to my students, it is perfectly fair to examine Marx’ ideas and disagree with them. It is patently unfair, however, to point to the failings of various political entities that had only the most nominal, superficial connection to his work as evidence of his errors.

Since students tend to begin from the prejudice that capitalism is good, and communism is not, I pose a direct question: what is capitalism, or what is the central feature of capitalism? Invariably, the answer points to free markets and minimal government interference. In other words, the students express the commonly held view that capitalism is identical with some kind of freedom. This myth is easily dispensed with a tour of political systems that were both deeply authoritarian and capitalist: Chile, Argentina, the fascist regimes of Germany and Italy, and American war economies top the list of counterexamples. At this point, I introduce what Marx considered the secret of capitalist production, surplus value. Virtually all of my students have been middle and lower middle class. Most of them work. Despite the complexity of the three volumes of *Capital*, they are usually quick in grasping the concept, as it is readily observable in their own experiences. They understand the value of what they produce and how they are expected to work in excess of their own compensation in order to generate even more value for someone else. And this is when we return to the list of crossed-out “Marxist states.” After discussing the meaning of surplus value, it becomes a rather simple matter to explain that in *every* single state on the list – Russia, China, Cuba, East Germany, Vietnam, Cambodia, all of them – one will find the establishment of surplus value. In other words, they come to understand that, whatever banners it flew, and however hard it pretended to be otherwise, neither the Soviet Union, China, nor even

¹⁴ Marx and Engels 1985, 82

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 105

Cuba was anything other than an authoritarian form of capitalism in which surplus value was generated for the benefits of those who owned the means of production, most often the elites of the ruling party.

Some students remain skeptical. Some remain incredulous. All of us have a difficult time looking past what we have been taught by parents, pastors, and other local influences.¹⁶ Whether it succeeds, or not, this is a start to a more honest conversation and I have found this prefatory dialogue useful. Why? Because students from Cuba perceived firsthand how their families lived in squalor, while Castro and his associates enjoyed living in relative opulence. The concept of surplus value, whereby the labor of many is exploited for the benefit of a few, makes sense to them, and, while some remain intransigent, *most* of the students start asking why they have been taught what are now apparently distortions, if not outright lies, about Karl Marx and his ideas.

III. The Twisted Trees of Human Nature

While the students can now recognize that the excesses and crimes of the Soviet Union or Cuba no longer count as evidence against Marxism, other prejudices persist. Part of our snarky inner monologue has been to conclude that whatever failings are said to go on in America's high schools, they must be excelling in courses on human nature, because, in general, undergraduates, regardless of their major, often arrive utterly confident that they can speak unerringly on the subject. More seriously, the "fact" of human nature is almost exclusively used as an attempt to foreclose the discussions. However, we refuse to abandon this ground to prejudice. We understand why students appeal to this argument, but our reading of Marx and like-minded thinkers has led us to believe withholding conceptions of human nature is central to our students' developing a sense of self-critical consciousness in terms of questioning the existing political and economic system, as well as to them taking alternative theories like Marxism seriously.

In his *Social Contract*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau claimed that democracy was a government fit only for a race of gods, and not for human beings.¹⁷ In our experience undergraduate students tend to agree with this principle, at least when it is made clear that Marx and Engels are among the few political thinkers, ever, to advocate explicitly on behalf of democracy.¹⁸ Raising this point in class yields some very interesting discussions, as students learn that the authors of the Constitution of the United States were aghast by the idea of democracy, whereas Marx was motivated by the promise of political equality. To the degree that they oppose Marxism, and support a republican form of government designed to minimize the passions and participation of the masses, students are called into considering their own potentially tepid commitment to anything like real democracy. Indeed, many are surprised to learn that Marx speaks so fervently about the idea of genuine "universal human emancipation," freedom from a system that they often recognize in advance of their encounter with his ideas as being grossly unjust, exploitative, racist, and misogynist.¹⁹

But prejudice and resistance still lingers on. Even if, at this point, the students have come to discard the absurd lies that Marx wants to enslave them all and make them share underwear, they maintain the view that his ideas are unworkable because human beings are of a nature that is

¹⁶ Some students also refuse to accept the superiority of Darwin's theories to the fictions of scripture. Some students refuse to accept math (I was one of those). No pedagogical strategy is perfect, but these have helped us greatly.

¹⁷ Rousseau 1993a, 240

¹⁸ Marx and Engels 1985, 104

¹⁹ Marx 1978, 30

inimical to cooperation, collectivity, and harmony.²⁰ It is perhaps a view drawn from Immanuel Kant's liberalism, which bemoaned, "Nothing straight can be constructed from such warped wood as that which man is made of."²¹ At this point, the pendulum has swung to the other extreme. Unburdened from having to answer for the Soviet Union and Cuba, the problem is no longer that Marx' ideas represent unmitigated evil. Rather, now the problem is that his ideas are *too good*, and human nature is essentially too wicked for those ideas to work. Of course, this refutation is hardly unique to Marxism. The respective ideas of Plato, Hobbes, or pretty much anything that fails to immediately resemble the status quo is subject to scorn, since obviously the present system works so well (unless, you happen to be poor, non-white, female, an animal, a tree, etc.).

Sean Walsh: I have found that, in Miami, the indictment against human nature can be particularly acute. Students are likely to suggest that human beings are necessarily selfish and competitive and only cooperate when there is advantage. To their credit, this view is derived and reinforced by scenes from their environment. The geography and culture of Miami seem only to encourage self-absorption, consumerism, and narcissism. Locked, for the moment, by the Everglades National Park (a sprawling zone of, for now, protected wetlands) on one side, and the Atlantic Ocean on the other, Miami is a highly condensed, overcrowded megalopolis. Perhaps owing to the authoritarian nature of Castro's regime, the prevailing attitude in Miami-Dade County seems to be grotesquely individualist. For example, driving an automobile in Miami is a decidedly hazardous undertaking. This is not merely anecdotal. Miami is among the most dangerous places to drive, "First in automotive fatalities, first in pedestrian strikes, first in the obscenity-laced tirades of their fellow drivers."²² There is no such thing as courtesy for one's fellow human being, and using a turn signal is generally seen as a sign of weakness. Consumption is necessarily conspicuous. In this place, the point of all consumption is conspicuous. It seems unlikely that most of the people purchasing vehicles from BMW, Mercedes Benz, and Jaguar can afford them, but the object remains to appear as though you can. It is not only a culture of "me," but "have you seen me (as I was running you off the road)?" There is often little concern for community or neighborhood.²³ Noise abounds at all hours, noise from car stereos, televisions sets, and very loud mouths.

As for crime, by some estimates, Miami ranked as the seventeenth "most dangerous city in the country" in 2011, putting it in company with perennially infamous cities such as Detroit, Baltimore, Oakland, and Cleveland.²⁴ When I ask my students how many of them live in a home with an alarm, some hands go up, depending on how many can afford such luxury. When I ask them how many live in a home with bars on the windows, many more hands go up. When I ask them how many live in a home with a gun, almost all of their hands are raised. Indeed, as my students in Miami generally attest, there is a great deal of evidence to support Kant's indictment against human nature.

²⁰ As Marx and Engels (1985, 99) explicitly state, "Communism deprives no man of the power to appropriate the products of society; all that it does is to deprive him of the power subjugate the labor of others by means of such appropriation."

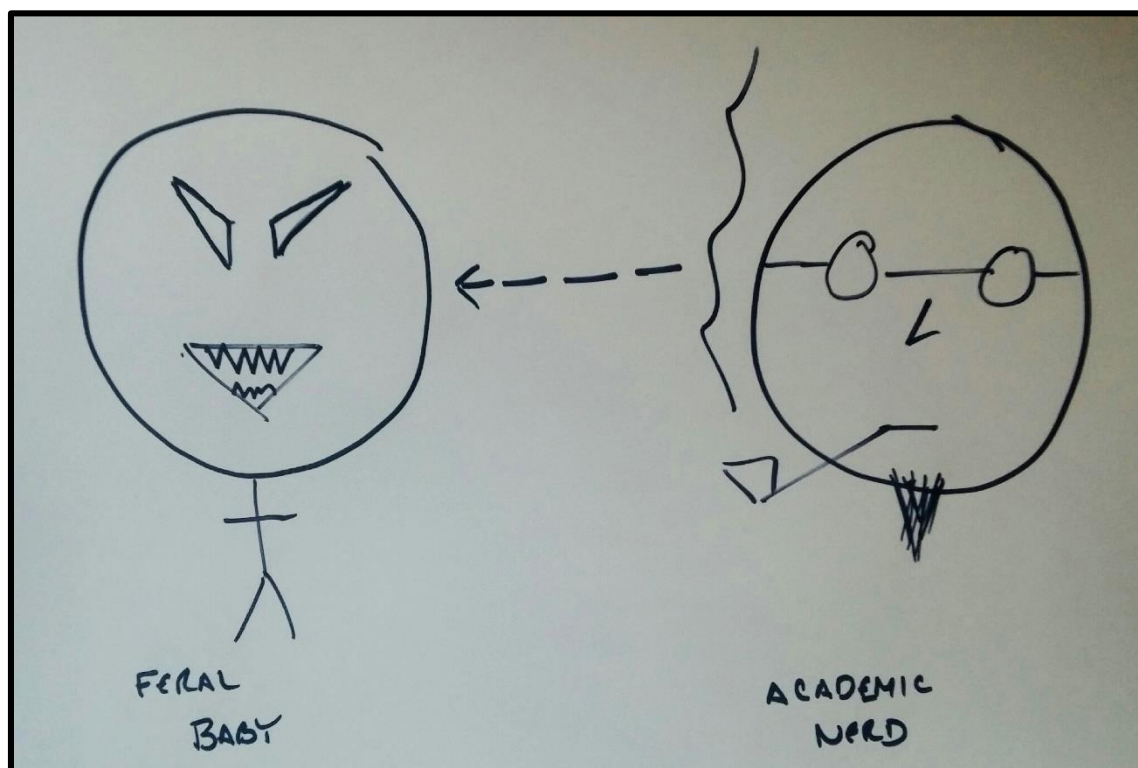
²¹ Kant 1991, 46

²² Palmer 2014

²³ Students have frequently regaled me with stories of awful neighbors whose transgressions ranged from throwing dead rats into their backyard to having gunfights with the Miami-Dade County Sheriff's Department.

²⁴ Huffington Post 2012

Rousseau offered one of the first rebuttals to this fell accusation, when he claimed that theorists indicting man in his natural state had confounded “the savage man with the men we have daily before our eyes.”²⁵ The same basic response holds true for Marx, following from his theory of historical materialism.²⁶ The manner in which production takes place at a given historical moment is what supplies the character of ideas, politics, religion, art, and philosophy.²⁷ Indeed, human being itself is largely configured by the historical particularity of production²⁸. The basic concept of historical materialism is fairly straightforward and most undergraduates grasp it quickly. But the human beings in front of them are the only kind they have ever known, and grasping the *extent* to which production influences what passes as human nature can be more challenging. Indeed, for Marx, we do not even really know what authentic human being looks like because our subjectivity has been so thoroughly perverted by the mechanisms of capitalism. In order to illustrate this point, I have employed a heuristic device, which I call “Feral Baby.”²⁹



The drawing begins with the figure on the left, the eponymous feral baby. As its name suggests, Feral Baby was left in the woods far from civilization before any kind of socialization or education could take place. The child has no language, no concept of human society or any of its trappings. Raised by woodland creatures, probably squirrels or wild boars, it has no concept

²⁵ Rousseau 1993b, 57

²⁶ Lukács (1968, 1) describes historical materialism as the basis of Marxism, and the defining factor of a Marxist. While Marx never used the term “historical materialism,” though Engels (1978, 760) describes their joint effort to establish a “materialist conception of history.”

²⁷ Marx 1970, 20-21

²⁸ As Marx (1988, 107) writes, “The transcendence of private property is therefore the complete emancipation of all human senses and attributes.”

²⁹ As readers can see by the expert drawing, only instructors with really advanced art skills should even attempt this.

of itself as a human being and spends its day chasing birds and gathering acorns (which students with knowledge of survival skills have told me are inedible). On the right is “Academic Nerd,” a pretentious pipe smoking member of the intelligentsia who pats himself on the back for writing research that does nothing to change the world, and makes inappropriately sarcastic jokes about conservative politicians to his undergraduate courses.³⁰

I pose the question to the class, “If Academic Nerd is an anthropologist, sociologist, political scientist, or some similar profession, what would he want from observing Feral Baby? What reason would he have to observe Feral Baby?” Answers are usually quick to arrive at the idea that “Feral Baby” represents human nature, uncontaminated by civilization and its contents. Feral Baby represents human nature in its purest form, and could provide evidence for Academic Nerd as to whether or not human beings are essentially greedy, self-interested, and violent, which is how we often see them in capitalism. I then ask the class what problems are inextricably associated with this kind of practice, or asked differently, “Why will Academic Nerd be unable to access this truth of human nature from Feral Baby?” Sometimes they arrive at the answer themselves, other times require a bit of prodding, but, in any case, the problem is not with the truth of Feral Baby, but the truth of Academic Nerd. In fact, it is Academic Nerd who is quite thoroughly enmeshed in the capitalist mode of production. Academic Nerd is already a product of capitalism, already contaminated by its superstructure, its norms, ideas, educational apparatus, and concepts. In effect, Academic Nerd is unable to assess Feral Baby in a manner unobstructed by capitalism; he will necessarily impose concepts onto Feral Baby (such as “feral” and “baby”) that are generated within a historically given superstructure. “Feral Baby” does not recognize the difference between civilized and feral; those are Academic Nerd’s concepts, drawn from this historical mode of production, and he takes them with him wherever he goes. It does not matter if Academic Nerd is on his way to the bank, or, like the Marxist anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss, he is on his way to study the Nambikwara; he takes capitalism with him. The lesson for our students is that while the nature of human beings in capitalism is there for them to observe, they have no vantage point from which to correctly assess human nature outside of, or beyond, the mode of production that has constituted their perspectives. There is no Archimedean view to be had. The trans-historical truth of human nature is inaccessible to us.

According to the Marxist view, if human beings appear rotten to the core, it is because the capitalist system we inhabit violently encourages pernicious behaviors. The idea, going back to at least John Locke, that the rich are the industrious and the poor, unreasonable and lazy, is clearly shown to be backward.³¹ In fact, the poor have to work much harder for their survival, whereas the objective of achieving riches is quite clear: it provides the advantage of not having to work nearly as hard, if at all. In that sense, the “Feral Baby” exercise helps dislocate prejudices against human nature and demonstrate how the capitalist system encourages laziness by making it the end goal.

Bryant Sculos: No matter how often I explain to my students that Marx does not offer a conception of human nature in the conventional sense of that phrase—however oversimplified I might think this interpretation of Marx is—it seems they have a fundamental difficulty wrapping their heads around it. I explain why Marx makes this argument and how it fits into his overall theory. Consciousness, our psychologies and resulting behaviors, our beliefs and our desires, are

³⁰ Most of my students verbally acknowledge the resemblance between “Academic Nerd” and me.

³¹ Locke 1980, 21

all shaped by our historical social conditions in which we are raised and live.³² There is usually an astute student who will push deeper and ask: “Well isn’t species-being like a kind of human nature, that people regardless of their social conditions, are at their best and freest when they are laboring as they choose?”

“Well yes, it is like a concept of human nature, but it differs from conventional uses of the phrase ‘human nature’ in that Marx argues quite lucidly that how we labor or how we would choose to labor is also determined or at least shaped by our existing social conditions.³³ The broad idea of freely-chosen labor may be trans-historical, but how it would manifest itself in reality is deeply particular.”³⁴ This is typically where the thoughtfulness ends though, sadly.

The next set of questions invariably revolves around the same theme: “But aren’t competitiveness and self-interest and greed natural, biological aspects of human beings as animals?” or more accurately those “questions” are typically posed as statements. “These characteristics ARE part of human nature and you and Marx are both naïve fools for thinking otherwise” (or so their tone often suggests). As much as I may have the urge to walk out of class and drink, I don’t. I take a deep breath and reply with a question or set of questions that encourages the student(s) to consider the (potentially ideological) basis for such a claim. “Are all people equally competitive?” “Is there any consistently verified DNA markers or other biological evidence which points to comprehensive genetic determinism regarding these varying levels of competitiveness across time?” “Are you examining this question from a neutral, asocial point of view?” We go around on these questions for a little while as they come closer and closer to understanding the historical and social essence of their preconceptions.

However, regardless of these questions and that my students’ minds tend to be more receptive at this point, they are often largely unconvinced of the potential accuracy or feasibility of the alternative, Marxian perspective. In order to more fully unlearn the assumptions that prevent them from fully appreciating the value of Marx’s position, I now ask, “How many people think that texting and driving improves their safety and well-being on the road?”³⁵ One student raises their hand, as a joke. Next, “How many people text and drive?” Almost every hand goes up. I then simply ask them to consider the social roots of that pervasive norm that so obviously and knowingly endangers their safety and even their lives. We discuss it. I transition, “Now think about the news on Black Friday over the past few years. People are getting trampled TO DEATH at Wal-Marts. People are literally murdering each other for a discounted, slightly larger TV than the one they probably have at home. Think about that, it isn’t even for something they need to live, and it isn’t something they probably wouldn’t otherwise be able to experience some version of.”

To drive the point home, I ask them: “How many people have heard of these people who jump onto subway tracks to save complete strangers? How many of you have ever done a single thing that didn’t benefit you? Even small things. How many of you have done these things at some sort of risk to yourself?” They share their stories. They feel more optimistic. The atmosphere of the room is changing before me, slowly and cautiously I press on: “Is it at least plausible that our current socioeconomic system, capitalism, promotes certain beliefs and behaviors at the expense of others? That we are capable of both great creativity, compassion, and

³² Marx 1998, 42

³³ Marx 1988, 69

³⁴ Now perhaps this question is based on how I teach the idea of species-being based on Erich Fromm’s very accurate elucidation of what he takes to be Marx’s socio-historical conception of human nature as the manifestation of species-being in a particular mode of production (Fromm 1961; 1962).

³⁵ This is an especially pertinent question in Miami.

selflessness as well as narcissism, hedonism, and thoughtlessness, but that our system promotes the latter practices more than the former?” I get a lot of nods here. With class typically about to end at this point, I tell them to think about this over the next two days until our following class meeting, and to try to come up with other examples, either for or against this view so we can discuss them then. It is not the point that they admit to accepting Marx’s view on human nature or any of these alternative concepts so much as is the pedagogical victory in getting them to seriously question their belief in the trans-historical naturalness of some of the most pernicious normative and behavioral aspects of capitalist society.

About as often as students suggest that the basic psycho-social manifestations of capitalism are natural, universal traits of human beings, I hear students bring up the question of incentive and laziness when we discuss socialism, communism or possibilities of a post-capitalist political economy. Though Marx himself says very little on the topic, contrary to prevailing opinion, what he does say makes it possible for me to answer this student inquiry fairly easily.³⁶ “So if everyone receives what they need, and contributes what they can, what prevents people from free riding or taking advantage of those who work hard?” I tell them, “First, remember, Marx argues that people naturally want to labor and be productive, creative members of society, but it is the existing social conditions and relations of production that either prevent them from laboring how they would otherwise choose, or turns the work they are compelled to do to survive (e.g., stocking shelves or pulling a lever for eight hours at a time) into pure toil. Marx argues that you would want to work if you could work how you wanted.”³⁷

Still they push back, “What would make someone want to contribute if they didn’t need to? Wouldn’t they take a few too many days off? Wouldn’t overall societal innovation decrease? People need incentive to put in those extra hours to invent things.” I agree with them; “People do need incentive, but why does that incentive need to be profit or consumer goods?” I offer them the example of the inventor of the Polio vaccine. “He gave it away to the world. His motivation to innovate was purely to contribute to the betterment of the world. Sure maybe his ego wanted the privilege that comes with solving such a difficult problem. Marx would have no problem with this.” I call on the next student: “Okay I generally agree with you,” He says, “but...” I interrupt him, “You mean Marx you agree with Marx on this...I want to hear you say it out loud.” [Everyone laughs]. I tell him to continue. “So I agree with Marx, but how do we get people to want to do the really terrible jobs like cleaning the sewers?” I make sure he knows how thoughtful and important this is superb question is, and it is a challenge to which the Left must respond.

Though I typically engage in a more Socratic style, I lecture at length now: “Well Marx doesn’t give us an explicit answer to that question, but he does offer two very important arguments that can help us come up with a solution using his ideas. First, both socialism and communism require post-scarcity, which means we have developed enough technologically to provide for every person on earth in all their basic necessities and likely beyond that to include some luxuries. This means that maybe we’ll have already developed a technology to clean sewers or pick up trash for us. Anyone here LOVE vacuuming?” I ask. A couple students raise their hands. “Well most of us don’t, so guess what? Now we have Roombas. Why is it so difficult to imagine that we could invent a sewer version of a Roomba? The second aspect of Marx’s work that is important to remind ourselves of is that his notion of post-capitalism is not utopian, that is it is not supposed to be imagined as a perfect society where there are no problems

³⁶ Marx 1985, 99

³⁷ Marx 1985, 100

or unhappy people or disagreements. If you think this is the case, I will give extra credit to anyone who finds textual support in Marx's writing for such an interpretation. So maybe you'll get to labor how you freely choose for six hours of the day, but for two hours you'll have to pick-up garbage. We can all hope that as problems come up, the more creative people will be there and be motivated to help us deal with them. There are people who love robotics and computer science here right? I'm looking at you to invent those poop-eating robots." Speaking of poop, where I teach, many of my students are older or at least work, many full-time, alongside being parents. In one instance I asked one of my more outspoken critics in a class whom I knew had two children, "When your daughter was a baby did you change her diapers?" He of course says yes. I ask him why.

He tells me, "Because I love her, and it is my job to make sure she is healthy and happy and taken care of." "So not for profit or self-interest then? For love? How ridiculous. Where is the profit in that?"³⁸

IV. 'It' Looks Good on Paper

Dispensing with the myth of phony Marxist "states," and distortions of human nature clears the way for students to read Marx on his own terms, just as one ought to read any political philosopher.³⁹ Many begin to appreciate that capitalism might not be the unmitigated good they had been otherwise led to believe, and that perhaps some of Marx' criticisms remain warranted. Potentially, the denizens of capitalism are largely alienated in a system where they have no control over their own labor, and nothing left to sell but their bodies. Exploitation is not the exceptional condition of some sweatshop in a remote developing nation. Rather, exploitation is the norm, no matter how luxurious the vestments in which it is garbed.

Still, there is usually one prejudice that normally remains. This one usually arrives in the form that, despite his insistence that he was putting socialism on a scientific basis, Marx was naïve, idealist, and ultimately utopian. "It looks good on paper," they say, "but it would never work in the real world." This objection, which may overlap in some ways, is different than the idea that human nature precludes the possibility of communism. Rather, the presumption here is that the mechanics of reality itself simply do not permit a mutually beneficial society based on collectivity and cooperation, or, as Marx states, "from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs."⁴⁰ Put more crudely, our undergraduate students are often convinced of the idea that someone always has to get screwed. Even more to the point, someone has to get screwed, and better you than me. This unfortunate fact, they contend, is not merely an idiosyncrasy of capitalism, but all possible politics.

In Miami, a city with enormous disparities in wealth, where the gaudy opulence and ostentatiousness of South Beach is mere minutes from the abject poverty and crime of Liberty City, the supposedly immutable rule of kill or be killed is on vivid display. The Miami area is

³⁸ I spoke to this student after class quite often, and on this occasion I thanked him for his thoughtful participation and contribution because I thought many of his peers got something very important from it. Closing down the avenues of dialogue for anyone but the most heinous racists or sexists (and even then pointing out the regressive nature of their views can be productive for others who hold the politically correct versions of them) is often the worst thing we can do. When discussing Marx especially, allowing students of the most fundamentally misguided views space to present their supposedly well-reasoned arguments and simply questioning them (or even allowing their peers to question them) can be exceptionally fruitful.

³⁹ Well, maybe not Hitler.

⁴⁰ Marx 1938, 10

home to fantastically wealthy individuals, banks, and major corporations. Yet, in sprawling slums like Overtown and Opa Locka, others “live on as little as \$11 a day.”⁴¹ According to a report by the United States Census Bureau, Miami-Dade County had the second highest level of income inequality in the country.⁴² In an environment so patently unfair, reeking as it does of staggering poverty, it becomes understandable why so many students see the wholly artificial, and remediable, problem of inequality as inevitable. For them, all societies must be this way to one degree or another, and a Marxist society, well intentioned as it may be, is naïve in defying this basic principle of reality. It simply would not work.

Sean Walsh: My approach for addressing this prejudice has been twofold. First, I pose a question, asking, “You have told me that ‘it’ would not work. What is this ‘it’ to which you are referring?” The response is usually an incredulous, “Marxist society (duh).” “Fine,” I will state, “but what is that? What is this ‘it’? How does ‘it’ work? How are things arranged? How do decisions get made? How does production occur? What kind of mechanism is there for order?” Now, after a few minutes the students realize they do not know, and the reason for that, I explain, is because Marx *never tells us*. He provides abstract principles for the communist society that arises after the revolution. It is clearly democratic, but the concrete details concerning what that means and how that will work are conspicuously absent. It is mutually beneficial insofar as “the free development of each is the free development of all”, but how that actually transpires is nebulous.⁴³ In fact, Marx does not explain how a communist society would actually work. He could not do so for two reasons. First, as a product of the capitalist mode of production and, as Lenin said, a member of the bourgeoisie, he was in no position to imagine the specifics of a genuinely communist society.⁴⁴ To do so would merely draw from the imagination provided by the capitalist mode of production. Secondly, given his commitment to democracy, it simply was not up to him to decide for all of us what that society should look like. It remains up to those who will inherit that world. It is, therefore, impossible to say “it looks good on paper, but would never work,” because it is *not on paper*, so we cannot possibly assess whether or not it would work. There is no ‘it.’⁴⁵ In effect, what I want to convey to the students is that Marx does not really write about communism. The overwhelming majority of his work is actually about capitalism, which is probably why Fredric Jameson refers to Marxism as “the science of capitalism.”⁴⁶

Secondly, the idea that “it” would not work also hinges on the concept of what works. While some are indifferent, many of the Miami students already recognize the inhumanity of conditions in their city. Judging by the rather obvious state of inequality, I ask, “Does capitalism work, if, by work, we mean providing for human needs? We are told that hard work ought to be rewarded. Is a single mother working three jobs at minimum wage not working? Is she, in all likelihood, not working harder than the CEO of a major corporation, yet earning only an infinitesimally small fraction of his earnings?” Oftentimes, our students realize that the moral

⁴¹ Olorunnipa 2014

⁴² Bee 2012. Only the greater New York area was higher.

⁴³ Marx and Engels 1985, 105

⁴⁴ Lenin 1987, 74

⁴⁵ Readers of Marx may note his commentary from “Critique of the Gotha Program,” in which he provides certain details of a post-revolutionary society. While his views here are sometimes mistaken for concrete details of communism, they belong only to a transitional phase. As Marx says, an intermediary phase would appear between capitalist society and “a higher phase of communism” (Marx 1938, 10).

⁴⁶ Jameson 1996

foundations they arrived with are incompatible with the exploitative and unjust nature of capitalism, and better fit, if not the absent specifics, the egalitarian principles of Marxism.

Bryant Sculos: After I take my students through what little Marx actually says about communism, I bring the discussion back to what Marx should be must more well-known for, namely his exposition and critique of capitalism. I ask my students, “Though we have just looked at how Marx doesn’t actually say very much beyond guiding principles for communism: non-exploitation, democratically organized labor, collective ownership of the means of production, and an egalitarianism based on need and ability, if we are intent of applying the logic of ‘It looks good on paper, but’ consistently we should look at capitalism in the very same way.”

There is nothing wrong with the logic of criticizing a theory for being problematic when practiced, so long as there is actually a theory there to point to and the applications that were supposedly attempted actually mirror that theory. Capitalism is a much better example than Marxism in this case.⁴⁷

I ask them, “What are the principles of capitalism?” Profit. Supply and demand. Market-determined prices. Wage labor. Freedom (or free enterprise). These are the ideas my students come up with, though I am quick to point out that Marx’s definition would only include wage labor and profit as they relate to surplus-value and commodification of labor.⁴⁸ “Now, if you were to read Ludwig von Mises, F.A. Hayek, Milton Friedman, or even Steve Forbes, some of the foremost capitalist thinkers, you would find many if not all of these things mentioned. Western governments over the past 150 years have been attempting to implement these principles into policy in various ways. “So are people free in this country?” I ask. One student responds, “No, but that is because the government over-taxes and over-regulates our lives—specifically when it comes to financial stuff.” Gold star for the future Fox News correspondent.

I immediately point out where we are: a public-university, deeply subsidized by taxes. They often complain about tuition, and rightfully so, but if we look at private universities, their tuition is significantly higher on average. I go back to the concept of free enterprise. “Let’s look at free enterprise. What is the first rule of investment that you may learn in an introductory course (and something my grandparents have taught from a way too young age)? ‘You need money to make money’. So then free enterprise can be very expensive, or impossible if you are poor. How is it free? How are we all free if we all aren’t free to even participate in one of the basic aspects of the system according to these thinkers? So then someone else, tell me how we are free? This ideal of capitalism, freedom. Where do we see it?”

A different student steps up, “We are mostly free, yes. We can choose the career we want. We can choose not to work if we don’t want. No one is forcing you to shop or invest or work.” While this point is superficially true, I respond, “Is that really all we mean by freedom though? It is certainly not what Marx meant. Don’t tell me all the people who work three full-time jobs would actively choose that life. Look at me, I love my job teaching, and as hard as I do work, I also had the benefit of a great public school education, which got me a near-full scholarship to a fairly prestigious private university, which then got me a paid position in the PhD program here. At the same time as I had all that opportunity and good luck, I still can’t play

⁴⁷ Though there are certainly Left critics like Noam Chomsky who have long-suggested that true capitalism has never really existed either.

⁴⁸ Marx 1991, 297. Specifically, Marx states, “All that matters in any sphere of production is to produce surplus-value, to appropriate a definite quantity of unpaid labor in labor’s product.”

in the NBA. Not only am I 5'5" and slower than a dried out snail, but I was also never taught how to play. Can I just go up to the Miami Heat and say 'Okay I don't really know what this sport is but I am positive I will be terrible at it, I'm on the Heat now'? So I can choose to not work or work an unspecified job that no one is under any obligation to provide for me *even if I am qualified*, and so there's a good chance I'll be sporadically unemployed or work jobs there is a likely chance I'll hate? If that's freedom, I'll take the opposite thanks." We all laugh.

"No of course not. I am very restricted in terms of how I am allowed to labor, and now imagine a world where most people have far less opportunity and luck than I did. Say, the world we currently live in perhaps. This is all completely consistent with the principles of capitalism, but are we comfortable calling this freedom? Look at how many people hate their jobs. Even if you are one of the lucky few that doesn't hate their job, is it your dream job? Would you do it if you won the lottery? If you wouldn't keep doing your job if you didn't need the paycheck, how can you say that you are free? You work to make money to survive and live a moderately enjoyable life, or provide a better one for your kids."

The broader point I am trying to make to these student is to be fair in their criticisms (that is, to not make up things and say 'Oh yeah, Marx said this'), but to also be weary of shallow critique (to not think Marxism looks great on paper and then not look and see if perhaps the same argument can be used against the system they agree with). There are theories which are pro-capitalism that look good on paper and suck in practice and there are theories which are pro-capitalism which when we really look at them suck both on paper and in practice. Marx never really put his ideas on paper regarding communism. What he details about capitalism though is pretty horrible, and when we look around we can see much of what he theorized about capitalism looking pretty crappy in practice as well.

V. Conclusion

Although addressing these prejudices can be frustrating, we have found the results rewarding. The discussions and dialogue that follow, more closely pertain to the texts and the criticisms tend to be better informed. We judge the success of these strategies, not by converting students, or having uniform agreement in the classroom, but by having given them something else to think about as they start reading Marx. While we have no wish to offer empirical evidence to support their value, readers can judge for themselves if these strategies, or derivations adapted for specific environments and student populations, merit application in their own classrooms. We have seen them open the minds of students in class who refuse even to make left-turns in traffic. More importantly we think, they become more critical of the ideological nature of capitalism and more sanguine regarding the possibilities of new twenty-first century instantiations of post-capitalist democratic politics without falling into the traps of the failed state capitalism represented in countries like Cuba, China, and the USSR. Our praxis is about dislocating the extant indoctrination with critique, not an alternative doctrine, at least not necessarily. Against the increase in online instruction that is part of the corporatization of the United States University system in recent years, we believe a physical classroom is a crucial space to occupy in order to use the practices discussed here. Being able to deploy various counterexamples in the moment, before a student has a chance to have their counterrevolutionary ideology further entrenched by the various distractions and ideological internet media sources available to an online student which can serve to undermine pedagogical praxis. Pedagogical praxis, like the kind detailed in this essay, is about the critical examination of the prevailing indoctrinating

apparatus of neoliberal capitalism. It is about dislocating this doctrinal hegemony, which seems at every turn trying to dismantle praxeological space by moving more classes online (at often greater cost to the student) or making the instructors' position more precarious by overloading classes, converting permanent positions to temporary, or tenured to non-tenured. However, capitalism cannot escape its own contradictions, or at least it has yet to do so, and thus this praxeological opportunity—and demand—remains.

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