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Theorizing social change

Robin Zheng

Department of Philosophy, University of
Glasgow, Glasgow, UK

Correspondence
Robin Zheng, Department of Philosophy,
University of Glasgow, Glasgow, UK.
Email: robin.zheng@glasgow.ac.uk

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Abstract

In this article I argue that social change deserves to be recognized as an area of philosophical study in its own right. I provide a non-exhaustive overview of existing philosophical work that addresses the problem of social change, alongside a preliminary framework elucidating some key concepts and distinctions for conceptualizing transformative social change. More specifically, I sketch out two broadly opposed approaches to social change — "liberal" versus radical — in order to excavate some assumptions underlying extant philosophical literatures (and popular thinking) about change. I then briefly outline some other fundamental problems common to all processes of social change.

1 | INTRODUCTION

How do we remake our world into a new and better one? This will require *transformative social change*, that is, a large-scale, comprehensive, global[1] alteration of social arrangements—a change *of* rather than *in* a system (Durkheim, 1893/2014; Parsons, 1951/1991). To be sure, transformative social change is often unintended and imperceptible in the moment, analyzable only in retrospect. Theorists in the social sciences have long hypothesized general patterns of social change (for accessible overviews, see, e.g., Harper & Leicht, 2018; McLeish, 2013). Premodern theorists proposed *cyclical* models of change, in which societies' fates rose and fell like the seasons (Ibn Khaldun, 1967). These were replaced these by *linear* models, positing that societies move progressively from simpler (or, in more sinister terms: 'primitive') to advanced ('civilization'), as in influential modernization theories (Lerner, 1958; Rostow, 1959; Tönnies, 1887/2001). *Dialectical* theories assume that there is a directionality to historical change, driven by continued overcoming of internal tensions, but that this is not linear (Aron, 1968; Cohen, 1978/2020; Marx, 1859). There are also theories concerning mechanisms of change. While *functionalist* theories propose that societies are homeostatic systems in which changes are re-equilibrating responses to stresses (Durkheim, 1893/2014; Parsons, 1951/1991), *conflict* theories argue that social change is driven by fundamental tensions between social groups with opposing interests (Dahrendorf, 1958; Marx & Engels, 1848/1972). Another family of broadly *interpretive*

theories (descended from Weber), focuses on the ways in which differently framed interpretations of social reality motivate actors to behave in ways that bring about change (e.g., Benford & Snow, 2000; Blumer, 1962/2005).

Clearly, transformative social change requires a complex mix of *objective* and *subjective* factors, that is, 'externally' given circumstances (e.g., limited material resources, moments of crisis) and 'internally' determined influences (e.g., individual psychologies, general levels of political consciousness). To return to my opening question, what I call *the problem of social change* is the philosophical task of constructing a theory that identifies the objective and subjective factors needed to effect transformative social change—in particular, how this can be done via the conscious efforts of identifiable actors. By "concrete" I mean a specific, observable (though not necessarily material) difference that obtains before and after the action. By "conscious efforts" I mean deliberate actions undertaken with the goal of bringing about that change—performed by groups of people working together towards this goal, that is, "identifiable actors."

Philosophers have been surprisingly reticent on this question.[2] Theories of justice tell us what an ideally just society would look like. Ethical theories tell us the morally right thing to do. But philosophers have virtually no such comparably systematic theories of social change, that is, theories telling us *the right way to bring about a just society*. One reason for this might be a reductive individualism that seeks to analyze social phenomena in terms of isolated, discrete, independent agents (cf. Kolers [2016a] in this journal). To this must be added a still-pervasive view in the Western philosophical tradition that objective knowledge requires an ahistorical and acontextual 'view from nowhere', which generates a presumption in favor of the permanent and universal, the ideal over the actual, as the proper objects of philosophical inquiry–thus tending to foreclose any serious discussion of change. Finally, it might be thought that questions of change are purely empirical or pragmatic, best answered by social scientists and policy makers. Yet the problem of social change cannot be reduced to the mere empirical task of identifying causal mechanisms and interventions that 'work', any more than ethics can be reduced to the task of manipulating human attitudes and behavior.

Indeed, an underlying interest in social change animates the growing number of what Sally Haslanger (2013) calls "ameliorative" projects that have taken root in the so-called 'core' areas of metaphysics, epistemology, and language, just as it has promoted greater attention to real-world oppression within ethics, moral psychology, aesthetics, social and political philosophy. As of yet, however, relatively few philosophers have tackled the problem of social change head-on; and those who have are rarely in dialogue with each other. By drawing together disparate threads from diverse literatures, I aim to show that social change deserves to be recognized as an area of philosophical study in its own right.

In what follows, I provide: 1) a non-exhaustive overview of existing philosophical work that addresses the problem of social change, and 2) a preliminary framework elucidating some key concepts and distinctions for conceptualizing transformative social change. To do so, I sketch out two broadly opposed approaches[3] to social change—*liberal* versus *radical*—to excavate some assumptions underlying extant philosophical literatures (and popular thinking) about change. I then briefly outline some other fundamental problems common to all processes of social change.

2 | LIBERAL REFORM

Before introducing the general features of *liberal theories of change*, I must stress that there are myriad varieties of liberalism, right-wing and left-wing, which may not conform exactly to the following. My aim is merely to give a 'rendering' of liberalism,[4] a recognizable enough portrait of this family of theories such that we may contrast it with theories in Section 2.[5]

Here are the basic ingredients. First, liberals adopt a social ontology according to which *individual persons* are the relevant unit for social, moral, and political analysis. Social processes, on this view, are reducible to interactions amongst individuals each engaged in rational pursuit of their own ends, and who possess equal moral worth (often expressed through the idea of *rights*). Second, society for liberals is founded in a moment of individuals coming

together and determining how to live in common. This is usually modeled using the device of a *social contract*, which embodies or generates the normative principles (e.g., equality and freedom) that they agree should regulate their interactions. Third, these principles govern society via the establishment of social *institutions* whose policies must uphold the equal moral worth of persons and the normative principles those persons agree to. In our current sociohistorical moment, the most important of those institutions include globalized markets (economic), a division of the earth into sovereign nation-states (political), and the nuclear family (social). It follows from these tenets that transformative change, for the liberal, amounts to *reforming social institutions so that they conform to the normative principles consented to by free and equal individuals*.

Some of the most impressively transformative liberal reforms include the establishment of universal male suffrage, equal civil rights across race and gender, an international human rights framework, and so on—though the liberal still faces tall challenges with respect to building the legal, economic, political, and cultural systems needed to actually implement and enforce these lofty principles.[6] Still, on the liberal approach to change, we have already won half the battle by finding the best normative principles and the best (feasible) set of social institutions needed to realize these. Again, the process of transformative change for the liberal is one of *reforming* the general scheme of social arrangements, not rearranging or replacing it altogether.

Liberal reform can be pursued 'top-down' or 'bottom-up,' through established legal/constitutional processes or through pressure from collective groups. But for the liberal, even the extra-institutional pressure of social movements is only normatively justifiable so long as it remains answerable to the general tenets of liberalism (cf. what many call 'respectability politics'; see, e.g., Harris (2014) and Smith (2014)). For this reason liberals tend to disavow any kind of protest that becomes 'violent' or disobedience that becomes non-'civil'. In this sense, the contentious politics validated by the liberal remains a form of *immanent* rather than external critique.

Historically, Enlightenment liberals have been great believers in progress and the claim that rationality will win the day to bring us an improved society (Mill, 1859/1998; cf. modernization theory). Insofar as the desired basic institutions are already in place, we simply need to make adjustments until we eliminate deviations from the principles that govern them. For this reason, liberal philosophers possess a keen interest in the epistemic dimensions of social change.

Contemporary liberals have cultivated a growing literature on moral(-epistemic) progress, often via appeals to empirical findings in fields like psychology, economics, decision theory, evolutionary theory which share the same individualist ontology and liberal commitments. The problem of social change, here, is conceived of as a question of understanding how we make *moral progress*. A major concern is conceptualizing what moral progress is and demonstrating against skeptics that it is possible (Buchanan & Powell, 2018; Kitcher, 2011; Moody-Adams, 1999; Roth, 2012; Singer, 1981/2011); and relatedly, to understand how we can know, in a non-question-begging way, that progress rather than regress is being made (Anderson, 2014, 2016). Theorists of moral progress offer accounts of the individual and collective epistemic practices by which the corrective moral insight needed to reform our institutions can be attained (Anderson, 2014; Jamieson, 2017; Lowe, 2019; Moody-Adams, 1999).

There is a (rather lopsided) debate of sorts over the role of moral theory and rational argumentation—and by extension, philosophers — in the actual work of social change (for more optimistic views, see Nussbaum, 2007; Singer, 1981/2011). Moody-Adams (1999) and Anderson (2014) argue that philosophy rarely produces by itself the "engaged moral inquirers," "moral gadflies," artists, and social movements whose contentious politics confront the powerful with a *practical* (and not merely speculative) moral problem that reveals their moral error. Buchanan and Powell (2018), Appiah (2011), and others downplay the causal role of moral agency as less decisive than surrounding socioeconomic conditions and wider group dynamics, for example, by arguing that moral revolutions are driven more by parochial codes of honor than advances in moral reasoning (Hermann, 2019; Pleasants, 2011; Tam, 2019). Others argue that social change is best achieved by designing social institutions that seek to alter *social norms* rather than improving moral reasoning: through adjustments in expectations, incentives, and sanctions (Bicchieri, 2016; Mackie, 1996; Sankaran, 2019).

Another key area which has taken up the problem of social change is the now sizable literature on *non-ideal theory*. (For an excellent starting point, see Valentini (2012) in this journal.) The term derives from John Rawls' (1971/2009) field-defining theory of justice, a perfect exemplar of the liberal approach to transformative social change. For Rawls, the proper procedure is as follows. First, having taken for granted the free and equal moral worth of individual persons, we use a contractual device (the Original Position and Veil of Ignorance) to determine the principles of justice that would govern the institutions forming the basic structure of society in an ideally just society. This is the task of producing ideal theory. Only *after* this do we turn to considering our actual non-ideal world, developing theory that can help us reach the just ideal. Groundbreaking work on non-ideal theory by philosophers such as Charles Mills (2005, 2015), Amartya Sen (2009), Elizabeth Anderson (2010, 2014), and others has both problematized and elaborated this way of proceeding, including through extensive discussion of the non-mainstream methodological commitments required to undertake non-ideal theory, and its limits (e.g., Aragon, 2021; Finlayson, 2015; Goodhart, 2018; Laurence, 2021; cf. also work on political feasibility, e.g., Gilabert & Lawford-Smith, 2012).

Mills' (2003, 2012, 2017) extensive body of work deserves special mention, not only due to its influence in the field, but because of the distinctive position it occupies between what I have been calling liberal versus radical theories of change. Although Mills ultimately defends the view that liberalism can be salvaged for genuinely emancipatory ends and in that sense provides an *immanent* critique, his designation of his preferred view as *black radical liberalism* indicates that it can also be read as an *external* (i.e., radical) critique of liberal theories of change. I turn now to such theories in Section 3.

3 | RADICAL CHANGE FROM BELOW

What are the alternatives to liberal theories of change? Here it is not so easy to give a concise description, since radicals come in many different stripes; I group them together only insofar as they reject some central tenets of liberalism. For instance, the right-wing alternative is an attempt to return to a 'glorious past' which rejects the idea that individuals are free and equal, appealing to a cosmic order that mandates a patriarchal social hierarchy structured around the institutions of family, state, and religion.[7] With respect to such feudal societies, liberal institutions like the global market and liberal democratic nation-states represent enormously transformative, progressive social change.

However, we remain far from achieving a just society. Numerous traditions of progressive radical thought, therefore — including but not limited to those put forth by 'small-c' communism[8] (a.k.a. revolutionary socialism), anarchism, Black radicalism, intersectional feminism, and critical theory—have criticized liberal theories of change on various grounds. These theories often also engage deeply with empirical inquiry, albeit using an alternative set of disciplines such as history, sociology, and anthropology, which reject the methodological individualism of psychology and economics[9] and embrace more qualitative and humanist methods.[10] Radicals usually reject the fundamental liberal institutions—capitalist markets, nation-states, nuclear families—that characterize our contemporary world.

The quintessential radical theory of change is Marxism. This understanding of social change, inspired by Hegel, rests on the *teleological* idea that history unfolds towards an end or purpose (*telos*), as manifest in the way that all things undergo processes of change in accordance with a *dialectical* principle of self-development, fulfillment, destruction, and transcendence. For example, as a seed grows and fulfills its nature as a seed, it eventually destroys itself by becoming a sprout; which similarly fulfills, destroys, and transcends its own nature by becoming a flower; which itself does the same by dying and producing new seeds for the next generation of flowers; and so on. Thus for Marx, human history until now has been driven by successive forms of class struggle, each of which produces the conditions for the next: the struggle between lords and serfs (feudalism) paved the way for the struggle between owners and workers (capitalism), which would eventually produce socialism and communism.

Marxists, like liberals, have an abiding philosophical interest in epistemological issues. To oversimplify: they argue that the material conditions of society determine its ideas and culture for the most part, and not the other way around. This means that the prevailing *ideology*, that is, system of 'commonsense' ideas, values, and norms that are

routinely taken for granted, must be subjected to critique because much of it is covertly beholden to those who benefit from the status quo.[11] Ideology critique is importantly different from correcting bias, because ideology does not represent a mere deviation from a fundamentally sound set of principles which prevents agents from properly seeing some truths about social reality. Rather, oppressive ideologies function to *constitute* reality insofar as they impel social entities to actually conform with social facts that are used to rationalize injustice, for example, when viewing women as nurturers socializes them to actually *be* more empathetic, obliging, or deferential than men, thereby further entrenching them in that role (Haslanger, 2013). Critical theorists have met these serious epistemological challenges by advocating forms of immanent critique undertaken from the perspective of participants *within* an ideology (Celikates, 2006; Jaeggi, 2018). Again, many argue that social movements and contentious politics are the key to challenging ideology and structural injustice (Haslanger, 2017; Hayward, 2017).

Huge strides in radical epistemology have been made in standpoint theory (e.g., Collins, 1990/2000; Lukács, 1971), studies of subjugated knowledge (Foucault, 1980), and feminist, social, and other epistemologies of ignorance and resistance (Collins, 1990/2000; Longino, 1990; Medina, 2013; Sullivan & Tuana, 2007). The common idea here is that some forms of knowledge are more (or only) accessible from certain social locations, for example, members of oppressed groups are in a better position to see through ideological beliefs that serve to disadvantage them. Black feminists like bell hooks (1984) and Patricia Hill Collins (1990/2000) have been particularly influential in calling for theory to be produced from marginalized perspectives. Latin American, African, and other non-Eurocentric philosophers have done so by developing liberatory philosophies undertaken from the perspective of the marginalized and dispossessed masses, which critically and syncretically engage with the Western tradition (Dussel, 2008, 2013; Mendieta, 2012; Schutte, 1993), while also rehabilitating "epistemologies of the south" whose vast stores of knowledge and experience have been utterly wasted by Western "epistemicide" (De Sousa Santos, 2014; Wiredu, 1995).

Ronzoni (2018, p. 8) argues that radical theories supplement gaps in liberal theory insofar as the "search for the emancipatory agent matters just as much as the definition of what counts as emancipation from a normative and institutional point of view" (cf. Laurence, 2021). Classical Marxists hold that the solution to the problem of social change is an international working-class revolution. Accordingly, Lenin argues that the state — conceived of as an instrument of coercive force used by one class to subordinate the other — must be smashed and replaced by a worker-led government (Lenin, 1917/1975). Marxism was widely embraced, but also significantly reshaped, by 20th century (especially Third World) liberation movements (G. L. Boggs & Boggs, 1974; Césaire, 1955/1972; Fanon, 1952/2008; Freire, 1970/2000; Guevara, 1965/2003). Many thinkers apply Marxist class analysis to other oppressed groups, such as women, indigenous Amerindians, and the African diaspora (J. Boggs, 1963/2011; Federici, 2004; Ferguson, 1991; C. L. R. James, 1980; Mariátegui, 1929/2011; Mies, 1986/2014; Mills, 2003), arguing that national liberation is integral to overthrowing imperialist capitalism (Cabral, 1979), or advocating non-Marxist socialisms grounded in aspects of traditional pre-colonial culture (Nkrumah, 1964/1970; Nyerere, 1962/1987; Senghor, 1998).

In Western Marxism, by contrast, the influential Frankfurt School of critical theory remained attuned to questions of change and progress, but — seeing both Enlightenment liberalism and Marxism as drained of emancipatory potential — evinced a certain pessimism about social change (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1947/1997), sometimes focusing on individual agency and resistance over collective social transformation (Butler, 1990; Foucault, 1980). Post- and analytical Marxists (influenced especially by Antonio Gramsci [1971]) retained hope[12] for socialism, but rejected key Marxist-Leninist ideas about the historical inevitability of capitalism's decline, the privileged role of the working class, and the need to overthrow liberal-democratic institutions (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985/2001; Wright, 2010).

A good illustration of liberal versus radical approaches to identifying agents of change is found in work on *global justice*, much of which implicitly adopts a liberal theory of change. This literature has been key to establishing that affluent individuals and countries are morally responsible for addressing poverty even in distant countries (Shue, 1980/1996; Singer, 1972; Pogge, 2002/2008). It exposes the moral rottenness of the prevailing global institutional order, whose rules permit wealthy, powerful nations to exploit poorer, weaker nations, for example by legitimating the regimes of corrupt despots and engaging in massive tax evasion. Global justice theorists have developed

practical policy proposals aimed at reforming multinational institutions and applying international pressure to promote better outcomes: for example, schemes of supranational taxation, labor regulation, and trade rules (Barry & Reddy, 2008; James, 2012; Pogge, 2002/2008; Wenar, 2008; see Brock, 2009 for a comprehensive review).

However, radical critics object that the global justice literature takes the perspective of the powerful and affluent as its starting point, thereby relegating the global poor to the status of mere recipients or beneficiaries rather than agents of justice in their own right (Chandhoke, 2012; Deveaux, 2015). Critics argue that institutions like the World Trade Organization lack the incentives, will, and knowledge necessary for transformative change, and are deeply at odds with the actual demands of anti-reformist, anti-capitalist social movements in the global South (Bell, 2019). By way of alternatives, these theorists advocate following the lead of poor-led social movements (Deveaux, 2018) or coalition-building across a "global civil society" (Chandhoke, 2013; Valdez, 2019).

Radical traditions often reject liberal assumptions about human nature; for example, Marxists endorse a more Aristotelian conception of humans as 'social animals' rather than psychological egoists. A drawback to Marxist theories, however, is that there is often much less emphasis on specifying what liberatory institutions will actually look like (but see Wright's (2010, 2019) influential corpus for socialist theorizing that explicitly tackles this problem head-on.) This is in part for good reason: as Marx put it, there can be no 'blueprints' for the future society because these must be determined by the free agents who actually find themselves in that historical situation. And indeed, once non-liberals spell out their proposals, they may nevertheless retain enough of liberalism's core tenets that the distinction between liberal versus radical becomes blurred (G. A. Cohen, 2009; Roemer, 1994); perhaps we should speak of the radical, then, as advocating the replacement of 'liberalism (capitalism, race, the family, etc.) as we know it'.

The envisaging of alternatives is much better developed in anarchist thought, Marxism's closest cousin and perhaps biggest rival. Anarchism played a formidable role against fascism (e.g., in the Spanish Civil War) as well as anti-globalization movements (e.g., Occupy Wall Street, the Zapatistas in Chiapas, Mexico); it also blends easily with strands of feminist, environmentalist, and LGBTQ activism. Traditional anarchists like Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1876) and Mikhail Bakunin (1873/1990) reject the idea that coercive power should be controlled by the proletariat after its seizure from the bourgeoisie, arguing that social order would arise spontaneously from solidarity and mutual aid. Strategy-wise, many advocate direct action, direct democracy, prefigurative politics, and local resistance (Boggs, 1977; Graeber, 2002; Rocker, 1938/2004; Scott, 2008). Taking their cue more from Spinoza than Hegel (Hardt & Negri, 2017), anarchists advocate the dissolution of *all* centralized authority—whether the state or political party (Holloway, 2002).

Adjudicating between liberal versus radical (or between different radical) theories of change is a colossal philosophical task that I do not attempt here, and it depends on substantive normative theorizing about the nature of justice and human flourishing.[13] Instead, I focus in Section 4 on outlining some challenges confronting *all* attempts at transformative social change.

4 | THE DIALECTICS OF SOCIAL CHANGE

The concept of "dialectic" has a long and varied history.[14] As I characterize it, what it means for A and B to be in *dialectical tension* is for them to be opposed in such a way that A affects B in one direction, which leads B to affect A′ back in the other direction, which further leads A′ to affect B′ again in the original direction, and so on — as in a spiraling helix which moves back and forth but on ever higher levels, or a conversation in which each side's reply to the other is a more nuanced and responsive version of the original view. To see processes of social change as dialectical is to recognize that there are recurrent practical problems which have this character of continued conflict and generation.

The *structure/agent dialectic* represents the need for transformation not only at the level of large-scale social arrangements, but also at the level of individual attitudes (Cohen, 2009; Collins, 1990/2000; Guevara, 1965/2003; Jenkins, 2015; Lugones, 2003; May & Strikwerda, 1994). Postmodernists and anarchists embrace the latter approach to change, emphasizing that resistance exists wherever individuals choose to transgress and destabilize oppressive

norms (Butler, 1990; Holloway, 2002). But others criticize such politics for failing to mobilize deeper, broad-based challenges to the structural underpinnings of oppression (and for relying on a strategy that implicitly requires substantial class (racial, etc.) privilege to be safely implemented (C. J. Cohen, 1997; Haslanger, 2015). Still others argue in turn that bringing about the collective action necessary to bring about these structural changes itself in the first place, and then implementing, enforcing, and sustaining them, requires attention to individual attitudes (Brownstein et al., 2021; Madva, 2016; Zheng, 2018a).

The *material/symbolic dialectic* represents the need to transform both material and symbolic structures. Transforming the material, through what Nancy Fraser (1997) calls "redistribution," includes overhauling political-economic arrangements such as private ownership of the means of production and the gendered division of labor. Transforming systems of symbolic meaning—for example, racist, sexist, bourgeois and other ideologies that rationalize political-economic arrangements—requires "recognition" of the value of previously disrespected identities and groups.

Contra the view attributed to classical Marxism that sexism and racism will automatically disappear with the end of capitalism, these have a 'life of their own' and must be tackled directly. Even substantial material improvements will not safeguard people disadvantaged by race, gender, and so on from being stigmatized, stereotyped, and scapegoated when times are hard. Many philosophers—particular in the African diaspora—emphasize the critical role for artists, novelists, and other cultural workers who reshape people's capacities for moral perception and creative imagination (Collins, 1990/2000; Hall, 2016; Locke, 1925; Taylor, 2016; Walker, 2004). As Audre Lorde (1984/2007) famously wrote: "Poetry is not a luxury."

But many have also shown how much (especially popular) culture is a major hindrance to social change, produced for commercial ends and serving to entrench the status quo (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1947/1997; Marcuse, 1964). The language and symbols of resistance movements are easily repackaged and made profitable; overemphasis on discourse, culture, and representation can divert energy away from struggles against more concrete political economic structures of domination (C. J. Cohen, 1997; Finlayson, 2018). Fraser's analysis of the "recognition-redistribution" dilemma puts a particularly fine point on potential tensions between symbolic and material dimensions of change: redistributive mechanisms that highlight group difference can have the unintended effect of stigmatizing these groups as deficient, needy recipients of special treatment, thereby undermining efforts to revalue these identities through recognizing their status as competent and deserving equals.[15] Still, there may be ways to simultaneously combine or toggle between symbolic protest and material confrontation (Celikates, 2016b; Zheng, 2019).

The *particular/universal dialectic* is the tension between making demands that highlight the plight of specific or multiply oppressed groups, versus demands that make no mention of group categories and demand benefits for all. Particularistic approaches give voice to groups who might otherwise be overlooked, acknowledging singular injustices in their full specificity, which is particularly effective for mobilization. Particularists recognize that resolving one problem cannot automatically resolve others, and many are wary that the very appeal to universalism itself functions to center the experiences and interests of an ostensibly neutral 'default' subject unmarked by difference, but which turns out to erase and marginalize crucial internal differences within groups (Alcoff, 2005; Dean, 1996; Young, 1990).

On the other hand, universalist approaches are key for emphasizing the commonality of suffering across social groups. Such 'big tent' stances can also be exceptionally effective for mobilization. Moreover, a kind of normative universalism is important for the moral legitimacy of movements: demands for transformative change must be justified with reference to justice and the well-being of the entire polity, and not merely the special interests of one's own constituency (Boggs & Boggs, 1974; Young, 1990). Universalist demands that disproportionately benefit the marginalized can often be advanced without the costs of potentially divisive rhetoric (Edsall & Edsall, 1992).

Finally, all efforts at social change must grapple with the *vanguard/masses dialectic*, that is, the interplay between more politically and intellectually advanced groups and the rest of the population, a phenomenon particularly well studied in Marxist and African-American political philosophy (Du Bois, 1903/1990; Freire, 1970/2000; James, 1997; Lenin, 1902/1975; Ransby, 2003). While vanguard leaders bring valuable skills and knowledge, they can easily dominate and treat others as objects to be rescued. While anarchists and others have advocated horizontal 'leaderless' organizational structures to prevent despotism (Sitrin, 2012; Spade, 2020), others point out that the "tyranny of

structurelessness" asserts itself through informal hierarchies, and advocate other solutions to the problem of organization (Freeman, 1970/2013; Nunes, 2021).

Philosophers have much to offer in service of navigating the tensions outlined above. Indeed, they have already tackled a range of thorny and enduring ethical problems more adjacent to classical moral philosophy, which we might classify under the *ethics of transition*:

- Do we have duties to resist oppression, protest, or engage in (un-)civil disobedience (Boxill, 1976; Brennan, 2020; Brownlee, 2012; Celikates, 2016a; Delmas, 2018; Hay, 2013; Hendrix, 2019)?
- What kinds of individual virtues, emotions, moral cultivation and psychology are needed for processes of social transformation? (Cherry, 2021; Congdon, 2018; Fanon, 1952/2008; Freire, 1970/2000; Guevara, 1965/2003; Harris, 2002; Jenkins, 2015; Krishnamurthy, 2015; Mcbride et al., 2013; Nussbaum, 2019; Srinivasan, 2018; Tessman, 2005)?
- Who is responsible for bringing about transformative change (Ackerly, 2018; Aragon & Jaggar, 2018; Godoy, 2017; Hayward, 2017; Jugov & Ypi, 2019; Lu, 2017; Marin, 2017; Miller, 2001; Parekh, 2011; Sangio-vanni, 2018; Young, 2011; Zheng, 2018a, 2018b)?
- Can violence against persons or property be justified, and if so, when (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011; Douglass, 1855/2019; Fanon, 1963; Gandhi, 1909/2009; Hamilton & Ture, 1967/1992; Harris, 2002; King, 1968/2010; Malcolm X 1965; Ransby, 2003; Sharp, 2002/2011)?
- What kind(s) of solidarity can achieve transformative social change (Alcoff, 2005; Appiah & Gutmann, 1998; Asante, 2007; Chandhoke, 2013; Dean, 1996; Gilroy, 2000; Gooding-Williams, 2009; Gould, 2007; Harvey, 2007; hooks, 1984; Kolers, 2016b; Lugones, 2003; Marin, 2018, #2197; Mohanty, 2003; Outlaw, 1992; Shelby, 2005; Scholz, 2008; Valdez, 2019)?

5 | PHILOSOPHY AND SOCIAL CHANGE

Philosophers possess a variety of distinctive analytical tools, techniques, and methods readymade for investigating complex problems like social change, ranging from formal logic (Braybrooke, 1998) to a 'handmaiden'-like role in clarifying concepts and developing frameworks for social scientific inquiry (Dotson, 2015; Khader, 2018),[16] to abstracting from close historical and empirical analysis to develop theories that speak across disciplines. They are proficient in navigating seemingly intractable debates, including how to balance considerations of efficacy versus normative justifiability in a principled way. They are accustomed to explicitly moral argumentation and value-laden concepts (which are assumed to be proscribed in the social sciences). I hope this modest overview serves to encourage further philosophical contributions to the study of social change.

ORCID

Robin Zheng https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5093-1100

ENDNOTES

[1] Prior to globalization, transformative social change of the sort that interests me could obtain within a single relatively isolated society; however, this is virtually impossible in our contemporary world. (Of course, more local changes can have genuinely transformative effects on people's lives, and might be described as such.)

[2] Of course, there are exceptions: Jaggar (1983), Wright (2010), Jenkins (2020), to name a few. As Shelley (2021, p. 457) puts it, the challenge concerns "not why contemporary capitalism might be undesirable, or what a more just economic order might look like, but rather what ought to be done about this *from where we are now*".

[3] I am heavily indebted to Chloé de Canson (unpublished manuscript) for this way of proceeding.

[4] Again, I am indebted to Canson for this argumentative strategy and turn of phrase.

[5] I readily admit that the distinction is itself not a hard one (see, e.g., the discussion of Charles Mills' "black radical liberalism" at the end of this section).

[6] Moreover, it bears noting that these ameliorations were often achieved through the efforts of radicals, since self-proclaimed liberals at the time strongly opposed them (Eley, 2002). I am grateful to Cain Shelley for this point.

[7] Such views were common across ancient philosophies: in addition to Plato's *Republic*, one might equally consult the *Bhagavad Gita* and the Confucian *Analects*.

[8] This distinction is made to mark a difference between the views advocated by communist thinkers and the implementation of policies that occurred under historical, actually-existing Communist parties.

[9] This is part of a wider set of methodological commitments that social scientists often refer to using the umbrella term *positivism* (Collins, 1990/2000).

[10] Pace Sankaran's (2019) stimulating critique of "New Ideology Critics," then, radical theorists do not so much neglect the social sciences as adopt a broader view of them, just as they conceive of the requisite social change as encompassing more than local coordination problems, due to *non-transparently* unjust structural conditions which (via self-fulfilling looping effects) can produce facts that appear to justify the status quo.

[11] For instance, values like 'freedom' are promoted because it serves the interests of the ruling class for 'free trade' to go unregulated, and for contracts between employer and worker to be viewed as 'freely' entered into; but in reality, weaker economies are devastated when cheap foreign goods flood their markets, and workers sign up because their only other alternative is to starve.

[12] Or defended it even when losing hope for its realization, as did G. A. Cohen (2009).

[13] Indeed, it may depend on what Hursthouse (1999) calls "ethical but non-evaluative beliefs about human nature and how human life goes," which are in principle value-neutral but only accessible from within a moral outlook.

[14] In common usage, it refers to the back-and-forth exchange of reasons flowing over the course of philosophical argumentation, as in Platonic dialogues. For Kant, "dialectic" became a pejorative for reason's mistaken attempts to acquire knowledge of transcendental metaphysics. He identifies a number of "antimonies"—that is, pairs of rational arguments leading to contradictory conclusions (e.g. the claim that we have free will vs. the claim that we are causally determined)—and argues that both sides of the antimony must be rejected. Hegel, however, contends that Kant is wrong to draw this conclusion, and that a dialectical understanding is needed to understand how "every actual thing involves a coexistence of opposed elements" or "a concrete unity of opposed determinations" (Hegel, 1830/2017).

[15] Arguably, at least some aspects of the recent ascent in global right-wing populism is attributable to social conservative backlash against feminist and anti-racist progress. Such backlash can be expected to continue wherever recognition-based remedies elevate the status of people on the bottom-most rungs of society without dismantling the overall hierarchy, because of the threat this represents to those hovering in the lower rungs just above.

[16] Indeed, philosophers have already played key roles in two of the three tasks identified by Wright (2010) for 'emancipatory social science': (1) diagnosis and critique, which explain how suffering and inequality currently derive from contingent social arrangements that can be altered, and (2) envisioning alternative arrangements, which must be desirable, viable, and achievable. I thus suggest that we should play a role in (3) developing a theory of transformation, which explains how to get from (1) to (2)—through the kind of 'underlaboring' akin to that performed by metaphysicians, philosophers of science, moral psychologists, aestheticians, etc. vis-a-vis their respective empirical disciplines.

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Robin Zheng is a Lecturer in Political Philosophy at the University of Glasgow. She received her PhD from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, and was previously a Visiting Junior Research Fellow at Newnham College, Cambridge and Assistant Professor of Philosophy in the Humanities Division at Yale-NUS College, Singapore. She specializes in ethics, moral psychology, feminist and social philosophy, with particular focus on issues of moral responsibility, structural injustice, and race. She is an Associate Editor for *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy*, an Editor of the de Gruyter *Transforming Political Philosophy* series, and a member of the APA Task Force on Diversity and Inclusion as well as the APA Task Force on a Good Practices Guide.