

Resolving the Welfare State Crisis

Advanced capitalist economies are without exception functional compromises, annealed in heated conflict between labor movements and representatives of capital. The provision of a welfare state depends crucially on the result of these negotiations, and in recent decades an uneasy equilibrium has been reached between the needs of citizens and the macroeconomic stability required by firms. This equilibrium is periodically punctuated by financial crises. The most recent, beginning in 2007, was triggered by the collapse of a housing bubble which had formed on the basis of reckless mortgage lending. Foremost among the causes of this crisis were a steep rise in subprime mortgage lending and a dramatic increase in housing speculation by wealthy investors (FCIC 2011).

The 2007-2009 crisis was the direct result of subtle transformations that occurred in the world economy between 1980 and 2007. Most notably, a dramatic increase in wealth inequality created a large class of people with the capacity to own second, third and fourth homes, and a dramatic decrease in regulation of business practices enabled the securitization of large blocks of questionable mortgage loans, backed (in the United States) by the implicit guarantee of the Federal Deposit Insurance Commission (FDIC). The crisis was alleviated through a trillion-dollar government program of printing money to buy Treasury bonds (“quantitative easing”). While this program provided the macroeconomic stability sought by businesses, it did nothing to ease the hardship suffered by the millions of crisis-stricken workers who lost their jobs. In the United States, crisis response was thoroughly bipartisan, and an elite consensus that the financial sector ought to be protected at all costs was never seriously questioned, despite the allegedly left-wing bona fides of the existing congressional majority and the election in 2008 of a president thought to be a break with his party’s corporatist recent past.

These events raise serious questions that contemporary political discourse has utterly failed to address. Why was the state so much more responsive to the needs of its wealthiest citizens? Why was

the reckless behavior that precipitated the crisis permitted in the first place and not punished when it was revealed? And what does such a crisis indicate about the state of the uneasy class compromise that has given us the modern welfare state? The political science literature has made sporadic attempts to understand these problems, but a dearth of historical and philosophical context has undermined the perspicacity of these accounts. While research has found that elite policy preferences drive policy priorities (Page et al. 2013), this finding is unable to explain the large concessions made to labor movements within living memory. For a unified understanding of the practical and philosophical origins of the crisis and how it might be resolved, we must turn to political theory. In this essay, I will propose a dialectical theory of the welfare state as the outcome of a process of sublation (*aufhebung*), combining the thesis presented by capitalism with the antithesis presented by communism (as understood by Marx). I will then suggest that the financial crisis of 2007-09 reveals shortcomings in the welfare state thesis, which will in turn lead to the emergence of a new antithesis.¹

Hegel's philosophy of history places great stress on oppositional antitheses ("antinomies"). His notion of the dialectic was a departure from its classical antecedents, emphasizing the immanence of the process as well as its teleological progression. For Hegel, this immanent teleology is expressed in history by the actions of *geist* coming to know itself more completely – "the concept develops itself out of itself" (Hegel p.31). In an example of this process in action, Hegel declares that family (thesis) is in dialectic with civil society (antithesis), which eventually yields the state, a sublation (*aufhebung*) of both that progresses teleologically towards something higher and better. Marx drew on

¹ Consider two additional points. First, the possibility of even a modest transition to socialism was precluded in the United States by political factors, including adoption of capitalism as a sort of nationalist ideology. This information was taken into account by "capitalists," who consequently increased their reservation value in view of opposition weakness. The threat of (socialist) revolution was simply not credible after 1950, and the ensuing evisceration of the working class may simply reflect their evaporated bargaining power. Second, capitalists now possess an exit option—the option to go negotiate with another nation's proletariat if their own has become insufferably truculent—either by bringing foreign workers to the factory (immigration) or sending the factory to a foreign country (outsourcing).

Feuerbach's claim that mankind had made god in its own image to replace Hegel's *geist* with man himself.

Marx famously was to "turn Hegel on his head" and restore man to an active subject in history (Capital, Vol. 1).² For Marx, only the actual is real, and by elevating *geist* Hegel is veiling the real and legitimating the apparent reality. Inverting Hegel's logic, Marx wrote that "Hegel proceeds from the state and makes man into the subjectified state; democracy starts with man and makes the state objectified man...just as it is not religion that creates man but man who creates religion, so it is not the constitution that creates the people but the people which creates the constitution." (Philosophy of Right p.30). Marx attributes to man the characteristics Hegel attributes to *geist*. Arguing that man's fullest existence is achieved under democracy, Marx calls this way of life "human existence" while other forms of government yield only "legal existence" because only in democracy do the laws and institutions exist for the sake of the people (ibid.). Social being determines consciousness.

On Marx's account, we begin with the social needs that make us distinctly human. These capacities involve us in dialectic, and this regular intercourse with others generates a need for recognition. However, when classes develop we lose our species-being, because we are no longer able to think and act in a community nor are we able to share a type with our fellow men (On the Jewish Question, p.35). In addition, introducing a division of labor will increase the focus on our natural inequality because natural variations in skill will become more profitable. This will frustrate our impulse towards community and identification with others, and will foster alienation. Man will thus become estranged from the product of his labor, and this alienation will reach its greatest extent under capitalism. Marx calls the bourgeoisie a "noble class" because they will force a reexamination of

² "The mystification which dialectic suffers in Hegel's hands, by no means prevents him from being the first to present its general form of working in a comprehensive and conscious manner. With him it is standing on its head. It must be turned right side up again, if you would discover the rational kernel within the mystical shell." (Marx, Capital, Vol. 1 – 1873 Afterword to the Second German Edition).

preexisting social modes of intercourse, which will allow the dialectic to proceed (Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts pp. 101-103).

Marx advocated what he called a “materialist conception” of history (History of His Opinions, p.6). He writes that the material ruling class is necessarily also the intellectual ruling class, and the ideas of the ruling class are internalized by all despite not necessarily being in the best interests of all parts of society. Indeed, the ideology of the ruling class will even be adopted by the rest of society when it directly contradicts their material interests (German Ideology p.160). The forces and relations of production that together comprise society’s base change over time, and this historical development eventually gives rise to a new ruling class, which propagates its ideology (superstructure) in universalist terms, mystifying the economic relations of society and generating false consciousness in the working class (German Ideology pp.174-5).³ As Marx puts it, “[t]he mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life” (History of His Opinions p.5). Marx predicts that this system will persist as long as society is organized around a ruling class.

The secular state, on Marx’s view, represents a form of political emancipation but not human emancipation, and this political emancipation in some senses *prevents* human emancipation, because the liberal rights conferred by political emancipation serve to separate us from our fellow man (On the Jewish Question, pp.30-31). Marx argues that this political emancipation is a stage that must be transcended before human emancipation can become possible. Although Marx never fully defines human emancipation, it seems to consist in non-alienated labor. Marx depicts the alienated⁴ individual as “a plaything of alien powers,” (On the Jewish Question, p.34) which are in some sense self-

³ “Morality, religion, metaphysics, all the rest of ideology and their corresponding forms of consciousness no longer retain the semblance of independence; they have no history and no development; but men, developing their material production and their material intercourse, alter, along with their real existence, their thinking and the products of their collective thinking.” (Marx, German Ideology p. 154).

⁴ Marx discerns four kinds of alienation: from the product itself, from the productive process, from the species-being, and from other human beings (Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts pp. 74-76).

imposed by the collective, but which take on objective force in individual lives (Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts p.69). This alienation can only be transcended via a revolution against private property (ibid.).

For Marx, religion is a response to alienation in material life, because our communal essence is frustrated by alienated labor (Philosophy of Right p.132). Religious sentiment is a fundamentally social product generated by a particular form of society (Theses on Feuerbach #7). However, the community provided by religion is inauthentic, leading to Marx's famous characterization of religion as "the opium of the people" (Philosophy of Right p.131). After the Reformation undermined the community-generating role of religion, the state filled the void by offering illusory participation in a community of citizens. Religious self-alienation will be overcome when the religious world is "resolved into its secular basis" (Theses on Feuerbach #4). Marx proposes that instead of achieving false community through religion, we ought to achieve genuine community by acknowledging our communal existence in our institutions (Philosophy of Right pp. 66-67). As man comes to recognize himself as self-created, man "attains his majority," and sees that he is the product of his own activities, meaning that "man is the highest being for man" and he no longer needs to posit an external creator (Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts p. 65).

In addition, Marx attempted a synthesis of materialism and idealism, writing that while people do indeed shape the world around them they do this not through idealization but through practical activity (Theses on Feuerbach #1). The bourgeoisie, on Marx's reading, cannot exist without "constantly revolutionizing the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society." Marx finds the notion of the bourgeoisie as a "revolutionary" class salutary because the revolutionary bourgeoisie will penetrate false consciousness and ideology: "[a]ll that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life and his relations with his kind"

(Manifesto p.476). This is why Marx found the capitalist phase of development both necessary and desirable – it will inevitably hasten reform of the relations of production.

Embracing Locke's labor theory of value, Marx argued that labor is the sole common denominator by which different goods can be compared (Capital Vol. 1). On this account, surplus value is the source of all profit and it is obtained by exploitation. As surplus value increases, exploitation increases in tandem. The amount of surplus value that can be extracted is said to fall over time, and this falling rate of profit is supposed to lead to the downfall of capitalism.⁵ Labor (variable capital) can produce surplus value, but all other forms of capital (constant capital) cannot. The commodities produced by this labor conceal the social relationships that led to their production, resulting in a tendency to perceive production relationships as between factors of production rather than people, which Marx labels "commodity fetishism" (Capital, Vol. 1 pp. 319-320). The labor theory of value is problematic and has been attacked from many sides (e.g. Robinson 1942), but Marx's insistence on divergent interests between classes and the absence of any long-run equilibrium are both prescient ideas that motivate my analysis here.

What would Marx make of the welfare state and the 2007-09 financial crisis and its aftermath? He would likely observe that the welfare state fails to properly objectify man, in the sense that it serves the interests of only a portion of the community. While acknowledging the outward forms of democracy, Marx would probably deny that the welfare state constitutes true human existence because the laws and institutions exist not for the sake of the people but for the sake of the protection of property. He would see the early 21st century as the apogee of alienation, and he would view skeptically the ever-increasing specialization and division of labor prevalent in modern welfare states. Thinking and acting as a community and sharing a type with our fellow men are precluded by

⁵ For criticism of this view, compare Sweezy, Paul (1946). "The Theory of Capitalist Development".

specialization and inequality. Marx might wonder, however, why the prophesied reexamination of social modes of intercourse had not yet occurred.

It seems clear that the ideas of the present ruling class have been internalized throughout society. Scarcely anyone questions private property and the sanctity of contract, even when this ideology contradicts their material interests. This “false consciousness” does not look so different from the false consciousness in Marx’s contemporary proletariat. It also seems clear that the liberal rights conferred by political emancipation have indeed driven us apart from one another (Putnam 1995). We have proven unable to transcend political emancipation and achieve human emancipation, and people still very much feel that their lives are shaped by objective, impersonal forces. One development Marx did not anticipate was the capacity of science to undermine religious belief. In a sense, the religious world has indeed been “resolved into its secular basis” (Theses on Feuerbach #4), but religion as a response to alienation in material life continues under other ostensibly non-religious guises.⁶ Our communal existence is acknowledged in our institutions to a greater extent than in Marx’s era, but we do not yet appear to have achieved “our majority” despite having “escaped” from an external creator. Commodity fetishism is, if anything, much more extreme than in Marx’s time.

It seems to me that Marx and Hegel both erred by concluding that dialectic is teleological. While there are strong tendencies towards progress in human affairs, these tendencies are not absolute and mask considerable periods of retrogression. I think that the dialectical process can be better modeled as a process of intellectual evolution, or what John Stuart Mill might have called the “marketplace of ideas” (Mill 1859). We might expect intellectual evolution to address and solve present challenges, but in parallel with biological evolution, increased complexity will inevitably raise new challenges. Looked at this way, we can see that the sublation (*aufhebung*) of communism

⁶ Speculation as to the content of this compensatory quasi-religious belief is beyond the scope of this essay, but consider the parallels between, say, the environmental movement and the early Christian church.

and capitalism into the welfare state addressed immediate needs. Society had collectively discovered a marvelous new mechanism for wealth creation that would sweep away all preexisting relationships, but that mechanism (capitalism) suffered from serious enough drawbacks that the portion of society which Marx labels the proletariat were willing to forgo its benefits unless concessions were made to redress the imbalance. This compromise is the work of the labor movement.

Later Marxian writers were interested to explain why the working classes failed to behave as Marx had predicted they would. Antonio Gramsci deepened Marx's notion of cultural hegemony by articulating the role of intellectuals in both transmitting and resisting imposed cultural hegemony.⁷ Asserting that capitalism rules through force plus consent, Gramsci suggested that capitalism maintains control of the working classes via ideological rather than physical coercion (Gramsci p.263). For Gramsci, the lower classes consent to the hegemony of the upper classes, accepting the resulting false consciousness. This process can be mitigated by "organic" intellectuals. (Gramsci p.169). Traditional intellectuals support the dominant social structure, while organic intellectuals are drawn from the working classes and are revolutionary because they arise out of the experience of practice (*praxis*). This *praxis* includes the process of organizing other workers, and organic intellectuals demystify the dominant economic and cultural hegemony for the workers in the process. The "modern prince" or vanguard party forms a new social order, and is at once the organizer and the active expression of the national popular collective will (Gramsci p.158). Civil society is a superstructure (rather than relations of production within the base). As capitalism advances, overt domination is superseded by tacit (ideological) hegemony by the upper classes. As a result, the revolution's target becomes the superstructure itself, and working classes must build their own dominant culture.

⁷ Gramsci also made an intriguing contribution to dialectic – he asserted that the *aufhebung* that Marxism would perform would be the synthesis of the Protestant Reformation and Renaissance humanism (Gramsci p. 22).

Gramsci's focus on intellectuals as the motive power behind revolution is consonant with the Russian experience in 1917, but it raises an interesting tension with Marx, who insisted that if the proletariat did not create the revolution for themselves, they would not be worthy of receiving it (Philosophy of Right pp.72-73). Lenin's notion of a "vanguard party" (What Is to Be Done pp. 13-15) likewise sits uneasily with the notion of the proletariat as the motive power behind world revolution.⁸ Lenin ignited a debate about the degree of permissible centralization of control in a vanguard party, and Rosa Luxemburg distinguished Lenin's approach sharply from social democracy, writing that "the Social Democratic movement cannot allow the erection of an air-tight partition between the class-conscious nucleus of the proletariat already in the party and its immediate popular environment, the nonparty sections of the proletariat...The working class demands the right to make its mistakes and learn the dialectic of history...Historically the errors committed by a truly revolutionary movement are far more fruitful than the infallibility of the cleverest Central Committee" (Luxemburg pp. 88, 108). Gramsci would side emphatically with Luxemburg, arguing that the vanguard party expresses the popular will rather than simply leading the proletariat by the nose.

Failure of the working classes to create a self-perpetuating "historic bloc"⁹ seems to be related to the failure to form an independent working-class culture. The attempt of the working classes to create a dominant culture can be easily frustrated, both by deliberate action by the upper classes and by the impersonal operation of the market. Conceptual reification of capitalism as the cause of this problem was first proposed by György Lukács, who argued that the proletariat was the true subject of history and that the materialist conception of history (and truth more generally) is only true in relation to the historic mission of the proletariat (History and Class Consciousness p.2). Lukács distinguished Marxism on the basis of its method rather than its dogma (What is Orthodox Marxism p.1), and

⁸ "Class political consciousness can be brought to the workers *only from without*" (What Is to Be Done p.48).

⁹ Gramsci borrows this idea from Georges Sorel (1908).

developed the idea of society as a totality – a set of interrelated elements that can only be understood by reference to their combined operation (History and Class Consciousness p.9). This totality, however, is lost when historical changes render the objective institutions of social life purely conventional. The resulting alienation leads to a situation of “transcendental homelessness” (Theory of the Novel p.40). Lukács rejects positivism, arguing against the concept of subject and object and in favor of the primacy of social relations. He emphasized the reassertion of totality against positivism and subjectivism, writing that “[t]he primacy of the category of totality is the bearer of the principle of revolution in science” (ibid. p.27).

On Lukács’ account, reification of capitalism results from runaway commodity fetishism, which causes the appraisal of things purely for their instrumental value (ibid. p.86). As capitalism develops and alienation deepens, social relations become objectified, and the reification process compounds itself until “there is no natural form in which human relations can be cast, no way in which man can bring his physical and psychic “qualities” into play without their being subjected increasingly to this reifying process” (ibid. p.100). Reification transmutes the purely notional properties of objects into things in themselves, independent, quantifiable features divorced from subjective meaning. This results in atomization and isolation. Ideology is a projection of the class consciousness of the bourgeoisie, and this ideology precludes a true understanding of the proletariat’s own revolutionary role. By combining Simmel’s understanding of modern culture, Weber’s theory of rationalization and the Marxian labor theory of value, Lukács was able to give an account of reification as a social pathology.

Lukács’ discussion of reification provided the founding statement of modern critical theory¹⁰, and was a major inspiration for the Frankfurt School.¹¹ Established by Max Horkheimer and Theodor

¹⁰ Along with notable contributions from Karl Korsch, particularly “Marxism and Philosophy” (1970).

¹¹ As well as Martin Heidegger’s “Being and Time,” though this is disputed.

Adorno, the Frankfurt School's Institute for Social Research brought together a broad community of scholars committed to critical investigation and anti-positivist sociology. One of these, Herbert Marcuse, offered a critique both of advanced capitalism and advanced communism. Marcuse locates a dialectic between positivism and Hegelian idealism, arguing that Marx concretized the dialectic by instantiating it in history (Reason and Revolution pp. 245-6). He presents the concept of "negativity" as a means of transforming or transcending ostensibly "positive" (or objective) reality, calling this "the positive meaning of negativity." Negativity leads via sublation to a genuine advancement – by revealing social contradictions and demanding the overcoming of those contradictions through social change, human beings create themselves and shape their own reality. This permits Marcuse to present Marx's writings as the negation of philosophy itself, or as the replacement of philosophy by social theory. In essence, an object's internal contradictions make possible a multiplicity of interpretations realized only in its negation. Marcuse argues that the central feature of capitalism is a social rather than a property relationship, so an eventual redress of property relations (by collectivization, for instance) would not ameliorate the alienation. He cites Marx as viewing "the abolition of private property entirely as a means for the abolition of alienated labor...not as an end in itself" (ibid. p.282).

Marcuse observed that advanced industrial society generates false needs, which integrate people into existing systems of production and consumption through such mechanisms as advertising and mass media (One-Dimensional Man, p.7). The resulting "one-dimensional universe" of thought and behavior withers the capacity for critical thought. As he puts it, "[a] comfortable, smooth, reasonable, democratic unfreedom prevails in advanced industrial civilization, a token of technical progress" (ibid. p.1). Marcuse seeks to use negative thinking to disrupt this process, writing of a "great refusal" to participate in the existing system.¹² For Marcuse, negative (or critical) thinking is

¹² Marcuse describes the Great Refusal simply as "the protest against that which is". One cannot help but be reminded of James Dean's character in *The Wild One* (a popular film in 1953, and one which Marcuse could easily have seen).

crucial because it enables perception of society's contradictions and forces of domination. Marcuse used Freud's psychological insights to consider why people would accept repression voluntarily. He argues that benevolent authority figures (represented by Freud's superego) are no longer required because the superego has become "depersonalized," and authority is now imposed solely by impersonal mechanisms such as the agents of state institutions (ibid. p. 98). Generally, he argues that the "system" induces citizens to think that they are freer than they really are, and causes them to identify with their oppressors. Political discourse recedes into the background, and material goods pacify the proletariat and preclude the arising of anything like genuine class consciousness (ibid p. 87). Intriguingly, Marcuse also alleges that tolerance itself can be co-opted to preclude criticism of what he calls the "Establishment"¹³ (Repressive Tolerance, p.123).

Marcuse questions both the revolutionary nature of the working class and the inevitability of a crisis of capitalism. He reveals what I take to be a mistake in Marx's work – the notion that the dialectic of history would cease to operate as it had in the past, and that capitalism would be left to succumb to its own weaknesses. In fact, the presence of a strong antithesis in the form of robust labor movements has resulted not in a crisis of capitalism but in a new synthesis which Marx did not anticipate: the modern welfare state. There is a gentle irony in this omission, because towards the end of Marx's lifetime, such a welfare state existed in embryo in Germany, the very state that Marx repeatedly castigates for its backwardness. Otto von Bismarck was the first in a long succession of reactionaries who successfully co-opted working class support by implementing social reforms such as sickness and accident insurance, old-age pensions and compulsory hours of work (Kersbergen 2013).

¹³ This has become a term of abuse, but Marcuse seems to use it in a purely technical sense.

Gramsci, Lukács and Marcuse provide keen diagnoses of the welfare state and of the implications of the 2007-09 financial crisis. Gramsci is surely right that it is ideological rather than physical hegemony that needs to be confronted if the working class is to be liberated from Marcuse's "false needs". To the extent that the vanguard party is simply expressing the will of the proletariat (*pace* Gramsci), this is consistent with Marx. Lukács' runaway commodity fetishism and his tale of the instrumentalization of society seem plausible, and explain the objectification of social relations and the reification of capitalism.¹⁴ However, it is Marcuse who seems to provide the most insightful diagnosis of what we might call the modern condition. Marcuse identifies the creation of false needs as a sort of hedonic treadmill, and he correctly ascribes these false needs to society's "hidden persuaders" (Packard 1957). The American economist John Kenneth Galbraith reached similar conclusions, distinguishing between "organic" and "manufactured" needs, and arguing that this "dependence effect" could continue indefinitely unless met by some countervailing force, which he thought could be provided by robust public education (Galbraith 1958). Gramsci and Marcuse would argue that we ought to attempt to distinguish between the genuine improvements in wellbeing arising from the fulfilment of "organic" demand from the empty positional satisfaction conferred by the fulfilment of "manufactured" demand. They would add that manufactured demand is a form of false-consciousness, and that by internalizing the value system of the bourgeoisie, the modern welfare state has entered a condition of permanent disequilibrium.

How might this situation be remedied? The ideas of the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas seem especially well-suited to provide the basis of a universal culture. Levinas gave an account of lived experience that emphasized the primacy of the human Other. He wrote that the Other is not fully knowable and cannot be made into an object of the self, and that face-to-face interactions with others

¹⁴ It is interesting to contrast Lukács' "totality" with Marcuse's "negativity", because they seem superficially opposed—negativity would seem to deconstruct totality by revealing a multiplicity of possible interpretations.

are irreducible, existing only as totalities. “The Other precisely reveals himself in his alterity, not in a shock negating the I, but as the primordial phenomenon of gentleness” (Totality and Infinity p.150). It is this event of being in relation with the other (which Levinas calls variously “expression,” “invocation,” and “prayer”) that forms the ethical (and indeed religious) basis of his philosophy (Is Ontology Fundamental pp. 3-5). Ethics, on this account, involves being in a non-subsumptive relationship with the other – one in which our individuality is retained and enhanced by the appreciation of an Other whom we can never truly know but to whom we bear “infinite responsibility” (Totality and Infinity p. 215). A genuinely other-focused ethics is precisely the antithesis needed to rebut the solipsistic character of advanced capitalism in the modern welfare state.

In this essay, I have attempted to give an account of the modern welfare state as the outcome of a process of sublation (*aufhebung*) between industrial capitalism and revolutionary communism. I have also suggested that the events of the last half-century present challenges for Marx’s theories, challenges which are taken up and largely resolved by his successors. I agree with Lukács that Marx’s method can be relied on even when his predictions fail, and I agree with Marcuse that liberation from false needs is a necessary precondition for human flourishing. Marx was correct that we find the welfare state “not as it has developed on its own foundations, but, on the contrary, just as it emerges from capitalist society; which is thus in every respect, economically, morally, and intellectually, still stamped with the birth marks of the old society from whose womb it emerges” (Critique of the Gotha Program, p.614). It is precisely these atavistic tendencies that Marcuse and Gramsci give us a program for combatting. Finally, I have argued that Levinas’ other-focused ethic is an ideal antithesis to the isolated, atomistic thesis presented by the modern welfare state. Acknowledgement of our “infinite responsibility” to one another seems to be one of the most crucial elements in resolving the dysfunctional aspects of capitalist economies and in furthering the dialectical evolution of the welfare state model.

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