Can't they just get along? (not quite)

Confronting and then sidestepping Marx and Foucault's irreconcilable differences in search for a sound theory of social change

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Few have been as profoundly influential in the world of social theory as Karl Marx. Perhaps this debt has been best acknowledged by the countless political groups and social movements that have used their own interpretations of different components of Marxist theory as a call to action and, at times, a road map. So the relatively recent introduction of Michel Foucault's canon of writings on discourse and power has proven equal parts exhilarating and problematic for revolutionaries and activists (like me), who are torn between fascination with Foucault's historical mapping of social construction and Marxist theory's vulnerability if these ideas as seen as viable criticism. Worse for us, Foucault's collected works seem to discourage engagement with any radical or liberatory social movement or action; such would be futile in light of inevitable reconstruction of "original" systems of oppression. Nonetheless, Foucault's work has undeniable and deserved charm and sway, and looks to be in many ways a more advanced look at power relations than Marx's: a perspective which should be heeded by movements, not pridefully ignored. We should ask where both Marxist and Foucauldian theory succeed at capturing true social power dynamics, and where they fail. Through this inquiry we should be able to form a better assessment for informing and guiding social change.

Certain academics will dispute that Marxists should have any qualms with Foucault. At the outset of his paper "Foucault, Governmentality, and Critique," Thomas Lemke engages Étienne Balibar's pronouncement that "Foucault's work is characterized by some kind of 'genuine struggle' with Marx."[1] [2] Responding, Lemke says Balibar "does not take into account the important theoretical changes in Foucault's work especially after the publication of the *History of*

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[1] Thomas Lemke, "Foucault, Governmentality, and Critique," *Rethinking Marxism* 14, no. 3 (2002): 1.

[2] Étienne Balibar, "Foucault and Marx: The question of nominalism," In *Michel Foucault philosopher*, edited by Timothy J. Armstrong, 38-56 (New York: Routledge, 1992), 39.

Sexuality, vol. 1," which Lemke asserts demonstrates Foucault's movement toward a much more government-focused, Marxist perspective.[3] In "Marx, Foucault, Genealogy," Bradley J. Macdonald argues Foucault's work did not oppose Marxist theory itself, but rather sought to be "free from a particular [Marxist] tradition."[4] He supports this with a quote from a 1983 interview, in which Foucault says he wishes for "the unburdening and liberation of Marx in relation to party dogma, which has constrained it … for so long."[5] [6]

Both authors (that is, Lemke and Macdonald) raise excellent points, highlighting Marxist undertones in work from a theorist often viewed as very Marx-separate. There are, however, some clear disagreements; for example, Lemke says Foucault gravitated toward Marx later in his life, while Macdonald more maintains Marx was just there all along. And even if we ignore the fact these arguments could not each both be exactly right, they each paint a Foucault which Foucault himself vocally contradicts. In the 1978 interview *Remarks on Marx* (an interview Macdonald claims to have read, implicit in the fact he cites it six times), Foucault reaffirms an assertion, first laid down in *The Order of Things*, that Marxist political economy was simply a part of the episteme of the 19th Century.[7] In that same breath he distances himself from a critique of Marxist ideology as a whole[8] (perhaps a comfort to Macdonald). Regardless, Foucault frames Marxist political economic theory as decidedly passé—a conclusion incongruent with Lemke and Macdonald's work, and one that Hegel-inspired Marxist theory absolutely (no pun intended)

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3 Lemke, 1.
4 Bradley J. Macdonald, "Marx, Foucault, Genealogy," *Polity* 34, no. 3 (Spring 2002): 259.
5 Macdonald, 259.
6 Michel Foucault, interview by Gérard Raulet, *Structuralism and Post-Structuralism: An Interview with Michel Foucault* Telos (March 20, 1983): 195-211.
7 Michel Foucault and Duccio Trombadori, *Remarks on Marx: conversations with Duccio Trombadori* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1991), 104.
8 Ibid.

contradicts. This, by the way, is merely two years after the original publication of the *History of Sexuality, vol. 1*, which Lemke uses as some evidence of a Marxist breakthrough for Foucault.

Both authors (but more so, and especially Macdonald) seem preoccupied to a higher degree with preservation of both Marx and Foucault's legitimacy than with critical discernment. Apologia may indeed be their goal, but it is less than productive when this defense suffers from a fatal and unacknowledged flaw. This incongruence is not totally unseen by Macdonald, who seems to realize Foucault's theoretical references to Marx do not honor a Hegelian notion of absolute political/economic/power relations. But Macdonald is still eager to point out instances where Foucault acknowledges admiration for Marx or Marxists, or where he owes Marx some intellectual debt (such as a somewhat trivially produced quote on "hieroglyphics" meant to establish how Marx [as well as Freud] helped to found discursivity).[9] Macdonald's tactics are not necessarily dishonest, but they do not adequately support the claim that Marx and Foucault's theories get along exceptionally well.

The problem I just mentioned—that authors like Lemke and Macdonald are overly defensive of their subject material first, and critically minded second—is shared not only by those in this debate equally sympathetic to Marx and Foucault. Kevin Anderson's very recent take on power theory and social movements, "Resistance versus Emancipation: Foucault, Marcuse, Marx, and the Present Moment," foregoes critical thought when it comes to Foucault, preferring to judge theory apparently on the basis of how nice it sounds. Anderson reveals a set of "problems" in Foucault, notably a "[failure] to distinguish among different types of resistance to power, whether reactionary and emancipatory" and "a sort of circularity or permanence of resistance –

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[9] Macdonald, 267.

and of power."[10] Yet it appears Anderson's disagreement lies less in a matter of theoretical fortitude than one of the theory's results. These are not so much "problems" as they are inconsistencies with what Anderson believes to be true.

The faults I have identified in the papers of Lemke, Macdonald and Anderson are not the mere components of their works, and they each certainly display a wealth of interesting, critical, and even important analysis regardless. The parallels between Foucault and Marx addressed by Lemke and Macdonald will be brought up later. But what all three authors share in common a methodology that is foremost defensive—of Marx and Foucault together, for Lemke and Macdonald, and of some morally distinct emancipatory process, for Anderson. As Anderson might put it (if he were to agree with me), this methodology exhibits two problems. First, it does not address the fundamental theoretical clashes between Marx and Foucault, and instead looks at surface- or end-level similarities (or differences) between Marxism and whatever Foucauldianism might be. Second, it does not challenge core theoretical assumptions or create anything new. This is an issue in Lemke and Macdonald's joint openness toward two clashing theories of power, but it might be even more problematic (and relevant to our focus of social change) when Anderson chooses to indict Foucault for resisting the notion of emancipation rather than asking *why* he does this.

The idea of emancipation (or liberation) and whether it is possible is important not only to Foucault's work but also to our search for the best formulation of a power theory for social change. Anderson's idea of a good theory looks to be the one that best supports the action he already wants to take (emancipatory change). But should the end goal of a social movement be

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[10] Kevin Anderson, "Resistance versus Emancipation: Foucault, Marcuse, Marx, and the Present Moment," *Logos* 12, no. 1 (Winter 2013).

emancipation? Maybe. A better question might concern whether there should be an end goal at all. If Foucault is right, and, a "circularity or permanence of resistance [and] power" does, as Anderson puts it, "[occlude] the possibility of an actual overcoming of capital and the state in a positive, emancipatory manner[11]," social movement actors should take notice.

Another important thing we should be aware of is how we separate (or do not separate) Marx and Foucault's respective theoretical models of power and change from associated ideologies, whether they belong to the theorists themselves or to subsequent scholars, thinkers or actors. Though he might draw the wrong conclusion, Macdonald is right to point out that Foucault takes issue with so-called "party dogma" of contemporary Marxists that burdens Marx.[12] It is doubtful that Marx would endorse all the ways his writings have been employed over time.

And it is also important to allow some separation between the theorist and the theory itself. If we want a theory truly representative of the human experience, requiring that its essence be pinned to a single individual seems counterintuitive. If we wish to compare and contrast Marx's theory of capital, political economy and oppression with Foucault's theory of power and discourse, it is less than beneficial to account for everything either man said during the course of his whole life. And frankly, doing so would guarantee confusion. While Marx's ideas experienced change over the course of his life, for Foucault, this was deliberate. In his interview with Duccio Trombadori, he explains:

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11 Anderson.

12 Macdonald, 266.

> I'm perfectly aware of having continuously made shifts both in the things that have interested me and in what I have already thought. In addition, the books I write constitute an experience for me that I'd like to be as rich as possible. An experience is something you come out of changed. If I had to write a book to communicate what I have already thought, I'd never have the courage to begin it. I write precisely because I don't know yet what to think about a subject that attracts my interest. In so doing, the book transforms me, changes what I think. As a consequence, each new work profoundly changes the terms of thinking which I had reached with the previous work.
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> In this sense I consider myself more an experimenter than a theorist: I don't develop deductive systems to apply uniformly in different fields of research. When I write, I do it above all to change myself and not to think the same thing as before.[13]

With this in mind, we should realize it is not only advisable, but imperative to extract the theory from the theorist's work without necessarily letting him dictate the theory's bounds. Foucault and Marx's own meta-reflections, especially Foucault's, can be helpful (evidently so in the case of that same interview, *Remarks on Marx*, which nicely covers Foucault's previously-written works, which at this point comprise his entire life bibliography save the last two installments of *History of Sexuality*). But by maintaining this separation and focusing upon the theoretical model and not the theoretician, we can skillfully navigate situations like the one Foucault speaks of, in which he held admiration and political enthusiasm for Tunisian Marxist

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[13] Foucault and Trombadori, 26-27.

students in 1968—this despite the fact the students had little actual grounding in Marxist theory, and Foucault, knowledgeable of Marxist theory, disputes it.[14]

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Foucault and Marx actually have a lot in common, in terms of style and in terms of some key assumptions; there is, after all, no doubt the construction of Foucault's theories was greatly informed by Marx's influence. Both use history to construct and inform their theory, and each agrees social structure and ideas are derived from social development (very often less than conscious), rather than of some natural order.

The chief differentiator between Marxist and Foucauldian theory is a disagreement over Marx's theorization of the inevitable and total progression of history. Marx takes for granted his own notion of historical materialism, its movement from serfdom, through capitalism, all the way to communism, and associated social structures determined by the presiding influence of the contemporary mode of production. Foucault, by contrast, only takes power for granted.

I want to identify three major component disputes that emerge from this disagreement, that are especially relevant to social movements: a dispute over Marx's totalizing view of economic dominance in capitalist society, one over his idea that sure social reformulation will lead to a better world liberated of oppressive structures and relations, and lastly, one over his notion that such liberation will come about with an end to the capitalist mode of production's domination of all society's functions.

Foucault's first contestation, of the view that the capitalist mode of production dominates society and that capitalists have access to all the power in society, is essential to understanding his assessment of modern power relations. While Marx holds a totalizing conception of power,

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[14] Foucault and Trombadori, 135-137.

Foucault thinks the domination of capitalists and the state (which, according to the Marxist depiction of capitalism, are basically conjoined) is merely a discursive deployment part of a larger, changing equation.[15] As noted by Steven Best in *The Politics of Historical Vision: Marx, Foucault, Habermas*, while Foucault receives Marxist influence early on, by the time he begins formulating his theories of social construction and power he views Marx's totalized societal conception as "a reductionistic discourse unable to analyze key forms of human experience such as sexuality and desire," and "a derivative by-product of bourgeois political economy."[16] While Marx has taught the world much about the nature of exploitation through this discourse[17], Foucault asserts, in Best's words, "that exploitation is only one aspect of power, which is itself far more general in its nature, strategies, and range of effects."[18] Foucault "does not so much deny Marxist claims to be true as he insists they are incomplete and inadequate."[19]

The second major component idea, society's inherent progression toward a liberated state, is again fundamentally opposed by Foucault. Both he and Marx conceptualize future freedom, but Foucault sees this as part of a cyclical pattern that restores and potentially even heightens domination, in new forms.[20] Though, as Best points out, both "foresee a future where individuals can be free of domination," Foucault's vision of this relies upon a theoretical sectioning-off, or rather differentiation of individuals and coincident abolishment of social

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15 Note that Foucault is guilty of totalizing at one point, when he uses "totalizing accounts of epistemes in *The Order of Things*. This is not the norm for Foucault, and we should view his theory, generally, as non-totalizing.
(Steven Best, *The politics of historical vision: Marx, Foucault, Habermas* (New York: Guilford Press, 1995), 136.)

16 Ibid, 88.

17 Ibid, 115.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid, 116.

20 Ibid, 88.

norms.[21] In his reading of Marx, eventual collective liberation relies upon a human essentialist component whose validity he doubts. Best describes Foucault's objection:

> Foucault substitutes an individualist politics of transgression for a revolutionary politics of liberation. As Foucault understands it, the politics of liberation combines a repression model of power with a human-essentialist notion of the subject and an apocalyptic conception of change. Political revolution will free human nature from the shackles of alienation, so that a new humanity can blossom in the postcapitalist world. For the politics of transgression, however, there is no human essence waiting to be liberated, no state of perfect freedom to be achieved, and no promised end of power relationships.[22]

As Foucault himself puts it, "I do not know whether we will ever reach mature adulthood."[23] [24]

The first two objections I have identified more or less explain the last, which is to Marx's idea that liberation will be achieved by way of an uprising of the working class to defeat capitalism. Aside from the fact Foucault does not see collective liberation as something achievable, his theory objects to the dichotomy of power-ful bourgeoisie and power-less working class around which society's inherent struggle must be centered. Lemke, in the same paper mentioned earlier, recognizes three types of power relations identified by Foucault: "strategic

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21 Best, 88.
22 Ibid, 127.
23 Ibid.
24 Foucault (CHECK Ibid).

games between liberties, government and domination."[25] Domination is the stable form of power Marx refers to, but as Foucault argues, domination relationships are not the principle source of stable power relations and exploitation.[26] Rather, these relationships form as a product or technology of government[27], which in Foucault's case assumes the older meaning, that is, self-control and guidance that is not strictly macro-political.[28] In Foucault's view, social change comes as product of all these power relations, and not simply leverage against a higher dominance by the underclass.

Foucault's critiques of Marx are, for the most part, fair. If we should attempt to see Foucault as a continuation of Marx, as Macdonald suggests[29], rather than a frontal criticism, we might even be able to digest his additions easily. Macdonald's inference, as mentioned earlier, has serious flaws; but even if Foucault and Marx cannot coexist harmoniously, Foucault can provide some needed amendments to Marx's theory. As Jürgen Habermas argues at the start of "Historical Materialism and the Development of Normative Structures," an essay translated in *Communication and Evolution of Society*, Marx "needs revision" with some incorporation of communicative action, which is ignored in Marx's theory.[30] That conclusion is especially rational if one considers the simple fact Marx's own communicated works have had such incredible influence upon subsequent social action, to the point our major case studies of countries

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25 Lemke, 5.
26 Ibid, 5-6.
27 Ibid.
28 Ibid, 2.
29 Macdonald, 260.
30 Incidentally, this volume was released the same year, 1976, as Foucault's *History of Sexuality, vol. 1*, which highlights the influence of discursive power on sexuality and the individual.

undergoing Marxist-inspired socialist revolutions typically forcefully bypass the capitalist mode of production entirely, despite Marx's theory claiming the capitalist stage is necessary.[31]

It is reasonable, especially in today's world, to critique Marx's totalized notion of capital economy-defined power relations. In regard to social movements, it seems illogical to treat power in such a way when (i) we wish to combat forms of power oppression that seem to exist outside the core influence of the capitalist state (e.g. sexuality) and (ii) we want to be able to affect change in a whole way, including interpersonal relations, rather than only in terms of what has been dictated by capital influence.

It is fair, if unfortunate, to concede some difficulty in maintaining positive ideals out of liberatory movements. We can look to a host of examples where emancipation of an underclass from a higher, oppressive authority was hailed as revolutionary, but where oppressive and arguably worse, if often covert, systems soon came in as a replacement. For instance, we can look to the freeing of American slaves, the Marx-inspired revolutions of the 20th Century, and even the American Revolution as instances where emancipation provided temporary relief before allowing new, if "friendlier" systems of oppression to replace the old. Sadly, there do not tend to be counterexamples.

And finally, the last important clash between the theories of Marx and Foucault, much related to the first, is crucial: can any degree of repeated social revolution dedicated to the upheaval of capitalist institutions (or other) defeat social stigmas and oppression in regard to structures like patriarchy and sexuality hierarchy? While capital explanations can be tied to these

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[31] In 1877, Marx denies his totalization of this progressive narrative, asserting Russia can achieve socialism without having to follow the road of capitalism. This contradicts earlier statements he has made in 1848 and 1853. Having now seen how Russia turned out, we should probably assume Marx's earlier theory is the best to work with. (Anderson.)

cases in some way, they seem less than principal. While Marxists might, as Best suggests, paint such "micronarratives" as "banal[32]," to not examine these narratives would be to favor the fate of the working class to any other oppressed social group that may co- or cross-exist in society.

Foucauldian theory can, to social movements, be freeing (in a sense). To understand power and its uses beyond an evidently flawed capital-centered scope should exhilarate social actors and support creative, encompassing action. Yet Foucault's preferred method of change, liberation through high individuality and/or tweaks in the system to feel good but not upset anything too much, can seem upsetting, for good reason. New scholars offer their share of valid criticisms of Foucault, criticisms again relevant to social change.

Best criticizes Foucault for "lacking a vision of the future as anything but an abstract possibility that is vaguely different from the present." While noting Foucault's valid suspicion of social engineering, Best says Foucault "does not acknowledge the power of an imagination that envisages alternatives to the degraded and dehumanized present."[33] Another prominent academic and critic is celebrity Marxist-psychoanalytic Slavoj Žižek. In his edition of Vladimir Lenin's writings, *Revolution at the Gates: Selected Writings from Lenin in* 1917, he writes in criticism of postmodernists, with whom he associates Foucault[34]: "[Exploits like *Médecins sans frontières*, Greenpeace, and feminist and anti-racist campaigns] [provide] the perfect example of interpassivity: of doing things not in order to achieve something, but to prevent something from really happening, really changing."[35] [36]

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[32] Best, 117.

[33] Ibid, 128.

[34] Fabio Vighi and Heiko Feldner, "Ideology Critique or Discourse Analysis?: Zizek against Foucault," *European Journal of Political Theory* 6, no. 2 (April 2007): 148.

[35] Paul Bowman, "Marxism(s) and Post-Marxism(s)," *This Year's Work in Critical and Cultural Theory* 11, no. 1 (2003): 21.

Žižek is also critical of Foucault's own critique of Marx's political economy, arguing that, in the words of Fabio Vighi and Heiko Feldner, "when class struggle in its crucial structuring function is neglected … a whole series of different markers of social difference (gender, race, etc.) is suddenly allowed an inordinate weight, bearing 'the surplus-investment from the class struggle whose extent is not acknowledged."[37] [38]

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Foucauldian theory's objections to Marxist notions of totalized, political economy-oriented, inevitably progressive social systems hold solid ground, and provide new outlooks for social change. A broader view on power, the realization that its foundations are discursive, and an ability to affect change in micro-setting untouched by Marxist theory allow for social change that does not only affect a cyclical change in systemic hierarchy without moving to challenge oppressive structures on a smaller scale. At the same time, critiques of Foucault's theory that most importantly question the implication that only minute (and allegedly ineffectual) change will not harm society expose a problematic tendency of Foucault's own discourse. While Foucault argues that radical systemic change can be harmful, the same can be said for the NGO-type of organization he implicitly supports. Further, there is some partial validity in Žižek's criticism that Foucault ignores capital too much: capital can operate in society in unseen ways, and capitalism, while potentially a discursive product, should be taken seriously as a chief dominating force in our society.

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[36] Vladimir Il'ich Lenin, *Revolution at the gates: a selection of writings from February to October 1917*, Edited by Slavoj Zizek (New York: Verso, 2002), 170.

[37] Vighi and Feldner, 154.

[38] Zizek in Butler, Judith, Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Zizek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left* (London: Verso, 2000), 96.

A good theory of social change employs a balance of these ideas. Rather than embracing Marx or Foucault's theory, we should come up with ideas for change that understand the discursive and variable nature of power and do not totalize our notion of society to the point that we reproduce it. We should also heed dominating relationships in society to ensure we do not neglect the contextual nature we have created.

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