ABSTRACT: In this essay I offer a reading of Karl Marx which deviates from traditional approaches. I should like to explicate the metaphysics of process in Marx’s philosophy. This work will make explicit a Marxian concept of change and transformation in the flow of history—as Marx’s vision of history is a dynamic unfolding.

On my view, Marx’s underlying structure which serves to support his metaphysics of process is production. In *The German Ideology* (1845-1846) Marx writes,

“The way men produce their means of subsistence depends first of all on the nature of the actual means of subsistence they find in existence and have to reproduce. This mode of production must not be considered simply as being the reproduction of the physical existence of the individuals. Rather it is a definite form of activity of these individuals, a definite form of expressing their life, a definite *mode of life* on their part” (Tucker, 1978, p. 150).

It is from the departure of real human relations that we see Marx beginning his analyses. I contend that these relations (human production) have ontological primacy. As I see Marx as a philosopher of change, I contend that the modern process philosopher is better suited to understand the metaphysics of Marx—and therefore the dynamics of production—in pursuit of the revolutionary struggle.
Marx, Process, and the Metaphysics of Production

In this essay I will offer a reading of Karl Marx which deviates from more traditional philosophical approaches. I should like to expound upon an element of process metaphysics throughout Marx’s writings. While it may be quite unorthodox, I want for others to see Marx as a process philosopher. This work will make explicit Marx’s view of the possibility of change and transformation in the flow of history—as I see Marx’s vision of history not as a strongly deterministic and linear ‘arrow of time’, but a vision of history that is a dynamic unfolding. From human production emerges history.

Some Antecedent Conditions

On my view, considering the metaphysics of process in Marx’s philosophy is not a radical notion. We must consider Marx’s main academic influence—G.W.F. Hegel. Among process philosophers of the twentieth century, Hegel is prominent “because historical development—be it of nature or of thought—lies at the very center of his philosophizing” (Rescher, 1996, p. 13). Rescher instantiates this point by drawing attention to Hegel’s ‘Concept’:

“The idea of Concept (Begriff) is central in Hegel’s thought, but Hegel’s concepts or universals are no mere abstractions existing in a static Platonic world—disoriented realm of immaterial pure forms. They are inherently active, and strive for a concrete realization in singularity so as to exist as particulars in and for thought” (Rescher, 1996, p. 13).

The lineage of Hegel is oft traced through such process thinkers as John Dewey and Alfred North Whitehead—Marx, while more rhetorically charged than these two exemplars of Hegelianism, might be accurately classed as a member of this group of process philosophers.
To the reader, it may seem as though this reading of Marx as a process philosopher would divorce him from his revolutionary spirit, or perhaps that I am selectively reading out the communism to make Marx a palpable philosopher of history—and ignoring the fiery polemic to which we are accustomed. No, he remains the fiery polemicist. It’s the same Marx! Marx, as a philosopher of process, is neither bound to mere explanatory frameworks nor would any philosopher. It seems that there must be an emotional force (read conviction) in the service of a philosophy or else such a philosophy would be left as an isolated cog in the æther. Let us briefly consider why the French philosopher Henri Bergson—who is thought of as a process philosopher in his own right—took to developing his philosophy of creativity, of the non-materiality of the human mind, of the emergent properties within nature. According to Suzanne Guerlac, “From Bergson’s perspective, [Herbert] Spencer’s account of evolution considered it only retrospectively; it then reconstructed evolution mechanistically on the basis of what Bergson called the ‘strange timelessness of the Newtonian world’” (Guerlac, 2006, p. 28) [emphasis is mine]. Bergson developed his philosophy, according to Guerlac, in response to the inexorable march of positivism of his day—can we not consider Marx’s philosophy as a response to the strange speculation of Proudhon? Or perhaps as a response to the strange encroachment on human well-being by the industrialists of the 18th Century? Can we consider it, like Bergson’s, as a philosophy of process? Marx’s work is both descriptive (as an explanatory framework of the unfolding of history) and normative (as he has a particular vision regarding future possibilities).

A final point for the skeptical reader: What of Marx’s anti-metaphysical sensibilities? While it is true that Marx was antagonistic toward the metaphysicians of his epoch—recall Marx’s assessment of philosophy from his 1844 Letter to Arnold Ruge titled *For a Ruthless Criticism of Everything Existing*,
“Now philosophy has become worldly, and the most incontrovertible evidence of this is that the philosophical consciousness has been drawn, not only externally but also internally, into the stress of battle. But if the designing of the future and the proclamation of ready-made solutions for all time is not our affair, then we realize all the more clearly what we have to accomplish in the present—I am speaking of a ruthless criticism of everything existing” (Tucker, 1978, p. 13) [his emphasis].

We need not cast aside a Marxian metaphysics based upon this passage—or any passage in his writing. On my view, this passage merely suggests that his philosophy, his metaphysics, had to be radically different from the turgid prose of those metaphysicians in their arm-chairs. And, to add more my point here, it is at the closing of the Theses on Feuerbach, written in 1845, that we see a statement which still leaves some wondering its meaning. He writes, “The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to change it” (Tucker, 1978, p. 145) [his emphasis]. My reading: Marx wishes for the philosophers to descend from their view from nowhere. It is this element of a desire for change which runs throughout Marx’s writing—of flux, of process—and it is that element which I should like to make explicit.

Work on Marx and Process Philosophy

Before beginning my own work I should note that I am not the first to consider Marx in light of process philosophy. John B. Cobb, Jr. (1981) considers process theology’s connection with Marxist thought in his essay, “The Political Implications of Whitehead’s Philosophy”, but this is mostly in the form of Latin American Liberation Theology—and his analysis of Marxism relies on post-Marx Marxist thought (which has, but not in all cases, diverged from Marx in many directions). I will not pursue this line of thinking.
In her book *Marx and Whitehead: Process, Dialectics, and the Critique of Capitalism* (2004), Anne Fairchild Pomeroy forges a connection between Karl Marx and prominent process philosopher Alfred North Whitehead. Fairchild Pomeroy argues that, to understand Marx and the dialectic, one needs a well-conceived and explicit philosophy of process. She sees such a philosophy in Alfred North Whitehead’s *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology* (1978). Far from challenging Fairchild Pomeroy (as my philosophical training is undoubtedly many years her junior), I am unconvinced that we need to extend our expedition for a metaphysics of process beyond the texts of Marx (was not the Hegelian influence enough?) Why cannot we recognize that Marx, years before Whitehead, offered the world a materialist philosophy of process? Still, I offer my work as a complement to Fairchild Pomeroy rather than as a critique or supplement. Before moving on, I will borrow a quotation which Fairchild Pomeroy cites from the existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre which exemplifies—what Fairchild Pomeroy outlines nicely in her opening chapter—the scattered nature of Marxist thought after Marx,

> “Marx’s originality lies in the fact that, in opposition to Hegel, he demonstrated that History is in development, that Being is irreducible to Knowledge, and, also that he preserved the dialectical movement both in Being and in Knowledge. He was correct, practically. But having failed to re-think the dialectic, Marxists have played the Positivist game” (Sartre as cited in Fairchild Pomeroy, 2004, p. 7).

**An Overview of Process Philosophy**

To accurately make explicit Marx’s metaphysics of process, I need to first outline the concept of process philosophy as it has been discussed in contemporary philosophical literature. I will rely on meta-analyses of process philosophy and process metaphysics. According to Rescher (2000), process can be defined as,
1. “A process is a complex of occurrences—a unity of distinct stages or phases; a process is always a matter of now this, now that.

2. This complex of occurrences has a certain temporal coherence and integrity; and processes accordingly have an ineliminably temporal dimension.

3. Process has a structure, a formal generic patterning of occurrence, through which its temporal phases exhibit a fixed format” (p. 24).

It is especially important to elucidate what is meant by the third point—is process structured in a purely deterministic way? Is it merely a matter of moving from A → B → C? One would be tempted to suggest that perhaps there are fundamental ‘substances’ which are in process, but, as Rescher notes, a metaphysics of process is intended to replace “the troublesome ontological dualism of thing and activity with an internally complex monism of activities of varying, potentially compounded sorts” (Rescher, 2000, p. 9). And, just as further point of clarity, Rescher writes, “The phenomenology of change is stressed precisely because the difference between a museum and the real world of an ever-changing nature is to be seen as crucial to our understanding of reality” (Rescher, 2000, p. 4). Process metaphysics, according to Rescher, is constituted by an underlying structural process with emergent properties which manifest themselves as reality. It is my hope to make this point clearer in what follows.

The emergent properties of reality, as we will see, can occur in two different ways (via process) and need to be made clearer. Rescher says there is a distinction between product-productive processes and state-transformative processes. The former is defined as, “those that engender actual products that can themselves be characterized as things (or substances); for example, manufacturing processes that produce pencils or automobiles and seed germinations that produce plants” (Rescher, 2000, p. 28). The latter is defined as, “those that merely transform states of affairs in general, paving the way for further processes without issuing particular things
or states thereof, for example windstorms and earthquakes” (Rescher, 2000, p. 28). So it is the case that substances do exist in the metaphysics of process (especially in the case of product-productive processes), but they cannot be separated from their activities—again, they are linked in their particular monads.

Process Metaphysics in Marx and Marx as Process Philosopher

It is at this point which I should like to begin analyzing Marx’s work in terms of his implicit metaphysics of process. Recall point three from Rescher’s desiderata of process—“Process has a structure, a formal generic patterning of occurrence, through which its temporal phases exhibit a fixed format” (p. 24). The first point to which I would like to draw attention is what, on my view, stands as Marx’s underlying processual structure. While this is point three in the list provided above, I find it to be a crucial element which ought to be addressed first. Let us first return again to Rescher for a moment as he writes, “The existence of particular individual things must, in the end, root in a unity of process—that such ‘things’ as there are should always be understood in processual terms and perhaps even be somehow reduced to processes” (Rescher, 1996, p. 52). On my view, Marx’s underlying structure which serves to support his metaphysics of process is production. In The German Ideology (1845-1856) Marx writes,

“The way men produce their means of subsistence depends first of all on the nature of the actual means of subsistence they find in existence and have to reproduce. This mode of production must not be considered simply as being the reproduction of the physical existence of the individuals. Rather it is a definite form of activity of these individuals, a definite form of expressing their life, a definite mode of life on their part. As individuals express their life, so they are. What they are, therefore, coincides with their production, both with what they
produce and with how they produce. The nature of individuals thus depends on
the material conditions determining their production” (Tucker, 1978, p. 150).

It is from the departure of real human relations that we see Marx beginning his analyses;
therefore, I contend that that these relations have ontological primacy and serve as the fixed
structure that Rescher establishes as a condition of process metaphysics. Additionally, I must
cautions one not read this passage as Marx describing production as the activity of atomistic and
autonomous individuals. He makes his opposition to atomism quite clear—here is a
complementary passage so there is no confusion on the matter,

“Production by an isolated individual outside society—a rare exception which
may well occur when a civilized person in whom the social forces are already
dynamically present is cast by accident into the wilderness—is as much of an
absurdity as is the development of language without individuals living together
and talking to each other” (Tucker, 1978, p. 223) [his emphasis].

Carol Gould, in her book *Marx’s Social Ontology* (1978) believes similarly—though her
project is not processual—she writes, “For Marx the fundamental entities that compose society
are individuals in social relations” (p. 1).

In continuing to address production as Marx’s metaphysics of process, I will address
Rescher’s other two criteria. The first criterion: “A process is a complex of occurrences—a unity
of distinct stages or phases; a process is always a matter of now this, now that” (p. 24).
Production, as Marx’s element of process, does seem to fit if we consider the following passage
from *The Grundrisse*.

“Production in general is an abstraction, but a rational abstraction in so far as it
really brings out and fixes the common element and thus saves us repetition. Still,
this general category, this common element sifted out by comparison, is itself segmented many times over and splits into different determinations. Some determinations belong to all epochs, others only to a few” (Tucker, 1978, p. 224) [his emphasis].

This passage illuminates the overarching process of production, but reveals that it is the union of a multiplicity of determinations (or characteristics). Continuing Rescher’s criteria—that production must be a complexity of occurrences—I must admit that this may be a case in which we simply infer that the characteristics of production are complex. While this may be the case, I contend that it does not necessarily invalidate the thought of production as process. Consider the complexity of any and all human social relationships of which a person is a part—would we not consider this a complexity of occurrences?

Rescher’s final criterion of process is: “This complex of occurrences has a certain temporal coherence and integrity; and processes accordingly have an ineliminably temporal dimension” (p. 24). Temporality is a central theme throughout all of Marx’s work and especially in relation to the process of production, he writes,

“Whenever we speak of production, then, what is meant is always production at a definite stage of social development—production by social individuals. It might seem, therefore, that in order to talk about production at all we must either pursue the process of historic development through its different phases, or declare beforehand that we are dealing with a specific historic epoch” (Tucker, 1978 p. 223).

We see here, and in the previous passages, that production, while present throughout all historical epochs, manifests itself in decidedly different ways in different epochs. But what is it
that causes production to change in time? Let us consider the following passage from Marx’s 1846 letter titled *Society and Economy in History*,

“The productive forces are therefore the result of practical human energy; but this energy is itself conditioned by the circumstances in which men find themselves, by the productive forces already acquired, by the social form which exists before they do, which they do not create, which is the product of the preceding generation” (Tucker, 1978, p. 137).

This passage, at first glance, can seem to be Marx adopting or promoting a strict determinist view of history, but this is not the case. It is not an instantiation of a fatalistic view of the process of production—it merely acknowledges that there are material conditions into which we come into existence. Then, once we recognize this fact, it is then the responsibility of the generation which finds itself with the capacity of production to improve the conditions of existence for future generations.

Since it has been mentioned, I should like to present an instance of Marx’s opposition to the notion of historical fatalism or, even, historicism—the notion that there are general laws governing the development of history. This is from a later writing (an afterword to *Capital*), Marx denigrates the conservative Hegelians for their metaphysics of finality (referring to their insistence that the German state was the highest form) by writing,

“In its mystified form, [conservative Hegelian] dialectic became the fashion in Germany, because it seemed to transfigure and glorify the existing state of things. In its rational form [Marx’s conception] it is a scandal and abomination to bourgeoisdom and its doctrinaire professors, because it includes in its comprehension an affirmative recognition of the existing state of things…because it regards every historically developed social form as in *fluid movement*, and
therefore takes into account its \textit{transient nature} not less than its momentary existence” (Tucker, 1978 p. 302) [emphasis mine].

Additionally, this passage, in particular, reiterates Marx’s earlier criticism of German metaphysics—namely the conservative Hegelianism—from \textit{The German Ideology}, where he writes,

“\textit{In direct contrast to German philosophy which descends from heaven to earth, here we ascend from earth to heaven…We set out from real, active men, and of the basis of their real life-process we demonstrate the development of the ideological reflexes and echoes of this life-process}” (Tucker, 1978, p. 154).

But, crucially, it reiterates Marx’s insistence on the problem of reification—or even what might be called the \textit{ossification}—of certain modes of thought as if they were a-temporally, read, \textit{eternally} valid. He spent much of his time penning responses to those who would project the putative laws of their own epochs into history. For instance, in an 1846 letter to P.V. Annenkov (titled \textit{Society and Economic History}) Marx criticizes Proudhon’s inaccurate historicity of the division of labor and concludes that the traditional problem of this inaccuracy is making something “an eternal law since he knows neither its origin nor its development,” and furthermore, “All through his book he speaks as if this creation of a particular mode of production would endure until the end of time” (Tucker, 1978, p. 139).

\textbf{Objections to Marx as Process Philosopher}

It is at this point that I should consider some possible objections to this particular reading of Marx. Again, it is not unprecedented, but an obscure sourcebook of process theology and one text from seven years ago may count as radical—since Marx has been dead for 128 years.
A first possible objection is my assertion at the opening of the essay that because Marx was influenced by Hegel that increases the probability that he can be classified as a process philosopher. I suggested that John Dewey and Alfred North Whitehead have an intrinsic link to Hegel—which is true. And that they are process philosophers—which is also true. But does the conclusion follow that every philosopher who is influenced by Hegel can be classified as a process philosopher? Or even every philosopher of history?

My response to this objection is that the conclusion certainly does not necessarily follow. Of course, I did not intend this to be my most forceful argument in favor of considering Marx as a process philosopher. I merely meant it as a possible link between Marx and process metaphysics. A first step on the journey which followed.

A second possible objection is that process metaphysics does not allow for structural critiques within society. And it is this form of critique which serves as a cornerstone of their production by Marxist theorists.

My response to this objection is that the possibility of process philosophy does not somehow dissolve existing structures in reality. It is that we now understand them not as eternal entities but mere material manifolds (Rescher, 1996) in a sea of process. We can still tear away at the seemingly stable facades of our institutions to reveal the undergirding in that it may be problematized in our critiques.

A third possible objection is that Marx’s view of history assumes determinism and progress toward a specific end.

My response is that a view of Marx’s materialist conception of history as a flow does not necessitate an ontology of strict determinism. What we actually see in Marx is recognition of the
sometimes brute facts of material existence and their relationship to the human social experience. And while Marx does claim that history progresses—what does it mean for something to progress? It means that we may not turn back. Pardon the metaphor, but I am at a loss for a better one, but can we remove the eggs from a baked cake? No. The material conditions, as an amalgamation of human social interactions, emerged and history unfolded.

**Process Marxism**

A possible set of issues arising from this work are: What are the implications of reading Marx as a process philosopher? This is something I have given a lot of thought to and I am still unsure whether or not current Marxists would accept this reading for numerous reasons. One possible reason is the uniqueness of their categorization. For someone with this thought, the category of MARXIST PHILOSOPHY is something special and not to be subsumed under a school of metaphysics—especially one linked with the classical liberalism or religiosity of Alfred North Whitehead (and today, much of work being done with process is theology—not a tempting field for the Marxist).
References


