

ESSAY

Much Ado About Theories: Teaching Marx and Other Suspicious Types in Christian Higher Education

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I've taught an undergraduate sociological theory course for 20-some years, and it's long been one of my favorites. Theories are fascinating phenomena. They can prod people to adjust their gaze, see things anew, step into the shoes of another, and occasionally even shift paradigms. Theories can delight, enrage, puzzle, unnerve, and challenge. They can move us from rooted recalcitrance to receptive revelation. Occasionally, they leave us unmoved because our cognitive biases make us apt to defend theories that affirm our prejudices, even when they become indefensible. In fortifying in-group boundaries, we tend to disparage perspectives that push against the ones ordering our own lives and embrace those that help us defend cherished us-versus-them boundary-markers. For those of us in religious communities, alignment with the *right* theories and opposition to the *wrong* ones can signify orthodoxy or, in reverse, apostasy. Bernard Lewis nicely captures the sentiment in an *Atlantic Monthly* article with the pithy title, "I'm Right, You're Wrong, Go to Hell" (Lewis 2003).

Over the past year, I've heard what is by now mythical "Critical Race Theory" (CRT) described as "pure evil," and an undergraduate student summarily dismiss a brilliant colleague of mine who, without revealing her ideological leanings, lectured on its contours and distinguished between its academic and popular forms. Christian college and university administrators worry about whether even a hint of something like CRT or Marxism will alienate an important donor, or cost them students in a narrowing and highly competitive market.

Theories are just explanations of relationships between variables situated at varying levels of abstraction. A theory can be a good explanation, or it can be a bad one. It can be simple or complex. It can be a really compelling account containing a few elements that seem contradicted by data, or an outrageously implausible one with parts that offer unparalleled insight. It can be an elucidation that made a great deal of sense in the 1950s, but is inadequate for explicating things in late modernity. In the final analysis, a theory is just an explanation, not "pure evil," and certainly not the final word on some matter.

When I teach theory to senior sociology students, I tell them that the course is intended to help them fill their “theory toolbox” with an assortment of tools. No one would hire a carpenter who showed up to build a house with only a saw in tow. Saws are good for some things but not for others. Likewise, no one would kick a carpenter off a project for having a brace and bit—the precursor to the cordless drill—in her toolbox. If an antiquated tool were all she used, the project may never reach completion, but if it were used in just a few tasks for which it was well suited, we might take note and seek to procure one for ourselves. Likewise, would one really desire to learn sociology from a professor who had never studied Marx, or study ethnicity and racialization with an academic who had scrupulously avoided CRT, or explore theology with a professor who had never encountered scholars outside his or her own tradition? Were I to permit sociology students to graduate having never read or discussed Marx, I would be as negligent as a music professor who had excised Bach or Mozart from the curriculum. They would have every right to demand that their tuition be refunded.

Does this mean that professors in Christian higher education should approach theorists like Karl Marx, or broad theoretical platforms like CRT, with the simple goal of debunking and rejecting them? What symbolic power some theories seemingly possess that they can hold entire institutions captive! What’s a university to do? Ignore theories that have gained traction in popular consciousness and you’re treading the path to institutional irrelevancy. Take them seriously, dissect them, discuss their merits and shortcomings with students, and you risk everything from institutional reputation to personal unemployment. Theories—what power! I believe there’s a much better way of handling theories that challenge a religious community’s accepted canon. Consider how I address Marx in my theory course.

I typically open sociological theory class with a brief prayer that ends, “God, help us to see just a little further through the ideas we encounter in our study of Marx.” Partly, this is to remind myself and the students that we find truth and wisdom in all kinds of places. Then, we discuss why Marx is generally viewed with suspicion in conservative religious communities. In this, I’m trying to help students learn to separate theories and concepts from the theorists themselves, and from ways those ideas may have been used or applied. And finally, I’m working to demonstrate how good theories can help explain a wide array of diverse phenomena. For example, in-class discussion about German historian/sociologist Max Weber’s concern that rationality and bureaucracy were colonizing the modern world centers on how the same rational/bureaucratic methods that helped Hitler more efficiently institutionalize murder during the Holocaust are also employed in world missions, the organization of churches, and children’s hospitals. Rationality is neither neutral, all good, or all bad, but it does revolutionize our thinking. Weber’s theory is sufficiently abstract to explain how supposedly neutral means/ends calculations underpin both the brutal efficiency of the Holocaust as well as some of the secularizing forces in, say, modern world missions. In grappling with Weber’s theory of

rationality, our understanding becomes more nuanced, and we are, I believe, better equipped to live as the people of God in a complex late modern society.

Back to Marx. The chief objections to Marx lie in his view of religion, and in his theorizing about the need to deconstruct a class-based society. Marx's famous "Religion is the opiate of the people" is commonly taken as a swipe at religion, and thus at God. But the phrase has at least two meanings. One is that religion can function to keep an oppressed group (for Marx, the proletariat) from acting on their own behalf, in effect soothing them like a drug by offering comfort in the life to come. For Marx, this "false consciousness" enables the oppressive class (the bourgeoisie) to continue their exploitation with less opposition. The other meaning is that in the 19th century, life was difficult, and the poor could not soothe their suffering, say from an injury, with the opiates available to the rich, but had to make do with the comforts of religion.

In my class, I find it helpful to point out a couple ways we might understand Marx's ideas. On the one hand, he seems to shortchange religion. Religion does so many good things for us that aren't reducible to drug-like effects or false consciousness. For example, it is an important part of the social bond, and it frequently convicts us about social justice issues, like helping widows in their distress, or offering "our" resources to the vulnerable. And so, seen one way, Marx was wrong, or at least incomplete about religion. On the other hand, religion can indeed function to some degree like an opiate. Some sociologists find a relationship between "other-worldly" (the goal of life is to go to heaven) religion and reduced concern for stewarding the natural environment. Climate change? Don't worry; God loves you, and God is in control. Religion can also function in us/them or in-group/out-group ways, enabling those in a religious community to focus on guarding resources and opposing others who might access their wealth (perhaps some immigrants or racial minorities). In this sense, religion can prevent its members from seeing things from the perspective of the other and contribute to an anesthetizing insularity. My point? We don't have to reduce Marx's ideas about religion to a bifurcated right/wrong, because we can use his theory to gain insight into different ways our religion functions. In this way, we can grapple with Marx as a prophetic voice who can help us engage in self-critique about how our churches, modes of religiosity, and lifestyles function in a complex, stratified, global society. Accordingly, we use Marx selectively and situationally, not as an ideological template for all of life.

The other objection to Marx, noted above, derives from fears that promoting Marxian thought will lead to a reckless dismantling of our current capitalist social system. And, if you've ever visited a communist or post-communist country and seen some of the dysfunction there, such fears are not without merit. For me, Marx's vision for a communist society seems impossibly utopian. His real insight lies in his critique of capitalist society, and all economic systems, capitalism included, should be critiqued. We tend to be falsely conscious of economic

systems that benefit us. Some of Marx's concepts like exploitation, fetishism of commodities, alienation, and false consciousness, have helped me to recognize strains, tensions, contradictions, and manipulation of the poor more clearly in the global capitalist society in which I live. I've become much more introspective about what I buy, who made it, under what conditions, and so on, as a result of reading Marx's critique. In a way, I can think more "Christianly" for having studied Marx.

To cap off this foray into how I approach Marx, I'd like to briefly outline a teaching approach I inherited from my late mentor Russell Heddendorf. In *Hidden Threads: A Christian Critique of Sociological Theory*, he contrasts the approach taken by Karl Marx with that of Christian social philosopher Jacques Ellul on the matter of revolution. Marx's work centered on the necessity and desirability of revolution in achieving a just and humane society. Ellul writes that the Christian accepts the principle of revolution, but with a different source of power, and a different end in mind than that envisioned by Marx. Ellul offers the concept of "Permanent Revolution," observing that the concept of revolution is desirable because Christians are not called to simply sustain, benefit from, and preserve human-built structures. Permanent revolution

... continues with the abiding presence of God's kingdom in the world. This means that God's order will be preserved in the world and his Word will be available to others. But it will be a revolution because of its conflict with the world and all that it stands for. By resisting the basic assumptions of our society and challenging its claims over people, this revolution attacks the basic elements of the world's order. In short, it supports God's work by attacking man's work. (Heddendorf and Vos 2010:89)

A revolution of this sort is permanent, or ongoing, because it continues until Christ returns. During this interim, as God's people resist the basic assumptions of society and challenge its claims over people, we do so as salt and light—salt which preserves (and is tasty), and light which reveals to the world (including ourselves) the truth about its condition. Of course, if we have invested too much in worldly structures, whether communist, capitalist, or a host of other "things of this world," we are unlikely to challenge the world's assumptions because our temporal commitments prevent it. No socio-economic scheme—communist, capitalist, or otherwise—can deliver the righteousness God requires. Rather, a new order can emerge as we repent, take the place of lesser honor, relax our grasp on the things of this world, and learn to embrace the upside-down world of Jesus and the Kingdom of God (Kraybill 2018). The following chart illustrates differences between Marx's and Ellul's approaches to revolution:

Revolution

Marx

Ellul

Directed against social power	Directed against spiritual power
Violent means are employed to accomplish desired ends.	Peaceful means are employed to accomplish desired ends. Revolution consists of the ongoing challenging of the world's assumptions. Violence is unacceptable as a means to solving problems. The Christian must use God's means to work toward God's ends.
Sudden and in response to crisis. A new and correct form of social organization offers the redemption that humans need.	Permanent. Continues with the abiding presence of God's kingdom in the world. Ongoing until Christ returns and accomplishes the redemption that schemes of social organization cannot produce.

As I study the work of Karl Marx with my senior sociology students, we almost never reject Marx's ideas outright, nor do we uncritically accept them. We use them as one uses tools. The longer I teach, the more I find myself counseling students to avoid the words "I agree" or "I disagree" in their written work. Whether we agree or disagree with a theorist or idea is of little value in our analytical task. In fact, dismissing an idea because "I disagree" may be little more than a way of avoiding something that broadens my perspective or challenges my thinking. Rather, I advise them—and remind myself—to try and simply debate the merits of various positions, and as they do so, to remain somewhat open to alternative explanations that may challenge and unsettle them. Avoiding the ideologically charged language of "disagreement" can help us think and write in more nuanced ways, and avoid simplistic pronouncements of particular theorists and theories as all evil, all good, all right, or all wrong. No axis of evil is permitted in theory class; it's just not helpful.

What a shame it would be to emerge from a Christian college or university unchanged, having rarely let oneself be challenged by uncomfortable ideas, or thinkers with reputations for promoting questionable views. College is a place to struggle, to, as Bruce Cockburn sings, "kick at the darkness till it bleeds daylight" (Cockburn 1984). And, as my students engage with various thinkers, ideas, ideologies, and positions, they are not alone. The college years are one of the few times in life when one has the opportunity to struggle with unfamiliar and sometimes uncomfortable ideas alongside their professors. And professors are at their best when they help students learn *how* to think, rather than *what* to think. Of course, it's always a

mix of both, but there's more risk in remaining ignorant of theorists and theories that have reputations for conflicting with one's "normal," than there is in sifting through, and sorting them into one's toolbox, under the guidance of someone—perhaps someone like me—who has spent his adult life sorting theories.

To conclude, I offer an example that illustrates ways in which testing theories offers a better approach to weeding out error than condemning them does. In a short book entitled, *Observing Ourselves: Essays in Social Research*, Earl Babbie (2015) includes a chapter called "Scientific Closed-Mindedness." In it he recalls how in 1975, and in the face of a host of other far more compelling social problems like global starvation or nuclear holocaust, a group of "186 Nobel laureates took the time and trouble to sponsor a national media campaign to condemn astrology" (Babbie 2015:143). In questioning the wisdom of such action, Babbie recounts how he was once asked to review an article that scientifically assessed predictions made by astrologers for a scientific journal. He assessed the article, found it had merit, and recommended publication. The other two peer reviewers examining it recommended rejection, not on the article's merits, but because they felt that pieces on astrology had no place in a scientific journal. Babbie explains that he had no particular knowledge about astrology and no ideological leanings about it one way or the other. He wonders why scientists would spend so much time and energy condemning and rejecting something like astrology when they could simply test its claims, and draw conclusions accordingly. He writes:

What interests me most about astrology is the resistance to it, especially among scientists. The resistance is particularly ironic, since it would be so easy to conduct a rigorous test of what astrologers purport to know. We could settle the matter once and for all, and those 186 Nobel laureates could then turn their attention to other matters. (Babbie 2015:144)

To drive home his point, Babbie also recalls that at a national convention, the *American Anthropological Association* voted to condemn sociobiology. Rather than simply test the theory—something they were well equipped to do—they condemned it. Where's the science in that?

Ironically, to condemn some theory or idea tends to draw attention to it and give it more recognition and clout. Maybe it's a good theory, maybe not. Maybe it's outrageous and explains little, but contains a few ideas that offer unparalleled insight. Condemn it and we may never know. But test it, refine it, reject it where it fails and embrace it where it succeeds, and, over time, your theory toolbox will be much better equipped to address the myriad problems confronting us in late modernity.

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