

The Rhetoric of Exploitation

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1 Exploitation, Coercion, And Deception

This essay is about the concept of exploitation, how it is used in political argument, and its relation to philosophical critiques of knowledge and agency.

Exploitation is an unfair exchange due to coercion or deception. So what are coercion and deception?

Coercion is when an exchange is based on a threat of punishment. A robber putting a gun to your head is coercing you. You willingly exchange your money for your life, so the exchange is voluntary but unfair. Our laws and customs prohibit the use of violence or threats of violence, except when sanctioned by society for the purposes of law enforcement or warfare. A coercive exchange involves trading something good for the absence of something bad, and thus it is not a cooperative exchange.

Deception is when an exchange is based on deliberate falsehood. A car dealer who knowingly sells you a car with a cracked engine block, while telling you it is in perfect condition, is deceiving you into making an exchange you would not otherwise make. A deceptive exchange is not cooperative, and our laws and customs prohibit the use of deception in an exchange.

The problem with coercion is that your choices are limited. The problem with deception is that the choices you are presented with are not real. One is an unfair limitation of your agency the other is an unfair limitation of your knowledge.

2 Social Relationships

When it comes to relations between individuals, we have laws and customs that define what is fair in a particular social and cultural context. These are roughly the same in most societies and cultures around the world. Cooperation is allowed. Exploitation is prohibited. Thus, we have a strong moral sense regarding fair conditions for exchange, and a strong sense of outrage at perceived exploitation.

That is why claims of exploitation are so useful in political discourse: they activate deeply held moral sentiments. There is a formula for using exploitation in a political context: you identify some large class of people as exploited by some other large class of people. Then you demand that this unfair situation be remedied. Many political ideologies are based on this formula.

3 The Marxist View Of Exploitation

Consider the Marxist claim that workers are exploited by the owners of capital.

The Marxist views capitalism as exploiting workers, even though workers choose their employment. Marxism justifies this view by the labor theory of value: the idea that the value of a product is determined by the labor used to produce it. Marxists believe that any profits that go to the owners of capital are unfair, because all value is created by labor.

I'm not interested in debunking the labor theory of value. It is obviously absurd. Digging a hole in the ground might require a lot of labor, but it doesn't necessarily create any value. So, if you are interested in that theory or debunking it, you can look it up online. My concern is how Marxists explain the existence of this supposedly unfair system. Why would workers agree to give away their labor at less than its actual value?

In the Marxist view of the world, the workers are exploited by some combination of coercion and deception. Society has a power of coercion similar to that of a robber with a gun. Society presents the worker with unfair choices: work or starve. Society also has a power of deception similar to that of the car salesman. Society can manipulate the worker's mind via religion and the media. In Marxist social theory, workers are exploited by their social and cultural conditions, and thus it is a moral obligation to liberate them from those conditions.

The labor theory of value has fallen into well-deserved obscurity, but the "exploitation" political formula has prospered. It provides the ideological structure for the majority of left-wing political movements. But it is also used by some movements that are usually considered to be right-wing. Because it is so politically effective, it gets used a lot. It can be used to justify demands for more social benefits, to excuse personal failures, to avoid personal responsibility, and to justify regime change.

4 Using Language to Insinuate Exploitation

If you want to make such a claim, here's how to do it.

You claim that the members of a class X are coerced and deceived into accepting an unfair social arrangement. It is true that we are always coerced by society, in a sense, because we are always in a social context that limits our choices. Likewise, we are always in a cultural context that influences our beliefs, and so one can always argue that the cultural context is deceptive. Thus, you can always claim deception or coercion due to the social and cultural context. And you can always find evidence to support such a claim, because every individual is influenced by culture and constrained by society. If anyone disagrees with you, you can simply label their view as part of the cultural deception used to support exploitation.

Seems easy, right? But there is one major challenge involved in applying this political formula. A victim implies a victimizer. For there to be an exploited class X, there must be an exploiter class Y. When both classes are within the same social and cultural context, how do you make it seem that one class is in control and the other is not?

The trick is to portray one class in objective terms and the other in subjective terms. When speaking about Y, you adopt a subjective perspective and use language that presupposes knowledge and agency. When speaking about X, on the other hand, you focus on the prior and external causes of belief and action. This undermines the presumption of agency and knowledge, but only for members of X.

For example, feminism portrays men as having agency, and thus responsibility for their actions, while it portrays women as lacking agency and responsibility. If a man has sex with a woman when they are both drunk, feminists view that as the man raping the woman. Why? Because by tacit assumption the man has agency and the woman does not. The woman's action was determined by alcohol or pressure. The man's action was an expression of his free will. The assumption that males have greater agency than females is a basic premise of feminism. Although it is not explicitly stated, it is implied by the language they use.

5 Framing Actions Objectively vs Subjectively

Any action can be framed objectively or subjectively, so by using one perspective versus another, you can make it seem that one party has agency and the other does not. This can be done by a choice of metaphor or sentence structure, and is mostly subconscious.

Consider these three sentences:

- Tom and Sarah hooked up.
- Tom picked up Sarah.
- Sarah went home with Tom.

All describe the same objective situation, but they place the subjective spotlight differently. The first emphasizes joint agency, the others emphasize the agency of one party over the other.

Here are some more examples:

- Once he targeted her and started putting the moves on, it was inevitable.

- She has a weakness for tall, handsome men.

And he was so charming.

Both emphasize male agency and female lack of agency. Feminism always emphasizes male subjectivity and female objectivity when it comes to action. When it comes to feelings, however, the roles are reversed. The subjective feelings of women are emphasized, while men are barely acknowledged to have feelings. Men do and women feel. Thus men are responsible for everything, and everything must be evaluated by how it makes women feel. This is effective because it corresponds to a biological asymmetry between men and women. Feminists take advantage of this asymmetry while denying its existence and the reasons for it.

Feminism also employs the notion of patriarchy, a vague conspiracy theory in which men somehow have collective agency, but women do not. By making it seem that men are an organized group and women are not, the actions of society become the collective choices of men. Society is viewed as an expression of male agency, not as an expression of male and female agency combined.

See how that works? You can make an arrangement appear to be coercive by viewing one side's participation as determined by prior and external causes and the other side as having free will.

6 Framing Claims of Deception

The same basic approach works for claims of deception. You attack the prevailing views of your culture as instruments of deception that emanate from the will of class Y (the exploiters) and determine the beliefs of class X (the exploited). In other words, you argue that truth is a social construct used to control people. But you do not apply this critique to yourself or your own beliefs. You portray one class as a unified subject that perpetrates the deception, members of the other class as objects that are controlled by it, and yourself as outside the context entirely and thus unaffected by it.

This is done by the selective use of metaphors and sentence structure, and also by shifting from philosophical discourse to ordinary discourse.

7 Men Going Their Own Way

Consider, for example, the Matrix metaphor often used by members of the “men going their own way” and men's rights movements. Supposedly men are deceived by culture and biology into making choices that are against their interests. Women are the deceivers. When a man marries a woman, the woman has deceived the man into serving her interests. Reproduction is viewed as in the interest of women but not men, despite the biological absurdity of this. Women know what they really want; men for some reason do not. How do MGTOW and MRAs make this seem plausible?

First, they emphasize the productive contribution of males and ignore the reproductive contribution of females, so it seems that females benefit and males receive nothing. That is their version of the labor theory of value. Then they explain male participation in this unfair scheme as due to deception. The male reproductive drive is portrayed as due to prior and external causes, and thus an illusion. The female reproductive drive is portrayed as intrinsic to the female, and thus real. They portray women as purposefully deceptive, creating the Matrix for their own benefit. They

portray married men as hapless fools deceived by the Matrix, and themselves as the enlightened ones who somehow have escaped from the Matrix and thus can see the truth.

Those are the rhetorical methods of exploitation ideologies. By selecting objective versus subjective perspectives, you can make one class appear to have knowledge and agency, while the other appears to be deceived and coerced. In essence, exploitation ideologies use philosophical critiques of knowledge and agency selectively to critique beliefs and actions they do not like.

8 Conclusion

Critiques of knowledge and agency are important in philosophy, but they are out of place in political discourse, or ordinary discourse for that matter. Both political and ordinary discourse take place within a framework of presuppositions about knowledge and agency. Philosophical critiques of knowledge and agency are critiques of the presuppositions of ordinary and political discourse. It is thus fallacious to import them into such a discourse. To do so is to commit a performative contradiction.

Society always limits our actions and culture always influences our beliefs. We cannot escape from a social and cultural context. But this does not mean that we are exploited by it. Society gives us more power as individuals, because it allows us to associate and cooperate on a large scale. Culture gives us far more knowledge than we otherwise would have.

Saying that an individual is exploited by his cultural and social context is as meaningless as saying that he is exploited by gravity. Gravity limits you in various ways, but that does not mean you would be better off without it, nor that gravity is immoral because it constrains you. Ethical notions such as “exploitation” only make sense within a social and cultural context that defines norms of fairness. They apply to individuals within a context, but they do not apply to the context itself. Exploitation claims are thus always bogus when they are made at the class level rather than the individual level.

The exploitation political formula is thus a method of deception, and a very powerful one. To fight it, you must understand how it works. It is also important not to fall into the fallacy yourself.