

RADICAL SOCIAL CRITICISM

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This paper discusses the concept of radical social criticism by sketching the burdens of proof a radical critic must shoulder. It provides guidelines for both radical critics of existing society (e.g., Marxists, feminists, and libertarians) and suggests lines of criticism that their more moderate opponents might pursue.

Nearly any reflective person has grounds for dissatisfaction with the social system in which he finds himself. Most of us are social critics of some sort, though some of us are more severe than others. A rough distinction can be drawn between the moderate or reformist critic and the radical critic: The former believes that the system is fundamentally sound, and/or his society is basically a good society. Any society falls short of its ideals and given that we are all sinners, it is not surprising that things don't go as well as they might. The moderate critic believes that existing institutions can and should be modified or augmented in various ways to permit or encourage society to approach more closely the appropriate ideals. The fact that most reflective people are at least moderate critics is not surprising. They usually have enough imagination to conceive of ways in which society might be better. Few thoughtful people believe that this is, at the level of social institutions, the best of all possible worlds.

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On the other hand, radical critics believe that existing social institutions are fundamentally unjust, immoral or otherwise objectionable. Feminists, Marxists, and libertarians all count as radical critics in this sense. It is a philosophically interesting question to ask what sort of challenge the radical critic offers. The main purpose of this discussion is to explicate the concept of radical social criticism, or radical critique as I call it, by outlining in a general way the burdens of proof a radical critic must shoulder. In doing this, I hope to provide a road map for evaluating any radical critique of existing society. In passing and by way of illustration, I shall make reference to Marx's radical critique of capitalist society.¹

To understand what radical social criticism involves, let us begin with a suggestive parallel in epistemology. Most epistemologists believe that they and others really do know something about the world. One of the most fundamental questions in epistemology is whether or not this is true. Because this question is so fundamental and because (good) philosophers like a good fight, the skeptical challenge to all or most of our knowledge claims is sometimes regarded as the main problem in epistemology. Skeptical arguments, such as those found in Descartes' first two meditations, seek to call into question whole categories of belief. Comprehensive skeptical arguments are supposed to show that most of the things we think we know are not really known at all. All belief is mere opinion.

The radical social critic aims at a parallel result. He believes that, contrary to popular opinion, the basic social institutions are unjust, immoral or otherwise objectionable. Just as the skeptic challenges the ordinary claims to knowledge that we make, the radical social critic challenges widely accepted pre-theoretical judgments about the justice or goodness of our basic social institutions.

The skeptic's opponents have often argued that the skeptic has set impossibly or unreasonably high standards for what counts as knowledge. Consequently, even if his arguments succeed, they only show that knowledge is unachievable in some non-standard sense of 'knowledge'. Whether or not this objection is well-taken, it points to an absolutely central question in the dispute between the skeptic and his opponents, *viz.*, 'What must the skeptic show in order for his position to be sustained?' An answer to this question will in part define skepticism itself. It also makes clear that the skeptic bears a burden of proof. He cannot simply assert that everything we believe about the world might be false or not known to be true; arguments have to be produced to show that genuine knowledge cannot be achieved.

A parallel question arises in the dispute between the radical

social critic and his more moderate adversaries: 'What must the radical critic show for his critique to be successful?' Put another way, 'What are the presuppositions of a (successful) radical critique of a society?' The radical critic, like the skeptic, bears a burden of proof. In what does that burden consist? The following are necessary conditions that a successful radical critique of a society must satisfy. All of them have a certain amount of intuitive appeal, but each will require some discussion and argumentation.

The first such condition I call 'the Critical Explanations Requirement.' A radical critic must identify social ills or injustices characteristic of existing society, and it must be shown that these ills or injustices are both pervasive and rooted in the society's basic institutions. For example, the Marxist charges that the structure of ownership relations which defines the capitalist economic system is responsible for the systematic exploitation of the worker by the capitalist. A libertarian might charge that the modern welfare state by its very nature systematically violates people's rights.

Failure to show that these ills or injustices are rooted in society's basic institutions would leave the radical critic open to the moderate reformer's contention that these problems can be significantly ameliorated without fundamentally changing the basic institutions of the society. Forestalling the moderate's challenge may require a fairly substantial theory to explain how the relevant social ills arise from the basic institutions of the society. For Marx, the defects of capitalist society fall under the headings of exploitation and alienation. Both exploitation and alienation are explained by appeal to fundamental structural and/or operational features of the capitalist economic system.

The second condition for a successful radical critique I call the 'Normative Theory Requirement.' The radical critic needs a normative theory to explain, or an argument to justify, the negative judgments referred to in the various critical explanations. For Marx, this requires answers to such questions as, 'What is wrong with exploitation?' and 'Why is alienation a bad thing?' A full-scale ethical theory would be sufficient to meet this condition, but it is unclear that it is necessary as well. This is so for two reasons: First, it may be that only part of a theory is needed to substantiate the relevant claims; secondly, and perhaps more importantly, it may be that a non-ethical theory of value and/or obligation would suffice. This latter point warrants a brief digression.

A normative theory need not be an ethical theory. The former is broader than the latter. What I mean by 'normative theory' is, roughly, any systematic attempt to identify fundamental values,

behavioral dispositions ("virtues") and/or action-guiding principles. How to distinguish moral from non-moral values, virtues, or imperatives are controversial questions. However, it is clear that social institutions and individual actions can be evaluated along a number of different dimensions, and some of these evaluations may issue in imperatives that agents believe are in conflict with, and even override, the demands of morality. Radical critics have characteristically shown a curious ambivalence about morality; many of them condemn existing societies as immoral and yet reserve the right to violate the dictates of (at least conventional) morality in pursuit of their ends. Whether or not this attitude is consistent is an interesting question which cannot be pursued here.

A third requirement for a successful radical critique of the existing order is what I call the Alternative Institutions Requirement. The radical critic needs to specify a set of alternative social institutions which he believes should and/or will replace the existing ones. This specification of alternatives must in turn meet the following conditions:

- a) These institutions meet the conditions for a good or just society insofar as the latter are specified by the relevant normative theory. Or, more weakly, it must be shown that these alternative institutions at least do not reproduce the problems of existing institutions.
- b) A plausible description/explanation of how the institutions will function can be given.
- c) These institutions can persist as stable social forms. Or, more weakly, there is some reason to believe that they are stable.

The rationale for this requirement and the detailed sub-requirements will be discussed shortly.

A fourth condition for a successful radical critique is that the radical critic must be able to tell a plausible story about how existing institutions can be destroyed or set on a course of fundamental change. Let us call this the Transition Requirement. All social systems that endure have mechanisms that tend to preserve their basic institutions. It seems at least possible that these mechanisms are powerful enough to prevent radical social change indefinitely far into the future. A radical critique presupposes that this is not the case. Looked at from another perspective, if the destruction of the existing order or the inauguration of the new society presupposes processes that are unlikely to occur, given

existing and foreseeable conditions, the radical vision of what society could and should be like can be justly labeled "utopian"; it has lost its significance for radical social change, and the radical critique must be judged a failure.

To sum up, the radical critic must meet four requirements for his or her radical critique to be a success: the Critical Explanations Requirement, the Normative Theory Requirement, the Alternative Institutions Requirement, and the Transition Requirement. The rationale or justification for each of these requirements is to be found in the ultimate purposes of a radical critique: To know the truth about the defects of the existing order and to lay the intellectual foundations for radical social change. In the case of the Critical Explanations Requirement, the Normative Theory Requirement, and the Transition Requirement, this is fairly obvious.

It is less obvious in the case of the Alternative Institutions Requirement. Why must a radical critic have alternative institutions in view to criticize successfully the existing order? This objection might be filled out in one of two ways: First, it might be said that getting rid of the old order for some people is simply a matter of pulling out. There is a long tradition, in both the East and the West, of withdrawal from the world in the face of human and natural evil. This withdrawal may be solitary or in artificially small groups (e.g., monasteries). These "rejectionists," as they might be called, usually locate social problems in human nature or at least the human condition, neither of which can be changed. However, it is doubtful that these rejectionists ought to be called 'radical social critics.' It would perhaps be more appropriate to refer to them as 'misanthropes' or even 'whiners'. (Whiners are people who merely complain about undesirable yet ineradicable features of the human condition, such as having to mow the lawn.)

A second objection to the Alternative Institutions Requirement stems from the observation that throughout history, successful (as well as unsuccessful) revolutionaries have usually had only the haziest idea, if any at all, about the institutions that ought to replace the ones they are intent on tearing down. It might be objected that a radical critic need provide no sketch of alternative social institutions, or at least he need not spell out in detail what these institutions will be. In short, isn't it enough to point out the defects of the existing society?

Two points can be made in response. First, radical criticism is essentially a cognitive enterprise. Radical action, i.e., revolution, might be successful even if the "theory" behind it is not. The requirements for a successful radical critique should not be con-

fused with the requirements for successful radical action, or more generally, for being a successful radical person.

Perhaps the most compelling reason why a successful radical critique requires a sketch of alternative institutional arrangements is to be found in the positions subscribed to by the radical critic's most formidable opponent: the moderate social critic. There are two lines of approach to social problems open to moderate critics. One kind of critic, whom we might call 'the liberal,' believes that the social evils identified by the radical can be eliminated, or virtually eliminated, by non-radical adjustments in existing institutions. By contrast, the conservative critic, as he might be called, maintains that the social ills identified by his radical counterpart are, in one way or another, part of the human condition (or perhaps post-feudal society). At most, they can be ameliorated, but their elimination is a purely utopian ideal that cannot be realized, or cannot be realized without regressing to a form of social organization which is impossible in the modern world. In addition, conservatives are inclined to argue that serious and systematic attempts to wipe out these social evils are likely to make matters worse. None of this may be true, and the liberal's optimism may be ill-founded, but the radical critic has to prove both of these points—and the only way to do this is to address the Alternative Institutions Requirement.

Moreover, radical social criticism is intended to have action-guiding significance on a society-wide scale. Whether the radical critic favors quick revolutionary destruction of the existing order or the gradual metamorphosis of the offending institutions, rationality requires that he have some idea of where he is going. Given that radical criticism is directed at the basic social institutions of the society, this guiding vision has to be articulated at the level of social institutions. Besides, no revolution results in the mere destruction of social institutions; new institutions always arise to take the place of the old ones. Finally, if social change unleashes dystopian forces, not only will the radical have failed to achieve his purpose, the results will provide some evidence for the conservative view that significant social change is a nearly always a change for the worse.

These considerations also support the detailed requirements spelled out above. That the alternative institutions must at least not face the same problems that face existing institutions is obvious. Regarding the second and third sub-requirements, if the radical critic has no idea of how alternative institutions might function or if he has no good reason to believe that they can persist as stable social forms, then, for all he knows, conservatives might

be right in their pessimistic assessment of the prospects for social change that is both fundamental and beneficial.

The burdens imposed by the Alternative Institutions requirement put considerable strain on the social sciences, notably, economics and sociology. The radical critic must describe institutional structures (such as an economic system) that do not as yet exist and explain how these structures prevent or preclude the recurrence of the social ills characteristic of the existing order. But these burdens are not unreasonable; after all, the radical critic claims to be able to explain existing social evils by appeal to structural or institutional features of existing society. So, for example, if Marx is to claim that the capitalist economic system is inherently alienating, then he ought to be able to explain how or why a socialist or communist economic system is not.

These considerations suggest a number of possible avenues of criticism that a radical critic's opponent might pursue: One powerful objection would be to substantiate the liberal's claim that the identified evils can be virtually eliminated by institutional tinkering. An equally powerful objection would be to substantiate the conservative claim that the social evils in question are ineradicable features of the human condition. Needless to say, making either of these cases would be very hard to do. A more modest, but more promising, approach would be to show that the alternative institutions envisioned by the radical critic would reproduce the social ills (at non-trivial levels) characteristic of the existing order. The historical evidence of what has actually happened in the aftermath of revolutionary institutional change suggests that this strategy might prove fruitful. If this is right, it provides some comfort for the conservative but by no means proves his position.

The upshot of all this is that the radical social critic must shoulder a substantial burden of proof, if he is to offer a successful radical critique of existing society. Unfortunately, the list of radical critics who have made a serious effort to shoulder these burdens is exceedingly short. It's not that defenders of the existing order have it any easier, but that is another story for another time.

1. In my forthcoming book, I reconstruct and critically evaluate Marx's radical critique of capitalist society as it pertains to the first and third requirements identified below. See N. Scott Arnold, *Marx's Radical Critique of Capitalist Society*, Oxford University Press, forthcoming, Fall, 1989.