

What Do Karl Marx, Napoleon, and the Majlis Have in Common?

Written by Patricia Sohn

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PATRICIA SOHN, SEP 29 2017

Welcome back to the new school year! If you are in the Global North (or the North of the U.S.), your classes have probably started recently. If you are part of the Global South (or the American South), classes have been underway for a month, at least. Meanwhile, we have been met with catastrophic floods, severe hurricanes, and on-going political debates on Capitol Hill in the U.S. *Plus ça change.*

I am teaching remotely this semester, e-courses, as I work on a couple of research projects from far away. One of the courses is an undergraduate comparative politics course. I have been writing and recording video lectures on our esteemed field and am reminded, wearily, as I do, of Houston and Florida's close encounters with Mother Nature, the elements, or whatever is your favorite way of describing our human efforts to encounter nature with something at least resembling aplomb. Houston and Florida seem to be doing a commendable and even wonderful job in many communities. Can we say the same for my lofty field, Comparative Politics?

Max Weber and Karl Marx continue to battle, in my lectures, over the sources of social, political, institutional, and, yes, economic change: is it culture, religion, and *The Protestant Ethic*; or is it Napoleon's centralized state? *Ah, you say. You mean, is it he who controls the means of production?* Yes. But it is also Napoleon's centralized state and his individual self-maximizing behavior that drove Marx to distraction. Then, I turn to *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Politics*, it must be said, my favorite introduction to comparative politics text. And yet, even there, self-maximizing behavior continues to be described in neo-structural-functionalist (or behavioralist) form as though it is the *very best* this world has to offer, and any thoughts or expectations otherwise are folly at best, naivety at worst.

Call me an ingenue. Or a neophyte. But *The Prince* is not, for me, a how-to book. It is a critique and a buyer-beware manual for dealing with just the sorts that our self-maximizing crowd want us to embrace.

Likewise, culture is presented in purely structural-functionalist form wherein culture is now reified *qua* individual self-maximizing; or, alternately, individual self-maximizing makes up its own inherent structural component of the human condition. Meanwhile, whole schools of thought within the core of comparative politics, historically, as well as suppressed sub-fields within comparative politics more recently are ignored as though structural-functionalism itself were not the brainchild of Sociology. Such suppressed and ignored schools include those addressing political culture through the lenses of Sociology, Anthropology, Comparative Literature and other disciplines, including those who draw upon the likes of Durkheim, Gramsci, Bourdieu, Geertz, Said, and others. We are somehow different because we claim to draw from other disciplines. Structural-functionalism? Sociology? This is not another discipline? Huh. *Plus ça change.*

I love Marx's critique of the Napoleon's individual self-maximizing in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Napoleon Bonaparte*, and, with it, his critique of centralized state power. It is one of the great snow jobs of intellectual history that the Leninist and Stalinist narrative of what Marx was about, as an intellectual, continues to be bought, hook, line, and sinker by both left and right in the U.S. Marx was a political ethnographer, perhaps one of the first. He spent long periods doing research in factories in London and nearby areas. Labor reform. Factory reform. Remember? Not new Napoleons claiming Bolshevik moral authority to allow the few to make the decisions for the many. That we

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typically only have our students read 50 pages of Marx's least significant work, *The Communist Manifesto*, feeds right into this travesty of intellectual history. Would Marx have taken dinner with Stalin? Yeah, I think not. Please, have your students read *The Eighteenth Brumaire* instead of *The Communist Manifesto* this year. It is Marx's own, single-authored work, not written on the fly in effort to be published before the revolutions of 1848 might peter out.

I am not a Marxian in intellectual terms. I am not a Weberian either, although I note that Weber's work on bureaucracy as defining whether a society and state are, indeed, "modern," does not bode well for us today. To be "modern," one must have a rationalized (read that, systematized, merit-based) bureaucracy. No pandering. No clientelism. No getting your jobs from your friends. No expanding the ambit of your office's authority through leveraging and power grabs. All of that lands you strictly in the "pre-modern" category. We are going increasingly pre-modern by the day, by my count, as an innocent political ethnographer just wandering through her life in the West today.

Intellectually speaking, I am a Durkheimian. And, within that, I am a fan of the Durkheimians within the Discipline of Anthropology. I find their uses of the concept of culture to be the most productive, particularly those of Mary Douglas and Victor Turner. Group boundaries and ritual. Those two concepts say a lot about what is political culture – and, even politics in general, today.

But, right now, I am primarily concerned with Weber and bureaucracy and getting the lines of authority within the state back in order. Judiciaries acting as administrative agencies? What are we? *The Politburo*? Or, perhaps, the *Majlis*? It is my own observation that we have done an excellent job, as the comparative law literature tells us, of limiting the powers of the executive since the Holocaust and the Nuremberg Trials of 1945 by turning to judiciaries to limit administrative agencies. Now, we need to turn to the Executive Branch to curb the power of judges, pressured as they are by legislators who think they can blow off their own difficult jobs and use judges, instead, to make (unpopular) decisions apart from and even counter to the law. Such legislators (and a few rogue judges) think that "judicial interpretation" is a *carte blanche* for *Anything Goes!*

As Derrida reminds us, words matter, too, and particularly their significations. Terms such as *Political Science* or *Comparative Politics* may carry many different significations at once. When one school of thought or field within the discipline claims the *monopoly of signification*, shall we say, it has an impact on our ability to develop the theories and knowledge that affect not only the classroom, but legislatures and parliaments, as well as the street. So, please have your students read our classics in social theory this year so that they can help us to think about and grapple with the problems that plague us in our various national contexts. Do not leave it to the experts. *We are* the experts. (You may want to take that one sitting down.)

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