

Sophistry, Politics and Philosophy

Helena Sheehan

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Callahan: Social disintegration and immiseration continue apace with a corresponding intellectual disarray. Reasons to abolish capitalism multiply daily, while Reason is treated as if it were a devious plot. How did we arrive at this juncture and what tools do we have to both apprehend reality and organize collectively to change it? Since the late 1970s, as the last waves of revolution receded, poststructuralism, postmodernism, and identity-based radicalism positioned themselves not only as the best means by which to challenge authority and bring about change, but more specifically, to criticize Marx and Engels and the presumed failures of the revolutions of the last century. It is no accident that philosophy, science and rational thought have also been targeted since they were the very means these revolutions employed to achieve their ends. Meanwhile, the capitalist juggernaut advances unimpeded by such critical theory, indeed capitalism appears to thrive on it. The resulting confusion nonetheless provides an opportunity to re-examine fundamental premises and definitions. I asked Helena Sheehan for this interview because her formal training in philosophy combines with her years of active political engagement to offer a perspective from which to assess our current dilemmas.

Callahan: Often, today, I hear philosophy used as if it was the same as “opinion”. Everyone has their own philosophy and can mean by that whatever they wish. At the same time, science is often said to have made philosophy obsolete or has taken over its function as a method for apprehending reality. What then is the philosophy of science?

Sheehan: Different people, including different philosophers, define philosophy in different ways. I use it to mean world view, a set of underlying beliefs about the world centred on the core questions of the centuries, such as: the question of whether phenomena can be explained in terms of natural forces alone or whether appeal to supernatural forces can be justified (typically the question of belief in the existence of God) or the question of whether phenomena are interconnected in a web of causality or events are disconnected and random. This is different from the loose way it is used to refer to random opinions on the one hand or the way analytic philosophers see it as a specialised method of technical analysis. In the early stages of our intellectual evolution, science and philosophy were fused. For example, in the theories of the pre-Socratics or Aristotle, what was philosophy and what was science? In the modern period, there came a differentiation, as experimental natural science developed and empirical science did make certain forms of speculative philosophy obsolete. However, there remained a need to think at a higher level of generality about the implications of empirical sciences and about everyday experience. Philosophy at its best both examines underlying assumptions and conceptualises an overview. As I came into the philosophy of science, I perceived a differentiation between west and east. In the Anglo-American world in which I was educated, the analytic tradition prevailed. The analytic tradition was focused on the epistemology of scientific method, from positivism through various forms of neo-positivism to post-positivism. In the socialist countries, under the influence of Marxism, the philosophy of science dealt with epistemological issues, but went further to a more substantive interest in the philosophical implications of the empirical sciences. Moreover, it took into account the socio-historical and political-economic contexts of science in a way that the other tradition either ignored or found itself paralysed by when it did pay attention. I located myself in the Marxist tradition and decided to write my book *Marxism and the Philosophy of Science: A Critical History* to argue its case.¹

Callahan: In your autobiography, *Navigating the Zeitgeist*, you threw down the gauntlet at the very outset when you wrote: “I do not regard myself as a de-centered postmodern subject ... despite the fragmenting

forces of my time and the positivist acquiescence in them and the postmodernist glorification of them.” You continue: “this is a defense of grand narrative. I am seeking to tell the story of my times in world-historical terms.”² Those are fighting words directed at specific figures such as Lyotard, Foucault and a host of others who not only coined the phrases you invoke but whose influence grew at the very moment Reagan and Thatcher were restoring order following the great revolutions of the Sixties. Could you explain what inspired you to take them on so pointedly in your book published in 2019?

Sheehan: Through my adult life, I was up against various forms of positivism and postmodernism and arguing for a radically different approach that was relevant to how we think about absolutely everything. Although they are opposite in many respects, positivism and postmodernism are both fragmenting approaches, blocking access to seeing the whole picture. This is in the interests of capitalism, a system that functions best when there is no awareness of it as system. Postmodernism in its heyday made much of the assertion of the end of grand narratives (which is, paradoxically, itself a grand narrative). In those days, the 1980s and 1990s, there were huge debates about contending paradigms, at least in classrooms, in journals and at conferences. In more recent decades, that has died down, but without anything having been solved. Both positivism and postmodernism have waned in the sense of there rarely being explicit articulations of their premises, but they live on in debased forms, sometimes with those taking such approaches not familiar with basic texts or knowing how to name their own approach, both within academe and in the broader culture. I still feel a need to take them on, whether in their explicit manifestations or in their current debased forms, because they are still dominant in their more diffuse forms and still sow confusion.

Callahan: In a recent talk you said: “This Marxism Today trend, Western Marxism, was very alert, in its way, to the trends of the times but it conceded so much that it actually lost its core. It was revising Marxism to such an extent that it was even questionable if it was even Marxism anymore.”³ You made these remarks in relation to John Bellamy Foster's book *The Return of Nature* which among other things, builds upon Engels' *Dialectics of Nature*, itself the subject of great controversy.⁴ Could you describe the trends and concessions you're referring to and how they relate to the broader questions of materialism, dialectics and history? What was the substance of the disputes and why are they relevant to Foster's-and your own-argument?

Sheehan: Throughout its history, Marxism has entered into controversies with other, often opposing, intellectual and political trends. In the midst of these interactions, there were always some swept off their feet by these other trends and proposed to revise Marxism to produce a hybridised version of Marxism by crossbreeding with other positions. The early versions of western Marxism, embodied primarily in the Frankfurt School, was influenced by neo-Kantianism and revised Marxism in that direction. The later version, a new left version of western Marxism, made many concessions to postmodernism. They backed away from grand narratives; i.e., historical materialism, natural materialism, science, determinism, class analysis, and economics. They tended to set a humanist Marx against a positivist Engels and to denounce the set of ideas that came to be called, “dialectics of nature”. The tide has turned on this debate. Kaan Kangal has written a good book on the whole history of this debate – *Friedrich Engels and the Dialectics of Nature* (2020). Those who have entered these debates in more recent times tend to a more positive view of Engels and the whole tradition within Marxism grappling seriously with the sciences from Engels through Bukharin, Hessen, Bernal, Haldane, Levins, Lewontin and now Foster. John Bellamy Foster, especially with his recent mega-book *The Return of Nature* (2020) has written his way through the whole history of this tradition and shown its relevance, even its necessity, in dealing with the planetary emergencies of our time. I locate myself within this tradition.

Callahan: There were others, weren't there? Perhaps even more important, scientifically? For example, Linus Pauling, J. Robert Oppenheimer and, above all, Albert Einstein. All these individuals were socialists and, in Oppenheimer's case, sympathetic to communism, yet were at the centre of the most significant discoveries of the 20th century. Pauling in chemistry, Oppenheimer and Einstein in physics. It would seem that Einstein's Relativity substantiates Engels' claim that dialectics resides in nature. That is: “Dialectics, so-called objective dialectics, prevails throughout nature, and so-called subjective dialectics, dialectical thought, is only the reflection of the motion through opposites which assert itself everywhere in nature, and which by the continual conflict of the opposites and their final passage into one another, or into higher forms, determines the life of nature.”⁶ Wasn't it the contention of people like Korsch and Lukacs, that

Engels was a rank amateur and this claim in *Dialectics of Nature* was false. Indeed, that dialectics only applied to history and the social sciences having no bearing on the so-called, “hard sciences”?

Sheehan: Yes, I’m glad that you mentioned Pauling, Oppenheimer and Einstein. There were many others too, if not so famous as them. Many of the Marxists I have known in the field of philosophy of science have had a strong background in natural science or have been working natural scientists. About that Engels quote, I avoid speaking of objective dialectics or even using dialectics as a noun. I prefer to use dialectical as an adjective to capture dynamism, interconnectedness, emergence and synthesis in nature and in history. That said, I stand with Engels in affirming a dialectical approach to a philosophy of nature. I think that Korsch and Lukacs were wrong. They were still in the grip of the neo-Kantian *methodenstreit* (dispute over method). I see Marxism as standing against an approach seeing one basis for science and another for life. It is a coherent and comprehensive basis for thinking about everything.

Callahan: In the talk I mentioned earlier, you said: “The alternative approaches, the varieties of neo-positivism and post-modernism simply don't do the job. They simply fail at an explanatory level.”⁷ This would seem obvious today given the facts of global warming, pandemic and forever war. Yet, no one is held accountable for the falsehoods that led us to this point. It even seems that the prestige of positivists like Popper or Hayek, on the one hand, or postmodernists such as Foucault and Derrida, on the other hand, remain intact. What all of them have in common is the rejection of philosophy as a legitimate field of inquiry, with its own history and its own criteria, much in the same manner Nietzsche sought to rid Europe of the “Plato disease”.⁸ Can this be explained as an attempt to escape the spectre of communism? Or, more specifically, the spectre of Marx and Engels? In other words, it's more important to destroy the influence of materialist dialectics than to find solutions to the problems facing humanity?

Sheehan: The answer, I think, is in the nature of capitalism itself. On its way up, in its struggle against feudal power, capitalism had a need for stronger explanatory concepts, for epistemologies of rationalism and empiricism as grounding for free markets, individual rights, contract law, parliamentary elections, etc. In its long decadent phase, in which we are now living, there has been an unravelling of powerful explanatory concepts into a confused dissipation of explanatory energy. The current debased forms of neopositivism and postmodernism underpin the social disintegration we see all around us. While they may be very different in many ways, from the plodding particularity of the one to the deconstructionist exotica of the other, they have much in common. They are both plays of the plural, skating along the surfaces, evading the heights and the depths. It is a central paradox of our times: never has there been such a totalising and systematising force as contemporary global capitalism and yet never has there been such inhibition of totalising and synthesising systemic thinking. The centralising market decentres the psyche. It thins out public space and breaks the bonds of social solidarity. Instead of addressing and challenging the disintegration, academics have been paralysed by a profound disorientation in the face of these forces.

Callahan: Many pundits wring their hands at “fake news”, conspiracy theories and Qanon, claiming we live in an era of “post-truth”. They look aghast at the rise of blood and soil nationalism, religious fundamentalism and “illiberalism”. Is this just a case of the pot calling the kettle black? Is this the predictable consequence of failing to grasp the relationship between humans and nature or, more specifically, the premises of scientific inquiry which include universals and reason as opposed to experience, meaning direct personal experience?

Sheehan: On both sides of this great divide, most dramatically on display in US politics and culture, is disorientation and disarray. The moral panic over fake news and post-truth is so myopic. Mainstream media have propagated, consciously or unconsciously (mostly unconsciously) a whole tissue of delusion and deception for decades now. There is a whole view of the world based on assumptions about the nature of the system, the structure of the economy, the exercise of political and economic power, underlying every news broadcast. Yes, there has been an increase in blatant lying and there is something deeply wrong with a culture that elevates blatant liars, such as Donald Trump and Boris Johnson, but there is a more insidious deception in what those who rail against fake news consider to be true news. In academe, there is a lot of funding, much of it public funding from the EU, being thrown at exposés of post-truth and fake news with social scientists teaming up with computer scientists to do high-tech fact-checking. It is based on liberal vanity and self-righteousness and pursued with a crude positivism that considers facts to

be simple and unproblematic data points with no sense of complex contextualisation and conceptualisation.

Callahan: Your book, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Science*, was first published in 1985. It was republished in 2017 which speaks to its current relevance.⁹ In addition to what you've said in this interview already, can you explain the renewed interest? I'm especially curious to know whether crises that we're now confronted with are forcing people to re-examine arguments that were supposed to be dead letters following 1991 and the much-heralded "end of history." More specifically, whether there is a revival of interest among scientists, historians and philosophers in the work and methods of Marx and Engels?

Sheehan: There is a revival of a critique of capitalism and a grasping for solutions to its evident irrationalities and injustices that doesn't totally map on to a revival of Marxism or a struggle for socialism. Yes, there is renewed interest in Marxism and new commitment to socialism. The new edition of my book, the attention given to Foster's book, the many lectures and seminars on Marxism and science organised in past two years do testify to a new relevance of this vision to the problems needing not only science but new ways of seeing and doing science to deal with the complexities of the pandemic, climate change and other dimensions of the planetary emergency we now face. However, a lot of younger progressive intellectuals are still seduced by postmodernist notions and diverted into cul-de-sacs.

Callahan: Speaking of cul-de-sacs, to what do you attribute the continuing appeal, the seduction as you call it, of postmodernism, debased or otherwise? What happened to overthrowing the government, the abolition of private property and the emancipation of humanity? It appears that what passes for radicalism today is the demand: "my desiring body must be recognized and protected by the State. I was born this way and the immutability of my identity is sacrosanct. None may question it and anyone who dares to should be silenced." What is especially odd is the obvious correlation between this line of thinking and old-fashioned nationalism, religious fundamentalism and know-nothingism. Yet it was ostensibly "left-wing" thinkers like Foucault who once declared: "True liberation means knowing oneself [La véritable libération signifie se connaître soi-même] and can often not be realized by the intermediary of a group, whichever one it may be."¹⁰ What does philosophy have to say about these developments?

Sheehan: Well, different philosophers would say different things about it. That is, if you can find any philosophers these days. Philosophy as a course of study has long been losing its place in the scheme of things. Philosophy departments have been closing down. I have even heard of universities selling off their philosophy books. I haven't found much of interest going on in philosophy departments or conferences or journals for a long time now, but it makes me so sad to see it when I remember the role philosophy once played in universities and my own yearnings that drew me to it. It is so fundamental to the human condition to probe basic assumptions and to reach for an overview. Anyway, I can only answer for this philosopher and my own conception of what should be said about it.

I think that the varieties of identity politics constitute a series of cul-de-sacs. Yes, there is a strange convergence between these new assertions of identity and old-fashioned nationalism and religious fundamentalism in a seeking for roots with simplicity and denial of complexity. However, there are new problems in today's world because identities have become unstable, fluid and problematic. Our ancestors could take so much more for granted and did not have to wrestle with perplexities about identities. We have many possibilities beyond the wildest dreams of our ancestors. Beyond the nations of our birth, we have travelled to many others. Beyond that, we have taken in something from those where we have never set foot through reading, media reports, encounters with those who have travelled here from there. Some of us have evolved identities that have taken us far from where we started. We have come to beliefs that are antithetical to the nations and religions that brought us forth and nurtured us. Many of us live far geographically, philosophically, politically and psychologically from where we were born. That is when the process is coherent. The problem these days is that there is so much in play, that so much of it is incoherent. New generations have grown up without the old orthodoxies. They have never stood on seemingly firm ground from which to feel swept by the winds of change. They have been blowing in the wind from birth. It has been flux all along. There have been so many ideas and possibilities in play. There have been so many images. There is so much noise. Thus, the emphasis on difference, on diversity, on

plurality, a sense that the stuff of experience cannot be credibly unified, whether on the collective level as history or even on the individual level as biography.

So I understand the social base of this searching, but I also have serious problems with how it manifests itself. The current obsession with identity comes across to me as narcissism in the emphasis on the microgrievances of the relatively privileged overshadowing the grievances of the seriously oppressed, as disproportion in the focus on gender and ethnicity as opposed to class, as suspension of critical faculties in a bland multiculturalism, as epistemological paralysis in the face of plurality, complexity, contingency. We construct our own identities today in a way unprecedented in the history of the world, but we still do so within the rhythms of socio-historical forces, from waves of migration as they impact on local streets and shopping malls to global structures of power which colonise selves as well as states. We construct ourselves but not in conditions of our own construction.

I have been interested in how all this connects to the latest wave of enthusiasm for the decolonisation of knowledge set off by the Rhodes Must Fall in South Africa. I had several sabbaticals at University of Cape Town. I hated that statue of Cecil John Rhodes perched at a commanding position on the mountain campus overlooking a panoramic view and dreaming of empire from Cape to Cairo. I was glad when it fell and when those students made the point that it wasn't just about the statue, that it was connected to demands for a drastic decolonisation of the curriculum. There were occupations and teach-ins and a radical raising of consciousness of those involved. There was probing of the relation between race, class and gender. There was support for workers' demands on outsourcing, wages and working conditions on campus. However, the inclusive beginning gave way to tendencies to racial essentialism and separatism, negation of intellectual norms and burning of public property, even progressive art. They were contemptuous of previous generations of struggle. They expelled white comrades from meetings. They were dismissive of "white Marxism". Even Ngugi wa Thiongo, who had been calling for decolonisation of the mind for decades, was treated with disrespect when he came to speak in South Africa at this time.

What to do with this realisation and revulsion at colonisation and centuries of oppression? Must every black person condemn every white person for every manifestation of racism and colonialism since the beginning of time? Must every woman hold every man accountable for every act of patriarchy and misogyny? Must every person to come from the working class reject any contribution to the struggle against the injustices of class rule from anyone born into a privileged class position? Including Marx, Engels, and Lenin? There is a difference between justified rage against injustice and an indiscriminating and unjustified backlash. Moreover, it will not lead to genuine liberation. It might set out to find a road to a just society, but it will not go there. It is a blind alley. It is seeking decolonisation of the mind, but it will sink into a nihilistic swamp. Fanon saw negritude, a retreat into past African glories, an emphasis on race and culture as opposed to class and socio-economic structures, as a blind alley. So how to proceed toward a decolonisation of the university? Do we reject all existing knowledge and start again at year zero? Do we idealise our own ancestors as earth mothers or sun people or salt of the earth workers, as bearers of sagacity that will be the key to our 21st century lives? Specifically, what to do with the intellectual inheritance of the ages? What to do with the history of knowledge as it has come down to us?

As I see it, the history of civilisation, the history of culture, the history of science, this knowledge may have been produced from an oppressive division of labour by class, race and gender, from a gulf between those who ruled and wrote from above and those who laboured from below to feed, clothe and shelter them, but through this our species has evolved and produced what imperfect forms of civilisation and knowledge we have. That legacy belongs not only to those who designed the buildings, wrote the books and conducted the experiments, but to those who gave birth and tilled the soil and built the cities. The civilisation that has been built – the cities, the schools and universities, the hospitals, all the advances in science and technology – all these belong to those who laboured from below without whom nothing could have happened. I don't renounce Aristotle, Galileo or Shakespeare, but I see them in socio-historical context and take from them what is of value within my transformed world view. It is irrational and nihilistic to denounce anything ever produced by dead, white European males, which also includes Marx, Engels, Bukharin, Gramsci, and Caudwell. That knowledge of the past cannot just be taken as it is, but analysed, criticised and re-contextualised to construct a new synthesis. The dominant historiography of knowledge must be scrutinised and transcended to tell a more inclusive, integrated and complex story. The story of

the oppressed must be foregrounded so that the history of colonialism is seen from the perspective of the colonised to construct a history that is more honest, more complex, more inclusive.

The lived experience of marginalised people has epistemic value and should have its place in the university curriculum but should not be exempt from the demands of logic, evidence, contextualisation and perspective. It should be set upon sound theoretical foundations. It should not be the case that experience is female and theory is male or that experience is black and theory is white. In this process of transformation, I think that much has been achieved in making space for gender and race, although not so much for class. We need to defend those achievements, which are coming under attack from the right who caricature these efforts as “grievance studies”. However, we can defend these achievements most effectively by a robust critique of those manifestations which make it easy to caricature. Out-of-focus identity politics, especially those based on overblown micro-grievances of the privileged in safe spaces fenced off with trigger warnings, which divert attention and resources from the more seriously oppressed. A reduction of comrades or colleagues who have something to contribute to a common cause to allies who must be silent and follow orders is neither progressive nor productive. You would think sometimes that the problem with the world is the very existence of white, heterosexual cis males. It is vital to rise above myopic separatism, to see each thing in the fullness of its interactions. Intersectionality theory is a move to articulate the interconnections by calling attention to the ways that race and gender and class and other factors intersect, but tends to understate the role of class. It is ungrounded insofar as it fails to name the system shaping all such intersections. Similarly, privilege theory tends to be concerned with confronting individuals to measure their inherited position on a moral calculus designed by those engaging in a race to the bottom to win the prize of being designated most oppressed.

Why is there so much emphasis on gender, race and ethnicity at expense of class? A meme, circulated without attribution on Facebook, articulates brilliantly how out of focus so much of current thinking is about class, race and gender. The first frame shows a man giving a lecture saying “We now live in a world where the richest eight men own more than the poorest 3.6 billion.” There is a photo of Marx behind him on the wall. The next frame shows Lisa Simpson exclaiming, “That’s an outrage! At least four of them should be women of colour.” Capitalism can accommodate increased focus on gender, race and ethnicity. Indeed, it must, because it is a complex system that needs to harness the skills of the previously excluded in terms of gender, race and ethnicity and even class, but the pressure is for that participation to be in the direction of assimilation. What the system cannot accommodate is a transformation of the mode of production, distribution and exchange and this is why analysis of class is off the agenda for our ever more market-oriented universities, ever more colonised, not by states, but by capital. Capitalism is the most powerful force determining our possibilities of life. A person’s relation to the means of production, distribution and exchange structures their access to material resources, physical health, psychological well-being and advanced knowledge. Only Marxism is capable of synthesis, of contextualising each thing in relation to the others, of seeing the pattern of interaction of all forces in motion, of finding a way forward from the morass of the moment. We have to find our way within capitalism to something beyond it. This means always thinking systemically.

– January 2022

Notes

- 1 Helena Sheehan, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Science: A Critical History* (Humanities Press, 1985).
- 2 Helena Sheehan, *Navigating the Zeitgeist: A Story of the Cold War, the New Left, Irish Republicanism, and International Communism* (Monthly Review Press, 2019), 8.
- 3 John Bellamy Foster, “Return of the Dialectics of Nature: Marxian Ecology and the Struggle for Freedom as Necessity,” *Monthly Review*, November 13, 2021.
- 4 John Bellamy Foster, *The Return of Nature: Socialism and Ecology* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2020).
- 5 Kaan Kangal, *Friedrich Engels and the Dialectics of Nature, Marx, Engels, and Marxisms* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).
- 6 Frederick Engels, *Dialectics of Nature*, (Moscow: Progress Publishers, [1883] 1974), 211.
<<https://www.marxists.org/.../marx/works/1883/don/ch07c.htm>>
- 7 Foster, “Return.”
- 8 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* (Vintage Books, 1989 Preface, 2).

9 Helena Sheehan, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Science: A Critical History*, *Radical Thinkers* (London and New York: Verso, 2017).

10 Michel Foucault, *Dits et écrits I: 1954–1975* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 2001), 678.
