

The Separation Principle: The Flaws of Cause and Effect History

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Introduction

“The objective is not to get the future right. Rather... better preparation for any of the futures which may arise.”

— Roger Spitz, 2022¹

Historians are programmed to learn about everything around us to understand the past, present, and future. One fundamental flaw lies in this ideology: even historians can not predict the future with utmost certainty. Historians such as Karl Marx, Akhil Amar, and Jack Goldstone have attempted to disprove this claim, as have many others. Usually, evidence of a universal trend throughout history is presented to back these claims. The issue with these claims is that they are too linear and idealistic. For example, Karl Marx argues, “The history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of class struggles.”² This claim states that all history, not just revolutionary history, consists of class struggles. Ideology like this ignores an entire realm of thinking, such as the complexities of human emotion and their irregularities or civil struggles and their regularities. What historians like Karl Marx are trying to do is find a common thread throughout history to explain all ideological threads. I define this as the separation principle. I use the term “separation” in this definition as I believe these scholars attempt to simplify history to acquire our attention by extricating history from its multiple contexts.

In short, the separation principle is the single common factor used to connect events within the realms of past, present, and future in any given society. The concept of the separation principle applies to any field of historical study, but this paper will focus on the sphere of

¹ Roger Spitz, *The Definitive Guide to Thriving on Disruption: Essential Frameworks for Disruption and Uncertainty*. Vol. 2. (San Francisco: Distributive Features Institute LLC, 2022).

² Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Karl Marx: Selected Works*, (Hackett Publishing, 1994), pg. 158.

revolutionary thought. The issue with the separation principle and the theories of Karl Marx is that claims like these are too one-dimensional and overly simplistic. Additionally, they require a selective ignorance of subjects that would challenge their universality. Historian G.M. Trevelyan would thoroughly agree with this proposition. He would argue that these historians are trying to define history as a physical science. Trevelyan claims that the physical sciences lay on two tenets: practical use and an ability to prove cause and effect.³ The issue with this statement is that history has far too many unpredictable factors for the field to be as simple as cause and effect. Raymond Aron, another well-known historian, and philosopher, states that “history is not rational and ‘necessary’ to this degree”.⁴ This paper will analyze the ideologies of leading theorists who attempted to define the separation principle within the context of revolution/class separation and discredit their claims.

I. Karl Marx & Terry Eagleton

“‘All history has been the history of class struggle’ should not be taken to mean that everything that has ever happened is a matter of class struggle”

—Terry Eagleton, 1970⁵

Karl Marx was one of the most influential thinkers and philosophers of humankind. His ideology of Marxism and its tenets created a mass movement of scholars known as Marxists. As previously stated, the main principle of Marx’s ideology is that all history is the history of class

³ George Trevelyan, *Clio a Muse and Other Essays Literary and Pedestrian*, (Longmans, 1914), pgs. 6-7.

⁴ Raymond Aron, *Main Currents in Sociological Thought: Volume One*, (Routledge & CRC Press, 2018), pg. 156.

⁵ Terry Eagleton, *Why Marx Was Right*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), pg 34.

struggle.⁶ Marx bases this idea on two principles: the mode of production and the universal class system. The mode of production refers to the concept that the workers in a capitalist society create the capital, yet capitalism feeds off the exploitation of these workers. This pattern continues until they can not separate themselves from their oppressors. Secondly, the universal class system refers to the idea that as capitalism advances, only two social groups will remain: the proletariat and the bourgeoisie.⁷ The writings of Karl Marx became the basis of many schools of communist ideology, such as Marxism, Leninism, and Maoism.⁸ The influential power of Marx's writings can not be understated. His ideology influenced and inspired countless scholars, including Mao Zedong, Joseph Stalin, and Leon Trotsky, as well as many others. Despite this many historians challenge Marx's ideas. Terry Eagleton is one of these historians who both bolsters and critiques Marxism.

Eagleton backs Marx by stating that the dystopia he tries to perpetuate in his works played out through nearly the entirety of the 20th century in Soviet-era Russia. He also identifies that Marx was an influential thinker who made prominent critiques of capitalism and its flaws. It is his critiques that carry the most weight in the end. The most noteworthy focus was on the movement of scholars who followed Marx. He argues that "some Marxists seem to have treated it as a Theory of Everything, but this is surely not so."⁹ He goes on to state that although Marx did manage to create a well-constructed theory on the grounds of revolutionary thought, he overlooked the importance of cultural and social issues. Marx focuses too heavily on the concept of culture and societies relation as a "superstructure"¹⁰ that is only affected by economic struggle. He alienates his ideology further by focusing his structures around this concept. Both these

⁶ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Karl Marx: Selected Works*, (Hackett Publishing, 1994), pg. 158.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pg. 159.

⁸ Andrew Walder, "Marxism, Maoism, and Societal Change," *Modern China*, vol. 3, no. 1, (1977): pg. 102.

⁹ Terry Eagleton, *Why Marx Was Right?*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1943), pg. 34.

¹⁰ Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, (Progress Publishers, 1977).

concepts of societal and cultural issues align with Trevelyan's thinking. The first statement made by Eagleton places Marxism in an attempt to be used by many for practical purposes. By diminishing all social/cultural issues as agents of economic strife, Marx's claims are put under even more scrutiny. This displays the flaws of Marxist ideology, in the attempt for a singular explanation for the entire revolutionary mindset. Additionally, this presents the failures of the Separation Principle. Turning more towards modern-day events, another scholar attempts to understand class division, struggle, and revolutionary mentality: Akhil Amar.

II. The Civil Scholars

“Patriotism is usually stronger than class-hatred, and always stronger than any kind of internationalism.”

— George Orwell, 1941¹¹

Where Marx believed the mentality regarding separation from citizen and state comes from economic class struggle, Akhil Amar believes this separation comes from political class struggle. Rather than claiming that politics can unite the nation, similar to the trends of Leninism that followed Marxism, Amar believes politics and its language are separating the nation. Amar's primary blame lies in how “the Court increasingly has come to assert a monopoly of interpretive power”.¹² Rather than looking at pre-Soviet Russia, Amar looks towards a modern-day United States. As the Supreme Court has received complete control over what the Constitution means, they can use the Constitution to their advantage and oppress the average citizen. We see this

¹¹ Orwell, George. “England Your England.” Orwell.ru. 2019.

¹² Akhil Reed Amar, “*Architexture*,” *Indiana Law Journal*, Vol. 77: Iss. 4, Article 1, (2002): pg. 680.

evident across countless Supreme Court cases such as *Korematsu v U.S.*¹³ or *Dred Scott v Sandford*.¹⁴ Amar also argues that the wording of the Constitution is purposefully vague, leaving it open to interpretation. Due to this, although the court decides the interpretation of the Constitution, the people also have interpretations of it. Discourse like this has effectively created our class division within the ideology of Amar. In essence, division between the proletariat and the court/state. Although this division is unquestionably present within the United States, it is also unquestionable that other factors are central issues of division, such as geographical and cultural divisions. These additionally lead to a division based on personal morals within the U.S. based on cultural ideologies heightened by geographical factors but also between international entities.¹⁵ Historians have also argued that politics have become a unifying force within the United States rather than a dividing force. The primary proponent of this is Robert Bellah.

While Amar believes that the language around the civil sphere has divided us, Bellah believes it has united us. He claims that the United States has developed a notion of civil religion. Bellah argues that “civil religion relates to the political society ... and private religious organization” within the United States.¹⁶ This civil religion is the new age reconstruction of American values. These are a core focus on individualism, universalism, patriotism, hedonism, and personal securities,¹⁷ that all Americans follow to some degree, consciously or subconsciously. This new narrative of unification under civil religion manages to encompass all Americans. There is still division, however, between Christians and non-Christians in this ideology.¹⁸ This being said, both groups still follow the civil religion, the same as how the proletariat and bourgeois follow capitalism. The main difference is that the basis of the civil

¹³ *Korematsu v. United States*, 323 U.S. 214, 65 S. Ct. 193 (1944).

¹⁴ *Dred Scott v. Sandford*, 60 U.S. 393 (1856).

¹⁵ Gunhild Setten, “Moral Landscapes,” *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography*, (2019). Pgs 193-198.

¹⁶ Robert N Bellah, “Civil religion In America,” *Daedalus*, vol. 117, no. 3, (1988): pg. 99.

¹⁷ Wayne Baker, *Are There Core American Values*. (University of Michigan, June 2012), pg. 2.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pg. 105.

religion is in Christian ideology, but as the U.S. continues to evolve, so does the civil religion. As the civil religion and the U.S. evolve, so do their “worshippers”. These worshipers then are either steadfast in the religious basis of the civil religion or evolve alongside the nation. Bellah still proposes that there is an option for unification under the civil religion as a whole. This concept of unification then opposes Marx's claim of opposition between the proletariat and the bourgeois and Amar's claim of opposition between the state and the citizen. Bellah's concept of civil religion holds strength within the context of the United States, but his own student Jeffrey Alexander is a critique of him. Alexander claims that Bellah's concept of civil religion is limited as it looks at Christianity. More specifically, Juedo-Christianity, as Bellah refers to it.¹⁹ Due to this specific lens, Alexander argues that civil religion follows one institutionalized religion rather than his concept of the “civil sphere”. Additionally, he argues that Bellah is too focused on this principle of religion in civil society.²⁰

III. Goldstone & the Social Sphere

“In a society that tries to standardize thinking, individuality is not highly prized.”

— Alex Grey, 2017²¹

Jack Goldstone is another scholar who shares a different perspective on the separation principle of the severance between state and citizen. Where Marx claimed that the separation principle resided in the economic sphere, Bellah and Amar claimed it resided in the political and

¹⁹ Gordon Lynch and Ruth Sheldon, “The sociology of the sacred: A conversation with Jeffrey Alexander.” *Culture and Religion*, vol. 14, no. 3 (2013): pg. 6.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pg. 7.

²¹ Alex Grey, *The Mission of Art*. (Colorado: Shambhala Publications, 2017), pg. 38.

civil sphere. Goldstone argues instead that it lies in the social sphere by introducing his “conjunctural model of State Breakdowns.”²² Goldstone looks at multiple factors within this model: Changes in ideology and philosophy, social hierarchy and inequality, population growth, and an inability to adapt.²³ He argues that these factors are the basis of all revolutionary ideologies and movements. Goldstone approaches the topic of the Separation Principle in a much different manner than the rest of our aforementioned scholars. Primarily, he looks at a variety of societies. Furthermore, he looks at a variety of factors. Rather than claim that one single thread of reasoning is the basis for all societal unrest and fervor, he instead assesses every angle. These societies range from France during the French Revolution to China under the dynastic transition of Ming to Qing.²⁴ By expanding his view and looking at multiple nations, he bolsters his argument that these trends are ever present in society.

In the end, his claim is proven flawed in its deep basis on demographic flaws. By focusing on singular nations and individual markers, Goldstone alienates each argument from one another in his works. This stance is contested by historians such as Charles Tilly who argue against such emphasis. Here we see the issue residing in scholars and historians focused on defining the separation principle: constant opposition. The Separation Principle bases itself on the universality of the scholars' claim and any opposition that proves a valid claim completely invalidates their assessment. Assessing all of our mentioned scholars, we see this trend. The conceptuality of Marxism as absolute is disproven by Amar who argues the focus is mainly political, not economic. Although these trends are typically aligned, Amar focuses on politics relating to civil struggles and religion, rather than economics. This claim is then disproven by

²² Jack Goldstone, *Revolution and Rebellion in the Early Modern World*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019), pg. xxiii.

²³ *Ibid.*, pgs. xxiii-xxiv.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pg. xxiii.

Goldstone who argues the focus is social and situational, not political or economic. This claim is then disproven by Bellah who argues the focus is not any of these but rather civil. Then Bellah claims that his own theory is non-universal.

IV. Disproving the Separation Principle

“Foresight does not seek to predict, but to drive imagination to inform decision-making and the actions required today.”

— Roger Spitz, 2022²⁵

There are many reasons why the arguments for Separation Principles are not universally possible. One of these main factors is human emotion and its unpredictability. Nassim Taleb is one historian who perceives unpredictability as all too predictable. Taleb argues that historians and economists are too bound by their structures of prediction. Taleb argues that as the earth evolves, so will its circumstances and unpredictability. Rather than look at prediction trends, he discusses sporadic events of randomness, which he labels as “black swans”²⁶, such as the COVID-19 pandemic or the 9/11 attacks. He argues that the longer the Earth is around, and the more we affect it, the more likely unpredictable events will occur. These effects may come from altering the environment through terraforming and pollution. These effects may also come from an increase in the population, an increase in human interaction, or skewed societal shifts. The main argument is that the unpredictable *is* predictable and that black swan events will always

²⁵ Roger Spitz, *The Definitive Guide to Thriving on Disruption: Essential Frameworks for Disruption and Uncertainty*. Vol. 2. (San Francisco: Distributive Features Institute LLC, 2022).

²⁶ Roberta Garner and Michael Ash. “Review of: Contemplating the Unusual and Unpredictable, by Nassim Nicholas Taleb,” *Science & Society*, Vol. 74, No. 2 (April, 2010): 248-258.

occur. In pertinence with the Separation Principle, this helps to add to the argument. If we are supposed to expect unpredictable events, how should we believe that history will always follow a certain pattern of events? We simply cannot.

Another flaw with these linear tracks of history is human emotion. Well-known historian and philosopher Raymond Aron once argued that human beings are “emotional, active, and intelligent”²⁷ but that they act out of the heart. He goes on to state that the mind and consciousness may drive thought but emotion, in the end, does drive action. In stating this, Aron is making the argument that humans do not react with their minds, but instead with their emotions. This claim is one that we can see play out throughout all of history. Emotion acts as the spark in both revolution and stagnation alike, such as how the events of the Boston Massacre affected the American Revolution.

We have also seen these events of unpredictable “black swan” events which were fueled by emotion play out in the modern era and completely unravel revolutionary trends. One specific example is that of Mohamed Bouazizi in 2010, which many argue sparked the start of the Arab Spring. Although unrest and fervor had spread throughout the Arab world, there had yet to be a spark to set off real change. Until the morning of December 17th, 2010. Mohamed Bouazizi, a street vendor, was harassed by police. This was a common occurrence and often a bribe or monetary trade-off was expected. Unable to provide the bribe, Bouazizi’s possessions (his cart, scale, and produce) were confiscated, and he was assaulted by the police, although eyewitness accounts vary. From here, Mohamed Bouazizi attempted to complain to the governor, but he was not even allowed a conference. In a fit of rage and utter devastation, Mohamed Bouazizi set himself ablaze in the square in front of the governor's office.²⁸ His actions, most definitely

²⁷ Raymond Aron, *Main Currents in Sociological Thought: Volume One*. (New York: Routledge Press), pg. 108.

²⁸ Jason Manning, “The Death of Mohamed Bouazizi,” in *Suicide: The Social Causes of Self-Destruction* (Virginia: University of Virginia, 2020), pgs. 1-2.

labeled as unpredictable, sparked outrage and anger which led to a rebellion in Sidi Bouzid, quickly spreading to Tunisia, and eventually the entire Arab world.²⁹ In this specific example, all it took was one unpredictable event to completely change the course of revolutionary history within the Arab world. A trend was not followed and there was no predicting the acts that would have unfolded.

V. If Not Linear, Does History Matter?

“The future is certain; it is only the past that is unpredictable”

—Anna Domańska, 2018³⁰

Many historians and scholars state we must study history to not repeat the mistakes of our past. One such scholar, George Santayana, famously claimed “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it”.³¹ Although this linear trend among some historians is flawed, this does not mean the study of history itself is. Simply because we can not predict with complete certainty why something is going to happen or the direct trends that will lead up to it, doesn't mean history as a whole is worthless. Rather, it means that the reasons for studying history are even greater. We study history so that we may learn from it and apply the lessons we have learned from it to our modern world. We can learn how we got to be the society we are today and how our societies evolved. We can learn how people of the past lived and how we compare

²⁹ Hafez Ghanem, “3 Roots of the Arab Spring,” in *The Arab Spring Five Years Later*” *Towards Greater Inclusiveness* (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2016), pg. 63.

³⁰ Anna Domańska. “The future is certain; it is only the past that is unpredictable,” sharedhistory.eu. 2018.

³¹ George Santayana, *The Life of Reason*, (C. Scribner's Sons, 1922; Project Gutenberg, February 14, 2005), gutenberg.org.

today.³² Besides learning, we can also discover parts of ourselves. We can discover how our nations, families, or even human beings, came to be and how we relate to that and each other. We can also discover how to expand upon ourselves and our roles within society.³³ History is an art and from it, we can learn how to be the best versions of ourselves. This requires abandoning all preconceived notions of predictability and trends that we have been taught our whole lives. Instead, we must learn to embrace the unexpected so we may look at life and the past through a new lens to see the whole picture. We may not be able to predict the future, but we can question the past.

³² Peter Stearns, "Why Study History?," *Historians.org*, 1998.

³³ *Ibid.*

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