Marx’s Destruction of the Private by Criticism and Force

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Abstract  This essay contends that Marx sought to destroy privacy, analyzes his conception of it, and explains why he thought privacy impedes the full development of human beings. Central to his argument is a critique of constitutional states and modern liberalism, which, he maintains, by protecting and justifying individual rights, fail to recognize citizens as species beings.

Keywords: Marx; privacy; species beings; revolution; consciousness; modern liberalism; constitutional states; Hayek; Aristotle; U.N. Declaration of Human Rights

Karl Marx sought to destroy privacy. Why? Because it is a pernicious concept that ought to be swept away along with the conditions that generate it! Privacy encompasses concepts inseparable from practices because, according to Marx, material conditions generate forms of consciousness: “Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life.” As Engels explains Marx’s materialist point of view, causes are to be sought “not in men’s brains . . . not in the philosophy, but in the economics of each particular epoch.” Hence to destroy false beliefs about privacy, the economic conditions generating them must be destroyed.

Marx does not however strictly maintain a materialist causality. Before the destruction of practical conditions in order to rid human beings of false consciousness, comes mental criticism. “I am speaking of a ruthless criticism of everything existing,” he says. Philosophical consciousness must battle against a mystical or false consciousness that values privacy and allows for private beliefs of all kinds—religious, philosophical, and ethical. The goal is to induce the masses to recognize the pernicious effects of privacy and make them intolerant of and incensed by it. Forced changes in social relations will dissipate private thought: “all forms and products of consciousness cannot be dissolved by mental criticism . . . but only by the practical overthrow of the actual social relations which gave rise to this idealistic humbug; that not criticism but revolution is the driving force of history, also of religion, of philosophy and all other types of theory.” Riled up, the masses will act and demolish esteem for and practices of privacy.

Although Marx detected the valuation of privacy and its practical recognition in
ages other than that of modern liberalism, he found them most evident during the age of modern liberalism. His critique thus focuses on Western countries in which liberalism sprang up and flourished during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Within such countries as England, France, and the United States, for example, the theory and practice of privacy was conspicuous because it was constitutionally defined and protected. Their constitutions included, for example, rights protective of economic privacy, such as the right to buy, to sell, and to work; rights protective of religious privacy, including the right to worship when, where, and as one wishes; rights protective of privacy of thought and conscience, such as the right to speak and to assemble; and rights to sexual and familial privacy, including the right to marry and to raise children.

Confusion about Marx’s views on rights prevails in universities today, I believe, and spurs my effort here to discuss them. Examples from my experience with undergraduates follow.

In my Introduction to Political Theory course in 2021, I used, as I typically do in lecture courses, an electronic teaching tool that displays in real time, student responses to multiple-choice questions posed by me. After students choose their answer via an app, columns appear on a PowerPoint slide, showing the percentage of responses per each answer. During my second lecture on Marx, for which they were assigned to read beforehand the “Communist Manifesto” and a few pages from “Critique of the Gotha Program,” I asked, “How does Marx sum up the ‘theory’ of Communists?” I listed five options:

A. Cooperation and harmony
B. The abolition of private property
C. Equality of rights
D. Equality of opportunity
E. A, C, D.

The two most popular choices were B and E—24% chose “The abolition of private property,” and 65% chose “Cooperation and harmony, Equality of rights, and Equality of opportunity.” The course enrolled 102 students and on that day 84 showed up (on Zoom) and responded electronically. Thus, only 20 of them understood the fundamental meaning of communism, which Marx and Engels could not have put plainer in their Manifesto: “the theory of the Communists may be summed up in the single sentence: Abolition of private property.” In contrast, nearly three times as many—fifty-five students—rejected the correct option and associated Marx with equality of rights and opportunity—values inaugurated by classical liberalism. Later in that same class, I posed another question, the answers to which again indicated misunderstanding of Marx. It was, “How does Marx describe the principle of equal right?” For answers, I listed seven options:

A. Obsolete
B. Bourgeois

C. Sacred

D. Trash & nonsense

E. Inalienable

F. A, B, D

G. C & E

The most popular answers were the last two—26% chose F (Obsolete, Bourgeois, Trash & nonsense), and 50% chose G (Sacred and Inalienable). Thus, half of the 84 students, that is 42, thought Marx describes equal rights as “sacred” and “inalienable”—attributing to him words used by the American Founders! Only one-fourth or 22 of the students understood Marx’s utter denunciation of the principle of “equal right,” as evident in their assigned reading from “Critique of the Gotha Program,” where he describes the principle as “bourgeois right,” “obsolete verbal rubbish,” “ideological nonsense,” and “trash so common among democrats and French socialists.”

To explain these tallies, one might reasonably conclude that only a fourth of the students read the assignment—that the other three-fourths answered incorrectly because they did not read the assignment. But then the question changes from “Why do students misunderstand Marx?” to “Why do they attribute to him ideas foundational to the American founding?” In other words, why do they associate equal rights with Marx?

I suspect that their association derives from their having learned, at some point before taking my course, about rights as conveyed by the 1948 U.N. Declaration of Human Rights. That document transforms the seventeenth-century conception of natural rights and its offspring, the eighteenth-century U.S. Bill of Rights, which both emphasize the freedoms of individuals, into an expanded conception of rights, which emphasize claims upon society or government to particular benefits. Friedrich Hayek says:

This document is admittedly an attempt to fuse the rights of the Western liberal tradition with the altogether different conception deriving from the Marxist Russian Revolution. It adds to the list of the classical civil rights enumerated in its first twenty-one articles seven further guarantees intended to express the new “social and economic rights.”

The addition means, Hayek argues:

[that these rights] could not be made universal within a system of rules of just conduct based on the conception of individual responsibility, and so require that the whole of society be . . . made totalitarian in the fullest
sense of the word . . . rules of just conduct which apply to everybody alike . . . can never take the form of “everybody must have so and so.” . . . [They can] never confer on any person as such . . . a claim to particular things.\(^8\)

A simpler and perhaps more plausible guess as to why students associate Marx with equal rights is that American welfare programs operate on the Marxist principle of “to each according to his needs,”\(^9\) and they know America is a land of rights. As Hayek explains:

> The transition from the negative conception of justice . . . to a “positive” conception which makes it a duty of “society” to see that individuals have particular things, is often effected by stressing the rights of the individual. It seems that among the younger generation the welfare institutions into which they have been born have engendered a feeling that they have a claim in justice on “society” for the provision of particular things which it is the duty of that society to provide.\(^10\)

In other words, it is not the students’ fault; they are confused about rights because the American government uses the language of rights indiscriminately to describe both the freedoms granted to all citizens and the entitlements to assistance granted only to qualifying individuals, the justification of which echoes Marx’s principle of distribution.\(^11\) Confusion abounds because the American government applies rights equally and unequally, some to all and some not to all.

The addition of positive to negative rights, or the fattening of rights in America, pertains to this discussion of privacy because it authorizes the government to intervene in the economic life of citizens, which classical liberalism regards as the domain of private individuals.\(^12\) Marx denounced attempts to modify liberalism in the direction of socialism because such modifications preserve rather than abolish the economy, the material basis of society. As he says in his critique of “Conservative, or Bourgeois Socialism”:

> The Socialistic bourgeois . . . desire the existing state of society minus its revolutionary and disintegrating elements . . . By changes in the material conditions of existence, this form of Socialism . . . by no means understands abolition of the bourgeois relations of production, an abolition that can be effected only by a revolution, but [counts on] administrative reforms, based on the continued existence of these relations.\(^13\)

In the remainder of this essay, I will amplify and connect the three topics I have covered so far—Marx’s materialism, Western liberalism, and natural rights—to show further Marx’s destruction of the private by criticism and force.
As indicated above, mental criticism and physical destruction are according to Marx complementary; both aim to abolish everything existing. This complementarity implicitly scorns a distinction put forth first by Plato and intrinsic to Western political thought, namely, that between reason and force, or persuasion and coercion. Marx indicates that force naturally follows reason to finish the job. Not only does the conjoining of the two defy centuries of intellectual confirmation, but so does its posited naturalness. Given that universities owe their existence to this confirmation and thus dedicate themselves to it, they should recognize Marx’s view as an existential threat, though it may be too late judging from the tsunami of cancel culture which follows Marx’s mandate: criticize and oust.

The goal of Marx’s mandate is to erase private consciousness; while in higher education that means thoughts unique to particular professors and students, Marx sought to erase it globally. That heretofore elusive goal may be nearing achievement thanks to the electronic proliferation of artificial intelligence. As distinguished scholars have recently noted, “As [ChatGPT’s] capacities become broader, they will redefine human knowledge, accelerate changes in the fabric of our reality, and reorganize politics and society . . . The question remains: Can we learn, quickly enough, to challenge rather than obey? Or will we in the end be obliged to submit?” Indeed, Marx predicts, “there will be one science,” resulting from the fusion of “the science of man” and “natural science.” He does not believe that the human mind can initiate change on its own, without the help of forces outside of itself, because the mind is never on its own or independent of lived experience. The postulate of free thought is an error of false consciousness: “The element of thought itself . . . is of a sensuous nature. The social reality of nature, and human natural science, or the natural science about man, are identical terms.” This one science emerges from sensuous consciousness that is universally human—not from a consciousness that is apart, unique, superior, different, or private. The very nature of thought excludes those concepts; private thoughts are not robust, healthy thoughts but weak, sick, perverse, or low forms of consciousness.

For a contrasting account of mind and method, consider Aristotle’s. According to him, to analyze all matters in the same way and insist on comparable results is naïve and unphilosophical. Minds captive to one method fail to distinguish between approximate premises and conclusions, on the one hand, and certain premises and conclusions, on the other:

Precision is not to be sought for alike in all discussions . . . it is the mark of an educated man to look for precision in each class of things just so far as the nature of the subject admits; it is evidently equally foolish to accept probable reasoning from a mathematician and to demand from a rhetorician demonstrative proofs.

Aristotle implies that a functioning mind recognizes its potential and its limitations; for example, when examining human affairs, it recognizes that it cannot criticize
away all premises—in particular, the premise that living beings seek what is good for
themselves. We cannot explain but rather must acknowledge that to be true. And we
can know that truth only as individuals from our own experience; if we were told that
truth before experiencing it, then it would fall on deaf ears. That is why the young,
who are “inexperienced in the actions that occur in life,” are not typically good judges
of human affairs.

Marx and Aristotle agree, then, that true or sound consciousness requires lived
experience. They disagree, however, on the nature of that experience. According to
Aristotle, one can experience life only as an individual, whereas according to Marx,
one necessarily experiences it as a member of a species. For Aristotle, our ability to
navigate resides in the soul, whereas for Marx, it resides in the species—a claim to be
explained below.

Be that as it may, Marx casts blame not on Aristotle but on later Enlightenment
thinkers for corrupting human consciousness. According to Marx, their state-of-nature
theories create the abstraction “man” and argue that civil society is composed of
separate and distinct corporeal men. “The highest point attained by contemplative
materialism, that is, materialism which does not comprehend sensuousness as practical
activity, is the contemplation of single individuals in civil society.”

The superior point of view according to Marx—namely, materialism which does
comprehend sensuousness as practical activity—sees men not as single individuals
but as species beings. “Man is a species being” because “he adopts the species as
his object” in theory and in practice, which means that he knows he can experience
“himself as a universal and therefore a free being” only through the life-activity of
the community. Man cannot exist for himself because he has no boundaries, no
definition, no unique attributes that he can or even wants to confirm as his own. He is
not merely a social being—living life in association with others—but is himself a true
resolution between the individual and the species, with a communal consciousness.
“Consciousness is . . . a social product” and it will bloom in the soil of communism,
which is itself an actual developing life-process; words cannot describe this new way
of being because it is not a product of the imagination, not an ideal. We cannot
speculate about it. In “real life,” Marx says, “speculation ends”: “Empty talk about
consciousness ceases, and real knowledge has to take its place. When reality is
depicted, philosophy as an independent branch of knowledge loses its medium of
existence.” In sum, Marx says, “Communism is for us not a state of affairs which
is to be established, an ideal to which reality [will] have to adjust itself. We call
communism the real movement which abolishes the present state of things.”

Communism will abolish liberalism’s commitment to the concept of individuals,
derivative from its fetishization of nature and human nature: “Communism . . .
consciously treats all natural premises as the creatures of hitherto existing men,
strips them of their natural character and subjugates them to the power of united
individuals.” That power cultivates “fully-developed naturalism,” which “equals
humanism.” By dissolving divisions, communism makes impossible a distinction
between public and private. “[I]t is the genuine resolution of the conflict between man and nature and between man and man—the true resolution of the strife between existence and essence, between objectification and self-confirmation, between freedom and necessity, between the individual and the species.”

Therefore, “[m]an’s individual and species life are not different.” If there is no private consciousness that is not defective by virtue of being private, then a man cannot live a life independently of others, differently from others. Indeed, Marx says, “my own existence is social activity, and therefore that which I make of myself, I make of myself for society and with the consciousness of myself as a social being . . . My general consciousness is only the theoretical shape of that of which the living shape is the real community.”

Not only can we not live fully as individuals, with our own unique and robust private thoughts, but we cannot even die as individuals, having led unique and robust lives. We die only as members of the community: “Death seems to be a harsh victory of the species over the definite individual and to contradict their unity. But the determinate individual is only a determinate species being, and as such mortal.”

Marx may be arguing that, since everyone dies alone, death seems to confirm each person’s individuality; but in fact, everyone dies because they are a member of the human species. However, he stops short of saying something that might comfort each of us—namely, that death is the most certain universal human experience and our most solid common bond. Why not add that? Perhaps because saying so would acknowledge nature as an eternal truth, when it is, according to him, nothing of the sort. Nature and man, and thus death, are merely abstractions:

Now I say to you: Give up your abstraction and you will also give up your question. Or if you want to hold on to your abstraction, then be consistent, and if you think of man and nature as non-existent, then think of yourself as non-existent, for you too are surely nature and man . . . Or are you such an egoist that you postulate everything as nothing, and yet want yourself to be?

In other words, the predicate of death as a universal bonding experience is the egoistic self, a mere abstraction: “your abstraction from the existence of nature and man has no meaning.” Our bonding as human beings occurs only “through human labour” because only through it do we come to exist. “Since the real existence of man and nature has become practical, sensuous and perceptible,” man stops existing when he stops “his process of coming-to-be” together with others. The process of living fully absorbs the so-called individual into itself.

Now, once we understand from Marx that the concept of rights attaches to the concept of individuals as portrayed in the state of nature and also understand that the concept of individuals belongs to liberal ideology, then we will understand that rights cannot be, as liberalism maintains, inalienable. Indeed, we will recognize that liberalism—not Nature or Nature’s God—created rights in order to fortify the
concept of individuals and to encourage individuals to exercise their rights and define their individual pursuits.

Marx’s logic is something like the following. Individual pursuits require privacy. Privacy is the domain of individuals. Liberal society thus fortifies a culture that values privacy, and that culture, in turn, animates society. Empirical reality and cultural values are codependent: “Morality, religion, metaphysics, all the rest of ideology and their corresponding forms of consciousness, thus no longer retain the semblance of independence.”

Marx’s effort to eradicate private life appears methodically in his essay “On the Jewish Question.” Divided into three parts, the second one critiques constitutional states. Such states create private life in order to compensate for the adverse effects of their economies, which encourage the fervent quest for money, or “huckstering.” Constitutional states do this chiefly by means of individual rights. Rights guarantee private decision-making and the freedom to create a private life, one that engages with fellow citizens only by choice, according to preference, and not by necessity.

According to Marx, the freedom to create our own private lives can never fulfill human beings, however, because it is predicated on the concept of the individual, a concept fortified by constitutional states. To steer one’s own life by one’s own choices misapprehends human nature and therewith the basis of a satisfying life.

Consequently, in the fully developed political state man leads “a double existence—celestial and terrestrial.” When he participates in his community, he lives a heavenly existence, but when he lives according to his own passions and interests, he lives a deadening earthly existence. In the liberal state, public and private opportunities split him in two: “He lives in the political community, where he regards himself as a communal being, and in civil society where he acts simply as a private individual, treats other men as means, degrades himself to the role of a mere means, and becomes the plaything of alien powers.”

Marx nonetheless recognizes a benefit of constitutional rights—namely, their inclusion of the right to speak and to assemble, which communists can exploit to foster their message. Such political rights thus have emancipatory potential (unlike economic, religious, and family rights, which tie individuals to private endeavors). Marx says, however, that, unfortunately and paradoxically, citizens in liberal states use their political rights, which bring human beings together and empower them to overthrow the state in order to strengthen the kind of rights that divide them and keep them beholden to the state:

The matter becomes still more incomprehensible when we observe that the political liberators reduce citizenship, the political community, to a mere means for preserving these so-called rights of man; and consequently, that the citizen is declared to be the servant of egoistic “man,” that the sphere in which man functions as a species-being is degraded to a level
below the sphere where he functions as a partial being, and finally that it
is man as a bourgeois and not man as a citizen who is considered the true
and authentic man.\textsuperscript{42}

In “Critique of the Gotha Program,” Marx explains further that rights strengthen
divisions in society because they strengthen inequalities. He is discussing the matter
of distribution in post-capitalist society based on common ownership of the means
of production. A faction of the German Social Democratic Party proposed a plan
according to which each person would receive a certificate for the amount of labor they
furnished, which they could then submit to draw from the common stock of goods.
Marx attacks the proposal as bourgeois because (like money) it rewards unequal
amounts of labor and thus treats people unequally:

\begin{quote}
this equal right is still constantly stigmatised by a bourgeois limitation.
The right of the producers is \textit{proportional} to the labour they supply . . .
But one man is superior to another physically or mentally and so supplies
more labour in the same time, or can labour for a longer time . . . This
\textit{equal} right is an unequal right for unequal labour . . . it tacitly recognizes
unequal individual endowment and thus productive capacity as natural
privileges. \textit{It is, therefore, a right of inequality, in its content, like every
right.}\textsuperscript{43}
\end{quote}

Marx proposes instead to let each work “according to his ability” and receive goods
“according to his needs.”\textsuperscript{44} But his key point, for our purpose here, is that rights
preserve—and even foster—inequalities.

In sum, rights are pernicious because they protect and encourage private initiatives,
which keep human beings apart. To unite individuals, then, we must according to
Marx abolish rights, and hence their protectorate, constitutional states. We must
paradoxically use the political rights constitutional states grant us to dismantle the state
and achieve human emancipation. The political freedom that citizens of constitutional
states enjoy is not enough because it reduces man “on the one hand to a member
of civil society, an \textit{independent} and \textit{egoistic} individual, and on the other hand, to
a \textit{citizen}, to a moral person.” We should instead aspire to “[h]uman emancipation,”
which “will only be complete when the real, individual man has absorbed into himself
the abstract citizen; when as an individual man, in his everyday life, in his work, and
in his relationships, he has become a \textit{species-being}.”\textsuperscript{45} Like all political philosophers,
Marx thinks his understanding of human beings is accurate—but perhaps it is not.
Perhaps his effort to acknowledge our need for one another and our weaknesses goes
too far by prescribing an orientation to communal life, one that preempts private
endeavors and aspirations, which, if pursued, might ultimately benefit many others
much more.
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Notes and References


11. “Entitlement Programs of the federal government . . . are rights granted to citizens and certain non-citizens by federal law. The programs are either contributory or non-contributory. Non-contributory means the program benefits are available to participants without regard to whether they have contributed to the program . . . Welfare programs such as SNAP (food stamps) or Pell Grants are examples of non-contributory programs. Participants receive benefits even though they have never made contributions to the program.” (See “Entitlement Programs,” Federal Safety Net: Make Poverty and Welfare Understandable, Robert Pfeiffer, [https://federalsafetynet.com/entitlement-programs/], accessed May 2023.)

States that describe entitlements as “rights” include, for example, Massachusetts: “Basic Food Stamp Rights,” Chapter 106 of the Code of Massachusetts Regulations (CMR). (See “Basic Food Stamp Rights,” MassLegalServices: The Online Resource
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for Massachusetts Poverty Law Advocates, Massachusetts Legal Aid Websites Project, updated February 3, 2003. [https://www.masslegalservices.org/content/basic-food-stamp-rights]

12. Even though it allows taxation and regulation by the consent of the majority.


14. See, for example, the beginning of Plato’s Republic, where a group of men tries to coerce Socrates, and he says that he might instead be able to persuade them not to do so (Plato, Republic, trans. G.M.A. Grube, rev. C.D.C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1992), 327c).

15. For example, when the first constitution of America was in jeopardy, the Federalists sought to persuade the Anti-Federalists to adopt a new one by writing The Federalist Papers. At the start of Federalist Paper No. 1, Alexander Hamilton says:

[I]t seems to have been reserved to the people of this country . . . to decide the important question, whether societies of men are really capable or not of establishing good government from reflection and choice, or whether they are forever destined to depend for their political constitutions on accident and force.


24. Marx, “German Ideology,” 158; see also 160.

25. Ibid, 155.

26. Marx, “German Ideology,” 162 (bracketed insertion is not mine).

27. Ibid, 193.

39. Ibid.
30. Ibid, 86.
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid.
33. Ibid, 92.
34. Ibid.
35. Ibid.
36. Ibid.
37. The first two sentences of “The Declaration of Independence” (July 4, 1776) are, with my emphases added:

When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

40. Ibid, 34.
41. Ibid.
42. Ibid, 43.
44. Ibid, 531.