

# MARX'S EPISTEMOLOGY AND THE PROBLEM OF CONFLATED IDEALISMS

Vincent L. Casil

*vcasil@ateneo.edu*

(ATENEO DE MANILA UNIVERSITY, PHILIPPINES)

## Introduction

In a world bewitched with commodities, the problems Marx initially diagnosed in his works are still present and continuously plaguing our society. Capitalism has radically transforms every facets of modern life; there is “madness” in Harvey’s words. (Harvey, 2018) Roughly two centuries after Marx philosophized, he already saw the advent of universal alienation, exploitation of the workers, commodity fetishism, and inevitable financial crises. These phenomena have been endlessly hounding the modern man, lest the contradictions of the capitalist system would be resolved. Marx provided the theoretical foundation to unravel this capitalist madness.

As early in *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx (1992) saw the absurdity in the system that dehumanizes and alienates humanity to valorize the capital. Instead of living for the sake of humanity, we are living for the sake of the capital. Capitalism’s logic drives competition and overaccumulation at the expense of environmental devastation; it forces migrant workers to leave their home and family for economic security. Its logic marginalizes the poor in the name of “development,” while creating meaningless and unfulfilling jobs for the sake of efficiency and productivity.

Marx’s idealism continues to be an indispensable framework for emancipation that challenges the present alienating conditions. His recognition of how the subject participates in the construction of the comprehended reality is a vital aspect of his thinking to forgo.

Despite of Marx’s explicit criticisms against the German idealists, his indebtedness to these thinkers, who set the context and foundation

of his idealism, is undeniable. Like Hegel, the progenitor of German idealism, Marx accepts the subject-object dialectical interaction, which includes the idealist assertion that the social subject practically and intellectually shapes its object, in other words, that the subject actively participates in making sense of the world. In the *Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx uncovers how subjective needs frame the subject's understanding of reality. He unravels that underneath the pretension of objectivity of the science of political economy, the alienated need to profit shaped by the market competition outlines the limit of this science. Concurrent with the same idealist epistemology, Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach* explicitly criticizes the old materialism, which simply thinks that matter is the fundamental reality; this materialism implies a realist epistemology, where knowing is a process of conceptually copying the matter and its structure independent of the subject. In the *Theses*, Marx criticizes that this mechanistic materialism annuls any active participation from the subject. While also criticizing the crude idealism that confines human activity and history solely in intellectual labor and reflection, Marx synthesizes the former and the latter in his new materialism that integrates the subjective and the objective realities, this new materialism acknowledges that the subject practically and intellectually contributes to shape the reality. (Marx, 1972, 143)

While idealism is apparent in Marx's early texts, his later texts, especially *Capital*, are understood to have a different epistemological framework. Althusser (2005) popularized what is termed as Marx's "epistemological break", the later Marx shifting to scientific work, purging his idealist heritage. In opposition to scientism, members of the Frankfurt school who are inspired and influenced by Marx retrieve the idealist facets of his philosophy to distinguish his thoughts from the oppressive Soviet Marxism. (Marcuse, 1985; Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002)

Although the *Capital* (1906) apparently articulates the laws, processes, and contradictions of capitalism, sections such as *Commodity Fetishism* still leaves traces of idealism, which has been explicated by Lukacs (1971). Aside from that, the *New Marx Reading* retraces the influence of Hegelian categories to Marx and the all-encompassing laws of the *Capital* (Backhaus, 1980; Bellofiore and Riva, 2015), which is

balanced out by Negri's rereading of the *Grundrisse*, underscoring that the role of the subject—workers movement and activity—is foundational to the creation of the new movements of the capital. (Negri, 1989 & 2014) Under these idealist frameworks, human beings are not merely objects helplessly determined by the natural necessities and economic forces; the agents, on the contrary, are given the space of freedom to react, reinterpret, and free themselves from the dominance of capitalism. (Mogach, 2017, 91) They are given space to think otherwise beyond the hegemonic framework of the capital.

Despite the critical relevance of Marx's idealism, Marxism and Marx-inspired thoughts have often neglected and underemphasized idealism as an aspect of Marx's thinking. Its status is often overlooked, as his philosophy is often confused with Engels' positivist and materialist-realist interpretations and with the failures and evils of Soviet Marxism. This disregard of idealism somehow originated from Marx himself, who constantly and explicitly disparages what he called as "uncritical idealism" he identifies with the Young Hegelians. (Marx, 1992, 385) Because of the seeming non-idealist meaning of these remarks, Marx's ideas were appropriated in a positivist and scientific light. His concepts are understood in a realist paradigm, where socio-economic movements and developments are understood like laws of nature existing independently of the subject. Engels started this realist line of reading, which was adopted by Soviet Marxism. It was then accepted as the official doctrine in the International Worker's movements of the nineteenth century. (Cole, 1952; Torrance, 1995, 3-10; Rockmore, 2002, 3)

Idealist and materialist-realist readings are the two conflicting interpretations of Marx's epistemology. Because of Marx's lack of lengthy discussion of his epistemology, most of the readings utilize key texts from his corpus to reconstruct his implied view on knowledge. Textual passages alone, however, are not sufficient basis of interpretation. Without any sense of context, his scattered remarks on knowledge could be framed to support both the idealist and realist readings. It is easy to interpret Marx's idea of the dialectics of commodities either as a law existing in the market or as the subject's-imposed comprehension of the socio-economic reality. Or that Marx's metaphor of turning Hegel

upside down must be crudely understood as Marx publicizing his materialist-realism contrary to Hegelian idealism.

To address this difficulty, scholars settle the debate by being sensitive to the context and historical shades of Marx's thoughts, underscoring how the philosophical and political discussions of his time shaped his ideas. Another way is to clarify the conceptual nuances of Marx's ideas and to show progression of the Marxian debate. This kind of task, like what Wittgenstein did, shows that the misunderstanding is not real but product of confusion in the terms and concepts.

The paper contributes to latter discussion to interpret Marx correctly. Focusing on the conceptual terms of the debate, it shows that the inability of the realists to recognize Marx's idealist heritage is out of the realists' limited understanding of the category of idealism in their reading. To prove the paper's case, the first section starts with elucidation of Marx's concept of epistemological idealism as read by his interpreters. It shows the actual meaning of epistemological idealism as used by Kolakowski, Lukacs, and other idealist readers of Marx. The second section shows how the realists conflates the two idealisms, how the realist reading is erroneously grounded on failure to clarify the difference between the concept of ontological and epistemological idealism. The third section highlights the differences between epistemological and ontological idealism. It explains that the Ontological idealism claims that idea is the fundamental reality (Kupers, 2013, 1-10), while epistemological idealism suggests that knowledge is dependent upon the subject. (Ewing, 2013, 11-60) Under this idealism, the subject in some sense constructs the characteristics of the known reality. Realists think that the idealist reading shows that Marx is holding an ontological idealism, while in fact the idealist reading underscores the epistemological idealism of Marx.

This conceptual or terminological inconsistency latent in the discussion of Marx idealist-realist debate explains how realist readings of Marx persistently deny the presence of idealist epistemology in his philosophy, despite of its strong reason. As the confusions are cleared out, and the concepts are laid bare, then three things would become palpable. First, it further underscores that Marx's philosophy should be separated from the materialist-realist readings especially of Engels

and the undemocratic regimes that publicized Marx as the foundation of their thinking. Second, real critique for and against Marx's philosophy could be appropriately made to further enrich his thoughts so that theoretical foundations will be more precise to address the problems of our times.

## Epistemological Idealism

The idealist reading of Marx emphasizes the presence of the post-Kantian and constructivist subject in his philosophy. Popularly held by Kolakowski, Avineri, and Lukács, for them Marx holds an epistemological idealist framework, which involves a constructivist view on knowledge. It views that the subject's knowledge is in some sense produced or constructed by the subject. In other words, knowledge is subject-dependent, constructed or modified by the knower.

Epistemological idealism can be traced from Kant's critical philosophy, culminating in a shift akin to Copernican revolution. Kant relocated the source of knowledge from the objects as perceived by the subject to the subject as constructing what can be known. Contrary to Aristotelian epistemology commonly held during that time, Kant reconceived knowing from the object being the source of knowledge to the subject as the ground of knowledge. As result, he shows that human knowledge is limited to *phenomena*, i.e. to what is sensed and conceptualized by the faculties of consciousness and not to *noumena* i.e. to what the reality actually is.

German Idealism took the Kantian epistemological view, extending the Copernican revolution. Hegel, who is its best representative, criticized the ahistorical transcendental Kantian subject, articulating the historical subject. (Ameriks, 2000, 1-17; Pinkard, 2002) As he explains, concepts and categories of thought that made knowing possible are not *a priori* universal truths across cultures, rather these forms of thought are products of the dialectical and historical movement of ideas. Dialectically speaking, the subject can be understood in view of the society, and society can be understood in view of the subject. The Hegelian subject, in comprehending the reality, acknowledges how his thoughts

are product of society and historical development of social reason; the historicized subject shows that the condition of knowledge is not universal but historical.

There are differences in Kantian and the Post-Kantian tradition, but both are epistemological idealists given their constructivist view of knowledge, where knowledge is in some sense constructed and produced by the subject. This form of idealism should be distinguished from the idealism that aspires for a better – or ideal reality. Although Marx seeks for the emancipation of a dehumanized society and aims for a better political and economic condition, this idealism is merely optimism and no way epistemological.

What is more important to underscore is that epistemological idealism should be differentiated from ontological idealism. Ontological idealism asserts that the nature of reality is fundamentally idea; it is often contrasted with materialism, which argues that reality is fundamentally matter. Although there is an interpretation that epistemological idealism implies ontological idealism, since a subject-dependent-knowledge could suggest that even the “knowledge of existence” could be a mere idea of the subject, the epistemological idealism by itself, as a claim about knowledge, does not necessarily lead to ontological idealism. For example, Kantian epistemology maintains an independent noumenal world from the subject. Epistemological idealism only maintains a subject-dependent-knowledge, which is clearly not an ontological idealist assertion. (Myers, 1997, 318)

### **The Conflation of Idealisms in the Realist Reading**

The realist reading of Marx thrives on the lack of delineation between ontological and epistemological idealism earlier mentioned. Because the realist confuses his critique of ontological idealism as applicable to epistemological idealism, the realist readings—from Engels to Wood—fail to address the significant point of Marxian epistemological idealism. Without drawing the distinction between two senses of idealism, the realists’ rejection of ontological idealism becomes also a rejection of epistemological idealism, which, however, is not evident in Marx’s works.

The realist reading of Marx asserts that knowledge and the characteristics of reality is no way subject-dependent but independently existing outside of the knower. Knowledge is produced as the subject's mind copies the outside structure of the reality. Early Marxists such as Engels, Plekhanov, Lenin, and Soviet Marxism and even the recent reading of Wood accepted this realist line of thinking. (Engels, 1946; Lenin, 1972; Tse Tung, 1965, 295-310; Wood, 2004)

Most of the realist readings restrict idealism ontologically without any hint of epistemological sense proposed by the idealist interpretations. The confusion of the realists about the meaning of idealism muddled their understanding of Marx's epistemology.

In *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*, Engels confines idealism in its ontological meaning. He argues that idealists are "those who asserted the primacy of spirit to nature," and they think that the creation of the world is out from the mind, idea, or God. For Engels, idealism simply means that idea, not matter, is the fundamental reality; idea is the cause of matter and not otherwise. In Engels' framework, idealism is one of the two major answers to the greatest question of philosophy, the question concerning the relation of "thinking and being." He explains that philosophers have been divided into two major camps: the materialists who assert the primacy of being and the idealists who assert the primacy of thinking. (Engels, 1946, 16-18)

As Engels limits the sense of idealism ontologically, he then concludes that Marx does not subscribe to any form of idealism. Out of this simplistic distinction, Marx is seen as anti-idealist, who is primarily influenced by Feuerbach's materialism, which views that matter is the primary cause of reality. This materialism, for Engels, is the ground of Marx's assertion that reality can be explained through the material economic condition. Through this framework, Marx is interpreted as resolving the theoretical contradictions of idealism by showing that its root is nothing but a form of theology. Here, idealism is understood as baseless assertion, since it is seen as grounded on the survival of the belief of an extra-mundane creator. (Engels, 1946, 80-81)

Engel's realist appropriation of Marx and his limited concept of idealism have influenced most of the next realist readings of Marx's

texts. Engels' distinction between materialism and idealism has become the basis of interpretation of the Marxists. Part of its popularity was its utter simplicity in its distinction of both concepts. Materialism is defined as the assertion that matter causes idea, and idealism is conceived as the view that idea causes matter. Aside from being simple, Marx's lack of systematic discussion of his epistemological views largely explains why scholars rely heavily on Engels' conceptualizations. (Avineri, 1968, pp. 65-66) Both Plekhanov and Lenin, for instance, follow Engels' concept of idealism, which also lead them to reject Marx's form of idealism, including the epistemological sense of the concept.

Influenced by Engels, Plekhanov distinguishes idealism from Marx's materialism. He thinks that any form of idealism, such as Hegel's and Kant's transcendental idealism, reduces everything to thought, as both conceive "being, matter, and nature" as either postulate of "Idea" (for Hegel) or of "Reason" (for Kant). Both Kant and Hegel's ideas, for Plekhanov, are closely akin to a "theological concept," a view that "nature was created by God," or "reality, matter," is created by "an abstract, non-material being," or "world's law is dictated [...] by divine Reason." (Plekhanov, 1976, 117-118) In both senses, it means that the reality is created by mind.

Lenin, like Plekhanov, also defines materialism against the backdrop of idealism, which he termed as the Empirico-criticism held by Mach and Avenarius. For Lenin, Empirico-criticism has cloaked Berkeley's idealism, since it remains grounded on the idea that existence is created by perception, *esse est percipi*. He criticizes this form of idealism because of its absurd logical implications. The end of Berkeley's idealism is solipsism, since when everything is conceived as one's personal idea based on personal perception, then even the human existence would become a product of one's idea. In his ironic remark, Lenin expresses this view that "if bodies are 'complexes of sensations' ...or 'combinations of sensations' as Berkeley said, it inevitably follows that the whole world is but my idea." (Lenin, 1972, 34)

Engel's realist influence has extended even to the recent readings of Wood of Marx. In *Philosophical Materialism*, Wood even defends Engels' idealist-materialist distinction to be correct despite of its inadequacy.



He argues that "Engels' rather Manichean distinction between idealism and materialism may be a simplistic and philosophically unsophisticated, but it is not wholly misguided. (Wood, 2004, 167)" Engels' real purpose, he explains, is to be an aid for delineating the concepts. By defining the categories simplistically, Engels made a clear distinction between the materialist outlook from the "traditional religious outlook" and the supernatural explanations. (Engels, 1946, 166-167)

By following Engels' categories, Wood disassociates Marx from any form of idealism. He also dismisses Marxian idealist account because like Engels, the very concept of idealism gives him an impression that it is related to some supernatural view. In Engels-like argument, Wood points out that Marx cannot be identified with idealism, given that idealism is a Hegelian notion where "nature is 'posited' by cosmic spirit as its 'externalization'." (Wood, 2004, 190-191) For him, Idealists maintain that "God created the world," and "the separation of soul dwelling in the body and leaving it at death," which cannot be identified as Marx's ideas. (Wood, 2004, 166)

Against idealism, Wood reads that it is more plausible that Marx is a naturalist and a realist. He further bases this realist reading on the assertion that Marx embraces "historical materialism," a view that "rests on the idea that the deepest and most historically potent human interests lie in developing people's *natural* powers to shape the world, and not in looking after the *supernatural* destination of their souls." (Wood, 2004, 168-169) It means that Marx is neither a supernaturalist nor a mystic, and this philosophical view brings him closer to materialism and realism.

A close analysis of the categories of Engels, however, reveals that his simplistic conceptual distinction cannot be reliable when one aims to clarify the nuanced epistemology of Marx. The categories, which are set by Engels, limit the possible reading of Marx, since it is focused only on the extremes of idealism and materialism without the intermediate views available. Engels identifies the primacy of thought and primacy of being as mutually exclusive alternatives. As a result, he fails to discuss any form of epistemological idealism, which is different from the concept of idealism he is espousing. He lacks an articulation of idealism that originated from Kant, and if he has ever mentioned him, it is in

the context of interpreting the philosopher as an agnostic who thought the reality is unknown. Kantian epistemology is only viewed in its ontological claim, the view that reality is an unknown “noumenal realm,” neglecting his assertion of a subject-dependent knowledge, the epistemological idealism.

### **The Difference between Ontological and Epistemological idealism**

The realists are certainly correct when they say that Marx does not hold any form of ontological idealism. Even in the *Manuscripts*, Marx (1992) explicitly states that he does not subscribe to the view that reality is fundamentally idea; he even refers to it as “uncritical idealism,” the view where the idea functions as a *demiurge* that creates the material reality. (Marx, 1992, 385) The realists, however, conflate two idealisms into ontological idealism and this should be critically examined.

The realists’ failure to elaborate epistemological idealism has led them to an unwarranted deduction that Marx should be distanced from any form of idealism. Without elaborating epistemological idealism, the realists have neglected an important insight that Marx held, which led them to miss the point of Marxian idealists like Kolakowski. For instance, Wood, who reads Marx as a realist, refutes ontological idealism, which he erroneously ascribed to Kolakowski and other Marxian idealists. This tendency of conflating idealisms is common in the realist readings of Marx. What they are criticizing is a simplified and crude interpretation of Hegel’s and Berkeley’s idealism, which cannot be identified with the idealist readings of Marx.

Against Marx-Engels’ realism and its followers, Marxian Idealists do not hold supernaturalism and mysticism. In fact, like the realists, Marxian idealists also reject identification with uncritical idealism and Berkeley’s idealism. For instance, Avineri reads Marx as an idealist epistemologically, but he maintains his materialist ontology. He explains that although Marx has advanced the idea of the objective and independent existence of the material reality, the philosopher manages to maintain the idealist epistemology where subjects modify what they perceive. (Avineri, 1968, 65-66)

Like Avineri, Lukács reads Marx as an idealist who maintains the existence of an “objective social reality.” For him, although Marx thinks that perception of the social reality is dependent on subject’s class (i.e. one’s context and condition), it does not mean that the Marxian view thinks that reality is produced by ideas alone or by an Absolute or *Geist*. Both the bourgeois and the proletariat perceive the same reality immediately (without theoretical constitution), but the mediation of their different class standpoint creates a varying perception of reality. As Lukács (1971, 150) writes, “...the objective reality of social existence is in its immediacy the ‘same’ for both proletariat and bourgeoisie. But this does not prevent the specific categories of mediation by means of which both classes raise this immediacy to the level of consciousness, by means of which the merely immediate reality becomes for both the authentically objective reality, from being fundamentally different, thanks to different position occupied by the ‘two’ classes within the ‘same’ economic process.”

Kolakowski, another Marxian idealist, reads Marx under the same idealist epistemology. He clarifies that Marx’s epistemology does not assert that the mind literally creates existence of things. Mind, rather, only provides a modified perception of reality, yet it never denies the existence of independent things. Kolakowski (1968, 45-46) explains that for Marx “human consciousness, the practical mind...does not produce existence,” yet this same mind “produces existence as composed of individuals divided into species and general.” He reiterates that mental concept is different from actual existence. “It does not follow,” – he adds - “that to be ‘thought of’ is the same thing as ‘to be’.” It means that there is still an actual existence of things, which he refers as the “force of opposition,” the reality that the human beings must engage and “must overcome” to satisfy their needs. (Kolakowski, 1968, 45-46)

Clearly, the Marxian idealists maintain in a certain sense that objects exist independently of the subject. Although they see that Marx holds the idea that the subject in some sense modifies reality, they make a conscious effort to distinguish between the idealism that views a subject-dependent knowledge from the idealism that asserts that consciousness produces the reality out of nothing. Contrary to the latter, they

never deny the existence of things, or reduce their existence into mere idea. The idealist readings underscore how Marx re-establishes the objective existence of things through his critique of Hegel's philosophy.

## Conclusion

As an idealist, Marx does not assert that the subject directly creates knowledge and reality, he rather views that the subject contributes to the construction of knowledge in a certain manner. The contribution does not only come from practical labor, e.g. a worker transforms wood into table or mountain into a building, but also through cognitive activities, that is, by understanding the reality in a set of categories produced by human being existing in a specific socio-economic condition. This kind of idealism is not the same with the crude idealism Marx and the realist Marxists are criticizing. It does not assert an ontological idealism, where everything is ideas, and the reality is the externalization of the mind and ideas *ex nihilo*.

One must recognize an epistemological idealism in Marx, since only in this context one can start to authentically engage and criticize his ideas. Various propaganda has maligned Marx, including his profound writings, identifying them with totalitarian regimes. Marx's ideas have been subject of simplification, which started from Engels, and due to its uncomplicatedness, these readings have become more influential and popular. By underscoring Marx's idealism, it shows a clear divergence between Marx's philosophy and the ideas of Engels, the Soviet Marxists and other realist Marxists. The simplified dichotomy between idealism and materialism, as a framework to understand Marx, confuses and obstructs one to approach the real thoughts of Marx. Such framework does not include other categories of idealisms, which are historically, philosophically, and conceptually more profound than what Engels and Marxism have thought.

As the realist reading unceasingly reveals to be untenable, then the idealist framework can show how to revitalize the critique against the capital, to engage its alienating forces, since the point, after all, *is to change it*. Man is not a slave of economic determinations; man can

modify the world in order to humanize it. The change, however, occurs not only through practical activities of the bodies, where cognition's role is to be a passive reflector of what is "out there". Marx shows that cognition actively contributes to shape our interpretation of the world, and thus, such idealism provides a space for freedom to subvert the alienating world also through cognition. Cognition and its development have critical roles to play for changing and humanizing the world. Against the pretension of objectivity of the science of political economy, Marx argues the need to humanize our thinking to show the alienated needs latent in our theories. To interpret the world is insufficient, for there's a constant need to reinterpret it. The quest for societal change not only requires us to act but also to challenge the assumptions and foundations of our thinking. It requires us to be conscious, not only of the information we have in this world, but also of the interests and needs our cognition serve.

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