

Book Review

Elisabeth Theresia Widmer, *Left-Kantianism in the Marburg School*, Berlin/Boston: de Gruyter, 2024, Pp. viii + 146, ISBN 9783111331775 (hbk) \$120.99.

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Elisabeth Theresia Widmer's *Left-Kantianism in the Marburg School* is a well-crafted and cogently argued volume that delves into the works of key figures in the Neo-Kantian Marburg School: Friedrich Albert Lange, Hermann Cohen, Rudolf Stammler, Paul Natorp, and Ernst Cassirer. Despite its concise size, the book, part of De Gruyter's prestigious "New Studies in the History and Historiography of Philosophy" series, adeptly explores the core theoretical tenets of these authors. Widmer's primary thesis posits that their contributions offer heuristic tools for critiquing capitalism. She introduces the concept of "Left-Kantianism" as a distinctive label over the conventional "Marburg School," and defines with this term the application of Kantian critical methodology to the critique of capitalism, distinguishing this approach from both the Hegelian Left and Marxist critiques by its emphasis on normative ethical structures rather than economic determinism.

In her introduction, Widmer articulates the themes of her work, distinguishing its approach through an analysis of the Marburg School's teleological rationality, advocacy for socialism as a historical movement, and Kantian methodology for normative demands promoting universal progress (p. 1). The critique of capitalism articulated by the Marburg Left underscores the inadequacy of societal restructuring as the sole remedy. It posits that a critical reassessment of the ethical underpinnings intrinsic to the capitalist mode of production is imperative. This critique, rooted in a solid philosophical foundation and inspired by Kantian thought, advocates for a gradual approach toward achieving equality and rights, emphasizing a teleological evolution towards an ideal socialist vision. Widmer emphasizes the intertwining of rationality and teleology, contrasting it with Hegelian historicism, to advocate for a progression towards a universal humanity and the full realization of human potential. The purposeful political background of figures like Cohen and Natorp stresses the cultural significance and advocates for a dynamic, rather than static, movement toward socialism. The volume importantly contributes to addressing structural injustices from a Kantian perspective, remaining pertinent in navigating the complexities of historical development and societal views. The relevance of these

discussions persists, highlighted by today's critiques on the problematic nature of *a priori* assumptions and universality misconceptions (p. 6).

The book challenges the homogeneous portrayal of the Marburg School's political philosophies as simply embodying "ethical socialism."¹ This exploration sharply scrutinizes the philosophical rifts within the school, e.g. between Cohen and Stammler on legal justification, which led to varied interpretations of socialism. Despite sharing a Kantian philosophical base, the political theories of other Marburg scholars, including Natorp and Cassirer, exhibit significant divergences.

Widmer situates her analysis against the historical backdrop of the 1850s, marked by the aftermath of the failed March German Revolution, a turning point in both socialist and liberal movements. This period saw, as well studied by Köhnke (1986), the repression of left-liberals and the emergence of the Progressive Liberal Party, highlighting the ideological fractures that hindered collaboration between Social Democracy and the Progressive Party.

It could be helpful to remember that, after Lassalle's death (1864), the Socialist parties gained broad electoral support, propelled by industrial development in Germany and the expansion of a potential worker base. Friedrich Albert Lange's *The Labor Question*, which appeared in 1865, exemplifies the era's complex ideological interplay, setting the stage for the Marburg School's political philosophy. However, the way in which German unification was forwarded, Bismarck's pseudo-democratization with universal suffrage and anti-Catholic and anti-Socialist laws simultaneously narrowed real democratic spaces, limiting the action margin for liberal or progressive bourgeois parties, thereby offering the Socialist Party a broader operational field than working classes. This situation persisted still during the Bernstein revisionism debate, accentuating the marginal role of Kantian tendencies within the Socialist Party's theoretical framework despite their significant presence in the academic discussion.

The theme discussed in Widmer's book leads us in fact to recall Bernstein's critique of the SPD political program. For he emphasizes the movement's importance over the end goal, we can infer that Marburg school's teleological framework acted in revising socialist strategies. Widmer contends that by basing their critique on a robust philosophical foundation, the Marburg Left both offers a nuanced, progressive interpretation of socialism, distinct from Marx and Engels' historical materialism, and presents a more structured critique of capitalism than historical materialism itself, advocating for a more polydimensional, realistic approach to social change.

Widmer's exploration stops short of deeply investigating the reasons behind Left Neo-Kantianism's confinement to the academic realm, and maybe a more

1 Cf. Sandkühler and de la Vega 1970.

comprehensive examination of how these authors influenced the emancipation movement would provide the opportunity for further considerations on the cultural framework of the era. The debate on revisionism, and the agrarian debate, reflect the academic strand of Kantian socialism, which had marginal status within the Socialist Party's theoretical framework, despite its potential contributions to the movement's emancipation and critique of prevailing power structures.

What is stated about Bernstein's work *The Preconditions of Socialism*² (pp. 15–6), may not suffice. For instance, how can Karl Kautsky's bequest, as a principal defender of Marxist "orthodoxy" against Bernstein, be termed anti-Kantian? Kautsky, in his writings on ethics (Kautsky 1906)³, endeavors to outline Marxist ethics based on a normative criterion, such as the ongoing struggle against dominating and oppressive powers.

From Widmer's perspective, as we have seen, there is a tendency to reevaluate so-called Left Neo-Kantianism from the standpoint of contemporary politics. Therefore, her systematic reconstruction needs to demonstrate the advantages of the Marburg School's Neo-Kantian normativism, and such debates serve only as historical and contextual sketches. However, without addressing why a Left Neo-Kantian movement has not factually existed beyond a few individual personalities, there's a risk of not substantiating this hypothetical use of the Neo-Kantian conceptual system, thus providing a theory that, to use Labriola's words to Croce, wavers "like so many hanging *caciocavalli*"⁴ without a concrete reference to an emancipatory movement. So, when Widmer employs the label "Left-Kantianism" to summarize the shared attributes with the Left Hegelians, establishing a comparative framework that accentuates their mutual emphasis on social and ethical concerns within their philosophical traditions, we must consider that the Hegelian movement was deeply embedded in the struggle for German national freedom and the emancipation of subordinate classes, making "Left-Hegelianism" label not just a political compass but an embodiment of the struggles in pre-unification Germany, with mass roots already before 1848 uprising. Furthermore, reasoning about differences between neo-Kantianism and Marxism on these issues, it's crucial to consider that,

2 Particularly in "Kant against Cant," which concludes with the "Back to Lange" appeal mentioned by Widmer – though Bernstein himself ranks Lange secondary to Marx, acknowledging his loyalty to the worker's emancipation movement and his scientific impartiality (Bernstein 1899, p. 220).

3 Widmer discusses Kautsky's work, arguing that, in opposition to Cohen, the Marxist political man rejects the Kantian moral law as a foundational political principle (p. 93).

4 Antonio Labriola wrote this in a letter addressed to Benedetto Croce, on December 25, 1896, speaking against the studies of the latter on "pure Economics", that for Labriola didn't consider the actual human behavior. *Caciocavalli* are southern Italian pieces of cheese, characteristically hung in a couple to mature on a wooden pole to facilitate its proper aging. The letter is cited in Agazzi 1962, p. 336.

capitalism, in a strictly Marxian sense, is defined as a social relation rather than merely an unjust state of things.

Let's now consider the investigation of Friedrich Albert Lange's work, the figure most closely aligned with classical leftism. His historical context is deeply rooted in the development and organization of the labor movement, having direct interactions with Marx and Engels. Elisabeth Widmer effectively argues, contrary to some interpretations, that Lange was thoroughly Kantian in his philosophical landscape. Furthermore, especially in his examination of *The Labor Question*, he integrates Kantian philosophy with socialist thought.

Lange's studies on national economy and statistics represent a difference from Marx and Lassalle, favoring a naturalist explanation of class struggles influenced by Darwin and Malthus, suggesting societal progress through legal reforms rather than revolutionary upheaval. His stance, integrating materialism with a critique of Marx and preference for Malthus's principles, positions him uniquely within neo-Kantianism, blending naturalism with Kantian philosophy (pp. 26–29). This leads to a complex interplay between naturalism and Kantianism, suggesting a foundational Kantian element in his political thought, termed "psychophysiological transcendentalism."

Furthermore, Lange's alignment with materialism and the Anglophone traditional emphasis on inductive logic for empirical statements (as Adam Smith and John Stuart Mill) reflects his belief in the possibility of necessary logical judgments about experience. Advocating for an empirical examination of *a priori* conditions, Lange's approach necessitates an adapted Kantian framework that incorporates psychophysical insights, moving beyond traditional Kantian methods. His work serves as a step towards examining the conditions of social experience, indicating that materialist movements in philosophical history have often acted as critical tools by delineating the limits of metaphysics (p. 35).

In Chapter 3, dedicated to Hermann Cohen, Widmer underlines the compelling notion of embodied ethical rationality, central to Cohen's theoretical proposition. Cohen posits ethical regulations should be seen as laws embodying the Kantian idea of the unity of humankind, highlighting this intrinsic critique of capitalism. Then, in Chapter 4, she elucidates how Cohen identified contradictions in the labor laws of his time that contravene the Kantian ideal of humanity, thus formulating a critique of capitalism centered on developing a Neo-Kantianism based on Kant's transcendental logic, presenting an anti-psychologist manifesto. We could consider this particularly interesting considering Cohen's psychologistic roots. Widmer aptly cites the importance of Cohen's seminal preface to Lange's *History of Materialism* (1896), which explores the interrelation between logic and physics, ethics and religion, and ethics and politics.

Cohen's political philosophy, extending beyond applying Kant's "Formula of Humanity" to capitalism, signifies a critical enhancement of Kantian theory by integrating historical and psychological contexts into normative principles. His redefinition of the categorical imperative underscores institutionalized social norms aiming at a just society, establishing his concept of ethical rationality as the "logic of the cultural sciences." This constructivist approach, aligning ethics with the systematicity of mathematics, delineates Cohen's rationalist-idealist stance. Cohen's socialism appears so as deeply rooted in his ethical foundation rather than solely in his political views. Central here is Cohen's integration of Judaism and social thought, asserting an indissoluble link between the two throughout his intellectual life. This perspective, albeit with a stronger religious inclination in Natorp's vision of socialism, underscores the nuanced interplay between religious reflection and socialist ideology.

As already in her introduction, Elisabeth Widmer examines Cohen and Natorp's views on imperialism, a theme further explored in chapters dedicated to these philosophers. This point, rightly emphasized by Widmer, is also shared by other figures across different currents, such as Windelband within Neo-Kantianism and Husserl, as seen in his 1917/18 lectures on Fichte (Husserl 1987; Windelband 1916). This invites reflections on whether the strict normativism of the Neo-Kantian school can lead to these "unpleasant" outcomes. There is here a proper *experimentum crucis* for Widmer's preference of normative approaches. Might the normative vision of neo-Kantians inadvertently lead to undesirable outcomes such as imperialism and nationalism? We cannot assume these merely being an epochal debt of Neo-Kantian philosophers. Widmer correctly articulates Cohen's functionalist critique of capitalism, starting from the concept of a regulative idea essential for ethics. According to Cohen, cultural norms must embody moral law, underscoring the necessity of understanding the functionalist elements borrowed from Kantian morality within his political philosophy (pp. 89–96). Further investigation into the idea of the State as law, and *Allheit* [totality], is suggested to fully grasp not only Cohen's but also Paul Natorp's viewpoints. Could we argue that with such a ground, the State becomes an "ethical and cultural unity", that could be harassed in nationalistic attires in situations such as World War I? Is imperative to consider the actual devices in the dissemination of universalistic structures and the concrete forces beyond them⁵.

⁵ For example Vatter (2017) defends Cohen's "infamous manifesto," arguing that the Neo-Kantian philosopher did not intend to sever ties with his social-democratic commitments. Contrary to a broad swath of literature, Vatter contends that Cohen's writings should be understood and interpreted within the context of Judaic messianism and a determination to engage actively in the concrete political milieu of World War I Germany.

Widmer's exploration of Cohen's relationship with *Völkerpsychologie*, particularly in *Zur Kontroverse zwischen Adolf Trendelenburg und Kuno Fischer*, clearly demonstrates the persistence of such elements in Cohen's work, and how *Kant's Grounding of Ethics* represents instead a significant turning point in the relation with *Völkerpsychologie*. The reference to Trendelenburg's influence, subtly suggested by Widmer, permeates the concept of movement [*Bewegung*] as opposed to development [*Entwicklung*], a theme echoed in the Fischer versus Trendelenburg debate. Using the term "movement" is typical of the anti-Hegelian line, demonstrating Trendelenburg's significance for the development of logic in the nineteenth century and its extensive influence on Neo-Kantian thinkers.

In the concluding chapter of her book, Widmer delves into the philosophical contributions of Stammler, Natorp, and Cassirer, underscoring the nuanced distinctions within these Left-Kantians. Despite sharing foundational principles with Cohen, Stammler's perspective significantly diverges, particularly in his approach to social norms and ethics. Stammler's critique focuses on the philosophical endeavor to discern ethical inconsistencies and the class origins of empirical sciences' inductive methods, advocating for a historical school of leftist thought that acknowledges the emergence of inequalities and injustices.

Widmer then turns to Ernst Cassirer, whose work, while not directly aligned with socialism, embodies a Kantian moral vision enabling the development of critical ethics, notably against fascism as represented by *The Myth of the State*. Cassirer's ethics is shown to bear the influence of Cohen's ethical theory, despite Cassirer's engagement with a broad array of sources. Notably, Cassirer's critique of fascism for Widmer echoes Cohen's "pure will" as a function of consciousness, which is revealed to be a necessary condition of the possibility of objective ethical normativity (p. 109). This intricate exploration reveals the depth and diversity of Left-Kantianism, from Stammler's distinctive stance on social norms to Cassirer's Kantian-inspired ethical critique, illustrating the rich tapestry of Neo-Kantian philosophy and its relevance to contemporary ethical and political debates.

In her conclusions, Widmer underscores the necessity of reevaluating the Left Kantian tradition, often overshadowed by Marxist or Left Hegelian counterparts. Her study seeks to highlight the critical value of Kantian theoretical tools, particularly those from the Marburg School, in critiquing capitalism. Yet, it leaves open the question of whether the context in which the Marburg School authors developed their ideas can be distinctly appropriated for a "leftist" use today or if these ideas are intrinsic to a critical view of capitalism of their time. Widmer argues that the Marburg School's ideal of ethical objectivity is useful still today. Ultimately, the debate on the foundations of ethics and how the philosophies of eminent thinkers like Kant, Hegel, and Marx can redefine tools for critiquing ideology in the 21st century, a time marked by the rise of right-wing forces in the Western world, is

paramount. This discourse offers an original and vivid approach to interpreting contemporary ideologies.

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