Forthcoming in Australasian Philosophical Review . This is the preprint version. Please quote the final version.

Envy and Inequality: A Marxist Buddhist Solution?

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Abstract

In this paper I argue that Marxist Buddhism may provide a novel approach to envy in society. It has been argued that envy arises in response to socio-political inequality, which is considered a problem given the social and moral harms associated with envy. Thus, achieving equality is expected to solve the problem of envy. However, anecdotal and empirical evidence suggests that is not the case, and that, in particular, societies inspired by Marxist ideals are not envy-free—if anything, the opposite seems true. Buddhism has traditionally condemned envy. It shares with Marxism the idea that individual wellbeing can be obtained, paradoxically, only through lessening emphasis on individuality—Marxism by means of economic collectivism, Buddhism by means of a spiritual transformation. Both aim at shrinking the self and are keenly aware of how quickly an emphasis on one's own desires leads to greed and exploitation of others. However, Marxist ideals have failed to yield successful large-scale flourishing communities, while Buddhism is a religion practiced by millions of people but has not advanced a politically progressive agenda in particular. Marxist Buddhism—argue—may perhaps bring together the best of the respective traditions to solve the problem of envy. However, I end by cautioning against such a radical reshaping of our psychological makeup, especially given the evidence that shows that there are morally and prudentially good types of envy, and sketch the profile of a Buddhist-friendly type of envy as an alternative to total eradication.

Keywords: envy; equality; political envy; Marx; Buddhism; emulative envy; Marxist Buddhism.

In "Equity and Marxist Buddhism", Tzu-wei Hung examines the long-standing yet timely topic of socio-political equality from the fascinating and novel perspective of Marxist Buddhism. He claims that this tradition of thought, which originated in Taiwan in the 1920s, is an attractive approach to equity, particularly in "developing countries that lack stable and rule-of-law governments" (p. of printed version). Marxist Buddhism inherits from Mahayana Buddhism the idea that all sentient beings are equal, while focusing in particular on social equity and on

building a just society on earth, as opposed to achieving afterlife bliss. Therefore, it privileges social engagement over spiritual practices, and attempts to correct the traditional sexism present in Buddhist traditions. At the same time, it emphasizes cultivating personal virtue and highlights individual responsibility in achieving social and political progress, while reducing reliance on the state. Huang claims that much Western political theorizing has implicitly depended upon the existence of a state that can ensure implementation of citizens' rights. But, at a global level, it is often the case that the state is absent, weak, or authoritarian. Finally, Hung also argues that Marxist Buddhism may help identify hermeneutical lacunae when discussing, for instance, international agreements, insofar as it stems from the experience of the oppressed Taiwanese people and their response to the constant threats of cultural and linguistic assimilation.

Hung's contribution is extremely valuable from both a historical and theoretical perspective, but, in this commentary, I will focus on a potential *application* of a Marxist Buddhist perspective to what, following John Rawls, we can dub "the problem of envy" in egalitarian societies (Rawls 1971).

There are historically different versions of this problem, but the gist of it is that socio-political inequality causes envy to arise, which is usually seen as a problem to solve. The normative assessment of this alleged causal connection between envy and equality is controversial, and works a little bit like a visual illusion: depending on one's political leanings and presuppositions, one might see a rabbit or a duck—the rabbit being the appropriateness or reasonableness of envy as a response to unjust inegalitarian regimes, and the duck being the necessity of rejecting egalitarianism since it's motivated by the vice of envy.[1]

[1] I am simplifying a bit. Actual arguments are more complex, and some argue that we should support egalitarian policies because they are justified by an independent moral principle or concern, and then add that a nice side effect of egalitarianism is to get rid of the nasty emotion of envy. For reviews of some these arguments, see Cooper 1982; Young 1987; Green 2013; Frye 2016; Bankovsky 2018; D'Arms 2017, 3.1; Protasi 2021, ch. 5 and section A.5. For

All these positions, however, have something in common: they share the belief that in an egalitarian society envy would not arise.[2] Imagine, then, a society where Karl Marx's dictum "From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs" is implemented. Such a society will be shaped by highly egalitarian principles, with everyone having access to resources, goods and opportunities. While absolutely perfect equality (in every respect, including, for instance, natural skills and appearances) might be impossible to achieve, this society will aim to satisfy everyone's needs equally. Presumably, in such a society, material differences between individuals will be minimal and class envy will be absent, right?

Wrong—argues Aaron Ben-ze'ev in his 1992 article "Envy and Equality". Ben-ze'ev draws from empirical and philosophical literature on envy to analyse the case of Israeli *kibbutz*, a largely egalitarian society, which strived for a communal life and where traditionally members shared most material possessions, including income. Ben-ze'ev shows that envy is more likely to *increase*, rather than decrease, in an egalitarian community such as the kibbutz.

I will argue that similar considerations apply to other contexts inspired by Marxism, and suggest that the problem doesn't simply lie in the implementation of Marxist ideals, but in its inability to reshape our psychology. I will then suggest that Marxist Buddhism may use the tool of mindfulness meditation, together with Buddhism's emphasis on the interconnectedness of human beings and on compassionate love, to pave the way for a psychological revolution that can support its political one. Buddhist Marxism could, in principle, solve the problem of envy. However, getting rid of envy altogether might be too drastic a solution. Setting aside the

a recent and bold defense of malicious envy for the rich as an outlaw emotion in capitalist regimes, see Archer, Thomas and Engelen 2022.

[2] Robert Nozick is a dissonant voice in the choir: In *Anarchy, State, Utopia* he observes that no matter how equal people may be along socio-economic measures, they will always find some term of comparison, and thus reasons to feel envy when they come off short vis-à-vis someone else (Nozick, 1974, 243).

feasibility of such radical change to our psychology, the costs might outweigh the benefits, given that envy can be valuable to individuals and communities alike. Thus, I will end with tentatively proposing a notion of *right envy* that is compatible with Marxist Buddhist spiritual and political ideals.[3]

A final proviso before we start: Hung adopts a distinction between *equality* and *equity*, according to which "the former is offering the same treatment to each person without discrimination, while the latter not only offers people the same treatment without discrimination but also considers the needs, differences and situations of the other people around them" (page of official version). However, he also clarifies that many of the texts in the Marxist Buddhist literature were originally written in Japanese, Taiwanese, or classical Chinese and that in these languages the notions of equality, equity, and fairness were sometimes used interchangeably. He ends up talking mostly of equity, while in my discussion I talk of equality, since it is the latter notion that has been used in debates about envy. However, I do not think Hung and I risk talking past each other, insofar as addressing socioeconomic inequality is a fundamental goal of Marxism in all its varieties, including the Buddhist one. Furthermore, one may be sceptical of the distinction between equity and equality either at a theoretical or a practical level, and may prefer to use alternative notions such as "substantive equality" or to think of equality and equity as part of the same political objective (as argued for instance in Minow 2021).[4]

1. Envy in the Kibbutz and in the Kommunalka

Aaron Ben-ze'ev has persuasively argued in favour of two claims. The first is that envy does not, by itself, involve a moral egalitarian concern, but rather a nonmoral, partial concern for an

[3] I thank Tiffany Aldrich MacBain for a conversation on this notion and suggesting its name.
[4] I am thankful to Yao Lin for this reference.

undeserved (subjectively perceived) personal inferiority.[5] The second claim is that "reduced inequality does not lead to less envy—on the contrary, in most cases it raises the intensity of envy" (Ben-ze'ev 1992, 551).

I will come back later to the first claim, when distinguishing between envy and resentment, but it is the second claim that is of primary interest here. In support of this idea that equality increases envy, he draws from a combination of empirical evidence from social psychological research and anecdotal evidence, mostly based on his analysis of the case study of Israeli kibbutz.

Ben-ze'ev's analysis is nuanced and it acknowledges the difficulty of measuring the intensity of envy in a society, since there are many factors at play, and some diminish it, while others increase it. However, I find his conclusions about envy in the kibbutz convincing.

Ben-ze'ev notes that the kibbutz is a largely egalitarian society, where members spend much of their life together and "enjoy equal standing with respect to the basic needs of food, health, education, and access to culture" (Ben-ze'ev 1992, 576). Minimal material inequalities concern different quantities of luxury items or type of work performed. Yet, there are many characteristics of the kibbutz that are likely to increase envy, such as physical proximity, perceived similarity of background and resources, and greater sense of personal responsibility for failing to achieve the same success as another person. Furthermore, in the kibbutz envy has practical impact, since in a small community bringing down the envied may be easier to obtain: targets of envy may be demoted from a privileged social position they occupy, or caused to lose what minimal material advantage they have. Finally, there are many zero-sum situations, which

[5] Also Rawls, among others, differentiates between envy and resentment on the same grounds: "envy is not a moral feeling. No moral principle needs to be cited in its explanation. […] Thus one must be careful not to conflate envy and resentment. For resentment is a moral feeling." (Rawls 1971: 533).

commonly give rise to and increase the intensity of envy, and envy itself may be perceived as more legitimate because of the shared commitment to egalitarianism.[6]

Ben-ze'ev does also acknowledge some variables expected to *decrease* envy, such as the less competitive nature of kibbutz society, the greater intimacy between members (which increases a broader understanding of another's lot and knowledge of hidden flaws or secret sorrows), and more opportunities to engage with people of different backgrounds. Furthermore, the fact that the society is, indeed, more equal, often increases general self-satisfaction.

Overall, however, Ben-ze'ev argues that on balance the factors likely to increase the intensity of envy weigh more than the factors likely to decrease it. Notwithstanding this conclusion, he points out that "a mainly negative correlation between inequalities and envy does not imply that we should not strive to reduce inequalities" (579), since such a reduction may be independently desirable.[7]

While the historical relation between Zionism, Marxism and the kibbutz system is complex and controversial, it is undeniable that the communitarian and egalitarian lifestyle of the kibbutz shares much with Marxist communitarian and egalitarian utopias.

The equivalent to the kibbutz in Soviet Russia might be the communal apartments, called *Kommunalka*, which were the prevalent form of urban housing in Russia after 1917. These were crowded spaces, where many families had to share a hallway, a kitchen, and a bathroom. These communal forms of living were in part the result of an intentional collectivist plan and in part a

[6] I speak in the present, but note that Ben-ze'ev article is two decades old, and today's kibbutzim may be significantly different from the ones he is referring to (for one, the level of communal life has steadily decreased through time, and was already lower in the 90s compared to earlier years).

[7] He ends the article with a couple of suggestions for making social comparison less significant, thus reducing envy: first, expanding the range of domains one values, so that in at least some of them one will perceive oneself as comparatively more successful, and, second, by settling for less and being content with little. I will come back in the last section to these "solutions" to envy, the second of which strikes me in many cases as worse than the evil it is meant to cure, especially if, as I will suggest, envy is not necessarily an evil in the first place.

side effect of too fast a process of urbanization and industrialization, where the supply could not keep up with the demand of housing in the cities.

The kommunalka share with the kibbutz many material and ideological conditions: an explicit commitment to equality and commonality; equal standing with regard to access to most material resources; physical proximity and constant occasion for comparison. However, an important difference is that in Soviet Russia living in a kommunalka was often a forced choice, and perceived lack of control over one's situation is a determinant of malicious envy (Miceli and Castelfranchi 2007, Smith and Kim 2007). Furthermore, the increasing political repression that took place in Russia from the 1920s on also caused people to spy on and report neighbours to authorities, thus leading to hostile relations, which also contribute to malicious envy. One can imagine how seeing someone in one's apartment enjoy a bit of material advantages, for instance an extra egg for dinner, might induce intense envy.[8] While envy does not by itself involve a moral concern (recall Ben-ze'ev's first claim mentioned above), it does easily mask as resentment, a moral emotion involving a perceived wrongdoing or unfairness ("How come they have an extra egg? What did they do to get it? Something is off here."). Thus, rationalizing one's envious feelings as righteous resentment, thus bringing oneself to perceive the slightly-better-off neighbour as a wrongdoer, would easily provide a justification for reporting them as a dissident. In turn, that reporting would ensure bringing down the envied.[9]

[8] There is a delightful scene in Lubitsch's film *Ninotchka*, where the intrusive and potentially envious gaze of the neighbor on one's omelet-making is depicted in simultaneously humorous and melancholic ways: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AH9_BGpsNCo.

[9] The fictional scenario I am describing here is grounded in scientific evidence. That envy masquerades as resentment and is often followed by post-hoc rationalization, and that malicious envy motivates to "level down" vis-à-vis the envied, are all robust empirical results. See Miceli and Castelfranchi 2007 for a review of these results and an insightful discussion supporting Ben-ze'ev's philosophical analysis. I also talk about these issues at length in Protasi 2021.

Even though it is hard to imagine a more fertile ground for the most vicious envy than the Soviet kommunalka, I have not been able to find any extensive scholarly investigation of envy in Soviet Russia, even though there are some discussions in journalistic works.[10] This is perhaps due to the fact that a contemporary rigorous empirical analysis of the levels of envy in the USSR would require a multidisciplinary team including social scientists and historians.[11]

Instead, the discipline where envy is most discussed in relation to Russia is literary criticism.[12] Envy is a central theme in analyses of Russian literature from Pushkin to authors writing during the Soviet era[13]—most notably, Yuri Olesha, whose famous novel *Zavist* (*Envy*) was published in 1927. The interpretation of this ambiguous novel is too controversial for it to provide any kind of evidence, but it is remarkable that the only (as far as I know) well-known literary work that has a paradigmatically envious protagonist is a product of Soviet Russia.

However, the type of envy that is most salient in Olesha's novel and in Russian literature more generally is not so much one for socioeconomic resources—whether it is healthy food, a house, or a job (all things the protagonist of *Envy* does lack), but one for goods such as belonging to a cultural elite; being revered as a great artist; or possessing virility and masculinity in a high degree.

Relatedly, this seems to be an envy for particular non-material goods that no political system can possibly aspire to eliminate: even in the most egalitarian kibbutz, someone will always be more attractive than someone else—prettier, wittier, more popular. In fact, perhaps

[10] Sociologist Gordon Clanton refers to these sources in a brief discussion of what he calls "The Russian culture of envy" (Clanton 2006, 436-438). The chapter contains no original field research, however, and only partially focuses on Soviet Russia. Envy is briefly mentioned in a fascinating virtual ethnographic museum on kommunalka, see: https://kommunalka.colgate.edu/cfm/essays.cfm?ClipID=387&TourID=920.

[11] The same applies to envy in the kibbutz, but to a lesser extent, since I take Ben-ze'ev to have been personally acquainted with kibbutz in a way that cannot be said of me with respect to Soviet communism.

[12] I am greatly indebted to Peggy Burge for a conversation and references on Olesha and Russian modernism.

[13] For a recent discussion, see Zotova 2020.

precisely in the absence of great material divides and in the presence of closer quarters and more frequent contact, this type of envy might be greatly intensified![14] Marxism surely did not aspire to achieve equality of this type.

But is it possible to disentangle the objects of envy as clearly as the objection implies? There are authors who claim that all envy is fundamentally driven by lack of self-esteem, and whose primary coveted good is social recognition (Taylor 1988; Salice and Montes Sanchez 2018). I disagree with this take, but I think there is a nugget of truth, namely that there are some fundamental types of goods we all desire, which are also usually sources of social recognition, and which are interconnected and interdependent. For instance, good health and physical attractiveness correlate with higher socio-economic status (both because of improved material conditions, because the higher classes dictate aesthetic norms, and because being healthier and more beautiful leads to greater socio-economic success). Education and access to cultural goods in turn correlate to all the aforementioned factors. Similar considerations apply to political power. In any society, elites are the ones that seem to have it all, even when material wealth is not the primary social currency, as in a highly egalitarian system. Correspondingly, even in highly inegalitarian systems it is possible that socio-economic envy is never primarily about greater wealth, but about all the many goods that correlate with it. Rawls admits that an envy caused by such a large disparity in primary goods so as to cause loss of self-respect may be excusable, in a passage resonant of Adam Smith's discussion of the importance of having a clean shirt (Smith 1976: 870).

[14] I owe this objection to Yao Lin, whom I thank. Rawls distinguishes between general and particular envy—the latter being concerned with this type of competition for particular goods, often not primary social goods, that our rivals have, and which is declared irrelevant to theories of justice.

A different type of concern with my argument is that the kommunalka scenario is not one of material equality, but of equal scarcity.[15] But no Marxist aims for equal scarcity, of course. So, the problem lies with the Soviet (and similar other) implementation of Marxism, not Marxism itself. Since it goes beyond the scope of a short commentary to analyse all actual and potential implementation Marxist ideals, I will happily concede the point and reframe my claim in a way that also accommodates the previous concern: we have good reasons to think that achieving socio-economic equality is not going to reduce envy but actually increase it, *in most real-world contexts inspired by Marxism*.

Unless, that is, it's a Marxism shaped by Buddhism.

2. Envy and the Bodhisattva

Buddhism, like all other major world religions, condemns envy (Tuske 2021). But its condemnation is not only grounded in the immoral behaviours that envy motivates, but it also stems from the core of Buddhist doctrines. Buddhists believe that suffering derives from self-centred cravings, desires, and attachments, and that in order to attain *nirvana* (transcendent bliss and peace) we need to let go of self-centred considerations, and of the very notion of a distinction between our interests and those of others.

As highlighted by Christina Chuang in a recent essay, a potential solution to envy and its detrimental consequences is to conceive of the self as "flexible, impermanent, and interdependent" (Chuang 2022, 97). The *Bodhisattva*, the person who is on the path to becoming a buddha, feels compassion and concern for all humankind. The suffering of *all* creatures is salient to the bodhisattva, without mediation through a particular self. Compassion here

[15] I am, once again, thankful to Yao Lin.

translates as *karuna*, a type of compassion, which is infused with wisdom and which aims at relieving suffering and giving joy. Karuna is the true opposite of envy, not only because it involves moral attitudes that are antithetical to immoral ones involved in envy, but also and above all because it is premised on the rejection of the ego (and of a subject and an object). Envy is a painful response to perceiving *you* as in some way superior, advantaged, doing better, or having more than *me*. This very distinction between you and me ought to be dissolved, according to Buddhism.

The Buddhist-inspired solution to envy thus involves not only compassion toward others, but also self-compassion, the two of which—Chuang highlights—end up coinciding.[16] Buddhism invites to see that "being joyful for others means being joyful for oneself, since all our actions are intertwined in a web of cause and effect" (Chuang 2022, 94). Once the difference between you and I becomes a mere grammatical device, competition and comparison between ourselves become a mere appearance. The pain of envy comes not only from the lack of the envied good, but, according to Chuang, also from the belief that one has control or ownership on goodness. But that, again, is a misperception and an illusion.

The Buddhist solution to envy is perhaps as radical as the Marxist one, but while the latter pursues, at least in theory, an impossible goal (complete, or near complete, socioeconomic equality) and ignores the psychological hurdles its implementation faces, the former invites us to reshape our psychological responses so that they can support our political objectives.

[16] Chuang also argues that this Buddhist-inspired solution to envy is in line with empirical evidence concerning envy management from clinical psychology, in which self-compassion is the first step (Chuang 2022, 93). She also shows how many of the cognitive distortions and maladaptive thoughts that are responsible for envy's most painful and detrimental effects to one's mental well-being are dependent on exactly the notions that Buddhism aims to eliminate: a strong sense of self as independent and distinct from others, whom one perceives as competitors.

In this regard, Buddhism seems better equipped to deal with envy than other religious traditions that have historically combined with Marxism, such as Christianity. Christianity also, like Buddhism, condemns envy, which is considered as a grave sin and which has been opposed, by some Christian authors, to the theological virtue of *caritas* (love for humankind) but also to the cardinal virtue of *humanitas* (kindness).[17] Paul in the first *Letter to the Corinthians* famously claims that "[l]ove is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud" (1 Corinthians 13-4), thus opposing envy to *both* love and kindness.

This imperative of rejecting envy and inviting the believer to be loving and kind toward one's neighbour resonates with the Buddhist notion of lovingkindness (*metta*). However, it seems to me that Buddhist lovingkindness and compassion have an advantage over their Christian counterparts: they come with a powerful tool capable of reshaping our emotional reactivity, namely mindfulness meditation (*sati*) (for a discussion of which, see Bodhi 2011).

Mindfulness can be defined as "lucid awareness of the phenomenal field" (Bodhi 2011, 22). It can be attained through a wide range of meditative techniques, such as focusing one's attention on one's breathing or another object (physical or abstract), in a sustained fashion; contemplating death; non-reactively monitoring one's experience (both perceptual/cognitive and emotional); and more.

By practicing these various forms of mindfulness meditation, Buddhist practitioners enhance both their cognitive and affective functions, some of which are accessible even to those

[17] This opposition is asserted by Aquinas in *Summa Theologica* (II–II, Question 36, Article 3) and other Scholastics. It's also represented by Giotto in a fresco on seven opposing virtues and vices in the Scrovegni Chapel. This might be as good a time as any to note that envy was added to the list of the seven capital sins in the sixth century by Gregory the Great. The list itself originated in the Egyptian monastic communities at the beginning of the Christian era. Monasteries share with kibbutzim both the communal life and the commitment to equality. It is natural to speculate that envy might be fairly prevalent in monastic communities, and Robert Browning's "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister" comes unavoidably to mind.

practicing these forms of meditation more occasionally. In a recent review article, Heppner and Shirk (2018) state:

> The mindfulness literature broadly links mindfulness (as a trait, a state, and an intervention) to enhanced cognitive functioning across a variety of indicators including attention, memory, and executive functioning (for a review, see Chiesa, Calati, & Serretti, 2011). Chiesa et al. (2011) argue that the type of cognitive functions enhanced by meditation actually varies depending on the skill level or degree of exposure a person has with meditation, with early stage meditation primarily influencing multiple aspects of basic attention and with more advanced stages of meditation having their impacts on aspects of executive functioning and working memory including unfocused sustained attention, as well as the ability to think flexibly and with liquidity, inhibit automatic responses, and hold more information at once. However, research with brief meditation shows impacts on both basic attention and higher order cognitive functions. (Heppner and Shirk 2018, 2)

These higher-order cognitive functions include more flexible thinking, less biased responding and decision-making, more accurate perceptual processing, and reduced pain sensitivity. Furthermore, and importantly for our purposes, mindfulness is consistently linked to more positive and fewer negative affective states, and an enhanced ability to regulate emotions. Finally, "[m]indfulness inductions also appear to facilitate positive interpersonal processes such as empathy and group performance" (Heppner and Shirk 2018, 5) and is seemingly associated

with pro-social behaviour, although evidence on this link is currently not as robust as for other findings, according to the authors.

Now, of course, no one practice is the panacea of all evils. Mindfulness is not sufficient to defeat the green-eyed monster, nor is it necessary, given that envy can be coped with also through other means, such as for instance cognitive behavioural therapy. Chuang herself brings up clinical psychological approaches to envy as complementary to a Buddhist-inspired one.

What is uniquely productive and novel in Marxist Buddhism, at least as presented by Hung, is that it emphasizes the interconnectedness of people not just or even necessarily at the metaphysical (or epistemic) level, but at the social one: Marxism is a globalizing movement that aims at international solidarity. Hung observes how Marxist Buddhism criticizes many contemporary humanistic Buddhists who ignored systemic factors leading to injustice and harm.

Here, I may perhaps find myself slightly disagreeing with Hung, when he says: "as oppression and obsolete moral laws are determined by social conditions, improving an individual's mentality seems to be less effective for changing these systemic oppressions." (p. of published version) It seems to me that it is an advantage of Marxist Buddhism that it can incorporate ways to "improve an individual's mentality". There is no need for a dichotomous approach—it's not one or the other, it's one *and* the other. We can change systemic oppression while changing individual mentalities, in a mutually reinforcing virtuous circle.

I do not think that Marxism, or any other political movement that aims at equality and equity, is particularly imbued with envy, as its many critics suggest. At the same time, it is not immune to it either—or rather Marxists, the individuals enacting Marxist ideals, are not. Hung mentions the debate on implicit bias reduction and correctly points out that implicit bias is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that requires a multipronged approach involving

structural and cognitive interventions alike, the former aiming at externally regulating the social environment and the latter focusing on improving a person's internal cognitive system. However, he highlights that cognitive interventions have seemingly proven to be less effective than structural ones. I do wonder how interventions aimed at circumventing cognition but still attempting to affect the individual feature in this debate. For instance, a recent review article seems to show that mindfulness does reduce intergroup bias (Oyler et al. 2021).

So, I think I may be more sympathetic than Hung is with regard to interventions at the individual level, because I see them as intertwined with the systemic level, *especially within a Buddhist framework!* And even if this optimism may turn out to be unwarranted with regard to implicit bias, I hope I have shown it is justified with regard to the problem of envy.

To sum up. Marxism shares with Buddhism the idea that individual wellbeing can be obtained, paradoxically, only through lessening emphasis on individuality—Marxism by means of economic collectivism, Buddhism by means of a spiritual transformation. Both aim at shrinking the self and are keenly aware of how quickly an emphasis on one's own desires leads to greed and exploitation of others. However, Marxist ideals have failed to yield successful large-scale flourishing communities, while Buddhism is a religion practiced by millions of people but has not advanced a politically progressive agenda in particular (much like other world religions are compatible with a variety of political outlooks and goals).

Marxist Buddhism—I have suggested—may perhaps bring together the best of the respective traditions to solve the problem of envy. But is envy really as problematic as I have presented it so far? And could there be a way for Marxist Buddhism to incorporate a form of envy that is compatible with its political aims, while leaving out envy's unpalatable aspects?

3. A *Right* Envy?

There is no medicine without side effects, and there is no modification of entrenched features of human nature without costs. Alleviating envy through a reduction of the weight of the ego and social comparison in our lives is no exception. In this final section I present the costs of the Marxist-Buddhist solution to envy, suggest that they may be higher than is desirable, and tentatively offer an alternative that aspires to respect the spirit of a Buddhist approach, if not the letter. Note that I will set aside the question of whether such changes would be feasible, even in countries with a collectivist culture, like for instance Taiwan, let alone countries with more individualistic cultures.

The attentive reader might have noticed that I have not yet defined envy. That is because envy is defined in different ways in the contexts described so far and that includes discussions in political philosophy. John Rawls, whose approach to envy and equality has strongly influenced subsequent discussions, defines it as "the propensity to view with hostility the greater good of others even though their being more fortunate than we are does not detract from our advantages […] we are willing to deprive them of their greater benefits even if it is necessary to give up something ourselves" (Rawls 1971: 532). As I have argued elsewhere (Protasi 2021), this is a particularly narrow definition of envy, one that assumes that envy necessarily involves not just the desire to deprive others of the envied good, but to do so even at a personal cost to ourselves.

There is no empirical evidence supporting the idea that all envy is like this, and quite a bit that disconfirms this notion. In social psychology a growing consensus has emerged in the last decade, according to which there is a *benign* type of envy which, if not always benign in the moral sense, at least can be, and at any rate is not as dysfunctional and maladaptive as envy has often been accused of being. Envy is an emotion we evolved to feel (like all of the other

emotions), so as to level differences between people and regulate social status (Lange and Protasi 2021; Lange and Crusius 2022).[18] Within this functional account, envy is defined as a painful emotional response to a perceived inferiority vis-à-vis a similar other, which involves a motivation to either improve one's situation or harm the envied person and/or envied good.

While psychologists only differentiate between benign and malicious envy, in my work I have defended a taxonomy of four kids of envy (Protasi 2016, 2021). For reasons of space, I will only articulate the profile of emulative envy. Emulative envy is more focused on the lack of the envied object than on the fact that another person, the envied, has it, and is accompanied by the perception that one can improve one's situation and obtain the envied object in the future. It thus motivates the envier to emulate the envied and is, definitionally, neither prudentially nor morally bad. I have argued that this type of envy can contribute to individual flourishing and can play a positive, albeit perhaps transitional, role in advancing social and political progress (see Protasi 2021 for a fuller account).

Now, how would Marxist Buddhists define envy? There seems to be no systematic account of envy in Han Buddhism. However, in a central text of Chinese Yogacara Buddhism, envy (*īrṣyā*) is defined as "to desire one's own reputation and advantage and not be able to stand in the glory of another" (Hsüan Tsang 1973: 437).[19] In many classical Indian (and Buddhist) sources īrṣyā is condemned as a necessarily defective state, but that's not to say much, given that all emotions are considered defective in this tradition insofar as they "lead to attachment and error" (Tuske 2021), much like in Stoicism. A fortiori, īrṣyā is condemned in all of the Buddhist schools, often with an emphasis on envy's preoccupation with the external goods of wealth and

[18] In the history of ideas, too, envy has been defined in ways that makes it less malicious and counterproductive. Aristotle arguably presented a variety of envy (*zēlos*) that motivates the envier to emulate the envied and achieve the envied good for oneself, which is neither morally nor prudentially bad as in the type of envy Rawls describes.
[19] I owe this reference to Tzu-Wei Hung, whom I thank.

honour. These definitions do not involve any particular motivational tendency or behavioural output. As explained in the previous section, this is understandable, since Buddhism is concerned with the very background conditions of envy. This is the reason why a Buddhist perspective is not amenable to the contemporary social psychological outlook on envy as a potentially functional emotion, and why traditional Buddhists would deny that even emulative envy can play any positive role, since it, too, is grounded in comparing oneself to another, encourages a competitive attitude, and entails what Chuang has called "a strong sense of equality" (Chuang 2022: 101).

However, isn't equality something *Marxist* Buddhists care about? Furthermore, a straightforward Buddhist approach would aim to eradicate envy completely, but that would be quite costly. An increasing number of philosophers has come in defence of envy's instrumental and non-instrumental value in recent years, both for individuals and for communities (in addition to my aforementioned works, see also: Thomason 2015; Romero 2022; Vaccarezza and Niccoli 2022; Archer, Thomas and Engelen 2022; among others.)

Fortunately, there is a precedent in contemporary philosophy of emotion that inspires an alternative solution to total eradication, and that is compatible with a Buddhist-inspired approach such as Hung's.

Righteous anger has been advocated as a crucial emotional tool for political struggle (see e.g., Lorde 1981, Frye 1983, Srinivasan 2017, Cherry 2021). Even though Buddhists are notoriously critical of anger as well, Emily McRae (2017) has defended political anger from a Buddhist perspective, arguing in favour of a form of anger, which is "metabolized" and purified of any desire to pass pain, and which is not only compatible with, but *grounded* in "active, engaged compassion" (McRae 2017: 113-115).

In the *Majjhima Nikāya* (the "Middle-length Discourses" of the Buddha, a central Buddhist text), a distinction is drawn between wrong (*micchā*) and right (*sammā*) version of the eight paths that lead to the extinction of suffering. I am wondering whether Marxist Buddhism couldn't incorporate a sort of *right envy*, a wiser one that interprets the difference between you and I as akin to the difference between two stages of myself. Just like we can sometimes look at our past selves with some envy (because we had the vigour and the innocence of youth, for instance), so we might be able to look at some more fortunate others, and feel an envy that is deprived of a strong sense of distinction between selves, and that is grounded in the idea that we are all human beings with similar aspirations, needs, and rights. We are all deserving of enjoying some successes, yet we are all flawed and bound to fail, or suffer disappointments. Such envy, *contra* the traditional opposition between envy and compassion (as presented for instance in Aristotle's *Rhetoric* II.9 1386b16), would be compatible with compassion, in two ways. First, it would be compatible with self-compassion, especially in light of the right understanding of envy as a natural, normal emotion that stems from our social nature and our psychology. Second, it would be compatible with feeling compassion for the envied if they suffer a setback, as opposed to Schadenfreude and rejoicing of their misfortune. Because this envy would be felt also in the context of understanding that we have limited control over our success, its phenomenology would be different from other forms of envy—its intensity muted, much like with metabolized anger.[20]

A full development of this notion would require a paper of its own, and it is possible that Chuang is right in believing that envy really is not compatible with Buddhism after all. So, I will end by reiterating that Marxist Buddhism may provide a novel solution to the problem of envy,

[20] Another possibility would be to think of this type of envy as a *transitional* emotion that society has to go through before full eradication. I thank Christina Chuang for this suggestion.

for those who are concerned by it. And for those of us who aren't, there are still many other features of this movement that make it attractive and worth thinking deeply about.[21]

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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[21] I would like to thank Vanessa Carbonell, Christina Chuang, Yao Lin and Corey McCall for very useful feedback on this paper.

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