

On The Existential Function of the Social and the Limits of Rationalist Accounts of Human Behavior

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INTRODUCTION

Rational choice theory has achieved widespread influence in a number of social science disciplines, most notably economics and political science. Given its prominent position within economics, it is not surprising that rational choice theory (and other rationalist perspectives) dominates theory and research on the corporation and decision-making by corporate actors. By contrast, however, the theory has failed to gain more than a toehold in sociology. Indeed, most sociologists are downright hostile to rational choice theory. When pressed to explain why, those in the discipline are very likely to complain that the perspective is “asociological”; that the theory posits an atomized conception of the individual that does not accord with the “sociological perspective.” But when it comes to human sociability, what exactly is the “sociological perspective?” Beyond the rather facile assertion that humans are profoundly “social creatures,” sociologists have done little to fashion a distinctive account of what that actually means. After all, lots of species are

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intensely social, perhaps none more so than ants.¹ Surely we are not social in the same sense that ants are. Our closest evolutionary relatives—gorillas and chimpanzees—are also very social species, and social in many ways that mirror human sociability. But there are also myriad ways in which human social life is qualitatively different from that of even our closest evolutionary cousins. Bottom line: to dismiss rational choice theory for its failure to honor the extent to which we are “social creatures” is to evade the real question: what is the distinctive essence of human sociability?

I will not pretend to offer anything like a complete answer to that question here, but believing that social life—including economic behavior and corporation decision making—is shaped by far more than rational calculus and narrow material motives, I want to use my contribution to the volume to call your attention to an evolutionary puzzle that has fascinated and perplexed me for at least 30 years and which, I’m convinced, renders narrow economic theories of human behavior untenable. So while I certainly will not deliver on anything remotely resembling an alternative to narrow “economic man,” I hope my sensitizing remarks will at least begin to suggest the kind of “micro-foundation” we would need to fashion to fully grasp the complexities of human behavior, including those that govern the economic realm and corporate life in particular.

I. ON THE RISE OF MODERN HUMANS AND THE PUZZLING ORIGINS OF THE EXISTENTIAL FUNCTION OF THE SOCIAL

The consensus is that modern humans—*homo sapiens sapiens*—emerged at the very southern tip of Africa around 200,000 years ago. As far as we can tell from the archaeological record, these new arrivals were anatomically indistinguishable from us. And yet behaviorally, they were very different, at least initially. In fact, we will need to fast forward roughly 150,000 years before we encounter clear evidence of what we would recognize as truly human behavior. The evidence for this behavior is overwhelming, appearing as a veritable explosion in the archaeological record of elaborate ritual burial and routine production of art and ornamentation—among other indicators—that we are clearly in the presence of our existential, as opposed to materialist, kin.

What is the nature of this “explosion” and what are its implications for an understanding of the social, as regards modern humans? One popular understanding of this evolutionary moment is that it marks the

1. DEBORAH GORDON, *ANTS AT WORK: HOW AN INSECT SOCIETY IS ORGANIZED* 95–103 (1999).

emergence of “culture” in the human experience. But even if we adopt a fairly narrow definition of culture, this account is demonstrably false. Tools, after all, are a rudimentary element of culture and certainly all of the prior species in the Homo line have been shown to produce and use tools. Indeed, depending on how broadly one defines the term, there is evidence for tool usage among our closet contemporary nonhuman relatives. For example, West African chimpanzees have been shown to use stone hammers and anvils to crack nuts.² Other species of chimpanzees have deployed other tools—including termite “fishing poles,” pestles, and various levers—in foraging for food.³ But even if we elect to set the bar a bit higher in our requirements for culture, it would be impossible to deny, say, Neanderthal that level of evolutionary development. Beyond an effective and highly adaptable—if static—tool assemblage, there are at least scattered claims made for rudimentary examples of representational art at Neanderthal sites. These include an incised piece of bone from a 350,000-year-old site at Bilzingsleben in Germany and an alleged outline of a female engraved on a pebble from the 230,000-year-old pre-Mousterian site of Berekat Ram in Israel.⁴

If the “explosion” of 45,000–50,000 years ago does not represent the onset of culture in the human—or even hominid—experience, how are we to understand the breathtaking leap that seems to have taken place? While others have stressed the emergence of symbolic thinking or high culture, as a sociologist, I would underscore the collective dimensions of the breakthrough. The sudden proliferation of art, elaborate ritual burial, and distinctive local tool assemblages, speaks to an unprecedented capacity for coordinated symbolic activity and collaborative meaning making. Henceforth, I will refer to this, in shorthand, as the onset of the existential function of the social.

While hominids had heretofore banded together almost entirely for the survival benefits afforded by group life, the collective now served a second separable function: the provision of group members with a distinctive collective identity, a shared cosmology, and elaborated rituals that together affirmed and valorized the life of the group. This represents a qualitative break with the entire 1.5 million-year sweep of the hominid experience on earth. We are finally in the presence of a form of sociability that we can clearly recognize as akin to our own.

2. Christophe Boesch & Hedwige Boesch, *Diversity of Tool Use and Tool-Making in Wild Chimpanzees*, in *THE USE OF TOOLS BY HUMAN AND NON-HUMAN PRIMATES* 158–87 (A. Berthelet & J. Chavaillon eds., 1993).

3. See W.C. McGrew, *Tools Compared: The Material of Culture*, in *CHIMPANZEE CULTURES* 25–39 (Richard W. Wrangham et al. eds., 1994).

4. IAN TATTERSALL, *BECOMING HUMAN: EVOLUTION AND HUMAN UNIQUENESS* 163 (1998).

I cannot overstate the significance of the coordinated, collaborative, and intersubjective nature of the activities reflected in the archaeological record from this period and beyond. A single example will suffice to make the point. It comes from an extraordinary burial at the 28,000-year-old site of Sungir in Russia. Archaeologist Ian Tattersall describes what the excavation of the site revealed:

[T]wo young individuals and a sixty-year-old male (no previous kind of human had ever survived to such an age) were interred with an astonishing material richness. Each of the deceased was dressed in clothing onto which more than three thousand ivory beads had been sewn; and experiments have shown that each bead had taken an hour to make. They also wore carved pendants, bracelets, and shell necklaces. The juveniles, buried head to head, were flanked by two mammoth tusks over two yards long. What's more, these tusks had been straightened, something that . . . could only have been achieved by boiling them. But how? The imagination boggles, for this was clearly not a matter of dropping hot stones into a small skin-lined pit.⁵

Tattersall goes on to speculate about what the burial tells us about the people who carried it out, arguing for such things as a belief in an afterlife, the presence of material surplus, and a surprisingly rich and elaborated material culture.⁶ But, as a sociologist, I am struck as much by what Tattersall doesn't mention as what he does. Above all else the site speaks to an extraordinary capacity for collaborative, meaningful, symbolic activity. I use the term "meaningful" to underscore the fact that the ritual act encoded in the interment was clearly full of cognitive and affective significance for those involved. How many people did it take to boil and straighten the mammoth tusks? Who contributed the 3,000 person-hours required to make and then sew the ivory beads on to the burial garments? What did the various grave goods and the rituals involved in their production mean to the mourners? We will never know, but we can be assured that the members of the group shared an acute and elaborate sense of the event's significance. In sharp contrast to the pre-explosion *Homo sapiens*, whose archaeological traces remain strangely mute, we are finally in the presence of voracious symbolists, people like us who possess both the capacity for, and an apparent need to fashion, shared identities and cosmologies as a central component of social life.

Before I move on and discuss the implications of the newly emergent existential function of the social, I cannot resist taking up the puz-

5. *Id.* at 10.

6. *Id.* at 10–12.

zling temporal gap between the rise of anatomically modern humans 200,000 years ago and the social behavioral revolution of 45,000–50,000 years ago. How are we to account for this extended gap? I see three possible answers to the question. The first possible answer is that the earliest “moderns” were, in fact, engaged in symbolic, collaborative activity, but we have yet to find the corroborating physical evidence to support the claim. Given the European bias in the archaeological record, this view is at least possible. Virtually all of our evidence for the qualitative change in human behavior comes from sites on the continent. By contrast, anatomically modern humans have been in Africa for all of the species 200,000 years on earth, and in the Middle East for some 160,000 years. Perhaps we have not searched long and hard enough in these areas to produce the evidence of much earlier instances of ritual burial and art.

While theoretically possible, this first answer strains credibility. After all, while Europe has certainly seen intensive archaeological activity, so too has Africa and the Middle East. Indeed, Europe’s fascination with Egypt and the Holy Lands made North Africa and the Middle East a central focus of archaeological research from early on. And since Leakey’s sensational finds in Kenya’s Great Rift Valley in the early 1950s,⁷ East Africa has been the center of archaeological investigation on human origins. Given the research attention lavished on these areas, it seems highly unlikely that we have simply missed the evidence of the “explosion,” especially given how extensive the evidence has been at the later sites. In short, the paucity of evidence of collaborative meaning making in Africa is almost certainly real, reflecting its general absence in the lives of the earlier *Homo sapiens*.

Given the lack of anatomical changes pre- and post-explosion, language, or the lack thereof, may hold the key to the puzzle. The second possible answer goes like this: while anatomically adapted to speech, perhaps early humans lacked the precise neural circuitry needed for fully elaborated language. So deprived, earlier *Homo sapiens* may still have possessed a marginally greater capacity for interspecies communication than Neanderthal, but nothing compared to what they would develop in time. While not identical, this view bears a strong family resemblance to the account of anthropologist Richard Klein, who has long held that the symbolic revolution of 50,000 years ago must have been triggered by a random genetic mutation that improved the organization of the brain, affording humans the capacity for language and enhanced symbolic activity.⁸

7. See Phillip V. Tobias, *Louis Seymour Bazett Leakey 1903-1972*, *S. Afr. Archaeological Bull.*, June 1973, at 3–7.

8. See RICHARD KLEIN, *THE DAWN OF HUMAN CULTURE* (2002).

The third possible answer is really a variant of the second. While fully adapted to speech and language, it may be that the actual behavioral innovation lagged behind the emergence of anatomically modern *Homo sapiens*. This may not be quite as crazy as it sounds. Think of written language. Clearly humans had both the physiological and mental capacity for written language long before those capacities were enacted behaviorally. Is it really so far-fetched to imagine that something similar might have happened with speech and the development of fully elaborated language?

Whichever version of the last two answers one favors, both accord well with the physical evidence and help explain some otherwise puzzling features of the archaeological record. The absence of significant ritual activity prior to 50,000 years ago becomes much less puzzling if we assume that a fully realized capacity for human speech and communication did not accompany the rise of anatomically modern humans but only developed later. This might also explain a second intriguing anomaly in the archaeological record. While Neanderthals disappear from Western Europe a scant 12,000 years after modern humans arrive on the scene, the two species appear to have co-existed in the Middle East for nearly 60,000 years, from 100,000 to 40,000 years ago. How can we account for these very different fates? Quite easily if we imagine that only the European *Homo sapiens* possessed a fully realized capacity for human speech and language. Without such a capacity, perhaps their Middle Eastern predecessors lacked the key evolutionary advantage needed to displace their Neanderthal rivals.

Whatever the case, the extraordinary evolutionary advantages conferred on modern humans by the acquisition of language and the related capacity for collaborative symbolic activity are powerfully affirmed by the archaeological record pre- and post-explosion. Consider the following stark contrast. Over roughly the first 150,000 years of *Homo sapiens* presence on this planet, the species was pretty much confined to Africa and the Middle East. The physical traces of their presence suggest a generally undifferentiated, continuous way of life. Nor do their numbers appear to increase all that much during their long tenure in Africa. And as noted above, where they overlap with earlier human ancestors—for example, Neanderthal—they coexist with, rather than displace, them.

After the “great leap” of 50,000 years ago, the story could not be more different. Within at most 35,000 years—and considerably less if we can believe recent dates from certain sites in South America—modern humans succeeded in peopling the globe. Within a scant 12,000 years of arriving in Europe, they—make that “we”—displaced the venerable Neanderthal who had lived continuously in the region for at least 350,000

years. Moreover, our numbers expanded in fits and starts before mushrooming explosively over the past four centuries. Finally, the “generally undifferentiated continuous” way of life of our pre-explosion ancestors quickly gave way to the dizzying variety of cultures and life worlds reflected in the archaeological record extending back 30,000-40,000 years. Over this span, “humanity was transformed from a relatively rare and insignificant large mammal to something like a geologic force.”⁹ None of this is really all that surprising when you consider the extraordinary evolutionary advantages which accompanied the acquisition of language and the greatly expanded capacity for communication, social coordination and forward planning that followed from this endowment.

II. THE COLLECTIVE AS EXISTENTIAL REFUGE

For all the obvious benefits that flowed from the hypothesized language/consciousness “package,” however, our evolutionary inheritance would seem to have come at a cost. In liberating us from a primarily material existence, language/consciousness endowed humans with art, symbolic thought, and expanded reason but also new fears and threatening forms of awareness. These were two sides of the same evolutionary coin. I see existential fear and uncertainty as an unintended evolutionary by-product of whatever mix of genetic and/or anatomical changes triggered the social behavioral explosion of 50,000 years ago. By “existential fear and uncertainty” I simply mean the clichéd “meaning of life” questions that, among all species, past and present, only modern humans seem capable of asking. Only the most stubbornly non-reflective person can, from time to time, avoid the nagging, if generally inchoate, sense that his or her life is accidental, without inherent purpose, devoid of meaning, and destined to end in death. The philosopher Thomas Nagel terms these fears the “outer perspective,” that state of detached reflection on what would appear at times to be the depressingly obvious “truths” about the human condition.¹⁰ According to Nagel, the capacity to stand outside ourselves and reflect on our situation is the basis for the “outer perspective” and the threatening mix of vertigo and fear that accompanies it.

Where exactly does this capacity come from? It is impossible to say for sure. Perhaps it is simply our greater capacity for abstract thought that allows us to formulate these questions. I am more inclined, however, to stress the strong link between language and these new fears. Language grants us the linguistic tools to make of ourselves an object. Instead of

9. Mitchell Leslie, *Suddenly Smarter*, STAN. MAG., July–Aug. 2002, at 58, available at http://alumni.stanford.edu/get/page/magazine/article/?article_id=38306 (quoting anthropologist Richard Klein).

10. See THOMAS NAGEL, THE VIEW FROM NOWHERE 209–14 (1986).

being the “I,” the unconscious subject, the spontaneous actor, we can now step outside of ourselves and become “me,” the object of my own reflection.¹¹ This is heady stuff and, if we can trust Mead and a host of others, the key to all those social skills that rest on our ability to “take the role of the other.” But for all the extraordinary social advantages that come with this ability, it may well also be the source of our existential fears.

Our existential fears are thus rooted in the intimations of aloneness and meaninglessness made possible by our evolutionary capacity for expanded self-consciousness. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that our attempts to escape from these fears typically involve efforts to overcome or lose self-consciousness. Nietzsche, for instance, described the Christian desire for “redemption” as “the essence of all Christian needs . . . it is the most persuaded, most painful of affirmations of it in sublime symbols and practices. The Christian wants to get rid of himself.”¹² Similarly, the timeless appeal of a love relationship would seem to rest on the desire to lose oneself in another. In general, the effectiveness of any collaborative existential project rests on its ability to inhibit self-consciousness by embedding the individual in a system of socially constructed meanings that substitutes the reassuring subjectivity of the “inner view” for the alienating effects of the “outer perspective.” It is the meaningful worlds we fashion in concert with others that insulate us from the threat of the “outer perspective” and affirm and valorize our lives.

This is precisely what I have in mind when I refer to the “existential function of the social.” For most of us, most of the time, the latent threat of the outer perspective is held in check by the lived experience of being immersed in the shared logics, meanings, and normative structures of the primary groups and relationships that undergird our lives. As a result, our daily lives are typically grounded in the unshakeable conviction that no one’s life is more important than our own and that the world is an inherently meaningful place. But one does not will this inner view into existence of his, or her, own accord. It is instead a collaborative product, born of the everyday reciprocal meaning making, identify conferring efforts we engage in with those who share the micro and meso worlds we inhabit. In this we function as existential co-conspirators, relentlessly—if generally unconsciously—exchanging affirmations that sustain our sense of our own significance and our lives inherent meaningfulness.

11. GEORGE HERBERT MEAD, *MIND, SELF, AND SOCIETY* 173–78 (1934).

12. FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE, *KRITISCHE STUDIENAUSGABE* 52–53 (Giorgio Colli & Mazzino Montinari eds., 1988).

The elaborate burials that suddenly appear in the archaeological record following the “explosion” of 50,000 years ago are the quintessence of this kind of collaborative existential project. Consider again the interment at Sungir.¹³ Tattersall describes sites like Sungir as “the most ancient incontrovertible evidence for the existence of religious experience.”¹⁴ What are religions after all but elaborated cosmologies and belief systems that offer reassuring answers to all those threatening questions. Am I alone? No, I am part of a special community of the faithful, a “chosen people,” if you will. Is life devoid of meaning? No, through our shared faith we have privileged access to knowledge that renders the world a profoundly meaningful place. What of death? Do we cease to exist when we die? No, provided the community offers the appropriate ritual response, the deceased is assured life after death. If death represents the most threatening embodiment of the “outer perspective,” then a shared belief in an afterlife and collaborative practices designed to ensure its attainment represents a powerful collective refutation of the threat. The elaborate and extraordinarily labor-intensive behaviors reflected in the Sungir burial speak eloquently to the emergence of the existential in the human experience. There is simply no narrow instrumental survival function served by such rituals. The thousands of hours devoted to straightening tusks and making and sewing beads could, after all, have gone into hunting, food preparation, shelter construction, or countless other activities directly linked to group survival. And why bury valuable goods and foodstuffs with the deceased when they could be used or consumed by the living? They did so because the binding, existential beliefs of the collective required it.

Let me be clear. I am not for a minute suggesting that all of the new behaviors that followed from the explosion of 50,000 years ago speak to the existential motivations touched on here. Endowed with language and expanded consciousness, modern humans behaved the way they did because they could not do otherwise. That is, they were now adapted to meaning making, communication, symbolic activity, and so on. This is simply what modern humans do. They also engaged in these new activities because they were instrumentally very effective. As noted above, there were great material advantages to be gained from their newfound capacity to communicate with each other and plan and carry out increasingly complex collaborative activities. Hunting and foraging expeditions could now range over much broader areas and involve more people. Productive roles within the group could (and judging from archaeological

13. *See supra* text accompanying notes 5–7.

14. TATTERSALL, *supra* note 4, at 11.

evidence, did) become more specialized, yielding survival gains for the collective. I could add other examples, but the point should be clear. Many of the new behaviors should be seen as trial and error efforts to devise more effective solutions to practical problems confronting the group. While Neanderthals survived by adapting the same general tool kit to a broad range of environments and climactic conditions, post-explosion humans—by virtue of their new evolutionary endowments—became (and remain) relentless innovators.

III. ECHOES OF SUNGIR TODAY AND SOME FINAL THOUGHTS

Before closing with some thoughts on the relationship between the material and existential functions of the social, it is important to assert the fundamental similarity between us and the Sungir band responsible for the aforementioned burial. It simply won't do to dismiss the behaviors reflected in the burial as those of a "primitive" people whose limited understanding of the world obliged them to engage in forms of irrational, non-instrumental behavior. The need to fashion shared identities and meanings to restrain existential fear and valorize our existence remains central to our lives. And safeguarding the central sources of meaning and identity in our lives continues to serve as powerful motivators of our actions, even when those actions fly in the face of, or seem to contradict, instrumental rationality. Don't believe me? Let me offer just a handful of (more or less) contemporary examples that in their own way seem just as irrational and contrary to material interests as those of the Sungir funeral party.

In the classic work of social psychology, *When Prophecy Fails*, Leon Festinger and several co-authors tell the story of a UFO or flying saucer cult in Chicago, whose leader prophesized the destruction of the world.¹⁵ However, because of their abiding faith and uprightness, the group, known as the Seekers, was to be spared and transported by flying saucer to the planet Clarion at an appointed date and time. To prepare for their exodus, group members quit jobs, left spouses and gave away their possessions and money. So what happened when the flying saucer failed to appear? Did group members turn on the cult leader whose false prophecy had cost them so dearly? Hardly, having organized their worldview and identities around the group, its members were ill prepared to abandon this existential structure of their lives. Happily, they didn't have to. Soon after the abortive exit, the leader of the Seekers received another prophetic "transmission" from Clarion in which the aliens announced they had spared Earth because of the group's abiding faith. Their beliefs

15. See LEON FESTINGER ET AL., *WHEN PROPHECY FAILS* (1956).

and identities thus valorized, virtually all group members recommitted to the collective and its all-important faith-based mission.

A more consequential and enduring example of the material costs of existential commitments would be the fierce defense of Jim Crow and the “southern way of life” assayed by many whites in the region. This included not only poor white agricultural laborers who were as disadvantaged economically by the system as their black counterparts, but also members of the South’s white business elite who paid dearly as the anachronistic caste restrictions imposed by Jim Crow retarded economic development—and profits—in the region.¹⁶

Then there is the fascinating case, documented by Kate Kellogg, of willful resistance by surgical residents to reforms that on their face would seem to be very much in their collective material interest.¹⁷ In 2003, in the face of growing concern about errors and accidents committed by exhausted, sleep-deprived surgical trainees, the American Council of Graduate Medical Education mandated a reduction in resident work hours to 80 per week. Over the course of two-plus years spent observing the attempted implementation of the reforms, Kellogg documented fierce resistance to the new rules. Indeed, during the period of her study, the reforms were successfully resisted in two of the three hospitals she studied. How can we understand this seemingly irrational, non-instrumental response on the part of highly educated medical professionals? Though she certainly doesn’t use the language I’ve employed here, Kellogg’s answer to the question is fully consistent with my stress on the “existential function of the social.” Many doctors resisted because they were deeply invested in what she calls the traditional “Iron Man” identity and culture of residency training. Notwithstanding the objective benefits represented by the reforms, many doctors were loath to abandon the existential commitments encoded in the Iron Man identity, beliefs, and overarching way of life.

Finally, just for “fun,” what rationalist perspective on social life could ever help us understand Islamic suicide bombers, or the roughly 100 Buddhist monks in Tibet who have burned themselves to death over the past few years to protest China’s “occupation” of the territory? Once again, these are cases that can only be understood by reference to the collaborative construction of shared beliefs, identities and overarching

16. See, e.g., MICHAEL SCHWARTZ, *RADICAL PROTEST AND SOCIAL STRUCTURE* (1976); C. VANN WOODWARD, *THE STRANGE CAREER OF JIM CROW* (1966); Harold M. Baron, *The Demand for Black Labor: Historical Notes on the Political Economy of Racism*, *RADICAL AMERICA*, Mar.–Apr. 1971, at 1–46.

17. See generally KATHERINE C. KELLOGG, *CHALLENGING OPERATIONS: MEDICAL REFORM AND RESISTANCE IN SURGERY* (2011).

world views, or ideologies, that render these seemingly unthinkable actions, not only possible, but reasonably common.

In offering up these examples, I am certainly not suggesting that rational calculus, self-interest, and the material demands of life are somehow secondary to the existential function of the social. On the contrary, the materialist challenge of human existence was no less salient after the great leap forward 50,000 years ago than it had been before. It is just that a second, very different, social function/activity was now evident in the archaeological record as well. It would be a mistake, however, to see the material and existential functions of the social as separate from each other or to attribute preeminence to one or the other. Marx famously characterized religion as “the opiate of the masses,” insisting that religious beliefs and ideologies (read: the byproducts of existential meaning making) were dependent upon and indeed subordinate to the underlying material logic of society.¹⁸ I find this rank ordering of these two realms or social functions unconvincing and overly simplistic. The human capacity and need for meaning and identity is as powerful a structuring force in social life as the material demands on the collective. It is precisely because modern humans need and are relentless in their efforts to fashion shared meanings (such as Christian theology) and identities (like Catholic, Lutheran) to restrain existential doubt that these elaborate constructions are available to those (such as capitalists) who would appropriate and exploit them for their own purposes.

The point is, the material/instrumental and the existential are inextricably linked. Even as strategic actors are working to advance their narrow material interests, they are simultaneously exercising the distinctive human capacity for meaning making and the construction of collective identities. We do what we do both to achieve instrumental advantage and to fashion existentially meaningful worlds for ourselves and others. This is as true today as it was when the Sungir band laid to rest their fallen brethren. Any complete theory of human strategic action must take this mix of instrumental and existential motives into account. This applies to economic behavior and corporate culture just as much as it does to any other aspect of social life. Until we take seriously the need to better integrate a concern with the existential function of the social into our scholarship on economic life and corporate behavior, we can never hope to fully understand these critically important and powerful realms of social life.

18. KARL MARX, *CRITIQUE OF HEGEL'S PHILOSOPHY OF RIGHT* 1 (1844).