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Is Most Marxist Art (And “Artivism”) Actually Social Democratic?

And if so, what should art (and design) universities do about it?

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Abstract

“Artivists” often proclaim that their work is Marxist. The accent is not always on economic inequality, as they deal even more with feminist (/queer), post-colonialist and environmentalist goals, but Marxism is the classical political tag that haunts their projects. Marxism is a concept that is applied to a broad variety of approaches. In philosophy some of the most notorious critics of Marx are called Marxists. As political artists often desire to change moderately the society piece by piece with the help of their art, one could still ask the question: Does this not sound more like social democracy? The “revisionists,” i.e. the social democrats—Kautsky and Bernstein as the theoretical pioneers of the movement—thought that a new society could be built by negotiating and ameliorating piece by piece the existing society. If art universities should support artistic development, should social democracy be added to the curriculum?

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Keywords

Activism, art education, art and design universities, art universities, Marxism, left-wing politics, political art, political theory, political philosophy, social democracy, teaching theory

So often has he been used as a source of inspiration for Marxist conceptualizations of art and the aesthetic that Karl Marx himself appears, miraculously, to be an aesthician *avant la lettre*: from Georg Lukács, Galvano della Volpe, Bertolt Brecht, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor Adorno, to Valentin Voloshinov, Max Raphael, Meyer Schapiro, Manfredo Tafuri, to name but a few. (Samir Gandesha & Johan F. Hartle 2017, xi)

Activism at its most aesthetic (the accent lying on the concept of beauty), I think, consists of small acts that pinpoint a societal problem, provide a sneak peek into a problematic territory of society that is not often highlighted, or exemplifies through a gesture what could be done differently. It provides change on a micro-level or makes the need for change visible.

Some of my favorites, in this respect, include the way Girls at Dhabas (Dhabas means a roadside tea shop), in Pakistan, first took selfies in roadside tea shops, that were mainly reserved for men, but then continued to occupy and claim “public space(s) on” their “own terms and whims,” by organizing female picnics in the streets and taking female groups to sleep in parks, so breaking visibly the boundaries of what is not commonplace for females to do in their urban environment. Another is Las Patronas, in Veracruz, Mexico. The train (*La bestia*) on which illegal immigrants to the U.S. travel from El Salvador, Nicaragua, Guatemala and Honduras travel passes through there. What began as an improvised act, throwing food to someone who shouted that they were hungry from the train, is today an organization that feeds hundreds

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of people daily. Mexican mothers cook food for the passers-through who are hungry and in danger.¹

These acts somehow appeal as beautiful; if not formally, then through their ethos, their way of exemplifying individual freedom to perform ethical deeds, and through illuminating singular potentials for equality and humanity. We cannot change the whole world, but, definitely, we can do something if we leave aside our (negatively sublime) global visions of what should be done but cannot be done by “small” individuals. Hearing about these acts, one can gain a spark of belief in the future. Notably, neither of the acts mentioned is about provoking any kind of clash or, frankly, about performing resistance.²

Looking at them, it is easy to understand why political art joined forces with activism more than it ever did with party politics. Although there is an aesthetics of party politics (rallies, flags), and although it often has a more massive impact than activism, its nature is more administrative, and thinking about art, party politics is less about individual, creative work, which is something that artists do. No wonder that experimental political artists in the contemporary art world broke the boundary separating their work from activism long ago. This is not to say that some artists would not have become artists of party politics too, but the role of this kind of artists is marginal in the contemporary art world. Crispin Sartwell has well analyzed the work of creative individuals in the shaping of political systems, see Sartwell 2010.

The actors of the Living Theater took up cooperative and communal expression, turning their work in a sense to sometimes be only (somewhat experimental) social work as early as in the 1960s (in New York). In Helsinki, Minna Heikinaho's Push Firma Beige gallery quit having art as its central “good” and turned into a breakfast place for the homeless and addicts (in the 2000s).

A good note to take up here is that an experimental attitude has never really been a part of the classical Marxist/Socialist tradition, following the determinist spirit of both Hegel's and his

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follower's Marx's philosophical system, as Axel Honneth critically argues for in his *Die Idee des Sozialismus* (Honneth 2016; *The Idea of Socialism*). Communism, like the coming afterlife in many religions, was going to fix everything, as soon as the historical forces that were taking us there had done their (messianic) job. The need to experiment for better practices was not really recognized.

The activist/artist mash-up, which is far from determinist (it is rather about the spirit of "all of us can do something"), has grown quite large as a territory. Besides ecology and feminism, occasionally anarchism, one of the key words discussed by the artists themselves and their supporters is Marxism. Of course, the whole issue of what can be called Marxism is a triggering one. Marxism is one of the examples Michel Foucault lays bare in his famous essay "Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur?" (Foucault 1969; *What is an Author?*). According to Foucault, Marxism is a good example of the presence of the author that has become so impactful that even the followers are somewhat extensions of their authorship. It is also important to note here that sometimes the words communist and socialist and/or leftist are used interchangeably with Marxist, when people are explaining what they are doing, and often, in theoretical discourse, when people talk about Marxist aesthetics, they actually mean Marxist art. This does not change the spearhead of my questioning, I think.

Of course, even Marx's own work (besides his early interest to write an encyclopedia article about aesthetics; Gisbertz 2017, 97), as Samir Gandesha (2017) suggests, is aesthetic in many ways. There is accent on the sensuous and sensual perception, and of course there are many notes on art. Still it is good to note, that these parts of Marx's work are virtually never taken up in any artistic Marxist work.

It is out of the scope of this essay to discuss what "Marxist" really means, and whether Marxist art could in any reasonable way, if we'd believe in Marx's programmatic thinking, be part of the historical development he worked to describe and fuel. This is, however, not even

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interesting in the context of ideas that artists have of their works. The interesting point, in art spaces, panel discussions, artist statements and essays written by artists, is the way in which artists describe their work as Marxist. In a sense, this just makes them join forces with a broader paradigm, of course, including for example mentioning such tags as feminism and ecology. For most of us working in the field, these are positive aspirations. But defining what these approaches mean, practically speaking, and making sure that we are on the same page when we use these keywords, is not common. It is also good to note that feminism does not have a “revisionist” counterpart, nor does ecology—but Marxism does. It is called Social Democracy, and the word “revisionist” was of course a mocking concept right from the beginning, although one could now probably quite neatly pick it up and turn it into a more positive one, like was once done with slurs like “Baroque” and “Rococo.”

My interest here lies in why artists keep repeating that they are Marxist, i.e. why they do not choose even sometimes to say that they are social democrat artists. This question would not arise if the very nature of their work did not look more social democratic to me. One thing that maybe keeps artists more occupied with the term “Marxism” more than “social democracy” is its more rebellious intellectual branding. Today agonism (from Greek *agon*, to struggle) is one of the key terms of neo-Marxism, for example in the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, who want to make visible the underlying clashes in society (Laclau & Mouffe 1985), but it has a long history that can be traced to the Hegelian understanding of dialectics, where development’s main motor is somewhat of something that we could call a clash.

Hegel’s dialectic philosophy, which Marx turned up and down, was based upon certain ideas on the development of human consciousness and self-realization. Hegel saw world history as a story of human development, or, to be precise, a story of the development of the Spirit (*Geist*), where the high season of art was already over. Hegel’s dialectics, his way of framing development, the part which was most actively adapted by other thinkers, was based upon the

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following principles: First, say, one has a phenomenon which dominates as a historical force. In Marx’s reading of Hegel this is capitalism. The “thesis” already includes and produces its own negation, which through historical development turns into an “anti-thesis” of the first. In Marx’s more practical and societal reading of Hegel, this is the revolutionary process organized against capitalism. By dividing society and not offering a decent living to the lower classes, capitalism was thus, according to Marx, forging its own negation (i.e. anti-thesis), which would then be lifted up (*Aufhebung*): on the way to the coming “synthesis,” the opposition was to be both abolished and preserved, followed by this higher form of the historical process (for Marx, communism).³

This way of thinking presupposes the need for a clash. If the thesis and anti-thesis in Hegel’s system were still about dynamic imbalances of energies (Hegel did not focus on the clash itself), Marx, maybe following his (and Engel’s) shock experience of the way the proletarians were treated, and the interpretation that the ruling classes would probably not give anything for free for those who had nothing, stressed the need for a struggle—for which *Das Manifest der Kommunistischen Partei* (1848; The Communist Manifesto), written by Marx and Engels, was a kind of a semi-theoretical battle cry.

Engels’s work *Die Lage der arbeitenden Klasse in England* (1845; On the Condition of the Working Class in England) had already actually showed, on various occasions, how much there existed members of the bourgeois and “the ruling classes” that desired to ameliorate the living conditions and the rights of the poor. (Another issue is how much critical theorists seem to fantasize about the poor and their needs, but this complicated psychology cannot be discussed here in detail: see Ranciere’s *The Philosopher and His Poor* (Ranciere 2004) and also his studies of the letters of poor workers of the 19th century (Ranciere 1981).)

When social democratic key thinkers, the originators of the discourse, are mentioned, two names pop up most often: Karl Kautsky and Eduard Bernstein. While Kautsky turned against

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the Bolshevik revolution, but stayed more orthodox in his relationship to (the already mentioned clash-driven) dialectics, Bernstein freed himself from it. His early work *Evolutionary Socialism* (Bernstein 1909 [orig. 1899]) notes, right at the beginning, briefly, that late 19th century history actually showed, how society made progress without revolution, and that Marx and even Engels accentuate the clash too much.

Thinking about the way the more Hegelian and Marxist theorists kept stressing the central role of the clash or lamenting its absence—this is the key train of thought in the texts of the theorists of the Frankfurt School, Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno and Max Horkheimer, who started their Marxist careers by asking why revolution had not reached Germany (see, for example, Adorno and Horkheimer 1969 [orig. 1946])—and thinking about how important this is for Marx, the whole idea that social democrats had, the way of thinking that society could be moved and ameliorated piece by piece, must have left out the most troubled personalities, who probably went more easily for the agonistic interpretation of society and its needs and for political expressionism, affect-driven politics and rioting.

An artist, tagging their work as “Marxist” might of course claim that their work increases the (class) consciousness of the “subalterns”, although this would (this is often the case today) probably mostly just point to the downshifting (originally middle-class) precariat (that consumes art). This would, though, easily put an accent on more theoretical work in political arts. It does not have to be so, of course. A small ‘artist’ act could make people see something, and this can add to a slowly boiling clashy consciousness, that would then, in the end, turn the intensified movement of politicized people into a revolutionary force. It is just that this is seldom what artists say that they want. Of course, some will say that they want to show people societal problems and make them aware of them, but this is often all that there is. There is no historical conviction about a coming revolution. Of course this can happen, even if the audience for political art, if we are talking really about the art scene, is really, really small—and one

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could then ask: why are you not then working on popular culture for broader audiences? The artist could, of course, then answer, for example, that they desire to incept this perspective and these illuminative facts first into the consciousness of the individuals that make up a (precarian, or downshifting middle) class of intellectuals, that would then spread this on a broader scale. (Some claim that popular culture, by its very nature, would force them to compromise too much, but this is, thinking of the broad variety of genres and audiences in popular culture, of course just a rhetorical claim.) A Gramscian Marxist could of course say that, like public schools, journalism and popular culture, the political art scene is a playground for thinking and growing societal change, and that they have decided to work in that open playground (Gramsci 2014). Famous artists and intellectuals like Pier Paolo Pasolini went, following Gramsci's thinking, to work in primary schools and journalism, and this really was a movement in Italy (see e.g. Braad-Thomsen 1988 or Siciliano 1978). Well, coming partly from the working class, this all sounds to me terribly theoretical, as I know how little of that in the end reaches the people who clean the ferries and fix issues with the electricity, but I can understand that a small glimpse of truth is hidden there. I would rather accompany Rancière and think the thinking that can work for change already exist there in other forms, but of course, also the distribution of middle and upper class knowledge can also help to develop the society on a grass root level.

Talking with 'artists' about the outcome of their projects, though, does not at least raise these matters, although the discussion often takes the route of mentioning that some people came to their exhibitions/events and had a discussion with them about the topic raised. i.e. I don't hear artists explaining the outcome of their political artistic work through any of the Marxist schemes mentioned above. At least there seems to be, or not often, no conscious Marxism at stake in the sense described, but on the other hand, often I hear that activist artists, when they felt that they accomplished something, desired to see their impact in the small change

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that they could provoke. The beauty lies in the small impact on a very concrete level (see e.g. Kantonen 2005, Möller 2016) and I wonder often why we need 'Marxism' to step up on the scene. The artists see, in the end, that the town decided to save "that old building" and/or that Company X had to admit this and that. And when one asks more about it (I have done this for years) it seems that the prevailing agenda is that society is changed piece by piece.

In the end, this does not, even at its most banal, take away the usefulness of saying that one's art is Marxist. Marxism as an intellectual horizon might work better in steering most political (leftist) processes than the "tag" of social democracy that takes us immediately into a maelstrom of heavy processes driven by unions, compromises made with capitalist companies so that current issues can be solved in contemporary capitalist societies.

Interestingly, though, these practical, not always "ideal," acts have not been repudiated in feminism, for example, and at least not as much in ecological thinking, and only the initially mostly economy-based thinking of Marxism includes this wish to dream and now experiment in culture beyond practical solutions in the everyday in a way which easily overshadows, for example, the work of the people who find ways of implementing this thinking in practice in today's society (in many European countries social democrats, take e.g. the building of the well-fare society in the Nordic Countries as an example). Marxism is for sure a better navigation tool for political dreaming than social democracy, but here I just want to point out that if theories are also considered to be at least sometimes, righteously, and usefully, mirrors of the world, social democracy should be raised to be at least a strong contender to Marxism when we discuss today's political art. It is here impossible to answer the question "is most Marxist art (and 'artivism') actually social democratic," but already the brief sketch outlined above should be enough for realizing that social democracy is absolutely unnecessarily unrepresented in our discourse on political art. For sure, far from all forms of Marxism and Social Democracy have not been presented here, but their presentation would be needed only if we take up the challenge

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of this article, as for making the point how Social Democracy is forgotten in the art scene and the education of artists the examples provided should suffice.

Of course, I cannot here totally throw away my position. Writing this in Finland makes it easy to stress that clashes are not necessarily needed. The Nordic welfare system and one of the most equal countries in the world (together with the other Scandinavian countries) (see Partanen 2016) has really been built mostly without violent clashes and antagonisms, through (of course sometimes heated) dialogue and slow political change. It is not of course the ideal, the societal *messiah*, that Marx and Engels envisioned, and what the political ‘artists’ often dream about: the (perfect) world where everything is solved. It is partly a compromise, but still living here should force any critical individual to think about why clashes would be so much needed in political theorizing. The same non-confrontational attitude was of course also visible in the examples of activism mentioned at the beginning of the article, the way Girls at Dhabas go for a picnic in the park where they “should not be” or the way Las Patronas cook for the troubled people of the trains passing by. And one could say that you find the same attitude in the political work of Mahatma Gandhi.⁴ The world is full of political movements that work out change without the clashes that Marxist thinking accentuates. And, definitely, this is just what political art and ‘artivism’ mostly is about, although on a very small scale, mostly.

What comes to teaching art, whatever art school and/or art university I visit (Berlin, Bengaluru, Mumbai, Bratislava), there are always some courses on political thinking/theory focusing on Marxist and/or post-Marxist thinkers, and I nearly always end up having lunch with someone claiming to be Marxist (artist, curator). Have you ever seen a course on social democratic thinking or heard about a course on political art that includes even a question on the role of social democracy in the arts?

Art schools were created to support the work of artists. When there were no art universities and art schools yet, the skills were taught by gurus and/or in temple schools (of the Indian

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continent), in the Chinese *keju* system, and (Central and Southern European) guilds (see Wy & Zha 2018; Amagasaki 2010; and Ryyänen 2020), and the focus was on craft skills. This of course has not been driven away from art schools, as artists still need skills, too—however much some of them might be totally turned into artistic theorists—but while the conceptual side of art has grown, theory teaching has become integral for teaching artists (and curators, added into the curriculum, too, lately). Theory teaching is not so much about art theory and art history as it used to be some decades ago, though. This still happens, but if one takes a look at the curricula of art universities, it is post colonialism, feminism and societal polemics that take over a large chunk of theory teaching. In my mind, it has been appropriate to make ecology and feminism major components of theory teaching in art universities, as the role of these ideologies, theoretical frameworks and issues has become a major one in the art scene, and, of course, me too, I think that these help us to build a better world. (One has to remember that of course the education of artists also partly makes up what the scene is, and especially becomes.) In the same sense, if we see the situation as I have sketchily portrayed it above, my question would be: should theories of social democracy also enter the curriculum? I would not take just anything that enters the art world to be a part of the curriculum: i.e., I would never support racism, misogyny or technocratic world-views, however typical these might become in the art scenes in which I roam. But social democracy is another issue. I cannot find it negative. If there is any point in my sketchy take on its actual role in the arts, we should somehow discuss its nature, potentials and problems, or at least present them in art university teaching. As we discuss Karl Marx, Judith Butler and Chantal Mouffe, we should take at least a look at Karl Kautsky and/or Leonard Bernstein, for example—or the practical situation of policies and solutions that make up the world of social democracy today. (I have already incorporated this into my own teaching).⁵

One of the backgrounds for the situation might of course be that so-called cultural Marxism

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(which turned Marx up-and-down to some extent, as culture was sometimes given a central role in changing the world) has really been a strong movement and as Bernstein already noted, for example the anarcho-syndicalist Proudhon gave writers and poets a major role in his fantasy about the coming revolution. Social democracy has not proclaimed a major role to artists. This is not of course something that free thinkers in the arts should care about, theoretically speaking, as they should concentrate more on theoretical ways of understanding what they do and frameworks that help them to reach what they desire to reach—and, if they are into change, finding the best ways to change the world. Looking at what many political and activist-minded artists aspire to do, the connection to social democracy should somehow be discussed in the education of artists, even if this does not lead to a trend in artists claiming that they represent social democracy. Alternative art spaces, political artists and curators could/should ask the question where do they stand in the clash that erupted between Marxists/Socialists and Social Democrats—even if they really, really want to keep the tag ‘Marxist’ for themselves, as what Marxism is was partly made more clear through the clash with the ‘revisionists’.

I am, even if I am sure that especially many who do not work in the art field ask for more support through examples, for good reason not mentioning here artists and agents that accentuate their Marxism in their work. Mentioning them would just create unnecessary clashes—a philosopher attacks artists for not being theoretically as systematic as he himself is (sigh), and picks up a couple of examples to not just exemplify what happens but to, inevitably, represent a problem by tagging them—and every case should be weighed individually. But I hereby challenge them to “do it,” to step out of the affect-driven, dreamy world of “isms” and take up a non-trendy model of behavior and political practice, and at least ask where they really stand.

For universities that teach artists, the message is clear, and it is necessary to take a step further. Teaching theory should be about the world in which we live, besides the world that we dream about—whether we talk about art practices or the world ‘out there’. Art university teach-

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ing is about the needs and aspirations of artists. These needs and aspirations are neither mirrored perfectly in discourse. And if social democracy is a part of the scene, why not acknowledge it? At least the question should be posed and the challenge called out loud.

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Notes

¹See the Girls at Dhabas webpage <https://girlsatdhabas.wordpress.com/>. I am thankful to artist Shubhangi Singh for introducing this group to me. For the problematics, see also Padke et al 2011. For the Mexican case, See Muoz 2017.

²Of course, not even all ‘artivism’ is (just) performative—and the level of practicality and impact varies from country to country. One might often, of course, have to step at least one step out from the world of art if one wants to have political impact in the ‘real world’. This is something that I believe Suraj Malik is aiming for in his thinking where e.g. public statues are mentioned as examples that could do that job well. See link for the talks: Suhail Malik: The Problem with Contemporary Art is not the Contemporary—Classroom—Art & Education (artandeducation.net).

³See e.g. Hegel 1977 with foreword by J. N. Findlay.

⁴Of course, like any living being, Gandhi was far from perfect. But he accomplished a lot. On these issues, see e.g. Bidwai 2012.

⁵In some cases e.g. discussion about Jürgen Habermas’s work has functioned as a more moderate, communication and public discussion oriented way of tackling issues like democratic discourse in leftists theory that in a way connects to the discursive space opened by social democrats. See e.g. the work of Simon Sheikh.