The Liberal Ideology: On Intellectual Pluralism and the Marginalization of Marxism in US Political Science

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According to long-standing but intensifying right-wing critiques, political science is plagued by a "liberal bias" and concomitant lack of conservative voices. Notably, a similar idea is percolating among many mainstream thinkers (al-Gharbi 2017; Sunstein 2018), especially those in need of an analytical framework to understand Brexit, Trumpism, and the rise of far-right, "populist" rage.

Indeed, there is a problematic lack of ideological diversity in our discipline. Yet, we contend that one of the principal victims of political science's "liberal bias" is the Marxist-inspired left. This article highlights two factors that explain this phenomenon: (1) a nearly hegemonic "liberal" (in the philosophical sense) ethos (i.e., a true "liberal bias"); and (2) the fetishization of positivist scholarship that supposedly is "neutral" and "objective."[1]

As we briefly discuss in the conclusion, Marxism's marginalization *matters* not only insofar as it detracts from ideological diversity but also because it has broader political implications. Indeed, it is only by engaging in a "ruthless criticism" of the structures that underlie the political–economic crises afflicting Western liberal democracies—as a Marxist analysis suggests—that we will be able to recognize the following: that the forces of what Blyth (2016) referred to as "Global Trumpism" are not aberrations but rather natural outgrowths of a crisis-ridden, alienating, and racialized (global) capitalist system.

We proceed by engaging in an "immanent critique" that exposes how our "liberal" discipline fails to live up to its own would-be principles. Such ideals suggest that political scientists should operate within and seek to construct a free and open "marketplace of ideas" in which diverse perspectives are actively sought and, in turn, are debated and evaluated by the rules of logic and rational discourse. In this regard, we argue that mainstream political science neglects its own supposed (liberal) values by largely excluding Marxism from consideration for reasons that are largely *ideological* and *political* in nature. In this sense, the discipline fails on its own terms.

The concluding section, in turn, points to a larger issue that is suggested by a Marxist analysis: that is, the need for deeper, radical critiques that question the "entire edifice" of liberal academia by calling for us to rethink disciplinary boundaries and, even more broadly, the ideological functions of universities within capitalist societies (Harvey 1990, 6).

MARGINALIZING MARX(ISM): EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

According to our recent analysis of graduate syllabi for introductory seminars in international relations (IR) and comparative politics (CP) at the top-10 political science programs in the United States (as determined by *US News & World Report* rankings), Marx and Marxism are highly endangered species (Sclofsky and Funk 2018).[2] Only one of the 22 analyzed syllabi featured Marx as "required" reading; only one other syllabus "recommended" one of Marx's texts. Overall, Marx-authored works represented less than 0.1% of listed readings. In one particularly jarring example, as we observed, "an introductory CP course at University of California–Berkeley dedicates an entire week to the study of class without a single writing by Marx" (Sclofsky and Funk 2018, 50).

This study further examined the total number of "Marxist" authors in these syllabi. Even after adopting a rather elastic definition of Marxism (including, e.g., Benedict Anderson), the results indicated that these authors represent less than 1% of readings. Corroborating these findings, the author of a recent study on the paradigmatic leanings of publications in "major" IR journals during the past 30 years decided to drop Marxism from inclusion in the accompanying graphs, given that "The lines…would be close to zero and mostly flat over the entire period" (Saideman 2018, 690).

Of course, Marxism is hardly the only "critical" framework that has an uneasy relationship with mainstream political science. Thinkers in the feminist, poststructuralist, and postcolonial traditions also suffer various forms of marginalization.[3] Furthermore, there are other cases of foundational texts by classical social theorists or political economists that are infrequently assigned in graduate seminars. For example, with the exception of some political theorists, few political science students will read Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* during their graduate program. One reason for this lamentable trend may be that thinkers such as Marx and Smith do not fit neatly into contemporary disciplinary boundaries, which imply the separation of politics, economics, and philosophy.

What is particularly concerning about Marxism's marginalization is that our epoch is defined by capitalism's global

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hegemony, its production of recurring crises and ballooning (racialized and gendered) inequalities, and the worldwide spread of a neoliberal logic. As the thinker who arguably understood capitalism better than any other and is capitalism's most insightful critic, Marx is thus especially relevant for our times.

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The lack of engagement with Marxism thus amounts to an important failure in political science education. As Tucker (1978, ix) suggested, "Not to be well grounded in the writings of Marx and Engels is to be insufficiently attuned to modern thought" and "self-excluded" from the debates that define "most contemporary societies." This is especially true vis-à-vis the Global South, where Marxism has proven most fruitful for inspiring generations of thinkers to grapple with their social realities (Leeds et al. 2019). Frantz Fanon, José Mariátegui, dependency theorists, and African and Asian independence leaders come to mind, among many others.

HEGEMONIC LIBERALISM

To reiterate, there is a prevailing "liberal bias" in US political science, although not precisely of the type derided by conservatives. Rather, it is a *liberal bias* in that ways of thinking that exist outside of liberal philosophy—and perhaps especially Marxism, given its "radical" challenge to liberalism—are largely excluded from mainstream spaces.

We draw from Freeden (2015), who conceptualized liberalism as an ideology that contains complex—and, at times, contradictory—principles. According to his argument, liberalism has passed through five stages, four of which we entertain here.

The first iteration of liberalism is a theory of restrained power aimed at protecting individual rights, which suggests that to be free "is simply to be unimpeded from exercising your capacities in pursuit of your desired ends" (Skinner 1998, 5). Of chief concern is the preservation of private property (Locke 1980 [1690], 66) and establishment of a series of political rights (which were universal in theory but highly exclusionary in practice). The preceding fed into a progressive view of history in which the acquisition of virtue, wealth, and power would maximize human happiness (Freeden 1996).

For Adam Smith, liberalism was reborn as a theory of economic exchange (Dewey 2000 [1935]). The idea in this second stage of liberalism is that individual actions are the key to social welfare. Given that state intervention is viewed as restricting liberty and progress, it is to be limited to safeguarding individual rights and enforcing the rules by which free-market capitalism is played—although in practice, of course, many of Smith's present-day acolytes demonstrate few qualms about mass incarceration, constant war, and other exercises of state power (Harvey 2007).

Subsequently, by the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many liberals had realized that limits to human progress also could arise from the market. Thus, the state had the duty to intervene when important human needs (e.g., health care and gainful employment) could not be secured through individual effort (Freeden 2015, 112). This new liberal twist emphasized social interdependence and established the basis for the welfare state.

Finally, and most recently, was the rise of a pluralist approach within liberalism that pushed for the recognition—and, perhaps, celebration—of diversity (Freeden 2015, 116). Such a "politics of identity" became part of the liberal core, thereby undoing some of the tradition's previous exclusions.

What is most pertinent for present purposes is that ideological diversity, such that it exists in mainstream US political science, is largely confined to competing variations of these themes.[4] Indeed, whereas there are spirited theoretical and political disputes within the discipline's mainstream, these largely take the form of debates *within liberalism* rather than between liberalism and critical traditions such as Marxism. For example, the most visible debates in political theory about the work of John Rawls tend to amount to an intra-liberal dialogue between thinkers who present distinct amalgamations (or interpretations) of liberal principles (see Sandel 1984; 2010). Marxist and other challenges to the entire Rawlsian enterprise are far more rare.

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Tocqueville (2003 [1835], 524) was remarkably prescient when he observed that "In America, the majority has staked out a formidable fence around thought. Inside those limits a writer is free but woe betide him if he dares to stray beyond them." Thus, as long as one claims to belong to the liberal in-group, it is possible to reach the commanding heights of political science, even if one's scholarly production is replete

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with xenophobic anxieties and antidemocratic sentiments (as in the case of Samuel Huntington). That is, ostensibly *politically* and *economically conservative* thought that springs from the *liberalism* of classical philosophy, such as the neoliberalism of today (Brown 2015), tends to find a much more welcoming home in political science than left-wing alternatives such as Marxism.

POSITIVISM AND FEIGNED OBJECTIVITY ON THE "ROYAL ROAD TO SCIENCE"

We now consider a second factor in explaining Marxism's marginalization. In recent years, various interpretivist-inspired approaches—including ethnography, discourse analysis, and critical race theory—have attained increased visibility within political science (Funk 2019; Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2013). Furthermore, at least in IR, a rising minority of US scholars—nearly 40%—now identify as "non-" or "post-"positivists.[5] Whereas this trend could open space for Marxism, many such thinkers—including numerous postmodernists, poststructuralists, and postcolonialists—instead "have joined the mainstream in either neglecting or rejecting Marx" (Sclofsky and Funk 2018, 55).

Additionally, positivism—and its associated values of "objectivity" and "scientific neutrality"—still retains a dominant position within the discipline's mainstream, which aspires for political science to be taken seriously as a "science" in the same way as the field of economics (Schram and Caterino 2006). This is reflected in the extent to which positivist understandings—as embodied in texts by King, Keohane, and Verba (1994) and Van Evera (1997)—have played an outsized role in graduate curricula and defining what counts as "legitimate" scholarship (Schwartz-Shea 2003; Tickner 2005). Moreover, this is reflected in the fact that nearly 75% of 2016–2017 publications in the *American Political Science Review* were categorized by editors as "quantitative," "formal," or both (Koenig et al. 2018, 482). The story, of course, is not one of absolute domination; indeed, significant pockets of difference exist. Yet there nevertheless is a discernible positivist mainstream that is suspicious of outsiders.

How is this related to the marginalization of Marxism? Perhaps most problematic from a positivist perspective is that Marx refuses to adhere to a fact–value separation, between what *is* and what *ought* to be (Ollman 1971). His scientific work simply cannot be separated from his political project or "normative" concerns. Indeed, he sees the latter (i.e., real-world change) as the ultimate goal of the former (i.e., intellectual production). Hence, his famous observation: "The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to *change* it" (Marx 1888, 145; italics in original). Thus, interpreting and changing are inextricably linked in that "the purpose of understanding the class structure of capitalism is to understand the conditions of transforming it" (Wright 2015).

For the positivist mainstream, Marx (1964) poses several problems. First, he challenges the notion that scholarship could ever be "neutral," "objective," or "value-free" by relentlessly highlighting the embeddedness of our ideas within political–economic structures. Second, he evinces clear normative commitments relating to class, alienation, and exploitation. Marx *demands* that we put our scholarship at the service of the larger goal of human emancipation. Here, he enters into fundamental conflict with mainstream political science, which is highly suspicious of open normative commitments—or at least those that deviate from mainstream, "liberal" values (Oren 2013).

It is not surprising, then, that one of the discipline's disciplining effects is to socialize members into the belief—reinforced through tenure-related incentive structures—that publication for publication's sake is the proper scholarly goal (Schmidt 2001). In his account of how to "survive" academia as an "activist–scholar," the noted political scientist Sanford Schram (2013, 43) revealed how his graduate education dulled his radical commitments: "Doctoral study had made me stop thinking about being a revolutionary; more and more I just wanted to change society for the better rather than keep believing that I could be part of a movement to overturn the structure of power."

To be clear, positivism is willing to countenance that ethical concerns can motivate scholarship—and that our chosen research topics should be, in some vague sense, "consequential for political, social, or economic life" (King, Keohane, and Verba 1994, 15). Yet, somewhat contradictorily, it simultaneously suggests that such beliefs must be bracketed during the research process lest they contaminate the well from which "science" drinks.

Given this background, as our recent study concluded, "For those who proffer the problematic (and ideological) notion that social science can and should be value-free…Marx is thus indeed a haunting specter" (Sclofsky and Funk 2018, 53). In other words, contrary to political science's stated desire for ideological diversity, Marx is largely beyond the pale because he shatters the illusion that to be "apolitical" is either possible or desirable and undermines the claim that social scientists can be "neutral on a moving train" (Zinn 2018).

We must analyze the university's ideological functions within capitalist societies; interrogate the neoliberal effort to reconstitute institutions of higher education according to the logic of the corporation; and consider how they can be further remade as liberating spaces.

CONCLUSIONS

Our analysis indicates that political science is, indeed, insufficiently ideologically diverse but that a primary victim is Marxist-inspired thought. Whatever we make of Marxism,

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this is problematic, for we are largely excluding from consideration one of history's greatest thinkers as well as the most insightful critic of what has become a globally hegemonic capitalist system. In this sense, again, mainstream political science fails to live up to the very values that undergird the liberal university. Furthermore, there are political consequences for the lack of engagement with the Marxist tradition.

A plethora of recent scholarly and popular works seeks to make sense of the Trumpian moment (Fukuyama 2018; Goldberg 2018; Mounk 2018). For example, in their bestselling book, *How Democracies Die*, leading comparativists Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) delineate how the erosion—and willful destruction—of democratic norms and institutional safeguards facilitates the rise of demagogues.

Yet, although Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018, 228–29) recognize that defeating racially charged resentment politics must involve reducing income inequality and creating universal social programs, the authors evince no broader understanding of the structural, economic forces that underlie the "morbid symptoms" of our time. They do not acknowledge that such policy initiatives are impeded by the antidemocratic and radically neoliberal politics of economic elites and their intellectual enablers (MacLean 2017). They also do not acknowledge that capitalism, as Marx long ago recognized, is an especially crisis-prone system and that its instability, contradictions, and inequities create openings that fascist movements are well positioned to exploit (Polanyi 2001). Remarkably, as Connolly (2018, 1095) noted regarding *How Democracies Die*, "no citations appear in the Index to either neoliberalism or capitalism."

Such is the danger of the marriage of political science to liberalism and neglect of Marxism. Whereas the former can identify the existential political threat that our current authoritarian moment poses, the latter has a story to tell about root causes—not to mention potential solutions.

Yet—and although this would be a step in the right direction—it will not suffice merely to reform political science by "adding Marxism and stirring" to ensure greater ideological diversity. Going beyond immanent critique and into more radical terrain, we must rethink the entire structure of the modern university, which rather arbitrarily divides the study of social phenomena into separate disciplines. The effect is to foment a technocratic sensibility that impedes our ability, for example, to correctly perceive the interrelatedness of the political and economic "spheres."

Even more profoundly, then, we must analyze the university's ideological functions within capitalist societies (Heller 2016; Kamola 2019); interrogate the neoliberal effort to reconstitute institutions of higher education according to the logic of the corporation (Mittelman 2017); and consider how they can be further remade as liberating spaces where we engage in "radical studying for another world" (Meyerhoff 2019). Our call for greater "ideological diversity" in the discipline is one small step toward these ends.

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NOTES

1. Naturally, we must leave other factors unexplored here, including the long-standing tendency to tarnish the Marxist tradition by invoking the many unsavory regimes that misappropriated Marxism for their own ends. As we previously noted vis-à-vis perhaps the most emblematic case:

   > Although the characterization of the Soviet Union as Marxist was endlessly rejected by many Marxists, and despite the fact that its tenets and policies resonated in only the most superficial of ways with Marx's ideas, the Soviet Union's fall provided a useful opportunity for Marx's detractors who promoted the idea that Marx and Marxism were also withering away. It was, in other words, "guilt by association" (Kellner 1995, xi). As we argue, this inability—or refusal—to separate Marx from Soviet authoritarianism continues to inform mainstream political science's rejection of Marx (Sclofsky and Funk 2018, 51).

   This is quite distinct from the more nuanced questions, which have long fueled debate between Marxists and anarchists, of what should be the proper role of the state—if any—in revolutionary societies and to what extent Marx can be criticized for his statist leanings (Lovell 1984).
2. Although these rating schemes are deeply flawed, it nevertheless is true that these top-ranked programs play a significant gatekeeping role in the discipline. Unfortunately, similar data are not available for other subfields. However, it is likely that the story is more encouraging in political theory, where Marx is recognized as a canonical (if still controversial) thinker, but also that Marxism is even more marginalized in the subfield of US politics.
3. The same is true for members of various minority groups. For instance, the "Cite Black Women" movement has demonstrated how the voluminous scholarship produced by women of color is rarely cited or included in syllabi (www.citeblackwomencollective.org).
4. Notably, the same also has long been true of mainstream US politics (Bell 2014).
5. See https://trip.wm.edu/charts/#/bargraph/37/1250.

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