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CLASSICAL CRITICAL THEORY, EPISTEMOLOGICAL DIALECTICS AND GENERAL ECONOMY. REPLY TO CRITICISM RAISED IN BELGRADE AND SHANGHAI

ABSTRACT

In my response, I initially defend my preference for classical Critical Theory, emphasizing its continued relevance in capitalist modernity, stressing that the epistemological approach does not imply dogmatism with regards to scientific theory or Historical Materialism, just as it does not imply closure with regards to political democracy. When it comes to the dialectics of the classics, I also defend an epistemological approach, arguing that the dialectics aiming for truth implies critique and negativity. However, confronted with the duality of transcendental ideas and historical relativity, I express my confidence in human intuition. Following Hegel, determinate negation must sublimate the intuitively conceived universality to a new conception that contains the result of the negation. Finally, I do not see how the conceptual aporias of general economy can be solved by the current political degrowth project. Still, politics is what we need more of, namely social democracy.

KEYWORDS

dialectics, capitalism, critical theory, epistemology, negation, general economy

It is a true privilege to have the possibility to think through one's arguments, express them in writing and have them published. Attempting to conceptualize intuitions about ideas and their realizations, it is an even greater privilege to have these arguments scrutinized by experts within one's own area of research. It is therefore with both gratitude and reverence that I take one more round with some of the main subjects that I discussed in *Capitalism, Alienation and Critique* (Sørensen 2019a). Even though academic arguments today seldom reach the public without having been reviewed and revised a number of times, and even though this is of course also the case with the book just mentioned, the critique that I received at the seminars in Belgrade and Shanghai, some of which we now have in writing, clearly tells me that there is still work to be done.¹

¹ As I write these words in the middle of the 2020 pandemic, an era seems almost way past when we as philosophical intellectuals would meet regularly around the globe and

Presently, I will confront and try to answer some of the critical points in the comments above. They were originally raised at two seminars, that is, first by Marjan Ivković, Srđan Prodanović and Milan Urošević at the University of Belgrade at the institute that was established in the 1980s in former Yugoslavia for the legendary Praxis group, and later at the East China Normal University in Shanghai by Tong Shijun, David Rasmussen and Andrew Benjamin. To continue and improve on the line of thought that I have been pursuing in the book, in the following I will focus on some of the main issues raised. Of course, I cannot answer all the questions posed, even though they may be important, but I have tried to collect various comments under three headlines, namely Critical Theory, dialectics and political economy that are also the main pillars in the book presently discussed. The overall arguments therefore, to a large degree, reflect the fundamental line of thought in the book discussed, just as I will reuse references from the book. Nevertheless, I hope, thanks to the challenges posed by the good friends and colleagues just mentioned, to be able to think through a bit better some of my reasoning concerning the said issues.

Initially, I defend my preference for classical Critical Theory, emphasizing its continued relevance in capitalist modernity, stressing that the epistemological approach does not imply dogmatism with regards to scientific theory or Historical Materialism, just as it does not imply ignoring political democracy (A.). When it comes to the dialectics of the classics, I also defend an epistemological approach, arguing in particular that the dialectics aiming for truth implies critique, negativity and destruction, but that this may be interpreted ontologically to have positive implications for the realization of the full human being (B.). With such a position, apparently I get caught between transcendental ideas and historical relativity, thus recurring to a simple intuition when I criticize injustice and alienation – and this I admit, emphasizing my confidence in human intuition despite ideology (C.). Having stressed the negative character of dialectics, the question is of course where this negativity should be directed and, following Hegel, determinate negation must sublimate the intuitively conceived universality to a new conception that contains the result of the negation. Hence, determinate negation does not develop a critical theoretical analysis while preserving the original criticism (D.). Changing the scene, I do not see how the conceptual aporias of general economy can be solved by the current Degrowth project, which is political in the traditional sense in which the general economy is not (E.). Finally, I also defend my rather traditional idea

discuss issues of common interest for the benefit of further inquiries. Allow me therefore to express my nostalgia for those days of scholarly enthusiasm and innocence and my gratitude to those good colleagues who contributed in this spirit to the said seminars in November 2019. In particular, I am grateful to those who afterwards formulated their concerns in writing, and whom I now hope to respond to in a satisfactory way. However, gratitude must also be extended to those close colleagues who initiated and organized these memorable events, thus instantiating this very old and venerable institution of inviting scholars to meet their critics in person for extended questioning, discussion and arguments about matters of common concern.

of politics against suggestions to reconceptualize the political, adding that precisely because of the present global challenges, traditional politics is what we need more of (F.). And this is where I come out of the closet as a social democrat, although maybe in a sense that may be difficult to recognize for those normally aligned with this agenda. I thus believe that to retain a viable idea of republican social democracy, we must retain both the principled critique of capitalism and the recognition of the sovereign desire for subjectivity (G.).

A. Classical Critical Theory is Relevant as Epistemology

Capitalism can be criticized in many ways and for many reasons (Tormey 2013), and my point of departure is the combined experience of social injustice and alienation (Sørensen 2019a: 2). Defining the original position of Critical Theory, Max Horkheimer argued that, in a historical period as the present one, “the true theory must be critical rather than affirmative” (Horkheimer 1988b: 216; see also Sørensen 2019a: 11–12), and with this theoretical position, I can still concur. Furthermore, he famously placed himself in a double “front position” between the positivism and metaphysics of his era, and with this I also concur. Today, however, as I read my critics and as a practical addition, maybe I should rather position myself as confronting both Political Liberalism and Historical or Dialectical Materialism. In accordance with the former, I thus accept the challenge to spell out in greater detail the normative political project that the said criticism must presuppose and imply, but this project I would rather title social democracy than liberal democracy (Sørensen 2019a: 23). As to the latter, i.e. materialism, I also think that a comprehensive normative project must involve critical accounts of the real societal matter that prompts the project, and that the two main pillars of such accounts regarding method and content are, respectively, dialectics and economy.

What I pursue is both a normative grounding for social and political critique and a conceptual understanding of the dynamics and the logic of the political economy that bears responsibility for the societal pathologies thus criticized. The account that I am looking for is thus from the outset a critical account, it is a conceptual, structural and historical account rather than one of individual actions, and as I have been raised intellectually in the late 20th century, such an account is best labeled a ‘critique of political economy’. This was the label chosen by Marx for his studies of the economy, and in most of the 20th century, such a critique was mostly conducted by various kinds of Marxists. Even though the Critical Theory of the 1930s did not focus much on economy, Marx’s critique of political economy was clearly presupposed in the critical social and political philosophy offered, and it is in this perspective that I consider myself a cultural Marxist (Sørensen 2019a: 4).

Now, as one of the grand old men of the contemporary Critical Theory community, Rasmussen has emphasized that in relation to traditional Marxism, classical Critical Theory represents an epistemological turn (Rasmussen 2004). This he reconfirmed at the Shanghai seminar (Rasmussen 2019: 5), just

as he recognizes my efforts in this direction. In the Kantian tradition, an epistemological turn implies taking seriously Humean skeptical arguments, but also attempting, through theory of knowledge (*Erkenntnistheorie*) or theory of science (*Wissenschaftstheorie*), to overcome such skepticism (Sørensen 2019: 24–26). Being thus committed to both social and epistemological critique, this implies that Critical Theory is committed to both justice and truth as criteria of validity, and that it recognizes a principled skepticism in relation to general claims about ideals and reality, when it comes to both politics and science, be that in theory or praxis.

This being the case, it is somehow puzzling that Rasmussen now finds it problematic to define Critical Theory at all in any “specific” sense. Consequently, this implies that even Horkheimer’s and Marcuse’s original definition of Critical Theory “was problematic from the very beginning”, and that, by implication, this is also the case with my endorsement of their conception as classical and thus worth taking seriously. Still, Rasmussen obviously himself presupposes a definition of Critical Theory, but rather than defining it in terms of epistemology, apparently it is conceived of in terms of sociology and cultural hermeneutics, namely as “we who have labored in” its “fields”, “a living tradition” that refer to some roots in Frankfurt am Main and “can be affirmed through its various manifestations”.

Within the epistemological framework, Horkheimer can be attributed the view that Critical Theory is “science” in the Hegelian sense, i.e. philosophy, but, as Rasmussen emphasizes, today, at least in the Anglo-sphere, the connotations of the word ‘science’ have changed radically. This displacement of meaning, however, seems to be forgotten, when he claims that Critical Theory is a “Marxist science”, and “as a science” it is grounded “in science”. Rasmussen thus seems to have succumbed to a categorical displacement from, at least, the epistemological ‘theory of science’ to a social ‘scientific theory’, which he then attributes to the founders of Critical Theory and criticizes as dogmatic and naive. An epistemological turn, however, does not mean that one has a specific scientific theory granting special access to truth; it is rather the exact opposite.

This displacement is also demonstrated with regards to the term ‘theory’. Interestingly, Rasmussen thus admits that he has for a long time been uneasy with the idea of ‘critical theory’ and even of ‘theory’ as such, finding them “too orthodox (...), too narrow”, preferring instead the alleged “openness” of “social criticism” (Rasmussen 2019: 5). Again, apparently he thus identifies the ‘theory’ of Critical Theory with an explanatory theory, as it can be encountered within normal social science. However, as I have argued at length referring to Kant, Carnap, Popper et al., theory of knowledge and theory of science are not explanatory theories of empirical causal processes; they are philosophical disciplines dedicated to understanding knowledge and truth in order to overcome abstract skepticism (Sørensen 2010). Hence, taking the notion of epistemology seriously, Critical Theory cannot be just another explanatory social scientific theory. It is precisely this traditional notion of scientific theory that Critical Theory explicitly criticizes.

When I claim that Critical Theory is “*the* singular theory of society”, it is in the same sense in which we have a theory of knowledge or theory of science, i.e. philosophical disciplines that delimit a certain part of philosophical issues. Theory in this sense does not attempt “to explain what [is] actually happening in society”, not even in terms of Marxian categories such as the forces and relations of production. At most, Critical Theory can be comprehensive and singular in the same sense that skepticism or realism are comprehensive and singular, namely as normative programs for how to relate to knowledge. When Rasmussen argues that Critical Theory should be “critique not theory” (Rasmussen 2019: 10), it is thus a false opposition.

Critical Theory is not a particular theory explaining, say, historical progress of society or the recurring economic crises of capitalism, or science as an institution, within the framework of Historical or Dialectical Materialism. Critical Theory is originally an epistemological critique concerning the possible truth of traditional theory fueled by the social and political critique expressed by the said materialisms. The “epistemological orientation” of Critical Theory does not mean that Horkheimer, or I, claim to possess “the one, true theory”; on the contrary, Critical Theory means being critical with regards to the truth claims of traditional theories that merely subsume and explain their objects under general theoretical concepts without considering critically and self-reflectively the societal aspect of scientific theorizing.

Furthermore, Critical Theory does not mean that theoretical and philosophical speculation should be abandoned, quite the opposite. Following Hegel, however, the full truth of a conceptual idea, say freedom or science, is only revealed in the realization of the concept, and this is why ideology critique is a hallmark of Critical Theory. The object of critique is the totality of capitalist society. In particular, when it comes to mainstream economics or classical political economy, their realization of economic freedom in the real societal totality of private property proves to be one of bondage, i.e. misery and unjust material living conditions. The realization of this material deficit, i.e. the resulting human suffering and harm, demonstrates that these theories of economy at best express a restricted truth of the matter in question, at worst that they are outright false, and this calls for a conceptual critique of the theories as ideology, such as it was conducted by Marx and Engels.²

Such a normative program for social science and social philosophy was what Horkheimer had in mind in the famous 1937 article. That is why he at first subsumed the research program of the legendary institute under the label ‘materialism’, but probably also why he abandoned it, thus creating a distance to the orthodox Marxist labels Historical and Dialectical Materialism. Regarding the former, classical Critical Theory represented an explicit break

² Bearing in mind the seminal role Hegel attributed to skepticism and negation in his *Phenomenology* (Sørensen 2019a: 43–45, 186–189), it is a bit surprising that Rasmussen attributes to Habermas the claim that Hegel would have nothing to do with critique, and that Marx should have learned everything in this regard from Kant (Rasmussen 2019: 7).

with any kind of what Rasmussen calls “economic determinism” in relation to “historical progress”, emphasizing instead the openness of history as well as the political importance of subjective consciousness and theoretical knowledge. As Marcuse emphasizes, what makes historical progress necessary is reason, freedom and happiness, i.e. our idea of humanity, not any supra-individual mechanics or fate (Sørensen 2019a: 34–35).

As Rasmussen indicates, Critical Theory is indeed a contested category, and rather than an empty signifier applicable to various manifestations of a tradition, ultimately he also defines it in terms of a specific content, namely as “political theory”, and even as “a theory of democracy”, opposed to “social theory” (Rasmussen 2019: 7–8). In fact, Rasmussen chooses a rather confrontational stance, arguing that, in relation to the constitutive “pluralism” of modern societies, claiming Critical Theory to be the right theory would be “tyrannical” (Rasmussen 2019: 8). Moreover, as he argues, “it is impossible to justify Critical Theory on epistemological grounds if one wishes to justify it as political theory for democratic society” (Rasmussen 2019: 10), and ultimately, this makes him discard not only me and the classics of Critical Theory, but even Habermas and Honneth.

In contrast to Rasmussen, and given the possible displacements concerning ‘theory’, on this level I prefer to talk about ‘philosophy’. Consequently, in the volume presently under scrutiny, i.e. the first of the trilogy *Dialectics, Deontology and Democracy*, I primarily discuss Critical Theory within the horizon of social philosophy, which has been the designation of the chair at the Frankfurt University that was first created for Horkheimer and held until recently by Honneth. For Horkheimer, however, the notion of social philosophy includes discussions of state, law and economy (Sørensen 2019a: 78), i.e. issues today typically dealt with in political philosophy.

Regarding volume two on moral philosophy, when I discuss the discourse ethics developed by Habermas, I of course recognize the epistemological grounds of his skepticism concerning ethical values and moral norms, and those grounds are also fundamental to his discourse theory of democracy, which I discuss in the third volume on political philosophy. In that volume I try to develop and defend an idea of social democracy that is robust, but still open to principled criticism and scrutiny. Hence, as I announce quite clearly in the first volume (Sørensen 2019a: 19–23), I dedicate the final volume to a critical but still affirmative determination of democracy in a very wide sense, and for this purpose I have conducted critical studies of Habermas’ political philosophy and philosophy of law (Sørensen 2015a, 2020a).

Interestingly, despite declaring the epistemological approach of the most prominent figures from the tradition of Critical Theory to be futile for political theory, Rasmussen still praises Habermas’ work on democracy. This possible inconsistency put aside, rejecting the epistemological approach of the main classics of Critical Theory as *prima facie* undemocratic seems a rather narrow, exclusionary and possibly self-defeating strategy for the dear living tradition, and definitely misaligned with the fact of pluralism that Rasmussen

cherishes as constitutive for modernity. In contrast, I may claim to recognize a much broader, inclusive and liberal idea of the said theory, including not just various Frankfurt descendants, but also non-German hangarounds such as e.g. Rasmussen, Tong, Ivković and myself. Hence, in the volume questioned presently, I argue that the classical 20th century version retains its relevance with insights valuable also for 21st century Critical Theory (Sørensen 2019a: 24), which in the following two volumes I demonstrate by integrating them in discussions of contemporary ethics and political philosophy.

B. The Dialectics of Critical Theory is Destructive

After this confrontation with theoretical aspects of Rasmussen's version of the Political Liberalism that has been so popular in the Prague community of critical theorists since Habermas worked on *Between Facts and Norms* (Sørensen 2017b), let me now turn to issues more predominant when Critical Theory confronts Dialectical and Historical Materialism. Whereas for Rasmussen, Hegel's ideas of science and dialectics are "no longer [to be] taken seriously" (Rasmussen 2019: 7), these subjects are precisely what interests Tong.

As with many other important issues, dialectics is subject to continued argumentation that emphasizes various distinctions. In *Capitalism, Alienation and Critique* (Sørensen 2019a) I argue that the suspicions voiced by Tong with regard to dialectics should be directed to the particular ontological and practical conception of dialectics that he has inherited from Mao and Dao, including the interpretations of Hegel's logic and natural philosophy by, respectively, Lenin and Engels. Instead, I offer the idea of dialectics that I grew up with and still defend, namely an epistemological conception of dialectics focusing on the experiential progression of consciousness to reason, spirit and absolute knowledge, i.e. dialectics as it was most prominently displayed in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, in which the concept of experience plays a crucial role (see, e.g., Vieweg, Welsch 2008). Still, in *Capitalism, Alienation and Critique*, I discuss antinomies between different conceptions of dialectics, referring in particular to Wolfgang Röd (1974). However, this variation and plurality with regards to dialectics, and especially the opposition between, on the one side, experience, negation and education, and on the other, logic, system and ontology, may not be easily detected at first (see, e.g., Cirne-Lima 2019), and even in comprehensive works it goes rather unnoticed (see, e.g., Holz 2011).

As a dedicated dialectician, and with roots in both Dialectical Materialism and Critical Theory, Tong is however acutely aware of these antinomies. Following his teacher Feng Qi, he argues for integrating epistemological and ontological aspects of dialectics as well as theory and practice. Moreover, pairing elements of traditional Chinese metaphysics with discussions of modernity in 20th century Chinese philosophy, he claims the continued fruitfulness of exploring such "national traditions" when pursuing "the critical theoretical course of immanent critique of modern society at the international or cross-cultural level". And to Tong, immanent critique is "the core of dialectics".

Within this ambitious and comprehensive philosophical program, Tong wants to defend his core concepts against my teasing critique in *Capitalism, Alienation and Critique*. Tong thus explains that for Feng dialectics is indeed a matter of logic rather than ontology and that dialectical logic rests on the basis of formal logic. Moreover, dialectical logic in this sense reconstructs the “forms of thought”, or what Kant would call “categories”. As for Lenin (see, e.g., Fogarasi 1972: 22–23), dialectical logic in this sense thus apparently covers much of the same ground as epistemology, focusing according to Tong on “both the knowing activities and the known objects”. For Feng the validity of logic is thus determined by its reflection of reality “as a totality of conflicting potentials or possibilities”, and therefore dialectical logic also has a value for the reality of human practice, being in this sense “both ontological and epistemological”.

This point of departure regarding the conception of dialectics is of course quite different from mine. Still, across thousands of miles and linguistic particularities, we share the experience of dialectics being used as a term to signal belonging to the kind of communism that was so powerful in the 1970s. Of course, in Denmark communists were not ruling the country, and “dialectics as a mere tool of power” was not as powerful as in China. Still, Marxism itself and various kinds of communists were very influential in the intellectual public sphere, and accusing an opponent in a discussion of being undialectical was a serious strike to his or – less often – her possibilities of continuing the argument (Sørensen 2019: 211–213). Nevertheless, both Tong and I want to retain dialectics as a core issue in serious philosophical discussions, and this is why I will continue to emphasize some points where we may still differ, both with regards to basic categories and philosophical temper.

As fellow critical theorists, we thus share today a lot of common ground. For Tong a basic reference is Marx who declared dialectics to be, in its essence, critical and revolutionary. However, when it comes to immanent critique, his main reference is Adorno, who emphasizes that this kind of opposition does not present something external, or transcendental to the position under scrutiny, but forces it to go by its “own force” to where it “cannot afford to go”. Meeting the opponent on his own ground, a successful refutation becomes much more devastating. Tong, however, wants to move beyond mere debate, and referring to Marcuse’s *One-Dimensional Man* he can claim that “contradiction belongs to the very nature of the object of thought, to reality”, that in reality “reason is still unreason”, and that reason must be brought to what Marx would call a reasonable form.

Again, we are on common ground. However, as rightly emphasized by César Ortega-Esquembre in his critical review of *Capitalism, Alienation and Critique* (Ortega-Esquembre 2021: 223), the best place to consult Marcuse’s conception of dialectics is *Reason and Revolution*. In this masterpiece, dialectics is presented as a way to deal with the fact that reality is contradictory, i.e. the experience that “man and nature exist in conditions of alienation, exist as ‘other than they are’” (Marcuse 1969: ix). However, apparently, and maybe in the interest of harmonious integration, Tong does not pursue further the

implications of Marcuse's critical approach. Hence, as Marcuse reads Hegel, it is clear that dialectics and critique must imply negativity, i.e. that the first step towards realizing the true concept of reason is a negative one (Marcuse 2000: 123, Sørensen 2019a: 226–227), and in this aspect, I suspect that I go further than Tong. Since reality is possibly reason, the contradiction is precisely that it is not, i.e. that reality is not what it potentially could be, what it is supposed to be. As Marcuse puts it, “the facts do not correspond to the concepts imposed by common sense and scientific reason” (Marcuse 1969: vii). Reason is not reason, justice is not justice, democracy is not democracy.

This is the contradiction, or the “internal inadequacy” (Marcuse 1969: viii), to which Hegelian dialectics responds. This is why we criticize reality as it is, this is why negativity is appropriate to make reality reasonable, i.e. to realize reason as true reason. Moreover, as Marcuse stresses against “various obscurantists”, “Reason, and Reason alone, contains its own corrective”. This is also why dialectics primarily is a matter of epistemology. What we want is “knowledge” (Marcuse 1969: xiii). To comprehend reality is to comprehend what things really are, and that means rejecting “their mere factuality”. The factual reality is thus rejected as false in order to realize the truth of reality, and this is not only a process in “thought” but also in “action” (Marcuse 1969: ix). Consequently, for Marcuse as for Hegel, the “governing principle of dialectical thought” is not immanent critique; it is the famous “determinate negation”, which, for Marcuse at least, is ultimately a “political negation” (Marcuse 1969: xi–xii).

Dialectics is thus a “dialectics of negativity” (Marcuse 2000: 282), and rather than immanent critique, determinate negation is the core of dialectics. As Hegel quoted Spinoza, *omnis determinatio est negatio*, all determination is negation. This is what unites interpretation and change, or theory and practice, in dialectics. Endorsing such a “destructive” (Marcuse 1969: xii) conception of dialectics, however, also has implications for what it can mean to unite the epistemological and ontological aspects of dialectics. Thus ultimately Tong also concurs with an epistemological understanding of dialectics, setting aside “dialectics as ontology” and “objective dialectics”. Hence, referring to Habermas, dialectics is best understood as a theoretical activity with a “practical intention” or with “practical concerns”, changing the world by discursively “interpreting” it.

However, for Critical Theory this is too modest a conception of dialectics. As I see it, dialectics has more to contribute when it comes to realizing the true human reality. Keeping in mind Marcuse's Heideggerian formation and Hegel's notion of *Bewußt-sein*, i.e. conscious being, if ontology refers to human being, then the emphasis on negativity could be said to be about how to realize true self-conscious human being, i.e. how reason, knowledge and truth are to be realized through theoretical critique and practical contestation in a real society. This understanding of ontology would leave more room for maintaining in the idea of dialectics the dual aspects of epistemology and ontology as well as those of theory and practice. Dialectics could thus be trusted to provide not only an interpretation of the world, but also knowledge about the true reality of human being and how it can be realized.

C. Dialectical Epistemology does not imply Relativism

Dialectics is also on the agenda of the Belgrade institute. Regarding Urošević, I can easily recognize the careful reconstruction of my line of thought, apart from the fact that the danger of nihilism and decisionism in Critical Theory I attribute to Honneth's misinterpretation of Nietzsche rather than to Nietzsche himself (Sørensen 2019a: 74). I therefore accept the challenge as posed, namely how I may justify my particular standards for a society without unnecessary alienation and inequality without recurring to "intuition", and how I can claim the fact of exploitation "*prima facie*".

The answer, however, will of course reveal some disagreements, also concerning some basic terms and fundamental ideas. Regarding the fact of exploitation, as I see it, the extraction of surplus-value from production and the resulting accumulation of capital is only possible due to the recognized and well-guarded property rights to the means of production. This is of course something emphasized theoretically by Marx and Engels in their critique of political economy, but today, this simple fact must be considered correct until proven otherwise, i.e. *prima facie*.

Regarding the value of intuition in normative matters, following especially Marcuse, I have a much greater confidence in the cognitive capacity of human beings than what Marx expresses in the *Critique of the Gotha Program*. As Marcuse argues, we may be under the "rule of false consciousness", which makes it "difficult to decide what is a fact and what is not", but "the layer of falsehood [...] can be broken". People can "learn to see and to think independently and to break the power of standardized information and indoctrination". To do so is an "intellectual task", and Marcuse therefore directs his hopes to the "campuses" (Marcuse 2001: 93). Human reason provides us with ideas that – enforced by idealist philosophy and critical social science – can function as critical instances in relation to the ideology of the real existing "capitalist social system". This is what makes ideology critique possible; hence, as Urošević suspects, I do recognize "transcendent norms", namely the universal ideas of, say, truth, justice and freedom.

Moreover, I also recognize the possible contradiction between recognizing that such transcendent notions are universal and that they rely on historical processes not yet completed. Again, my answer is that I tend to attribute a much greater role to the potentials of human cognition, individually as well as collectively than most Marxist materialists, be they Historical or Dialectical. As Hegel presents the logic of human consciousness, we are able to form the idea of something, which can subsequently become more precise and consistent through the experience gained from successive determinate negations (Hegel 1970: 73–74, Sørensen 2019a: 43–44, 186–188). We may thus have a vague idea of, say, justice, in this case typically due to injustices experienced. Similarly, we may have an idea of freedom due to experiences of a real lack of freedom, an idea of logic due to experiences of contradictions, or an idea of democracy from a rule of the people only halfway realized. In all cases, I

recognize *prima facie* the subjective validity of the experiences. To be a real human being means to have ideas of justice, freedom and logic, and, in many periods of history, also of democracy.

However, that does not mean that these ideas are objectively true with regards to their content. This is why negation is so important for dialectics. As reasonable conscious beings, such experiences of ours are always possible to contest and criticize with reference to transcendent standards. These standards, however, are themselves inherent in the said experiences. To recognize something as unjust, one must have an, at least implicit, intuitive and vague, concept of justice, and in that sense the critique is always immanent, claiming its truth with reference to both correspondence and coherence. Still, the core of dialectical critique is the determinate negation. At best, the negation of an idea prompts a cognitive process towards greater precision, more consistency and better justification of the idea in question. This process happens in time, possibly reaching historical completion and maybe even universal completion. This final hope is what many cynics and self-proclaimed realists denounce as unrealistic and utopian, but, being idealist in the same sense as Marcuse and Hegel, I prefer to retain the hope of possibly realizing transcendent ideal standards, thus making them immanent in real society and real history.

Hence, within this idea of dialectics, the truth of reality is not that it is inherently dialectical and thus subject to eternal change, admitting no transcendental standards, such as it is often conceived of in Dialectical Materialism. For me this expresses metaphysics in the most classical sense, namely a kind of vitalism, taking organic life as the model of reality *per se* (Sørensen 2019a: 176). The dialectics that I pursue, does ultimately also become metaphysical, but Hegel's initial steps in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* are epistemological, taking both skepticism and experience seriously. Ideally, dialectics thus makes us more knowledgeable with regards to reality, and, as I argue, for Marcuse it also enables liberation from one-dimensional thought (Sørensen 2019a: 225–230).

This idealism, however, does not imply neutrality with regards to struggling classes, as Urošević suggests – quite the contrary. When Foucault dismisses any transcendent norm of justice as unjustified and merely expressing “bourgeois” ideology, he is left with the problems of decisionism and relativity. Why should one class be right rather than the other? There must be an additional reason why we should support the proletariat and not the bourgeoisie. Moreover, endorsing both dialectics and transcendent standards is not a contradiction; on the contrary, they presuppose and mutually condition each other. Even though we cannot claim to know the truth of, say, justice in detail, we can still experience and thus know when a society is unjust and thus not true.

The final truth is that human consciousness cannot sustain the experience of unnecessary and unjustified human suffering. A societal system that generates and admits such experiences cannot be true. Witnessing the sufferings of others is unbearable to the human being. This is the final transcendental standard that has survived for generations despite all kinds of pain and brutality. This is the reason why the proletariat and subalterns in general should receive

preferential treatment. Fortunately, in many cases this intuitive standard is strong enough to negate and break through the bourgeois ideology and false consciousness, and to call human beings to do their duty to each other and to humanity at large. This is why affluent people do not want to confront poverty and misery, this is why they prefer gated communities and offshore hideouts, this is why they end up spending so much on charity. It is in this fundamental humanity, i.e. this moral anthropology, that we must place our hopes. This is the final transcendental justification when we criticize capitalism.

D. Determinate Negation develops Universality, not Totality

Scrutinizing further the dialectical method of classical Critical Theory, Ivković focuses on Hegel's determinate negation that he conceives of as a "method of social critique", "a critical operation" working as "a critical tool of critical theory". Interestingly, however, this time the challenges posed get an unexpected twist, some of the core concepts apparently being displaced, at least partly due to an ambiguous and potentially misleading quotation of mine.

Hence, when I both affirm Helga Gripp's statement that a totality is characterized by a continuous dialectical mediation of the universal and the particular, and mention that Critical Theory criticizes capitalism as a totality, Ivković of course concludes that this characterization also holds for capitalism. This conclusion determines his first sub-question, namely whether in the encounter of a particular instance of injustice, what we encounter is a "dialectical movement of universality and particularity". However, considering more closely my affirmative reference to Gripp regarding her characterization of dialectics, I must admit that I thereby contribute to the slide that I wish to avoid, namely from dialectics in the epistemological sense defended above towards dialectics as the meta-method of science regarding its empirical object field, often assuming the vitalist, and sometimes even mechanical, metaphysics of Dialectical Materialism.

Being somehow seduced by the elegant wording of Gripp, I failed to oppose in principle a factual totality as it was criticized by Marx et al. with the universality of ideals to be realized by Hegel. In the latter case, the particularity of any ideal realized in fact is the challenge to be overcome. Accordingly, and following the idealism of Hegel, I can conceive of a universal truth that is to be realized of, say, "the good society" and, as Hegel sees it, the truth of an idea, or a concept, depends on it being realized. However, the real realization of any idea always proves to be particular and thus not universal. The experience of a specific particular realization fuels what Hegel characterizes as a determinate negation, a particular recalcitrant fact – the black swan – thus negating the universal truth conceived of, which then produces a determinate result, namely the knowledge of what was not sufficient to hold as a universal ideal. Hence, today when so many people are forced to beg on the streets, or flee their native country, our society – globally speaking – cannot after all be that good a society. This is the experience that negates the ideal idea that

is supposed to legitimate our present social reality, the experience that both annihilates and retains, the famous German “*Aufheben*” that is often characterized as *sublation*. In Hegel’s epistemological idea of dialectics, this is the core operation that moves experience toward knowledge (Hegel 1970: 94, 106, Sørensen 2019a: 173).

To spell out the conceptual contrast between universality and totality in relation to the universal idea of the good society, i.e. our knowledge of the ideal society, the totality of capitalism is nothing more than a particular factual realization of the said idea, i.e. a particular historical totality negating the universality of the idea of freedom, a reason for skepticism with regards to the knowledge allegedly expressed in liberal thought. Being realized as flawed and thus false, it provides a reason for thinking through again the idea of the good society. The determinate negation, however, provides a result, namely experiential knowledge about what did not hold. Consequently, the determinate negation is not a Popperian falsification where we start from scratch again. We have – so to say – learned by experience (Sørensen 2019a: 173). Since the idea of the good society implies societal justice, since even the idea of society necessarily implies justice, a specific experience of injustice in a real society provides a determinate negation of the particular idea that has been realized.

Hegel’s determinate negation is not a negation to operate with in relation to “the immediate particularity of the phenomenon that we are criticizing”. It is a negation that questions the immediate universality of the particular idea, or ideal, that we believe in. It is not about developing and expanding our experience and empirical understanding of a “particular instance of injustice” to reach a full theoretical understanding of “how the societal totality of capitalism is instantiated in this particular experience of injustice”. Therefore, I do not consider Hegelian dialectics a diagnostic tool of Critical Theory. Furthermore, sublation does not mean that we preserve “an element of the immediate experience of injustice”, but that in the idea of justice to be developed, we preserve an element – an active ‘Moment’, as Hegel puts it (Hegel 1970: 77–78) – of the immediate universal idea of justice just negated, and in addition the experience of its fallibility. When Prodanović argues to acknowledge the “common-sense articulation of social issues”, questioning my insistence on the “predominance” of theory over practice, the point is thus that the universal idea and the immediate experience may be valid even though the particular articulation is not.

I understand and sympathize with Ivković’s argument that if “theoretical diagnosis [...] is to inspire political action”, it needs something like the preservation of the immediate experience of injustice. However, as a social and political philosopher of education, I am not interested in such a diagnosis in itself. I want an argument that is practical in the sense that it motivates sufficiently to take action in the service of justice and human flourishing, not just an inspired reaction to what is perceived momentarily as unjust, and the question of what motivates one normatively in this sense is an old philosophical problem. Hence, a classical challenge is the weakness of the will, i.e. the problem

of *akrasia* (Lemmon 1962). Also nowadays, *akrasia* plays a prominent role, for instance, in the famous claim of Slavoj Žižek, namely that we know what is wrong but we are doing it anyway.

For me, however, sheer ignorance is still the main challenge. The Enlightenment is still not completed, and in this perspective, a theoretical diagnosis is of course relevant; however, rather than merely rely on inspiration from an innate human sense of justice, I emphasize the need for continued enlightenment, education and formation. I do believe that human beings are not only conscious, but also moral and poetic beings, but the right character education makes you even more receptive to truth, justice and beauty. In such a project, a theoretical diagnosis may play a part, but it cannot stand alone, not even assuming the sense of justice. So, we agree that a diagnosis is not sufficient, and since it is a little uncertain precisely what theory and thus the qualification ‘theoretical’ means in this context, I am not even sure that such a diagnosis is necessary.

Hence, for me the determinate negation does not mean that we try to distance ourselves from the immediate experience of injustice and understand the “interplay between the universal and the particular in this phenomenon”. As Ivković argues, within a totality of dialectical “mediation between the universal and the particular”, “a particular phenomenon” of, say, injustice is an instance of something universal, within, say, capitalism, e.g. the principle of exchange or commodification. Any “given experience of injustice” as a phenomenon in the empirical world should therefore be fitted into a “broader picture”, demonstrating that the “societal totality of capitalism” is instantiated in particular experiences of injustice. And with such a theoretical reconstruction of the scientific process I can easily sympathize, but this is not the Hegelian dialectics of the determinate negation that Horkheimer and I defend (Horkheimer 1988a: 258–286, Sørensen 2019a: 43–45).

Consequently, the questions developed as a result of Ivković’s first sub-question are answered in the negative. Regarding the second sub-question, as I see it, I do not share the understanding of “critique as dialectical movement, a distancing, a determinate negation”. Moreover, we should be happy to take up the challenge to develop “an alternative vision” of the good society, letting the universal idea of social democratic justice confront the all too real capitalist totality. And we should be happy to become more knowledgeable with regards to this comprehensive ideal thanks to the experiences gained by determinate negations. Determinate negation is what gives us experiences as we try to grasp reality in change. Therefore, we should not accept that a comprehensive vision of social democracy can be characterized as “totalizing”, “abstract and static”.

It may very well be that the relative impotence of contemporary critique of capitalism is partly due to such convictions, which are widespread under headings such as positivism, phenomenism, constructivism, anti-essentialism, deconstructivism etc. However, such convictions should not be taken at face value. As I have argued elsewhere, anti- or post-metaphysical approaches to reality weaken social critique (Sørensen 2019b), and Marcuse would even

claim that empiricism mystifies the relation to reality (Sørensen 2019a: 222–224). Consequently, such positions must be shown to express ideology and false consciousness in the most classical Marxist sense. For instance, when capitalism is perceived positively as a concrete “dynamic totality” in contrast to an alleged static vision of the good society as social democracy, we should criticize the universal validity of the opposition static-dynamic as ideology, reminding ourselves that societal movement often reflects the fact that we run around blindly in the maze driven by desire and haunted by fear. Hence, as an idea of what we should strive for, social democracy is still the best candidate. This I will return to below.

E. General Economy is not just about Political Economy

Being formed intellectually in a period in which Marxist social criticism played a huge role in the public sphere, I am still preoccupied with political economy, and especially the critique of it. In fact, as I also mention in *Capitalism, Alienation and Critique*, I consider dialectics and the critique of political economy to be two essential pillars of the classical Critical Theory that I presently defend (Sørensen 2019a: 4). However, as it also becomes clear in the said book, my approach to the economy is influenced very much by French positivism and especially Georges Bataille (see also Sørensen 2012a). What I criticize is not just the injustice, alienation and reification implied by the unequal distribution of scarce resources reproduced by capitalist relations of production, but also the instrumental utilitarianism of the economic man typically assumed in contemporary economics. Bataille thus insists that when it comes to resources, rather than dealing rationally with scarcity, the real problem is how to handle the excess of energy that always confronts us.

However, as Prodanović recognizes in his presentation of my account of Bataille’s general economy, within such a combined perspective, Bataille ultimately faces some serious aporias, both in terms of ontology and when it comes to normative recommendations. Prodanović then asks if the recently developed idea of Degrowth has the potential to resolve those aporias, apparently suggesting that by applying the idea to everyday life, we could get to the point where our desires would become incompatible with overproduction and overconsumption, i.e. where desires equal needs – and that may very well be possible and advisable, especially taking on board Marcuse’s dialectical hopes regarding the potentials of human nature for peace and sensibility.

As Marcuse argues, nature, including human nature, is “a historical entity”, which is presently “bent to the requirements of capitalism”. The primary drives of human nature, aggression and sexuality, have been adapted socially and technically to commercial and military needs, and in general, “the violation of nature is inseparable from the economy of capitalism”. This historical character of however nature also means that it could be otherwise. As to nature in general, Marcuse is well aware of the problems of pollution and considers the ecology movement part of the political struggle. Regarding human nature,

and referring to the young Marx, Marcuse argues that it “would be different under socialism”, letting men and women “develop and fulfill their own needs and faculties in association with each other”. Most famous in this vision is the idea of a new “radical, nonconformist sensibility” that changes human nature “down into the instinctual and psychological level” (Marcuse 1972: 59–62). As Marx phrased it in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, the human being would appropriate nature as “species being”, unfolding through the “richness of man’s essential being” the richness of “subjective human sensibility (a musical ear, an eye for the beauty of form – in short, the *senses* capable of human gratification [...])” (Marx 1988: 108 Marcuse 1972: 64–65)).

For Bataille, however, human desires and human nature do not have the same kind of historical plasticity. Human being is basically and essentially a negation of nature, but it is only realized as a particular singular human subject, i.e. as a sovereign that negates the inner experience that is constitutive for the human being, although in a human way. Sovereignty is thus a negation of a negation, i.e. a negation of the result of the first negation, transgressing humanely the prohibitions that constitute humanity. Sovereignty is expressed through human squandering and consumption, disregarding instrumental production and servile accumulation, establishing instead a particular difference that makes a difference with regards to the universal human being. To be human means to experience being restricted by prohibitions regarding aggression and sexuality (Bataille 1987: 62–65, Sørensen 2019a: 153), to be sovereign means to be capable of transgressing them in a human way, for instance by letting the experience of momentary miraculous beauty trump the expected and planned productive utility (Bataille 1976a: 254–257), or by the murder that transgresses the most universal human prohibition (Bataille 1976a: 269). Sovereignty thus borders inhumanity, transgressing what is human without annihilating it. The desire to be sovereign is the desire to be free and unrestricted, to be a subject in itself, to experience and express oneself as a distinct singular subject in arts and transgressive acts.

Sovereignty in this emphatic sense is not easy to harmonize with Degrowth, at least not as it is conceived of in the *Vocabulary* of Giacomo D’Alisa, Federico Demaria and Giorgos Kallis (D’Alisa, Demaria, Kallis 2015). Nevertheless, as Prodanović mentions, the *Vocabulary* recognizes the inspiration from Bataille’s general economy and in particular the notion of expenditure (D’Alisa, Demaria, Kallis 2015: 313). The purpose of the Degrowth project is thus to “overcome the insane growth proposed by capitalism through social expenditure”. This expenditure should be economically unproductive and genuinely collective as in the case of “a collective festival, the decision to subsidize a class of spiritual people for philosophical reflection or leave a forest in peace”, withdrawing capital from circulation for unconditional consumption. Moreover, such consumption is neither for individual use, nor for the use of capital; it is “political”, offering the collective the possibility to define the good life beyond “individual illusions” (D’Alisa, Demaria, Kallis 2015: 316). Degrowth is thus a political project, emphasizing democracy and often including the idea of unconditional basic

income, in general proposing to think anew “institutions for the socialization of unproductive expenditure” (D’Alisa, Demaria, Kallis 2015: 318).

In contrast to many ecologists, the Degrowth project does not recommend utilitarian rationality with regards to scarce resources. In fact, the idea of scarcity is considered constitutive for capitalism as such. Scarcity makes it rational to be economical and accumulate capital for future productive use. In contrast, Degrowth considers itself part of the anti-utilitarian movement, recommending unproductive expenditure on arts, basic human needs and festivals to celebrate “the politics for a new epoch” (D’Alisa, Demaria, Kallis 2015: 317–318). Ultimately, the ideal of Degrowth is “individual sobriety and social expenditure”, and this will imply a much greater “weight on democracy and deliberative institutions” (D’Alisa, Demaria, Kallis 2015: 320) than today.

As much as I sympathize with this project – and it may even serve as a point of departure for the final reflections on social democracy below – I do not think it offers anything to solve the said aporias. In the *Vocabulary*, the entry on “Expenditure” by Onofrio Romano gives a brief, precise and rather comprehensive account of Bataille’s general economy. Hence, when considered generally, due to solar radiation there is always an excess of energy that will either be stashed in earthly matter or dilapidated in the tepidness of the universe. Scarcity is only a problem from the particular point of view of a single entity, i.e. as considered within a restricted economy, and as Romano points out, considering ecology and climate, Degrowth protagonists risk generalizing even further the particularistic view on economy, demanding for humanity as a whole the rational use of scarce resources (Romano 2015: 139–140).

Obviously, however, this is not what the editors of the *Vocabulary* have in mind, making themselves spokesmen of social expenditure and individual sobriety. But this moral-political ambition does not solve the aporias of the general economy. The Degrowth project aims to transfer expenditure, and thus resources, from individual use to social use but, despite the entry just mentioned, apparently it does so without relating to the metaphysical ontology of Bataille, ignoring both the dialectics of human being and the reality of the universe as understood by the theories of relativity and thermodynamics. With the emphasis on morality, sociality and democracy, Degrowth is much more explicitly and consistently normative than the general economy, refining the political solutions within a restricted view of economy, and rather than solving the aporias, the project may be said to ignore them and, by doing so, may even escape them.

F. Sovereignty makes General Economy Apolitical

This is probably where Benjamin would protest, namely because of my traditional and restricted idea of politics. And not just for theoretical reasons. Just as it is the case with the Degrowth movement, Benjamin is preoccupied with the “advent of the Anthropocene and the actualization of climate crisis”, but rather than simply calling for political action, for him it becomes an urgent

practical question, both “who or what represents political positions” and “what counts as political actions.” In the present situation, we should thus be open to re-conceptualize the political. And Benjamin is quite right to attribute to me a rather traditional idea of politics, and that it is this idea that makes me criticize the possible societal implications of Bataille’s general economy (Sørensen 2019a: 129–130, 177–178). As Benjamin stresses, the question of whether I can argue that Bataille’s general economy is apolitical is intimately tied to the question of subjectivity or sovereignty. Against my understanding of sovereignty, Benjamin thus suggests that I may have misunderstood the idea of the inner experience and its role in the general economy.

Benjamin explains how the irreducible subjectivity of Bataille’s inner experience must be understood in contrast to the finality and closure of Hegel’s idea of experiential knowledge. To know is thus “to relate to the known, to grasp that an unknown is the same thing as a known thing”, and the infinite “chain of things known is for knowledge the achievement of itself”. Even as achieved, however, there is something unsatisfactory for Bataille about this understanding of knowledge, and this makes him ask “why must there be what I know?” This question opens up for Bataille what he considers “the exhausting nature of metaphysical interrogation” (Lurson 2018: 313, Bataille 1973: 372). As Benjamin relates, at the limit of knowledge is the unknown, but also the possibility of absolute knowledge. To avoid mastery, i.e. to avoid assuming the position of God, Bataille’s sovereign subject only mimes absolute knowledge, but that does not prevent the subject becoming unknowable to itself. Even for Hegel, the truth of subjectivity only becomes accessible to the knowing subject in its dismemberment and “absolute disruption”, and this is why Bataille recognizes that Hegel touched the extreme before returning to officialdom, recoiling from the way to ecstasy. Exhausted upon return, Hegel was allegedly prone to sadness and fatigue, whereas Bataille signals ecstatic inexhaustibility, as it is expressed in poetry and laughter.

Now, Benjamin obviously wants to rescue Bataille’s general economy from accusations of having a conception of desire that leads to a “project of commodification” within neo-liberal capitalism, and with this I concur. Hence, sovereignty is the desire to grasp the moment as valuable and meaningful in itself, enjoying the present expenditure without any second thoughts, i.e. without instrumentalization for the benefit of any kind of planned project. Sovereignty is “in human life the aspect opposed to the servile or subordinate aspect” (Bataille 1976a: 247). Bataille does indeed insist on the ineliminability of the incomplete, offering also expressions such as the blind spot, the accursed share etc. And, yes, non-knowledge does not allow itself to be negated and sublated in the productive Hegelian sense, where the resulting knowledge makes further experience, negation and thus knowledge possible (see, e.g., Derrida 1967: 43–44).

Still, the general economy is not all about the inner experience of the non-achieved; as Bataille stresses, human sovereignty is also about the “autonomy of decisions” (Bataille 1976b: 608). Sovereignty is expressed through intentional behavior, namely the action itself and its immediate purpose, e.g. demonstrating

autonomous subjectivity momentarily in the pleasure of, say, experiencing life, engaging in artistic activity or transgressing norms. Moreover, sovereignty is the expression of freedom refusing to accept the limits posed by “the fear of death” (Bataille 1976a: 269). As Benjamin puts it, however, there is a “continual opening sustained by [...] the continuous presence of forms of productive negativity”. Being thus conditioned by servile and instrumentally productive actions – in short: work – this continual opening “orientated by the prolonging of life” makes it possible to undo the opposition between need and desire. And that may very well be so, especially if we accept Marcuse’s ontology, but I do not see how Bataille can be of any help in this project. As Benjamin, Bataille would probably choose life instead of sovereignty, but still, I do not see how Bataille can undo conceptually his oppositions between need and desire, necessity and freedom, norm and transgression. For him, expressing sovereign subjectivity is fundamentally – i.e. ontologically – opposed to life, society and humanity, both in terms of consciousness and desire.

Prolonging life is of course a condition of politics, just as it should also be the result of the right kind of politics, and Bataille is indeed preoccupied with peace and the prohibition of violence. However, such issues are necessary for politics, but they are not sufficient. I cannot conceive of “the political” if it does not relate to justice with regards to rights and goods, i.e. law, forms of government and the social organization of wealth, and there must be an interest in these issues both in principle and as institutions. None of this, however, matters much to Bataille. As contemporary Marxists, he criticizes the suffering, alienation and in particular the reification experienced under capitalism, but the criticism is an intuitive negation of the totality experienced. It is not followed up with principled normative reflections on issues such as justice or government. In the general economy, it is the dynamics of energy that determine what can be done in society, and apart from global peace, welfare and freedom, Bataille does not have much to say about what should positively determine our decisions.

As Antonio Campillo emphasizes, sovereignty is by nature not political, but rather “anti-political or apolitical” (Campillo 2019: 17, Sørensen 2019a: 119–120). As I see it, Bataille is thus “apolitical” in the same sense as many Marxists and liberals, namely by disregarding the possible ways of organizing society deliberately and in detail for the common good. Hence, even if it is true that the basic decision is between affirming capitalism and the continued human life on planet Earth, I will still insist that “the prolongation of life” demands political acts and institutions in the most traditional sense. In other words: We need some kind of social democracy.

G. Republican Social Democracy – what else?

That brings us back to practice, i.e. practical politics, which was left rather open in the theoretical discussions of dialectics in *Capitalism, Alienation and Critique* and therefore generated comments from most of the discussants. As

Ivković clearly sees, the Bataillean idea of subjective sovereignty, opposing instrumental reason and the “imperative of self-preservation”, is “not easily reconcilable” with the political ideal of social democracy. So what do I have in mind? Being raised intellectually the way I am, I have of course been suspicious about established real-life systems of social and liberal democracy, and I still am. Still, as a minimum condition, yes, I do think that restrictions should be imposed on the market economy and commodification, and the sooner the better, but that is of course not sufficient. So, what would it mean to realize social democracy as “politics at its best” (Ferrara 2015: 27), to utilize a phrase favored by another prominent political liberal from the Prague community, Alessandro Ferrara. What would social democracy ideally mean?

As mentioned above, *Capitalism, Alienation and Critique* is only Volume I in the trilogy *Dialectics, Deontology and Democracy*, and, as indicated by the title, Volume III will be dedicated to the question of democracy. Still, let me explain in a few words why and how I came to affirm social democracy as the best title for my aspirations within political philosophy. The articles referred to are planned to become chapters in the final volume of the trilogy.

My original point of departure in the 1980s, entering the world of philosophy at the University of Copenhagen, was a set of intuitions that I soon recognized as left-wing anarchism. Central figures in this line of thought were especially 19th century Russian thinkers such as Mikhail Bakunin and Pyotr Kropotkin. However, as I see it today, despite being most critical towards almost all kinds of authorities, the anarchism of my youth did not stimulate systematic self-critical thinking or scholarly studies into conceptual matters. Instead, historical narratives were offered, both to add substance and legitimacy to our radical normative anti-authoritarianism and to add credibility to the prospects of realizing direct democracy and social equality. Most popular was the history of the Spanish revolution in the 1930s, but the stories from the Paris commune of 1870, the Russian revolution and 1968 were also relied upon (Sørensen 2012a: ch. 14).

Today, after four decades of studies in moral, social and political philosophy, I defend republican social democracy. Apparently, there is a long way from social anarchism to social democracy, but as I see it, the alternatives are even further away. This is, for instance, the case with political liberalism as conceived of by Rawls and others, which, as mentioned, has nevertheless become very popular among Prague critical theorists. With my point of departure, I of course have a lot of sympathy for the anti-authoritarian impulse of liberalism, but the problem is the principled antinomy between politics and liberalism. Classical British liberalism combines moral individualism, the right to private property and human rights with a belief in the providence of God’s invisible hand. This vision sets man free to pursue individual success, and the freedom is enhanced by the secularized version of neo-classical political economy, where the theory of general equilibrium liberates the economic man from moral inhibitions concerning this pursuit. Whether secularized or not, according to the liberal agenda, everybody has the right to freely pursue his or her own happiness, and

nobody has the right to interfere in this pursuit. The social production and distribution of wealth is therefore beyond collective decision-making, both when it comes to creating wealth and enjoying the fruits of it.

Liberal individualism thus goes hand in hand with a fundamental distrust or even hostility, towards politics, and therefore the idea of political liberalism is almost contradictory. Of course, Rawls manages to construct a sensible normative position, but this is only by limiting the scope of politics considerably, i.e. by ousting the so-called comprehensive doctrines from politics. As I argue, the basic tenets of liberalism thus make it difficult for it to endorse conceptually political ideals and institutional necessities such as the state, government, parliament, democracy and the like (Sørensen 2014). The popularity of political liberalism reflects Anglophone political philosophy in general, where the theories of justice and utilitarianism have been found much more interesting than democracy.

Moreover, as political liberalism is almost self-contradictory, so is, almost by implication, liberal democracy. This has been argued with remarkable clarity by the Spanish philosopher Rafael del Águila (Águila 1997), and, in general, I have found Spanish language philosophy much more fruitful with regards to normative discussions of democracy and republicanism, probably because many Spanish-speaking countries had experiences with authoritarian regimes only a few decades ago. In fact, suspecting that the well-established Anglophone liberal democracies simply take democracy for granted, I have made this experience a methodological principle, directing my attention towards philosophers in young democracies in non-Anglophone countries such as, for example, Habermas and Enrique Dussel (Sørensen 2013). This has also made me much more aware of the importance of, say, the difference between the republican autonomy and liberal freedom, or the one between political rights and human rights. Finally, in contrast to the liberal republican tradition in the UK and USA, I have also learned to appreciate the social republican tradition in France, e.g. Montesquieu, Rousseau and Durkheim, and it is all of this that I gather under the heading of social democracy, which was also, for a time at least, the ideal adhered to by Marx and Engels.

Writing around the previous turn of the century, Durkheim is also situated in a young republican democracy, arguing strongly for the legitimacy of the democratic republican state. Compared to monarchy and aristocracy, democracy means the rule of superior intelligence, since popular consultation before the final decisions are made means that more questions have been dealt with, and that cannot but increase the chance of reaching the right conclusions. Moreover, if the state is ruled in this way, one can say, in contrast to liberal commonplaces – the bigger the state, the more freedom for citizens. It is democracy and law, i.e. the state, that establishes real freedom in society, and welfare institutions and interventions add to this freedom (Durkheim 1997). Without health, education and social security there is no real freedom. And whereas liberal republicans mostly rely on natural sympathy or inborn moral sense, Durkheim offers a philosophy of education, educating teachers to secure the

democratic republic for the coming generations (Durkheim 2006). As I have argued elsewhere, for Durkheim philosophy of education, ethics and political philosophy are all in the service of the social democratic republic (Sørensen 2012b), and, as mentioned above, discussing Habermas' discourse theory of deliberative democracy is also beneficial to determine the balance between civic duties and human rights in such a society. And if things go well, we may even develop human nature in ways hoped for by Marx and Marcuse, e.g. becoming sensitive in a way that furthers peaceful encounters.

Hence, adding to my reluctance to adopt political liberalism is also Rawls' leniency towards the idea of just war and the rights to pre-emptive attacks and so-called humanitarian interventions, undermining the legitimacy of the United Nations (UN) at a time in history when war again began to proliferate after decades of relative peace. As already recognized, peace is indeed a condition for politics, and I have therefore also criticized Rawls on these issues (Sørensen 2015c), just as I have criticized Michael Walzer and Habermas for their alleged realism regarding the same issues. Habermas, however, does recognize that the continued historical institutionalization of peace, since WW II mainly through the UN, adds to the likelihood of achieving a perpetual peace, such as it was projected by Kant (Sørensen 2015b). Even though cosmopolitanism may be criticized for providing ideological support for opening up new territories for market economy, it is less certain whether this also hits Kant's republican project of world citizenship (Sørensen 2016). The idea of a world citizenship extends politics to the global level, whereas cosmopolitanism only refers to ethics and civil society, and Kant must be praised for being one of the very few modern philosophers who is unconditionally against war (Sørensen 2017a).

That much about social democracy for now. More will come in Volume III, *Justice, Peace and Formation*. Still, I hope this has indicated a little bit what I have in mind when I, from time to time, speak in favor of social democracy. As a final remark, I may add that I am very much aware of the alienation and discontent produced presently by the existing democracies in the western world. However, as is also argued by Ferrara, this should not make us give up democracy, but rather find ways in which the idea of democracy can once again become exemplary within the existing democratic horizon. As I see it, one element is to liberate democracy from capitalism and liberalism – hence the critique of political economy and the ideal of social democracy – while another element is to demonstrate that democracy is the only form of government that allows, and indeed invites, individual human flourishing, thus recognizing the desire for, and the recalcitrancy of, human sovereignty without fully succumbing to it. This latter point, i.e. domesticating sovereignty, is the one to which I presently dedicate my work within philosophy of education (Sørensen 2020b).

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Asger Serensen

Klasična kritička teorija, epistemološka dijalektika i opšta ekonomija. Odgovor na kritike iz Beograda i Šangaja

Apstrakt:

Na početku, branim svoju privrženost klasičnoj kritičkoj teoriji, naglašavajući njenu kontinuiranu relevantnost u kapitalističkoj modernosti, ističući da epistemološki pristup ne implicira dogmatizam u pogledu teorije saznanja ili istorijskog materijalizma, dovršenost u pogledu političke demokratije. Kada je u pitanju dijalektika u klasičnom smislu, takođe branim epistemološki pristup, argumentujući da dijalektika koja stremi istini implicira kritiku i negativnost. Međutim, suočen sa dualnošću transcendentnih ideja i istorijske relativnosti, izražavam svoje poverenje u ljudsku intuiciju. Sledeći Hegela, negacija neposredno datog mora da uključi intuitivno shvaćenu univerzalnost u novu koncepciju koja sadrži rezultat negacije. Takođe, ne vidim kako se pojmovne aporije opšte ekonomije mogu rešiti unutar savremene politike ‚od-rasta‘ (*Degrowth*). Ipak, treba nam više a ne manje politike, i to one socijal-demokratske.

Ključne reči: dijalektika, kapitalizam, kritička teorija, epistemologija, negacija, opšta ekonomija