



The Case of Anti-Essentialist Marxism

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doi: [10.33329/elt.13.4.1](https://doi.org/10.33329/elt.13.4.1)



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ABSTRACT

There is a tension between essentialist and anti-essentialist Marxism. Karl Marx's notion of creative labor as the human essence may be contrasted with Resnick and Wolff's anti-essentialist theory of over-determination. A dialectical reading reveals that over-determination, though posited as anti-essentialist, is itself a human creation—an expression of the very creativity, the human essence, it seeks to negate. Employing the ideas of Paul Smith, Jon Gubbay, and George DeMartino, this paper exposes the ethical and logical inconsistencies in the Resnick-Wolff framework, especially their unadmitted dependence on essentialist assumptions such as class injustice and social theft. Engaging Terry Eagleton's advocacy of a historically relativized essentialism, this author wants to assert that even indeterminate or relational phenomena presuppose a human essence. It concludes that in the last analysis over-determination, rather than refuting essentialism, reaffirm humanity's creative and ethical core, thus situating Marxism within a dialectical continuum of essence and process. Thus the opposition between the two strands of Marxism is not absolute.

Key Words: Essentialism, Over-determination, Creative Labor, Marxism, Human Essence.

The theory of creative and alienated labor as propounded by Marx in *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* is part of essentialist Marxism whereas as Resnick and Wolff claim, "The Marxian conception of society as a totality of over-determined processes implies a distinctly anti-essentialist view of causality in society" (1987, 25). So, the essentialist theory of creative labor as human essence and the anti-essentialist theory of over-determination appear to be diametrically opposite to each other. But a dialectical probe into the matter may resolve this contradiction. The present study endeavors to do the same, beginning with the idea of a creative man. Man is creative not only in the sense that she, through transforming nature, creates material objects or articles but also in the sense that she creates processes as well. Politics, economics, culture, and law are as much human products as gramophones, telephones, radios, and refrigerators. It is reasonable to think that both these entities will not be found in distant galaxies, nor are they seen to have any existence in the animal kingdom. In its long course of development, man modifies, transforms, and reinvents her material set of products; in the same way,

she modifies, changes, reinvents and thus complicates the other set of products – the processes. Up to some point in history, man keeps adding new processes to the old and already existing set, and throughout history, he keeps modifying all of them and all their relationships. The more man develops and the more civilization proceeds, the more complicated and intricate the processes and their interrelationships become. Every process thus determines and gets determined by every other process and the combined effect is over-determination. Now it is not difficult to see that the so-called over-determination is also a human product; it is one reflection of man's creative genius. We cannot talk of it in the context of the planets, stars, galaxies, and black holes or think of it in the context of the animal kingdom. The discourse of over-determination is restricted to the narrow margins of human society precisely because it is caused by man. It is the human essence that makes possible even an anti-essentialist discourse that struggles against the idea of essence. But as Paul Smith claims, "The manner in which they (Resnick and Wolff) insist that the principle of over-determination necessarily and inevitably demands such an uncompromisingly anti-essentialist position as theirs is itself, logically, a kind of essentialism." Smith further says, "The more they posit the utterly indeterminate character of the over-determined totality, the more their famous 'starting point' of class processes as a way of grasping that totality will always appear logically arbitrary, always a tendentious choice rather than an epistemological necessity" (2018, 247). Jon Gubbay remarks, "Choosing class as the entry point smuggles back an essence into the theory" (1989, 145).

What Terry Eagleton says about the anti-essentialist fallacy of Postmodernism in his *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (1996), well applies in the case of the Resnick-Wolff brand of anti-essentialism. Eagleton says, "Since Postmodernists are keen on sensuous particularity, it is surprising in a way they are so nervous of this belief in the specific whatness of something.... But not many philosophers would doubt that there are certain properties that make a thing what it is, or that things which are members of the same class must have something in common, even if that something is no more than a network of 'family resemblances'" (1996, 97-98). "To believe in essentialism is not necessarily to entertain the implausible view that all of the properties of a thing are essential to it.... Nor is it to assume that there are always sharp breaks between one thing and another and that everything is locked off from everything else in its own watertight ontological space. In fact, you may hold with Hegel and others that the relationality of things is precisely of their essence." That blurred boundaries do not necessarily obliterate essence is beautifully presented by Eagleton in this statement, "A field with uncertain boundaries can still be a field, and the indeterminacy of its frontiers does not throw everything within them into ontological turmoil" (98). Besides, "Nor does a belief in essentialism necessarily commit one to the view that there is only ever one, central property which makes a thing what it is. Essentialism is not necessarily a form of reductionism." Also, "It is hard to see how water which was not wet still be water, but one could always argue that what is taken to be essential about human beings and their institutions is historically variable.... You could have, in other words, a kind of historically relativized essentialism" (99). Eagleton pleads for essentialism in quite a new way, "To say that women should never be oppressed anywhere just on account of their common humanity sound like a more forceful criticism of patriarchy than to say that they have no common humanity, to begin with" (100). Further, "To be some kind of cultural being is indeed essential to our humanity, but not to be any particular kind. There are no non-cultural human beings, not because culture is all there is to human beings, but because culture belongs to their nature" (102). His deadliest blow against anti-essentialism reads like this, "Postmodernism is against essentialism; but it is also against meta-narratives, universal Reason and non-pluralist cultures, and these views are arguably essential to it" (103). His final remarks on the essentiality of essentialism are an eye-opener, "We cannot jettison essentialism because we need to know among other things which needs are essential to humanity and which are not. Needs which are essential to our survival and well-being ... can then become politically criterial: any social order which

denies such needs can be challenged on the grounds that it is denying our humanity, which is usually a stronger argument against it than the case that it is flouting our contingent cultural conventions" (103-104).

A few anti-essentialist over-determinists, George DeMartino being an important exponent of this trend, mean to say that over-determination is not an ontological given, but a theoretical choice. This twist, they think, helps them to escape the trap of over-determinist essentialism. But, this stand would not help much. The theoretical choice is a human one and the discourse woven around it is a human creation. Secondly, if over-determination does not describe the world, but rather creates it after a theoretical choice, then the theory in question ceases to remain materialist. But Marxism is a dialectical materialist philosophy. Thirdly, if it is a theoretical choice, the question is – why does one choose it? If it is a random, groundless choice, one need not be serious about it. But, if it has a logical and ethical ground, what is that logic and ethic, what is that ground? Resnick and Wolff maintain almost a silence as to why they are committed to over-determination and why they have chosen class as their entry point. Their disciple DeMartino's deliberation on the issue is revealing. DeMartino first expresses his uneasiness with the flimsy ground of Resnick and Wolff's commitment and choice in this way, "Wolff and Resnick's treatment of the ethical dimensions of class processes – and of their commitment to the concept of class – is largely intuitive" (2018, 227). "If the normative moment in Resnick and Wolff's attention to class and exploitation is underdeveloped, the normative moment in their commitment to over-determination is absent altogether....Yet Resnick and Wolff do little to motivate or justify their commitment to over-determination. Like class over-determination is treated as an entry point that distinguished the Marxian framework from others. But, it remains ethically unmoored. Why is this?" With a tone of regret DeMartino recalls his past reservations against his teachers, Resnick and Wolff, "I claimed that in practice they had come to treat over-determination as an objective ontological category and that they then sought to advance a form of social theory that was faithful to it. In so doing (I argued) they had fallen into the very same essentialist epistemological error they criticized in others – that of believing that social theory must reflect the truth of the social world it sought to map" (228). We agree to this position of DeMartino. But, in no time he modifies his position to defend the Resnick-Wolff brand of over-determinist theory from the charges of essentialism. He apologetically maintains, "I now think my critique was at least partially mistaken. Resnick and Wolff do not explicitly take the view that the world is marked by an over-determinist ontology that good theory must capture." DeMartino clarifies his new understanding of Resnick and Wolff's theoretical position, "Like all other concepts, over-determination appears in this work not as a non-negotiable ontological given, as an objective statement about the way the world is, but instead as a terribly consequential theoretical choice that theorists can make as they try to create knowledge of the world.... Ontological, epistemological, and methodological concepts do not just describe the objects and practices in the world; they participate in shaping that world" (229).

There seems to be more than one problem in this exposition. First, DeMartino's uneasiness is clear in his use of terms like "at least partially mistaken" and "do not explicitly take the view." One may infer from the first that his critique was not wholly mistaken and from the second that Resnick and Wolff at least implicitly take the view that the world is marked by over-determinist ontology. Secondly, there is no semantic continuity between "over-determination appears... not ... as an objective statement about the world is" and "Ontological, epistemological ... concepts do not just describe the objects and practices in the world; they participate in shaping that world" (DeMartino 2018, 229). The first is a non-dialectical negative statement implying that over-determination does not describe the world and the second is dialectical maintaining that concepts both describe and shape the world. Why "do not just describe" is not applied to over-determination remains a mystery. That DeMartino is trying to defend the indefensible is clear. Over-determination, as a theory, shapes the world but describes the world

before shaping it. Thirdly, how can a theory or concept “shape” the world without knowing it at least partially? How can it know that it “shapes” something without a prior idea or description of the reality of that thing before being “shaped” by the theory or concept? How can we say that our theoretical choice is “terribly consequential” if we cannot differentiate between this consequence and its previous form unshaped by the theory in question? The shaping theory of over-determination must know “the way the world is” and then only can it be certain that it “shapes” that world anew. To “shape” it one needs to “know” it. Otherwise, whether it is “shaped” or remains “unshaped” cannot be known. Thus, over-determination is not only a theoretical choice but also involves a description of the world. DeMartino is still uncomfortable with Resnick and Wolff’s logically and ethically unmediated commitment to over-determination. “My sense is that Resnick and Wolff’s avoidance of ethics reflects concern that if they were to give the ethical moment any serious play in their epistemological or ontological accounts, any might at all, they might then put at risk their commitment to over-determination” (234). He goes on to say, “I want to suggest that irrespective of the reason, it is a mistake to repress the ethical moment in over-determination, not just for the sake of theoretical consistency, ... but also because the ethical entailments of over-determination are among its most theoretically and practically important, powerful, and exciting features” (235). DeMartino finally declares that over-determination itself is an ethical position: “The commitment to radical contingency and ignorance that over-determination entails does not separate us from ethical reasoning – it follows from it. To choose over-determination is to stake out an ethical position in defense of perpetual aperture, creativity, innovation, productive ignorance, and audaciousness and risk-taking that is combined with abiding care and humility” (239). DeMartino thus agrees that the ethical foundation of over-determination is creativity and innovation! Let us add – DeMartino would not agree to this addition – that the ethical foundation of over-determination refers back to the human essence, that is, creativity, and we should choose over-determination because it reflects and defends human nature as expounded by Karl Marx.

Now let us consider how Resnick and Wolff’s choice of “class” as the point of entry cannot bear any logic without recognition of its relation to the human essence. They say, “The class division of society into exploiters and exploited ... is unjust and has an undesirable influence upon every aspect of that broader society.” Further, “Those laborers who produce goods and services should own them and decide what to do with them.” And, “If and when this does not occur in a society, Marxian theory claims that a kind of social theft takes place: some individuals ‘steal’ the surplus labor (or its fruits) from those who have produced it” (Resnick & Wolff 1987 quoted in DeMartino 2018, 227). The question is: Why do Resnick and Wolff think of “class injustice”? Why do they maintain that the producers should own what they produce, why do they term the process of appropriating the fruits of the labor of others a ‘social theft’? What if others, not the producers, own the products and decide what to do with them? Resnick and Wolff would not clearly answer. Their disciple DeMartino says, “To the question ‘What is your moral anchor?’ would come the reply, ‘Why do you need a moral anchor?’” (2018, 232). If there is no moral or logical anchor behind all these talks of ‘class injustice’ and ‘social theft’, one may have no motivation to agree with Resnick and Wolff’s brand of over-determination and class analysis. In their undue fear of being termed essentialists, Resnick, Wolff, and their disciples try to mystify and conceal what is as clear as daylight. The terms ‘class injustice’, ‘social theft’ etc. used by them will bear force only concerning the recognition of the human essence. Man changes nature through labor and thus realizes his potential as a human being. Through the production process, the human essence is realized, and the potential man truly becomes a man. The product thus not only realizes man but also expands him. The product is his expansion and extension as it contains some parts of him. There is an unbreakable bond between man and the product, between the subject and the object. So, if the product, man’s realization, and expansion, is taken away from him by others, then it is a ‘theft’, an injustice.

I agree with Paul Smith that “Marxism can no longer operate without the concept of over-determination and that it is unavoidably part of Resnick and Wolff’s legacy that they have made that the case” (2018, 247). Over-determination has opened our eyes to the fact that society is much more varied and intricate than it was thought to be. But, I part with Resnick and Wolff at a specific point of this theoretical journey, that is, I am reluctant to accept the concept of unlimited contingency and endless over-determination. To put it in other words, I do not adhere to their anti-essentialism or anti-hierarchy. I have shown how over-determination, as both process and theory, itself is a human creation and thus testifies the human nature.

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