

Debasing the Superstructure

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Abstract:

In orthodox Marxism, the base-superstructure distinction was understood as a means to demonstrate that material reproduction was the primary causal and moral driver of social transformation. This orthodox conception has been supplemented by more nuanced accounts, and also criticised for neglecting non-material aspects of social reproduction. Existing critiques, however, overlook the possibility that Marx's primary concern was not to define the relationship between material and ideal dimensions of social life, but to *debase* a superstructure of academic theory that understands itself as a "voice from nowhere", operating outside the social practices it analyses. In this paper, I show how Marx recurrently *debases* academic theory by demonstrating how it relies on forms of subjectivity generated in everyday social practice. He thereby provides a subtle, practice-theoretic, account of the mutual implicatedness of theory and practice that is compatible with recent theories of embodied cognition, and suggests productive directions for contemporary social theory.

I - Introduction

The base-superstructure distinction offers a well-trodden – and, today, largely deprecated – path for relating economic transformations to changes in culture. The distinction, closely associated with orthodox Marxist theory, is most commonly understood to refer to a dichotomy between material and ideal dimensions of social life. The material pole of the dichotomy, in which the forces of production (science, technology, and the working classes) reside – is regarded as more foundational and causally efficacious than the ideal pole, to which class relations, legal and political institutions, and cultural systems are relegated. Changes in the material pole are accorded both causal and moral primacy – transformations in that sphere are understood as progressive and emancipatory, while the institutions of the ideal pole are positioned as regressive impediments to the emergence of a more emancipated society (Kautsky 1909; Trotsky 1923; Cohen 1978).

This orthodox account has been critically extended by more recent forms of Marxist theory, which present various models for the relative autonomy and mutual implicatedness of material and ideal dimensions of social life (Gramsci 1971; Althusser 1971; Poulantzas 1973; Hall 1976). In more recent forms of social theory, inversions of the base-superstructure dichotomy have become common. One variant accepts the basic narrative that transformations in material reproduction drive transformations in culture – but then views these transformations as driving in oppressive, rather than emancipatory, directions (Horkheimer and Adorno: 27-34). Another asserts that cultural reproduction is the driving progressive force whose emancipatory potentials are held back by the current organisation of material reproduction (Habermas 1989: 113-197, 332-373). A more fundamental line of critique asks whether the base-superstructure distinction can be sustained in any actual empirical examination of existing social practice, and argues that social reality cannot plausibly be carved up into distinct material and ideal variables: economic and cultural dimensions of social life are intrinsically intertwined “all the way down” (Fraser 1990; Honneth 1996).

All along, however, there has been an alternative tradition that has understood the base-superstructure distinction, not in terms of different spheres of social life, but as a way of

expressing the mutual implicatedness of forms of everyday practice and forms of subjectivity – including the most apparently abstracted and rarefied forms of subjectivity expressed in high culture and art (Williams 1991). This tradition relies on a small number of relatively explicit metatheoretical statements across Marx's corpus. This approach has not succeeded, however, in reconciling its interpretation of Marx's method, with what often seem to be straightforward references to a dichotomy between material and ideal dimensions of social life in Marx's work.

In previous work, I have carried out a detailed textual analysis of *Capital* and other works that resolves the apparent tension and, along the way, provides a strong evidentiary basis for the non-economistic interpretation of the base-superstructure distinction (Pepperell 2009; 2010; 2011a; 2011b). In this paper, I explore some of the implications of that work by examining Marx's recurrent preoccupation with mocking forms of analysis that treat themselves as somehow directly expressive of the free self-development of thought, unconstrained by social factors (cf. Hegel 1969: 31).

I argue that the base-superstructure distinction needs to be seen as an expression of this preoccupation. Viewed in this light, the base-superstructure distinction is intended to *debase* a puffed up superstructure of high culture that views itself as floating freely above the mundane social context in which lesser forms of human activity are understood to be embedded. Marx seeks to bring these self-elevating forms of thought back down to earth, by demonstrating how they, too, express forms of subjectivity that have been primed by the mundane social practices from which they seek to distinguish themselves. The underlying metatheory offers fresh possibilities for how contemporary social theory can explore the relationship of theory and practice – and suggests new theoretical resources for understanding the complex mix of emancipatory and oppressive potentials in the social practice of our own time.

II - Debasing Theory

Throughout his career - from his earliest sketches to the fully developed theory in *Capital* - Marx repeats the same basic analytic move: he debases high academic theory that regards

itself as timeless and universal, by relentlessly drawing attention to its formal similarity to forms of subjectivity required to engage in mundane social practices that are patently socially and historically specific. While the complexity of Marx's analysis increases greatly as his work develops, this specific critical move is preserved. But why?

One major motivation, I suggest, is that this form of critique enables Marx to transcend *debunking* forms of critique, which seek to strip away ideology to reveal a purportedly real phenomenon lurking underneath, but which, in the process, must discard the debunked positions. Instead, he substitutes a *debasing* critique, in which the universalising *pretensions* of high theory are deflated, but the theoretical claims can still be preserved and appropriated to make sense of some specific and limited aspect of social practice. In this way, high theory can be shown to be *socially valid* - but in a limited, qualified manner that is obscured by universalising abstractions. Marx's critique thus operates by demonstrating, not how competing positions are *wrong*, but how they are *right* - and, in particular, by showing that competing theoretical claims can often only be defended by means the theorists themselves would regard as perverse and debased.

Schematically, Marx's approach takes the following form. *First*, he ventriloquises a puffed up form of theory - writing in the voice of the theory, as if it were his own. *Second*, he describes a set of everyday social practices that rely on forms of subjectivity that formally resemble the forms of subjectivity expressed by the theory being criticised. *Third*, he suggests - very crassly in his early work, but increasingly subtly across his career - that the theory is primed by and expressive of those everyday practices, and is therefore valid as an explicitation of the logic of those practices. Even though the theory has been demonstrated to have this bounded validity, the theorists are still made to look foolish for their unreflexive pretentiousness. They are exposed for dressing up the humble garb of everyday life in academic finery, and mocked for posing as profound original thinkers with world historical insights, when their categories can be shown to channel forms of subjectivity enacted on every street corner. The trap for readers lies in the first step: if Marx is not recognised to be sending up forms of theory he intends to criticise, the reader can easily mistake him to be endorsing the very positions he lampoons. This precise misunderstanding has heavily distorted Marx's reception, to the point that he is

now primarily “known” for precisely the positions he was attempting to ridicule.

I have provided more comprehensive textual support for this interpretation elsewhere (Pepperell 2009; 2010; 2011a; 2011b). Here, I briefly illustrate how this strategy operates by examining key passages from *The German Ideology*, the *Grundrisse*, and the first volume of *Capital*, and then highlight some of the implications for contemporary social theory.

III - The German Ideology

The German Ideology illustrates this approach in a very short span of text, and therefore serves as a good introductory point for identifying each of the steps, which can be obscured by the length and scope of later texts. The work opens with the famous lines:

Hitherto men have always formed wrong ideas about themselves, about what they are and what they ought to be. They have arranged their relations according to their ideas of God, of normal man, etc. The products of their brains have got out of their hands. They, the creators, have bowed down before their creations. Let us liberate them from the chimeras, the ideas, dogmas, imaginary beings under the yoke of which they are pining away. Let us revolt against this rule of concepts (Engels and Marx 1976: 23).

The sarcastic character of these opening sentences is not overtly declared – a tone-deaf reader might mistake them for the text’s own manifesto. Marx and Engels soon clarify, however, that the position just outlined is the target of their critique:

These innocent and childlike fancies are the kernel of the modern Young-Hegelian philosophy, which not only is received by the German public with horror and awe, but is announced by our *philosophic heroes* with the solemn consciousness of its world-shattering danger and criminal ruthlessness (1976: 23).

The text then explicitly declares that its aim is to show how this philosophy expresses “real conditions”, while puffing itself up into something that appears much more grandiose:

The first volume of the present publication has the aim of unclanking these sheep, who take themselves and are taken for wolves; of showing that their bleating merely imitates in a philosophic form the conceptions of the German middle class; that the boasting of these philosophic commentators only mirrors the wretchedness of the real conditions in Germany. It is its aim to ridicule and discredit the philosophic struggle with the shadows of reality, which appeals to the dreamy and muddled German nation (1976: 23-4).

The text goes on to equate the Young Hegelian perspective with a fairy tale, and accuse the Young Hegelians of engaging in a self-aggrandising fantasy. The “new revolutionary philosopher” tilts at the windmill of false consciousness, believing that, if only the right battles be fought at the level of concepts, freedom will follow. Without the idea of gravity, no one will drown. Evidence of material harm becomes more grist for the idealist mill – more proof of the harmful nature of the ideal, rather than a practical reminder of the material character of the problem to be solved (1976: 24).

In the next section, the text illustrates how the great revolution in the realm of pure thought shares remarkable formal similarities with happenings in the German market:

The industrialists of philosophy, who till then had lived on the exploitation of the absolute spirit, now seized upon the new combinations. Each with all possible zeal set about retailing his apportioned share. This was bound to give rise to competition, which, to start with, was carried on in moderately civil and staid fashion. Later, when the German market was glutted, and the commodity in spite of all efforts was not favourably received in the world market, the business was spoiled in the usual German manner by cheap and spurious production, deterioration in quality, adulteration of the raw materials, falsification of labels,

fictitious purchases, bill-jobbing and a credit system devoid of any real basis.

The competition turned into a bitter struggle, which is now being extolled and interpreted to us as an upheaval of world significance, the begetter of the most prodigious results and achievements (1976: 27-8).

The sensibilities expressed in the great philosophical revolution, in other words, are also being generated, over and over again, in the much more mundane realm of competition between industrial capitalists. This prosaic struggle, playing out beneath the lofty heights of philosophy, is nevertheless generative of sensibilities that are formally similar to those the philosophers themselves wield – but which the philosophers take to be the results of the free and unconstrained movement of thought unbounded by social constraints.

IV - The *Grundrisse*

The German Ideology presents this analytic strategy in its crassest form. In the *Grundrisse*, Marx puts these same tools to work in a more sophisticated way.

In the introduction, Marx considers the great difficulty with which Adam Smith managed to articulate the simple category of labour – a category that, Marx argues, is on one level extremely old (it is genuinely true that people have always “laboured”, so the category picks out a phenomenon that transcends many different forms of social life). On another level, however, Marx points out that those other forms of social life themselves lacked this category, as an explicit articulation – and that it was by no means an easy category even for Adam Smith to articulate (Marx 1973: 24).

One interpretive option would be to conclude that Adam Smith – genius that he was – finally discovered a phenomenon that had always already existed, but had previously never been recognised. On this interpretation, Smith would have deduced through the sheer brute force of reason that, logically speaking, all forms of human intercourse with nature were, in their essential being, the same form of activity – a form of activity which he then christened

with the term "labour".

Marx is not happy with this option. He suggests instead that Smith's genius lies in his sensitivity to the implications of a very recent historical shift – a shift that meant that, in at least one dimension of practical experience, all manner of activities involving intercourse between humans and nature are being treated indifferently as the same sort of activity. It is this practical enactment, for Marx, that renders plausible and potentially intuitive the development of the simple category of labour *per se*. While the category seems so abstract that it applies to all human societies, its practical abstraction, Marx insists, is directly true, as a practical matter, only for us (Cf. Sohn-Rethel 1978; Toscano 2008):

[T]his abstraction of labour as such is not merely the mental product of a concrete totality of labours. Indifference towards specific labours corresponds to a form of society in which individuals can with ease transfer from one labour to another, and where the specific kind is a matter of chance for them, hence of indifference. Not only the category, labour, but labour in reality has here become the means of creating wealth in general, and has ceased to be organically linked with particular individuals in any specific form.... The simplest abstraction, then, which modern economics places at the head of its discussions, and which expresses an immeasurably old ancient relation valid in all forms of society, nevertheless achieves practical truth as an abstraction only as a category of the most modern society. [...] (Marx 1973: 104-5.)

Marx argues here that categories that appear at first glance to be socially transcendent and historically general, can be reinterpreted as categories that are fully valid only for capitalist societies:

The example of labour shows strikingly how even the most abstract categories, despite their validity - precisely because of their abstractness - for all epochs, are nevertheless, in the specific character of this abstraction, themselves likewise a product of historic relations, and possess their full validity only for and

within these relations (Marx 1973: 105).

In this passage, Marx applies the same basic critical approach wielded in *The German Ideology* – but here in a manner that makes clearer how it is possible to preserve and validate the insights of competing forms of theory, even while rejecting their pretensions to universalism. Marx does not argue that the simple category of “labour” is invalid. Instead, he bounds this validity to one historical period, by picking out the practices that have rendered the category valid for a specific moment in time.

V - Capital

As I have demonstrated elsewhere (Pepperell 2009; 2010; 2011a; 2011b), in *Capital*, the same critical strategy is deployed, but is much more difficult to recognise, as the steps in Marx’s debasing critique can be separated from one another by hundreds of pages. Across the text as a whole, however, the basic strategy remains intact: Marx ventriloquises a range of contradictory political-economic views - in chapter 1, for example, he stages a play of competing voices, each of whom has a different interpretation of the wealth of capitalist society. Marx does not endorse any of these positions and, indeed, tonally attentive readers have noticed that the text sounds “double voiced” and sarcastic, without being able to explain what theoretical purpose the sarcasm serves (LaCapra 1983; When 2007; Sutherland 2008). The sarcasm flags that Marx is offering these positions up for ridicule, preparing for their debasement by revealing the much more bounded and restricted sense in which they can be said to be valid within capitalist societies.

Marx tips his hand at various points - including a much-misunderstood passage at the opening of the second chapter, where he notes:

As we proceed to develop our investigation, we shall find, in general, that the characters who appear on the economic stage are merely personifications of economic relations; it is as the bearers of these economic relations that they come into contact with each

other (Marx 1990: 179).

This passage is generally read as a universal ontological claim - and therefore understood as an endorsement of a crass base/superstructure framework, in which other aspects of social life are mere epiphenomena of the economic base. Marx is speaking here, however, about his presentational strategy, stating explicitly that his critique relies on ventriloquising competing theories - the actors on his presentational stage - in order to debase their universalising self-understanding and show that, far from universal discoveries of the essence of material reproduction as such, they express sensibilities incubated in contingent, narrowly bounded dimensions of capitalist societies.

Marx's "base" is therefore not simply economic in character, and the relation of the base to the superstructure is not simplistically causal. There is not one single base, but hundreds, generated through a vast array of different social practices on the ground. New forms of subjectivity are part and parcel of shifts at the level of mundane practices - and theorists can potentially help to explicitate these new-found practical insights, so that they become easier to appropriate as a basis for conscious social transformation. This explicitation, however, relies on theorists' ability to situate their insights, reflexively, within the broad base of practical life in which new forms of perception and thought are incubated.

Behind Marx's complex presentational strategy lies a method that rejects the premises of economic determinism. Marx does not think we are driven helplessly by all-powerful economic forces. He thinks we are *actors* - we act; we *do*. And when we act, we *think*. And through our thoughts and actions, we create possibilities. Sometimes implicit possibilities, and often contradictory ones, whose combined effects we do not think through prior to acting. By explicitating these possibilities, we can - just possibly - render them accessible for conscious appropriation in the service of future forms of collective life. The danger of universalising forms of thought is that they abridge this process of explicitation and obscure the practical innovation and creativity that bring forth new possibilities. By debasing the superstructure, Marx aims to open up the power of socially grounded theoretical insight, in the service of emancipatory social transformation.

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