

Karl Marx, the Manifesto and Bentham's philosophy

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Abstract: My paper is focusing on the differences and similarities between Marx/Engels and Jeremy Bentham (1748 – 1832), the famous founder of utilitarian philosophy. Even though Marx often criticized Bentham in his *The Capital* (1867) as an “arch-philistine” and an “insipid, pedantic, leather tongued oracle of the ordinary bourgeois intelligence of the 19th century” it can be shown, that Marx and Engels used utilitarian arguments in their *Communist Manifesto* (1848). Bentham and Marx both argued in favor of the greatest number, although Marx most often purposely avoided the term “happiness”.

Introduction

Jeremy Bentham and Karl Marx broke through the self-referential debate of philosophy. Seldom one will find two political thinkers, who enfolded such a vast history of reception and had such an enormous influence on social movements. In this, and their temporal closeness, one can find some similarities, but today both are commonly perceived as two thinkers with rather divergent worldviews. Marx caustic remark on Bentham in his *Capital* (1867) is widely known:

“Classical economy always loved to conceive social capital as a fixed magnitude of a fixed degree of efficiency. But this prejudice was first established as a dogma by the arch-Philistine, Jeremy Bentham, that insipid, pedantic, leather-tongued oracle of the ordinary bourgeois intelligence of the 19th century.”¹

However, today we are discussing the *Communist Manifesto*. In my perspective we can find in it some striking similarities between both thinkers. Those similarities led me to question Marx polemics.² Isn't it the case that we most often have the most trouble with our neighbors? Maybe Marx criticized Bentham so vehemently because, he saw that their theories had a certain amount in common. A few of us might have recognized: It was quite common for Marx to launch his most aggressive attacks on other socialists.

The Communist Manifesto and its utilitarian arguments

Despite Marx' polemics on Bentham, it is Bentham's principle of „The happiness of the greatest number“ which doesn't seem to be too far away from Marx thought. Especially in the *Communist Manifesto* (1848) many arguments can be found, which are based on the interest of the majority:

“All previous historical movements were movements of minorities, or in the interest of minorities. The proletarian movement is the self-conscious, independent movement of the immense majority, in the interest of the immense majority. The proletariat, the lowest stratum of our present society, cannot stir, cannot raise itself up, without the whole superincumbent strata of official society being sprung into the air.”³

¹ MECW, Volume 35, p. 605.

² Form my comparative study see: Ritschel, Gregor: Jeremy Bentham und Karl Marx. Zwei Perspektiven der Demokratie, transcript, Bielefeld 2018.

³ MECW, Volume 6, p. 495.

Or like Marx formulates on another instance in his (and Engels) *Manifesto*:

“You are horrified at our intending to do away with private property. But in your existing society, private property is already done away with for nine-tenths of the population; its existence for the few is solely due to its non-existence in the hands of those nine-tenths. You reproach us, therefore, with intending to do away with a form of property, the necessary condition for whose existence is the non-existence of any property for the immense majority of society.”⁴

Marx based his argument on numbers. If one compares the “independent movement of the immense majority, in the interest of the immense majority” with Bentham’s formula of “happiness of the largest number”, both authors suddenly seem to be close to each other. Suddenly the revolutionary Marx appears to be the neighbor of the reformer Bentham. In my view both, Jeremy Bentham and Karl Marx (despite their different approaches) were driven by a democratic principle. Both questioned privileged minorities. Both were looking out for ways to equal freedom of all individuals.

You may be familiar with Marx, but what did Bentham do? In a nutshell: Bentham was born in 1748 (in London). Trained as a lawyer, he criticized the idea of natural law and the famous legal scholar William Blackstone (1723 - 1780). For Bentham only human made “positive law” was real. In his middle years he promoted the idea of the “panopticon”, which he developed together with his brother Samuel (1757 - 1831) during a stay in Russia (Krichev, 1786 - 1787), where his brother (on behalf for Catharine the great) developed and build military ships. The panopticon was invented as a simple surveillance platform. Jeremy Bentham reformulated the idea and applied it to prisons (as well for all other social institutions like schools and hospitals). Around 1800 he failed with his attempt to implement the prison-panopticon in England. In his eyes this was due to corrupt aristocratic elites and especially King George III. In the following years Bentham vehemently criticized their “sinister interest” and the lack of transparency in common law and in English politics. In the 1820ies and 1830ies, he was the head of a movement called “philosophical radicals” which were known for their progressive views. Together with James Mill (1773 - 1836) he founded the Newspaper *The Westminster Review* in 1823. Also the old Bentham outlined a plan for a modern representative parliamentary system, in which every voice should count equally (“*Constitutional Code*”, first published in 1843). He died in 1832 (in London).

⁴ MECW, Volume 6, p. 500.

Marx's and Bentham's common ground can be formulated in the following way: Both opposed an undemocratic excess of political power that they believed to exist in concrete minorities of specific historical formations. While Bentham fought the aristocracy and its political dominance, Marx, only a few decades later, criticized the bourgeoisie and its system for its underlying social inequality. Both criticized veiled privileges, incompatible with democracy.

So what about Marx's polemic against Bentham? Might they be explained by the fact that Marx believed, that he had found an ideological competitor, which converted rather similar insights into false conclusions? As Georg Kramer-McInnis pointed out – like Marx – Bentham was a radical atheist, a materialist and a democrat.⁵

Marx and Engels on Bentham and his philosophy

The tension between Bentham and Marx can be clarified by looking more closely at the early work of Marx and Engels. Bentham and Marx both became famous for their social critique as well as for their critiques of religion and the church.⁶ Marx's critique of religion best shows us why and how Marx criticized Bentham based upon what he knew about him.⁷

In his writings on religion, Marx referred to the Christian teaching of otherworldly salvation. Marx told the reader that the suffering makes people seek relief in the "opium" of religion and that their pain drives them into the illusory happiness of the afterlife. In order to attain true happiness, however, Marx argued that it was necessary to turn to the actual social problems causing the pain. Marx writes in the introduction to his *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* (1843 – 44):

"Religious distress is at the same time the expression of real distress and also the protest against real distress. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of spiritless conditions. It is the opium of the people. To abolish religion as the illusory happiness of the people is to demand their real happiness. The demand to give up illusions about the existing state of affairs is the

⁵ See: Kramer-McInnis, Georg: Der „Gesetzgeber der Welt“: Jeremy Bentham's Grundlegung des klassischen Utilitarismus unter besonderer Berücksichtigung seiner Rechts- und Staatslehre, Dike (u.a.), Zürich (u.a.) 2008, S. Ivii.

⁶ See for example: Bentham, Jeremy (as Gamaliel Smith): Not Paul, But Jesus, London 1823.

⁷ One could say that Marx had a great lack of familiarity with Bentham's writings, although he often referred to him. On those passages where he cited him or paraphrased in his *Capital*, he referred to those works which had been published by Dumont in French. For example: MECW, Volume 35, p. 605.

demand to give up a state of affairs which needs illusions. [...] Thus the criticism of heaven turns into the criticism of the earth, the criticism of religion into the criticism of law and the criticism of theology into the criticism of politics.”⁸

This quote suggests that “real happiness”, in contrast to the illusory happiness of an afterlife, should be anticipated in this life. Happiness was not to represent a mere idea, rather it should be the result of social change—a change of practice and a change of habits. From this point of view, Bentham’s writings do not seem to be far removed from Marx’s position. While Bentham did not consider himself a revolutionary.⁹

However, for the young Bentham, only individuals could and should define what happiness meant to them. The individual citizen and the equality between them were crucial for Bentham’s ideal. His disciple John Stuart Mill (1806 – 1873) presented Bentham’s political ideas in the sentence: “Everybody to count for one, nobody for more than one”.¹⁰ In Bentham’s later writings, he wrote about the “sinister interest” of the ruling few that could have delusive effects on the larger parts of the population. Here political elites produce misleading definitions of a happy life that only appear to be reasonable for all. Within this paradigm of moral anthropology, Bentham shed light on various forms of persuasive speech. One of Bentham’s biographers, Charles Milner Atkinson, summarizes Bentham’s analytical comments regarding his political antagonists in Bentham’s *Handbook of Political Fallacies* (1824)¹¹ in an amusing way:

“The *Book of Fallacies* consists of a laborious, but incisive, exposure of many mischievous absurdities which passed current as good sense in political assemblies; and it was directed mainly against devices made use of in support of corruption and arbitrary power. Thus Bentham ridicules appeals to the Wisdom of our Ancestors, the ‘Chinese Argument’; the Hobgoblin Argument, ‘No Innovation!’; the Procrastinator’s argument, ‘Wait a little, this is not the time’; the Snail’s Pace Argument, ‘One thing at a time!’ ‘Not so fast’, ‘Slow and Sure!’ and so on. Fallacies of ‘Confusion’ are so admirably dealt with; for example, the use of ‘imposture terms’ applied to the defence of things which under their proper name are manifestly indefensible.”¹²

⁸ MECW, Volume 3, pp. 175–6.

⁹ Since he considered himself as a social reformer.

¹⁰ See: Mill, John Stuart: *Utilitarianism*, chapter 5, 1863.

¹¹ Latest edition: Bentham, Jeremy (author); Schofield, Philip (ed.): *The Collected Works of Jeremy Bentham: The Book of Fallacies*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2015.

¹² Atkinson, Charles Milner: *Jeremy Bentham: His Life and Work*, London; Methuen 1905, p. 185.

In the light of this, one may argue that Bentham began to confront the phenomenon of ideology in a similar way as Marx would do several decades later. J.R. Dinwiddy wrote:

“Had Marx read the later, fully radicalised, Bentham, he would still no doubt have regarded him as an essentially bourgeois kind of reformer – but he might have recognised none the less that their respective theories had a certain amount in common. This was particularly true in the area one might call the social psychology of politics. One of the most interesting respects in which Bentham anticipated Marx was in his perception that people’s behaviours and ideas and beliefs are largely conditioned by their social situations. John Stuart Mill, in a famous essay on Bentham in 1833, praised him for having drawn attention to the ‘selfish interest in the form of class-interest’, and for having identified the phenomenon which Bentham called ‘interest-begotten prejudice’ – for showing, in other words, how a ruling class or elite will develop (to a large extent unconsciously) beliefs and ideas that suit and support their own collective interests. Bentham admitted that one could not always predict how an individual would think and behave from examining his or her situation. But he considered that the behaviour of groups was almost invariably determined by their self-regarding interests – and that the larger the group was the more confidently this rule could be applied.”¹³

Still, a fundamental discrepancy between the two thinkers can be identified here: Marx’s critique of ‘illusory happiness’ tells us, that all humans are led by public imaginations. Perceptions of happiness, for Marx, are much less of a private matter than Bentham had treated them in his early writings. According to Marx, the idea of otherworldly salvation was a culturally-shared conception, which he believed to serve the interests of the ruling classes. An empirical approach that exclusively considers the individual pursuit of happiness would therefore be misleading, since in reality individual actors and social structures influence each other. This is precisely the criticism that Marx and Engels formulate against Bentham (or, rather, their version of Bentham). Engels wrote an article for the social democratic paper *Vorwärts* in 1844, in which he referred to the contemporary political debates in England and to Bentham (as the thinker who had mistakenly derived the notion of society exclusively from its constituent individuals):

¹³ See Dinwiddy, J. R.: ‘Bentham and Marx’, in *Radicalism and Reform in Britain, 1780-1850*, The Hambeldon Press, London; Rio Grande 1992, p. 426. Similarly, Jon Elster remarks: ‘Elsewhere Bentham refers to the “interest begotten prejudice” which multiplies the sinister interest of the few by creating the illusion, in the many, that the few are best fit to rule. If Marx had read these passages, he might not have been as critical of Bentham as he was’: Elster, Jon: *Securities Against Misrule. Juries, Assemblies, Elections*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge; New York 2013, p. 149.

“Bentham [...] takes the essentially social nature of this principle [i.e. the principle of utility] further and in accordance with the national trend of that time makes the individual interest the basis of the general interest [...]. Bentham here makes the same error in his empiricism as Hegel made in his theory; he does not seriously try to overcome the contradictions, he turns the subject into the predicate, subordinates the whole to the part and in so doing stands everything on its head. First he says that the general and individual interests are inseparable and then he stays unilaterally at the crudest individual interest.”¹⁴

Engels (and Marx) dismissed Bentham’s assumption that the common good equals the sum of individual interests, which Engels assessed here as a bourgeois and therefore an egoistic disposition.

Nevertheless: Marx and Engels proclaimed in their *Communist Manifesto* (1848) that ‘the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all’.¹⁵ This key statement, one could argue, shows that their focus on the individual resembles Bentham’s ideal form of individualism. In both cases, nobody should remain unfree and freedom should be universal. But, at the same time, Marx criticized Bentham’s idea of individualism as a form of methodological individualism as well as a bourgeois lifestyle.

Marx and Engels regarded Bentham’s oeuvre (in their teleological Hegelian perspective) as an expression of the bourgeois struggle for recognition (“Anerkennung”). By doing so, they reduced Bentham’s utilitarian philosophy to a self-description of bourgeois market order. This becomes clear in the following quote from the *German Ideology* (manuscripts written around 1846):

“The extent to which this theory of mutual exploitation, which Bentham expounded ad nauseam, could already at the beginning of the present century be regarded as a phase of the previous one is shown by Hegel in his *Phänomenologie*. See there the chapter ‘The Struggle of Enlightenment with Superstition’, where the theory of usefulness is depicted as the final result of enlightenment. The apparent absurdity of merging all the manifold relationships of people in the one relation of usefulness, this apparently metaphysical abstraction arises from the fact that in modern bourgeois society all relations are subordinated in practice to the one abstract monetary-commercial relation. [...] All this is actually the case with the bourgeois. For him only one relation is valid

¹⁴ MECW, Volume 3, pp. 486–7.

¹⁵ MECW, Volume 6, p. 506.

on its own account—the relation of exploitation; all other relations have validity for him only insofar as he can include them under this one relation [...].”¹⁶

The bourgeoisie, the historical agent of the ideology of utility, according to Marx, did not know any other end than utility. The bourgeois was thus depicted as a constantly calculating individual who believes that all other individuals do the same. In contrast to Bentham’s, more or less bourgeois, idea of individualism, Marx promoted individuality in the sense of the free development of all.¹⁷ This idea is inspired by the ancient Greek philosophers like Aristotle. But Marx’ idea of modern individuality could only be reached through the abolition of the market order, wage labor and alienation.

Conclusion

Marx and Engels found harsh words for Bentham, but their remarks on Bentham were not exclusively negative. Marx’s efforts concerning a society-based form of democratization (in extension of a solely formal one) can be read as a continuation of Bentham’s democratization project and its aim to establish a civil rights-based state, in which every voice should be heard equally. While the reformist Bentham attacked the aristocratic hegemony within the sphere of British politics, the revolutionary Marx attacked the bourgeois state (that had established itself to some extent by that time) in the defense of the proletariat. Both fought for forms of democracy in different ways and in different historical contexts

However Karl Marx’s polemics against the “genius of bourgeois stupidity” were not so much aimed at Bentham as a person. Rather Marx polemics intended to attack the bourgeois market beliefs of the time. Marx words: “There alone rule Freedom, Equality, Property and Bentham. [...] Bentham, because each looks only to himself”¹⁸ criticized a system, to whose ancestor he stylized Bentham as an “arch-philistine”.

But beside this, Marx and Engels came to an ambivalent assessment of Bentham’s utilitarianism and of cause the chartist movement. In *The Condition of the Working Class* (1845) Engels described Bentham’s philosophy as an important stepping-stone in the evolution of the

¹⁶ MECW, Volume 5, pp. 409–10.

¹⁷ Forbes, Ian: Marx and the New Individual, Routledge, London; New York 1990, pp. 32–33; 220–237. See also the Yanis Varoufakis understanding of Marx intentions: Marx predicted our present crisis – and points the way out, in the guardian, 20th of April 2018, online: <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/apr/20/yanis-varoufakis-marx-crisis-communist-manifesto> (accessed on 6th of June 2019).

¹⁸ MECW 35, p 186.

Chartist movement: “The two great practical philosophers of latest date, Bentham and Godwin, are, especially the latter, almost exclusively the property of the proletariat; for though Bentham has a school within the Radical bourgeoisie, it is only the proletariat and the Socialists who have succeeded in developing his teachings a step forward.”¹⁹

¹⁹ MECW, Volume 4, p. 528.