

Reviews & Debates

CALLING (INTELLECTUAL) BULLSHIT ON INEQUALITY'S PERVERSION OF ALIENATION

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Abstract

The 'intellectual' justification of economic inequality as framed through the work of Harry G. Frankfurt is the basis of the following review essay. The target adopts a belief in the practice where the more one repeats a simplistic argument so, too, will such ideas hold the potential weight to be uncritically received. In a demeanour that only one from the insulated armchair of affluence and security provided by the academy can, Frankfurt, less than subtlety, reiterates a claim that an authentic morality would suggest inequality is the most proficient stasis for a given sociality. Challenging such a position, the trajectory of this assessment invokes both Marx's early conceptualization of estrangement and a Gramscian critique toward the dumbing-down of critical thought alongside academia's subservient role to political-economic power. Misinformed of the causality of socioeconomic disparity (and impediments to human potential), a review of Marxian thought can shed light on how economic inequality is not centred on a deficiency in subjective perception but rather a structural equation of material relations that have long enabled such a reality to withstand. It is through an insolent exposure of elitist proposition and ill-informed misdirection that those who would distort philosophical thought can be shown for what they are; (unconscious or not) 'traditional intellectuals' validating the endurance of capitalist enclosure.

Keywords

Alienation; disposable populations; economic inequality; Gramsci; intellectuals

Giving reference to the laborious and problematic temperament of criticism, Alain de Botton (2014, 239) noted how disparaging commentaries are far from "a wise expenditure of effort" as their purpose – if negative – is one of contradiction. The ironic communicative undertaking of said evaluations are "to inform the public of works ... whose existence it has

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heretofore never suspected, only then to insist – often with considerable brio – that they should ignore them completely” (Ibid). Acknowledging the measured constraints of life, it would be hoped that critical commentary toward the efforts of another be propelled by a “mission of trying to unite a time-short and suffering audience with works that would be of genuine benefit” (Ibid). Alongside specific writings that would later make up part of the Grundrisse (Marx and Engels 1987; 1986), several scholars within the Marxist tradition have, too, highlighted the importance of time in and beyond capitalist entrenchment (see Wendling 2011; McLellan 1971). Cognizant of the limiting conditions that impart a rapid tempo over society, one may simply heed the title of this review as an apologetic negation of de Botton’s sage request and a cue to its reduction of Harry G. Frankfurt’s *On Inequality*. If time is of importance to the reader, rest assured a simplistic topographical reading of the book will provide recognition of its weakness(es). For those of whom time is no consequence or the few seeking a more detailed criticism you are encouraged to read-on.

Much like a bigot prefaces a propagated soliloquy of their active discriminatory inclinations with ‘I’m not a racist, but ...’ so too does Frankfurt follow suit when implying this work is, in no way, “inspired or shaped by any social or political ideology” (Frankfurt 2015, 65). As the xenophobe demonstrates a conscious acumen of their internal racism, which must be introduced and interpreted as nothing of the sort, *On Inequality* is consistent in its repetition of mitigating dogmatic conventions of power. Trivial in its attempt to cloak individualistic and structural political standpoints by suggesting the text is “motivated exclusively by conceptual or analytical interests,” (Ibid) the root of *On Inequality* is not difficult to decipher. Rather than providing a philosophical account of how the economic (as Subject) is formulated: by what circumstance(s) – both historic and contemporary – income, wealth, and, in turn, status is waged through a financialization of exploitable labour power as a consequence of private ownership over the means of production, Frankfurt endeavours to misdirect the reader from the importance of targeting economic inequality as a site for—and in need of—transformation. The very introduction is framed not from outside but within a shallow rubric of authority and control (through the words of Barrack Obama no less). (Whether conscious or not) With little mind given to the necessity of lessening the broad concentration of monetary control outside the hands of a minority, the work rests comfortably within the confines of neoliberal ideology and, if one was to push the context, imperial discourse.

Early in the treatise Frankfurt reveals an insecurity that many weak arguments so often invoke; a tactic to limit the range of alternatives around a given subject. Employing a thin totalization of thought, the author uses his view from the ivory tower as an outpost to look-down and command rather than participate and encourage. Through this technique a subtext is made to earmark ignorance upon those who may think outside the selective borders erected. Such an enclosure is exemplified when Frankfurt charges;

Hardly anyone would deny that there are situations in which it makes sense to deviate from this standard [of economic equality]; for instance, where

opportunities to earn exceptional compensation must be offered in order to recruit employees with skills that are badly needed but uncommon (2015, 6).

Aside from early attempts, like that above, which subtly try and lead one to validate inequality, it should be stressed that Frankfurt's example is not of some proto-anarchic milieu. In no way is this quote founded on a belief that certain persons should be exceptionally remunerated based on their skilled labour power as (sold and) applied toward vocations that many do not have, share, or desire (i.e., sanitation workers, waste management employees, middle-school teachers, and so on). To the contrary, Frankfurt is regurgitating a sentiment long-situated in credentialism as the underlining qualifier of financial reward (Collins 1979; see also Livingstone 2004; Bowles and Gintis 1976). How this is derived to be philosophical is on the verge of comedic in that it is nothing more than conservative economic theory wrapped in the language of (an accessible) humanities.

Far from his contemporaries, Frankfurt's prose is more suited to the pages of a national newspaper that purposely writes to a literary proficiency marginally above middle school than for a cohort interested in engaged social and political thought. A literary litmus test, if you will, would draw attention to the fact that one, almost universally, could replace Frankfurt's overuse of the phrase egalitarianism with the more acute assignment of meritocracy. Like the latter suggests, those suffering from socioeconomic duress are instructed to be both acceptingly content and agreeably docile in the bed upon which they have made for themselves. This, as any effective paternalist would, is quickly followed with the resolution that "having less is compatible, after all, with having quite a bit; doing worse than others does not entail doing badly" (Frankfurt 2015, 69). Thus one should relinquish any sentiment of just reciprocity and feel comfort in the recognition that there is always a subaltern more downtrodden. The key (for many at distal levers of power) is to have prospective antagonists absorb an emotive condition of guilt or hierarchal pretense "when we recognize that those who are doing considerably worse than others may nonetheless be doing rather well" (Ibid, 71). While assumed, it is not entirely clear if Frankfurt is aware that such perspectives have been foundational for capital systems to fracture solidarity amongst the marginalized by pitting the dispossessed against itself.

Misconstruing the Theory of Estrangement and the Promotion of Disposable Populations

More offensive to scholars who take social theory seriously, is the inconsequence through which a Professor of philosophy fails to effectively transpose discourse and consciousness in an effective manner. Take, for example, the premise that those whom raise even modest issue toward an appraisal of economic marginality are doing so out of a position of envy.

To the extent that people are preoccupied with economic equality, under the mistaken assumption that it is a morally important good, their readiness to be satisfied with some particular level of income or wealth is—to that extent—not

guided by their own most distinctive interests and ambitions. Instead, it is guided just by the quantity of money that other people happen to have (Frankfurt 2015, 10 [*italics added by author of the review*]).

It should be underscored that Frankfurt is not speaking about a sociopolitical strata engaged in protest or confrontation (i.e., Communist or Socialist Parties, anti-Capitalist movements, organized labour and Trade-Unionism, and so on) but the many within any given society that simply question monetary centrality. For Frankfurt, this subset, in its self-ignorant depravity, are fundamentally doing nothing more than preventing their eye-to-hand coordination from being deployed so as to pull-up their bootstraps with each minute of contemplative concern aimed at the concentration of wealth. Frankfurt takes repeated aim at trying to disseminate that what an ‘other’ has is not only of little consequence or importance but is of no other’s business.

... a preoccupation with the alleged inherent value of economic equality tends to divert a person’s attention away from trying to discover—within his experience of himself and of his life conditions—what he himself really cares about, what he truly desires or needs, and what will actually satisfy him (Frankfurt 2015, 11).

In addition to this distorted bypass of politico-historical thought, political economy is dually recognized to be given the same measure of (dis)respect. When concerning the subject of estrangement against the backdrop of modernity, few have so thoroughly misinterpreted the clarity of Marx’s demarcated concept as Frankfurt. Through a perverse re-defining of the theory, reproach (let alone comment) is left absent toward the minority who hold tremendous wealth nor toward the pretext through how said capital was consolidated, but rather is pointed at a population’s unease toward said conditions. This false caricature of alienation bastardizes its theoretical origin by suggesting it is in the very act of immaterially critiquing economic disparity (as compared to one’s objective separation from the means of production) that negates one from their true potential.² Frankfurt does not, however, stop here but further chastises those who interrogate wealth disparity as contributing “to the moral disorientation and shallowness of our time” through

² In true neoliberal fashion, Frankfurt appears to direct (or perform) a discussion about capital outside the economic; suggesting it is not resources which influence affect but rather one’s internal stability and intrinsic acceptance that underwrites a person’s full potential. Invoking an elementary philosophical juxtaposition, he argues “since the unsatisfactory character of his life is not due to the size of his income or his wealth, his life would not be improved if he had more money” (Frankfurt 2015, 51). One can hear the physical twists from a specific grave in Highgate Cemetery in London as Frankfurt illustrates his lacking comprehension of socioeconomic status and the promotion of a select ideology. While it is true that monetary girth does not act as a guarantor of internal contentment it is, nevertheless, materiality—to which capital subsidizes—that is central to individual and social formation (which includes duress and distortion as much as it warrants happiness and ease). Again, it is understood how this is lost on Frankfurt due to an obvious poverty in understanding Marx’s work on estranged labour and the canon of critical thought devoted to the study of alienation.

posing “the question of how their economic status compares with the economic status of others” (Frankfurt 2015, 14). Suggesting a critical review of economic inequality to be a matter of ‘insignificance’ (Ibid), the reader is able to recognize the depth of Frankfurt’s political economic and philosophical illiteracy (or political ferocity) through his incapability to deduce Marx’s rich depiction of how one’s ‘experience’ and ‘life conditions’ have been and remain directly impacted under the socioeconomic dislocation(s) of capitalism; hence, a people’s interest, concern, and critique of economic inequality.

On the basis of political economy itself, in its own words, we have shown that the worker sinks to the level of a commodity and becomes indeed the most wretched of commodities; that the wretchedness of the worker is in inverse proportion to the power and magnitude of his production; that the necessary result of competition is the accumulation of capital in a few hands, and thus the restoration of monopoly in a more terrible form ... So much does labour’s realisation appear as loss of realisation that the worker loses realisation to the point of starving to death. So much does objectification appear as loss of the object that the worker is robbed of the objects most necessary not only for his life but for his work ... So much does the appropriation of the object appear as estrangement that the more objects the worker produces the less he can possess and the more he falls under the sway of his product, capital. All these consequences are implied in the statement that the worker is related to the product of his labour as to an alien object. For on this premise it is clear that the more the worker spends himself, the more powerful becomes the alien world of objects which he creates over and against himself, the poorer he himself—his inner world— becomes, the less belongs to him as his own (Marx and Engels 1975, 270, 272).

No longer is one’s loss of realisation or objectification centred around ‘economic conditions,’ as Marx (and Engels) so dutifully laid out.³ This profound deliberation, a generation shy of two centuries old, is entirely perverted by Frankfurt; alienation is displaced from a separation of objective materialism to that of an ephemeral subjective critique regarding inequality. It is not that one is prevented from accessing even a modicum of subsistence through the means of production that is the causality of disparity but rather that the dispossessed have failed to take the needed individual responsibility for their plight in circumstance, life, and relation to said marginality.

... a preoccupation with others interferes with the most basic task on which a person’s intelligent selection of monetary goals for himself most decisively depends.

³ As the often quoted exert alludes; “Labour’s realisation is its objectification. Under these economic conditions this realisation of labour appears as loss of realisation for the workers; objectification as loss of the object and bondage to it; appropriation as estrangement, as alienation.” (Marx and Engels 1975, 272).

It leads a person away from understanding what he himself truly requires in order effectively to pursue his own most authentic needs, interests, and ambitions. Exaggerating the moral importance of economic equality is harmful, in other words, because it is alienating. It separates a person from his own individual reality, and leads him to focus his attention upon desires and needs that are not most authentically his own (Frankfurt 2015, 11-12).

Critique, for Frankfurt, is what causes alienation rather than one having little more than their labour power to sell off in direct estranged competition against other members of their class (and subservience to diametrically aligned social relations that perpetuate the process). This line of thinking advises that the less time (narcissistically) devoted to the solitary concertation of bettering one's self is the true axis as to why legions are perpetually worse off. In true meritocratic form, Frankfurt shrewdly frames a person's placement in life as their own doing. A more perfect ideological construction to buttress the stability of existing power could not be found. Scoring nothing short of a rigid Calvinist demeanour, Frankfurt chastises those exploited under capitalism through the individualistic carceral approach of blaming the victim.

To fortify such intonations Frankfurt commissions played-out utilitarian one-or-the-other scenarios of absolute binaries. When one reads more deeply into the superficiality of such dated interpretations, however, a sentiment is found that substantiates a most disturbing subtext. While careful not to nakedly divulge a neo-Malthusian eliminationist drive there are more than hints toward how to address (human) improvidence through a language of ethical rationalism amidst scarce resource(s) and fiscal restraint (see Kallis 2009). A method through which this is invoked is by qualifying "an equal distribution ... leads to the worst possible outcomes" and that entertaining alternatives to (concrete dualities of) economic disparity "would be morally grotesque" (Frankfurt 2015, 35). In non-fictional form, Frankfurt appears to echo the ideological negation of humanity as voiced by Charles Dickens' literary character Ebenezer Scrooge (prior to his elevation in societal conscience): "if they would rather die ... they had better do it, and decrease the surplus population" (Dickens 2009, 14). Possibly not being exposed to such literary treasures as a child is what enables Frankfurt to promote the merciless refrain that posits it better to let certain populations die-off in rapidity rather than suffer the prolonged inevitable.

Even if we suppose that a person with one unit of food or medicine may live a bit longer than someone with no food or medicine whatsoever, perhaps it is really worse to prolong the process of starvation or of illness for a short time than it would be to terminate sooner the foreseeable agony (Frankfurt 2015, 38).⁴

⁴ After this callous edict, an olive-branch of compassionate backtracking is injected by Frankfurt (2015, 44) who (oddly) offers; "situations involving inequality are morally disturbing". Nevertheless, any hope in his humaneness is smothered when an immediate follow-up suggests that disparity is entirely acceptable as long as it does not "violate the ideal of sufficiency" (Ibid). (Apart from failing to define what 'ideal' implies and who sets such a measure) The

Upon reading how Frankfurt brackets such inhumane economic 'balances' as admissible, while negating solutions outside pre-meditated binomial examples, one is alarmed by his politely hostile frankness. The promotion of this thinking chillingly resonates in the ear of those familiar with the sociological critiques of Zygmunt Bauman's waste (2004), Bertrand Ogilvie's *l'homme jetable* (1995), Slavoj Žižek's irrelevance (2011; 2009), or the impending promise of said conditions by Brad Evans and Henry A. Giroux (2015), as expression is given to a barbarism that substantiates the virtue of disposable populations.

Frankfurt as (a Gramscian Defined) Intellectual

Upon review of his work, one can observe Frankfurt as an astute portrayal – in more ways than one – of the cohort that Gramsci so thoroughly chastised as the “popularised traditional type of intellectual” (Gramsci 2000, 122). Apart from highlighting a deluded sociopolitical awareness of his ‘apolitical’ intentions, Frankfurt perceives himself a thinker “autonomous and independent of the dominant social group” (Gramsci 1971, 7). The company to which many like Frankfurt belong perceive themselves distinct from the confines of power. Plausibly framed as public intellectuals in contemporary argot, Gramsci describes these self-affirmed appointees of thought as nothing more than the “deputies” or “functionaries” of the State and bourgeoisie, which postulate legitimacy – and thus the continuity – of an embedded hegemony. In this vein the label of intellectual is in no way a title of esteemed station but rather a moniker of the highest insult (Ibid, 12). Moreover, Gramsci's work on intellectualism can be further utilized when specifically reviewing Frankfurt as author.

Rather than giving thought-filled respect to the complexity of themes related to grounded ideological persuasion and disproportioned capitalist relations, Frankfurt has depreciated their worth (on more than one occasion).⁵ His most publicly recognized publications approach subjects of distinct societal and philosophical significance yet meet them with the greatest of triviality in both qualitative and quantitative countenance. Their ethos is not of insight but a (telling) bulimic aesthetic which fails to elucidate contrasting viewpoints or enable broad(er) theoretical proposals to surface. Furthermore, the material engaged is done so with a feigning juvenility that simply

paradox of this sentimentality so late in the text is recognized as a slim effort to insert some measure of ethical virtue to the work. What remains clear is the underlining thesis; those with wealth – and the structure onto which sustains its repetition – are not an ally, perpetrator, or perpetuator of inequality but rather that unsophisticated blocs simply cannot accept or are unwilling to self-adjust their paucity.

⁵ This is not to suggest that tomes of a given subject need to be delivered for value to be executed, as a Costco-sized bag of chips has no more nutritional value than a package with the same ingredients a tenth in size. Inversely, concise works have shown to hold considerable influence in their brevity to engage a given subject through a multitudinal engagement a specific topic of significance. All one need do is reference the pamphlets of *Wage, Labour and Capital* (Marx and Engels 1977) or the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (Marx and Engels 1976) to see the validity of this remark. The premise in the above statement is that Frankfurt does neither.

recaps a handful of refrains; the scholastic equivalent of a child hounding a disgruntled parent in the attempt to ‘get their way’ through a practice of repetitive bombardment.⁶ Here one witnesses the inception of a practice that opts to abandon dutiful analysis toward complexity and structural implications stressing the dissemination of knowledge for a trend of one-dimensional asininity.⁷ From the perspective of name-recognition and monetary remuneration, however, this method has worked most assuredly in gaining access to the broadest of readerships through a base level language whose scale of attention to philosophical scripts of power, personality, and ideology parallels its vocabulary.⁸ This is not to suggest terseness is unable to accomplish such feats but rather that a broad distance exists between expediting densely outlined text for reachable prose and the outright evasion of layered deliberations; not simply dumbing-down but circumventing arguments based on one’s ineffectual ability to fully comprehend the timbre therein. In a time and space when it is fashionable to suggest evidence is trumped by emotion and popularity⁹, Frankfurt has traversed his limitations through the delivery of vulgar sub-simplification within magazine-length books selling well into the hundreds of thousands. Most compelling to the review, however, is that an exert from a lesser known work of Frankfurt’s entitled *On Truth* may paraphrase a critique worthy of use (against himself):

Bullshitters, although they represent themselves as being engaged simply in conveying information, are not engaged in that enterprise at all. Instead, and most essentially, they are fakers and phonies who are attempting by what they say to manipulate the opinions and the attitudes of those whom they speak. What they care about primarily, therefore, is whether what they say is effective in accomplishing this manipulation. Correspondingly, they are more or less indifferent to whether what they say is true or whether it is false (Frankfurt 2006, 3-4).

⁶ *On Inequality* is not Frankfurt’s first demonstration of popular frivolity but a literary sibling, as a decade prior to said work he was greeted with wide acclaim through the original employment of this technique. Ironically, the title of said book was *On Bullshit* (also published through Princeton University Press).

⁷ There has been an interesting rise in popularity toward books of ‘light’ scholarly attentiveness with titles of a particular vulgarity (see James 2016; 2012; McGinn 2008).

⁸ A parallel could be made with reference to a variety of pundits, bloggers, and pop-culture commentators whom have conferred television enthusiasts who gaze upon situational comedies such as *Frasier* [1993-2004] and the more recent *Big Bang Theory* [2007-] as somehow intellectually elevated as a result of their passive visual consumption. Writ large, the scenario infers that by simply consuming, irrespective of the property’s quality, one is advanced in cerebral pursuit.

⁹ While much work on the subject of ‘post-truth’ has become fashionable of late (see Rabin-Havt and *Media Matters for America* 2016; Keyes 2004), the words of Carlo Ginzburg are heralded: “I do not think that arrogant indifference to the facts is anything new. The phenomena gathered under this misleading label, like the appeal to the emotions, are hardly novel. If we look at the history of the twentieth century, we see that this was a prominent characteristic of many historical developments” (as quoted in Prieto 2016).

One could look at Frankfurt's 'accomplishments' as another institutional example of a dampening toward valuable scholarly inquiry and debate. Far from providing an original contribution to the academy, Frankfurt's work symbolizes an effort to sustain the limits of popular intelligence, critique, a sound control over language, and a 'moral' philosophy that reads like the essay of an undergraduate student the night before it is due for submission (minuscule citation, poorly referenced, overwhelming repetition, absent of economic and political reflexivity, and so on).¹⁰ As warned by Gramsci (1985, 32) when concerning the potential loss(es) when one steps away from the fruitful toil of digging into modernity's most complex arrangements:

In order to be easy we would have had to falsify and impoverish a debate which hinged on concepts of the utmost importance, on the most fundamental and precious substance of our spirit. Doing this is not being easy: it amounts to fraud, like the wine merchant who passes off coloured water as Barolo or Lambrusco. A concept which is difficult in itself cannot be made easy when it is expressed without becoming vulgarized. And pretending that this vulgarization is still the same concept is to act like trivial demagogues, tricksters in logic and propaganda.

Alongside these concerns, Gramsci underscores (and condemns) the lack of faith of said authors and those in edition of communicative mediums toward the marginalized, particularly the proletariat, whom have repeatedly displayed the cognitive ability to "understand the most refined" of ideas and concepts (Ibid). It is here where the organic intellectual takes shape in both critique and recognition of whom and what Frankfurt is doing through such works (Gramsci 1971, 15-16). If seeking to truly support the advancement of the subaltern, intellectual works must strive to move beyond adapting "themselves to the average level of the regional strata that they address" (Gramsci 1985, 32). Constructive efforts must be undertaken to ensure that arguments exceed mediocrity (let alone reflect the linguistic depth of a culvert) "so that there is a stimulus to intellectual progress" (Ibid, 33). It is essential that truth is spoken to and about power; therefore, challenge must be brought to the propagation of 'traditional' intellectual thought. If such endeavours refrain from doing so, regardless of how incremental, then the process of an alternative intellectual proficiency, while ever plausible, is slowed in its potential. This is where the manoeuvre of the organic intellectual cannot be as lazy in either its critique or analysis as can be afforded to Frankfurt (and other scholars of this calibre who have consistently opted for the latter in their dearth of intellectual rigor). In prevention of the acceptance of watering-down realities Gramsci heeded that cautioned by Marx (and Engels) of letting others frame and define meaning and critique.

¹⁰ Few interested in a scholarly discussion or analysis of social and political thought will be fulfilled upon completion, as Frankfurt offers little more than a trifling essay of unexacting weight that leaves primarily few satisfied; possibly the shareholder of a Fortune 500 multinational needing a quick read during a connector flight in that they will be left feeling justified in their privilege; a bachelor of business administration student who needs to feel as though they have more fully participated in the mantra of their liberal arts post-secondary institution; and – most assuredly – the publisher who will make a mint selling a plethora of 100-page hardcover books for just under twenty dollars a pop.

[W]e have to grasp the intrinsic connection between private property, avarice, the separation of labour, capital and landed property; the connection of exchange and competition, of value and the devaluation of men, of monopoly and competition, etc.— we have to grasp this whole estrangement connected with the money system. Do not let us go back to a fictitious primordial condition as the political economist does, when he tries to explain. Such a primordial condition explains nothing; it merely pushes the question away into a grey nebulous distance (Marx and Engels 1975, 271).

Inequality is not the causality of a singular actor nor emancipated by such. It is rather through the endurance of a structural equation grounded in material alienation that enables this discriminatory reality to continue. The philosophical haze created by Frankfurt evaporates once exposed as a marketed medium to 'explain' elitist propositions through ill-informed misdirection. From here a more resolute clarity emerges showing the vibrancy of substantive social change engineered by those who continue to confront fiscal disparity and dig at its exploitative roots. In closing, an apology is warranted to Alain de Botton (and my wonderful parents) whom encouraged an adoption of silence towards those periodic contexts when nothing of comfort or kindness could be said. While this review clearly highlights a failure to heed such insight it remains essential to expose the traditional intellectuals whom tread upon a path that sell inequality.

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