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In Defense of Political Equality: On Bai Tongdong's *Against Political Equality*

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Abstract

Bai Tongdong's *Against Political Equality* argues for Confucian meritocracy over a pure democracy of equals. His arguments draw on a multiple modernities comparison between the Spring and Autumn Warring States period in China and early modernity in the West, and rest on a Mencian conception of human nature according to which humans are equal in moral potential but not in moral actuality. I argue that there is a crucial disanalogy between this Chinese early modernity and Western early modernity: the role of capitalism. In a similarly comparativist and modernist spirit, drawing on B. R. Ambedkar and M. K. Gandhi, I argue that this disanalogy challenges both Bai's critique of democracy and his positive account. Bai's failure to take into account the role of capitalism in Western modernity raises a challenge to the explanatory power of his Mencian conception of human nature with regard to the failings of contemporary democracies, namely that capitalism fosters the relevant features of our moral psychology that cause those failings. Further, without that grounding assumption, Bai's arguments against democracy cut equally against his Confucian meritocracy. The disanalogy also creates challenges for his positive proposal. Bai, I argue, provides an ideal theory of Confucian meritocracy at the same time as he provides a non-ideal theory of democracy. But, taking into account the non-ideal cultural and moral psychological features of capitalism, Bai's Confucian meritocracy is likely to fall into an unjust and oligarchic hierarchy.

Keywords: Bai Tongdong, B. R. Ambedkar, M. K. Gandhi, equality, democracy, meritocracy, capitalism.

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Bai Tongdong's *Against Political Equality* is an erudite, thought-provoking, sensitive, and—in many of its details—persuasive response to the familiar conflict in modernity between liberty and equality. Bai, like many contemporary thinkers, is worried about the illiberal and damaging effects of an uneducated democracy of putative equals.[1] In the age of popularly elected authoritarians like Trump, Modi, Erdogan, Duterte, Orban, Kaczynski, Johnson, Bolsonaro, and so on, it is hard to maintain that there is nothing to worry about. Democratic political equality in the form of "one person, one vote" seems to have undermined important rights and political liberties and stood in the way of material improvement to the lives of many citizens of various countries around the world. Given those infringements on important liberties and quality of life, what is so important about democratic equality?

Bai argues that in order to protect liberalism (understood as constitutionalism, rights, and the rule of law) we must qualify democracy through instituting a Confucian meritocratic hierarchy to serve as a check and balance on the excesses of democracy. Democracy causes certain illiberal ills. Democracy causes these ills because human nature, at least by and large and under certain conditions, is unsuited to democracy. Since we can't change these facts about human nature, we must adapt our political institutions to them.

This is a common form of argument against democracy. Indeed, one might think it is the master argument against democracy. We find it in various forms and held with varying levels of sincerity and cynicism in various places. It is found in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century justifications for colonial rule, in arguments at the turn of the twentieth century for denying women the vote, in Walter Lippmann's powerful arguments in the 1920s for managerialism, in recent arguments for epistocracy, perhaps even in Plato's *Republic*. John Dewey puts it cleanly when he claims that every social philosophy implies a conception of human nature, and these anti-democrats are honorably open about their conception of human nature.[2]

1 Cf. Brennan (2016), Caplan (2007), Mulligan (2015), Ancell (2017), and Tucker (2020).

2 Dewey ([1939] 2008, 72): "Every social and political philosophy will be found upon examination to involve a certain view about the constitution of human nature: in itself and in its relation to physical nature."

This is not to conflate Bai's use of this argument with any of the above, or to read him in light of any of those views. Indeed, Bai voices *the* argument with far less cynicism and far more respect for the worth of persons than most of the examples in the last paragraph. His use of the argument is particularly interesting for two reasons. The first is that Bai is no authoritarian. He wants to resist the hierarchist's push to authoritarianism, if anything, more strongly than he wants to resist democracy's race to the bottom. Bai uses the argument to ground meritocracy as a check on the excesses of democracy, as part of a larger package of mixed government, not to get rid of democracy wholesale. The second reason is that Bai's argument rests on a claim about multiple modernities and an analogy between those modernities. He cannot thus be said to be articulating a colonial Western conceit about the superiority of the West over the Rest. In fact, in making his multiple modernities claim, Bai is criticizing one form of that Western conceit, the idea that liberal democracy is the political telos of history to which all has been tending, and from which all is a falling away. There are other forms of political ordering, with concomitant conceptions of political virtue and political selfhood, that are occluded from view by an overly simple Whiggish history and that ought to receive attention, both on their own terms and for what capacity they have to speak to the problems we now face.

With this much, one can and should have no quibble. The problems of modernity ought to be addressed with the potentialities of modern*ities*, and recovering those potentialities involves removing the theoretical blinkers that are placed on us by the kinds of conceits that Bai is concerned to criticize. Bai's methodological outlook is one with which I have the greatest sympathy, and I will say frankly at the outset that his cosmopolitan investigation into the potentials of early Confucian thought is exactly the kind of political philosophy of which there ought to be more.[3]

[3] I have some regret that in this short piece I cannot do justice to the important moral psychology of compassion that Bai describes in the second half of his book, and the way in which that moral psychology might form the basis for a distinctive form of international political ordering. One aspect of Bai's book with which I am in full agreement is the connection he sees between a detailed moral psychology and political philosophy—

Yet I find myself unable to accept Bai's substantive arguments against democracy or his arguments for Confucian meritocracy, even as I see their force. I will argue that Bai's multiple modernities analogy does not take account of an important disanalogy between the SAWS[4] modernization and the European modernization: the role of capitalism. Taking this disanalogy into account, I will argue, affects both Bai's diagnosis of the failures of democracy and his arguments for Confucian meritocracy. First, it provides an alternative explanation for the failures of democracy: that capitalism fosters expressions of human nature that undermine democracy, and thus that there is not a simple mismatch of human nature to democratic political organization. Second, failing to take capitalism into account means that Bai underestimates, I think, the pressures that face his proposal for a Confucian meritocracy. In short, capitalism will undermine the positive aspects of (even a Confucian) meritocracy, corrupting it like it corrupts democracy. So, without addressing capitalism, Confucian meritocracy will fare no better than the democracy Bai criticizes. In making these arguments, in the kind of cosmopolitan and comparativist spirit that animates Bai's book, I will draw on M. K. Gandhi and B. R. Ambedkar, two thinkers also concerned with the problems of modernity in a cosmopolitan vein.

I. Modernities, Capitalism, and the Western "End of History"

Bai's theoretical argument draws on a comparative analysis of China's early modernization—in the Zhou-Qin transition or Warring States period—with European early modernization. He uses this comparative analysis to argue, quite correctly in my view, against the complacent and imperialist apologetics of a standard Western modernization narrative on which the European process of modernization is definitive of "progress" and "history."[5] His interest

just one example of the richness of his book.

4 SAWS is Bai's abbreviation for the Spring and Autumn and Warring States period, which ran from 770 BC to 221 BC. This is the period in which the philosophers he discusses lived and, he claims, was politically very similar to the situation in early modern Europe

5 Compare also the modernist "flowering of reason" in South Asia after 1450 described by Jonardon Ganeri (2011), or the earlier, perhaps modernist, development of a conception of public reason in South Asia in the sixth century CE.

in criticizing this still commonly held view is twofold. First, it dethrones Western liberal democracy from its teleological perch at the "end of history," thus opening up room for theorizing alternative systems of governance and alternative political philosophies. Second, it provides a justification for Bai's use of early Confucian thought to address contemporary problems caused by European modernity. On Bai's reading, they were, after all, speaking to similar issues of modernization. I am in deep sympathy with both Bai's general theoretical claim about multiple modernities and the humanist and cosmopolitan impulse that underlies his comparative project.[6] It is in this sympathetic and (hopefully) similarly humanist and cosmopolitan spirit that I say what follows.

> Bai identifies several similarities between China's modernization at the end of the Warring States period and European modernization. The most critical for his argument is the claim that essential to both transitions to early modernity was the collapse of feudal hierarchical orders and consequent instability and war.[7] The central problem of both early modernities, for Bai, is thus the problem of governance: how to structure and govern societies in the breakdown of the previous feudal order with its traditions and set conceptions of human place and role. The different Confucian and Western answers given to this problem, Bai notes, both involve the development of some doctrine of equality and some doctrine of social mobility on the basis of merit. It is essential for Bai's arguments that those answers can be rightly compared, precisely because they are responses to analogous historical situations.

I do not want to deny that there are important and relevant similarities here, nor that it is possible and theoretically revealing to perform Bai's cosmopolitan comparison. What I want to insist on is a recognition of the pertinent and central features of European modernity that are

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6 It will be sufficient for my purposes here to identify this broad similarity in spirit, perhaps characterizable by the methodological impulse to bring what are normally perceived as different traditions into conversation and dialogue, and to let this conversation challenge the different deeply held assumptions that we all have.

7 There are others that Bai partially references, including the development of Weberian-style state bureaucracies, speedy technological and scientific advancement, and the development of cultural technologies like nationalism.

not captured by Bai's level of description. These differences may not necessarily change the problem so described, but, at the least, they change the conditions under which that problem now must be addressed, and the resources that theorists have available to address that problem.

In European modernity, the problem of governance was not simply how to govern societies given the breakdown of feudalism. It was the question of governance given the breakdown of feudalism *partly because of and concomitant with the development and spread of an economic and industrial social order* that we now call capitalism.[8] It was that economic order, and the patterns of global exploitation and domination that fueled and spread it, that drove the particular formation of Western political concepts that our present situation currently embodies.[9] Bai's early Confucians, so far as I know, were not confronted by the rise of such an economic order.[10] Here we have an important and relevant

[8] Without getting into too much detail here, I think it is correct to say that this development of capitalism is distinct from the development of industrial society that Bai calls "modernity 2.0." I take it that Bai means by this term things like the increase in urbanization, in geographical mobility, and (at least somewhat) in social mobility that arose with the vast increase in industrialization, the rise of industrial capitalism, and the spread of the railway in the second half of the nineteenth century. If this is the right time frame to locate "modernity 2.0," then capitalism—understood as a system in which goods and services (including, importantly, human labor and land) are produced for profit through exchange—had developed at *the very latest* half a century, if not two-and-a-half or three centuries, earlier (hence why it makes sense to speak of "industrial" capitalism as against, for example, "agrarian" capitalism). See generally Wood (2002). See Hobsbawm (1977, 14): "[capitalism] had already achieved, as it were, its historical breakthrough on both the economic and politico-ideological fronts in the sixty years before 1848." This more or less standard historiography does admittedly gloss over the industrialization (and capitalization) of English agriculture *well* before 1789; see, e.g., Pinheiro (2020).

[9] This is of course not to say that this capitalist development was in some sense historically necessary (in some Marxist fashion) nor to say that these concepts cannot be re-imagined in ways that overcome this developmental baggage.

[10] Now, it may be that the analogy between the pre-Qin transition and early modern Europe still holds *strictly*, if one holds the developments that I have briefly described here to be developments in late and not early Western modernity. This can be granted and my fundamental point still stand. Even if the analogy is strict, our responses to the present problems that the world faces cannot rest on a historical and conceptual foundation set by early modernity, if early modernity does not include capitalist development. For that development is now central to our problems and cannot be ignored.

difference—though not the only one—between the two modernities.[11]

Even if Bai's early Confucians were faced with something like the beginnings of this economic order, that historical fact would mandate a methodological demand to pay attention to our present economic order. Any *present* humanist cosmopolitan project that looks, as Bai's does, to decenter forms of Western ideological hegemony must involve, in my view, attention to the material and spiritual and conceptual effects of this capitalist development that the world has now undergone. And Bai does not do so sufficiently.[12]

Take, just as one example of a contemporary humanist project that does pay such attention, Gandhi's proposal for Indian independence in *Hind Swaraj*. Gandhi contended that Indian independence would not require certain standard Western political responses (constitutionalized rights, legal protections for and enshrinements of pluralism, or a strict unified nationalism), to certain features of Western modernity (secularism, a certain form of individualism coupled with urbanization, the idea of the nation, a certain scientistic thrall to technology and a detached, objectivist and objectifying, epistemology) precisely because India at the turn of the twentieth century had not yet gone through the capitalist "stage" of modernization that gives rise to these features. That is, Gandhi also recognizes an analogy between a non-Western

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11 There are other disanalogies that may be of general theoretical interest and of relevance to Bai's arguments. For example, competition among states in the SAWS was competition *for* a shared purpose of reunification under a single imperial state. The question was who was to rule, and the existence of separate states was thought temporary and not a new continuing circumstance of politics. One might argue that the general issue of equality among people requires first the idea of equality between states, thus putting Bai's central analogy at risk. I thank an anonymous reviewer for making this timely point.

12 I take myself here to be making a particular example of a general point that Bai himself correctly makes: the historicist point that while some problems remain roughly the same between "antiquity" and "modernity," others are expressed in a different form and others newly arise. (Bai notes that it would be wrongheaded to analyze the modern economy without taking account of modern finance, for example.) I think it is equally wrongheaded to analyze modern politics without taking account of the modern economy. Bai makes some gestures towards this embedded political economic analysis in his reference to the role of corporations in comprising his "sixth fact" (See Bai 2020, 67). But the analysis does not go deep enough. I address Bai's "sixth fact" in more detail in what follows.

modernization (India at the turn of the twentieth century) and European early modernization. But he is sensitive to the deeper metaphysical and epistemological, let us say spiritual, features of modernization that arise from capitalist development and that require avoiding (in Gandhi's case) or resisting (in ours).[13]

II. Capitalism, Human Nature, and the Failings of Democracy

It is of course not enough just to identify some disanalogy or other in order to mount a criticism. One has to identify the specific results of the disanalogy. I will argue in this section that noting the disanalogy opens up room for an alternative explanation of the ills of democracy, namely that capitalism fosters the features of our moral psychology that Bai thinks makes us unsuited to democracy. So, our unsuitedness to democracy is not something fixed in the nature of things, but something contingent that can thus be changed. Without that critique of democracy, we need not resort to Confucian meritocracy as a corrective, especially since Bai's arguments against democracy fundamentally rest, I will argue, on the unargued for assumption of a Mencian conception of human nature, according to which only some (the great people) can actualize their full human moral capacities, even though all have equal moral potential.[14] I will call this assumption about human nature the *Mencian assumption*.[15]

Bai identifies several problems with democracy (63 ff.). All of his arguments rest on the (correct) claim that proper participation in any form of governance requires the development and exercise of certain moral and epistemic capacities and the possession of certain resources.

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13 This reading of Gandhi is Akeel Bilgrami's. See the two essays on Gandhi in Bilgrami (2014) and Bilgrami (2016). See also Mantena (2012a).

14 Of course, one may still prefer Confucian meritocracy to democracy on other terms.

15 I assume for the purposes of argument that Bai's interpretation of Mencius, particularly of 3A.4, is correct, though one may read that passage and others as pointing out something about necessary social structures of rule (that there just *must* be a king, irrespective of the equality of human nature) and not about human capacities. See Bai (2020, 44-47). Thanks to my anonymous reviewers for making this point to me.

For example, decision-makers have to be properly informed about the decisions they make and how they affect relevant parties; they have to make decisions in light of more than their narrow self-interest; they have to be able to justify their decisions to others on the basis of reasons and engage politically with other decision-makers in order to inform themselves and make the right decisions; and so on. Each of these arguments, I will claim, fails in at least one of two ways. Some fail because the problems Bai attributes to democracy are better attributed to capitalism. Others fail because—absent the Mencian assumption—they would apply just as well to other forms of governance, including a Confucian meritocracy.[16]

In the case of democracy as a system of governance, all citizens (as participants in the process of governance) have to have the capacities and resources mentioned in the previous paragraph. But there are certain constraints, Bai argues, that stand in the way of just and humane democratic governance under modern conditions. The first is that it is particularly demanding to be properly informed, given (a) the limited time citizens have to devote to becoming informed given the nature of modern work and (b) the large size of society, the number of affected parties, and the consequent complexity of policy decisions. The second is that there are standing temptations to self-interest and the pursuit of private wealth, especially where the costs of being informed are so high. Those temptations need not be distractions or irrationalities; Bai claims that it may be perfectly rational and perfectly proper for people to choose to be politically uninformed or to devote their limited time to pursuits other than politics—especially given the negligible import of individual votes—after all, as we philosophers apparently know so well, the life of contemplation is superior to the practical life.[17] These constitute what Bai calls the "sixth fact" (in addition to Rawls's five facts that describe pluralistic societies in *Political Liberalism*) of modern societies (67).[18] Let us examine these arguments more closely

16 Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for this formulation.

17 Especially, it seems, when contemplation gives us seemingly unassailable reasons not to act politically in concert with others.

18 Bai also cites, almost as an aside, common arguments about the evolutionary limitations of our cognition, e.g., at 65. Of course, if these were true, why would the supposed elites

before turning to Bai's master argument from the Mencian conception of human nature that lies behind them. I will argue that without the backing of the master argument these considerations do not speak against democracy more so than other forms of governance.

There are two kinds of consideration that comprise the sixth fact: epistemic considerations concerning the demandingness of being informed and moral considerations given temptations to self-interest (or even the prudence of choosing self-interest over general compassion). I will work through each of them in turn. Take the size of society and consequent complexity of decisions. This does not seem in principle to cut for or against democracy. Meritocrats or epistocrats or technocrats similarly would suffer from these difficulties. Perhaps, one might say, addressing large-scale and complex decisions requires higher development of the relevant epistemic and moral capacities.[19] But this, while true, is only a problem for *democracy* in particular if the Mencian assumption (or something else) holds such that citizens in general cannot develop these capacities to this higher extent.

A similar argument runs for the moral considerations concerning the temptations to self-interest and private wealth (the rationality of choosing the life of contemplation I address when I tackle the Mencian assumption). As Bai admits in Chapter 4, we cannot just assume the meritocrats are immune to self-interest or that the best among us choose politics. We need even then to have ways of funneling the best among us into politics, and we also need institutional as well as educative mechanisms for resisting the temptations to self-interest. So, the only difference between democracy and meritocracy in this respect is, again, the *number* of people who need to develop this moral fiber and the compassion and commitment needed to put the general will ahead of

fare any better? Have they somehow transcended evolutionary limitations? See, more generally on arguments from evolutionary psychology, Smith (2019).

19 It is for this reason that Bai suggests a greater role for democracy in local contexts, where local forms of knowledge are correspondingly of higher importance. And it is important to recognize that Bai's meritocratic proposals are not intended to imply that all meritocrats will think alike. He admits and explicitly relies on room for diverse and competing viewpoints among the elite. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for criticisms along these lines.

one's own self-interest. Here again the Mencian assumption is needed.

The moral inadequacies of citizens for democracy are also amenable to a different explanation. Bai accepts the Confucian point that the development of human capacities is a social and relational process. Our capacities are developed differently given different social conditions and different relations to others. But this opens up the possibility that self-interestedness is fostered by the particular capitalist conditions in which we currently live (though, of course, it may be fostered counterfactually by other conditions). These conditions include huge competitive pressures arising from the commodification and exploitation of human labor and human capacities that set human beings against each other, the prioritization of narrow financial and corporate interests above other interests because of the role of money in a capitalist economy, the worship of economic growth and economic efficiency for their own sake above the human and social goods that growth and efficiency are meant to serve, a worship tied up with a purely economic and instrumental conception of rationality that itself fosters self-interest and ideologically blinds us to other ways of thinking of ourselves and others, and the alienation from social and solidaristic life with others that comes about when we must compete with those others in a marketplace for artificially scarce resources. Bai rightly criticizes the effects of money and corporate influence on politics. But it is precisely because these interests have dominated politics for so long that the moral psychology of overweening self-interest is so prominent and that the pursuit of "private" interests is seen as (and therefore becomes) antithetical to politics. Capitalism constantly trains us to prioritize our own interests ahead of those of others and the general will, precisely the psychological tendency that Bai rightly complains undermines democracy.[20]

[20] One might worry that "capitalism" is too broad and large a concept to play the kind of explanatory role I have here given it. Of course, "capitalism" is not a single thing that can be used as an independent variable in an empirical study, and I am drawing in broad brush strokes. And I have no room here to get into the intricacies of the relevant debates about the nature and definition of capitalism. But the shape of the relevant phenomenon and kind of explanation should be more or less clear—at least as clear as the Mencian assumption.

Capitalism—in the form of the concentration of power and influence directed toward profit—also partially explains the epistemic problems citizens face. Concentrated and privatized media ownership and a free market model of information distribution underlie much of the disinformation and misinformation that permeates modern political society, as well as the need for higher epistemic capacities in the form of what we now call "information literacy." And why would citizens want to engage themselves politically when they sense that, through no fault of their own, the influence of wealth far outweighs their own?[21] The general point is that the epistemic and moral vices that no doubt play a role in the current ills of democracy—even if they are individual vices—have structural and political causes that need to be explored before they can be sheeted home to simple failings of character.[22]

Bai's most compelling argument—one that does not rely on the Mencian assumption—is from the nature of modern work. He argues that modern work conditions consume our time and our energies so that workers "know little about public affairs or anything outside of their narrow specializations" (63). Let's accept this claim on its face for now, though note that it actually comprises two related claims: the first is about our time and energies being consumed, and the second concerning the problem of skill specialization in the workplace. Why do we not have enough time?[23] And why can't we be the kind of people, as Marx suggested, who can hunt in the morning and read criticism in the evening? (Marx [1845] 2007, 132)

One obvious line of response is to point to the conditions of work under capitalism: that the vast majority of us must sell our labor on the market under exploitative and competitive pressures, and that since time and money are treated (at least by modern economics) as fungible and equivalent goods, our time (like our labor) has been appropriated from us. If one accepts *something* like this story, the relevant time limitations are not fixed constraints, but contingent on the particular

21 For contemporary studies of the political influence of wealth, see e.g., Gilens (2005), Bartels (2009), and Bartels (2016).

22 See Dillon (2012).

23 See Rose (2016), where Rose argues that a fair distribution of free time for pursuing whatever leisure goods one wishes is an egalitarian requirement of distributive justice.

social and economic structures that are currently in place.[24] In turn, if we could change the conditions of work, then they would not pose a challenge to democracy.

So much for time. What about specialization? There is admittedly something to be said for the idea that specialization stands in the way of generalist kinds of knowledge and understanding, and for the claim that politics requires something like the latter and not the former.[25] The way Bai figures this idea is by following Mencius's distinction between "labor of the muscles"—work that is done for oneself and a close circle of people—and "labor of the mind"—larger forms of (political) work that are done for the people (45). "Labor of the mind" is superior to specialized labor, insofar as the former requires fuller development of general human virtues—compassion for all and wisdom to apply that compassion properly—and the latter does not. That is, as Mencius says, "[t]here are affairs of great people, and there are affairs of small people. . . . The former rule; the latter are ruled" (*Mencius* 3A.4, as cited in Bai 2020, 45). This distinction between the great and the small concerns Mencius's conception of human nature: the Mencian assumption, as I called it earlier. According to Mencius, while everyone has "equal moral potential," not everyone equally actualizes that potential. The "great people" have more fully actualized their moral potential, while the small people have not; the great people are more fully human(e) (*ren*) insofar as they have more fully developed their distinctively human capacities. And those "great people" can only ever be a small minority; hence why democracy is infeasible: in Bai's words, "only great human beings can become rulers" (45). Lying behind Bai's claims about specialization is the claim, based on the Mencian assumption, that the particular kind of virtues needed for politics are the province of the very few.

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24 There is a reason why one of the earliest demands of worker organizations was the eight-hour day. And it is also no surprise that resistance to the alienation of modern work—a political demand if ever there was one—has always been led by workers.

25 This claim is in some tension with the idea that politics is itself a specialization that requires a certain specific kind of training or education. This is a background tension (though I do not say contradiction) in Bai's conception of meritocracy: the old question of whether politics is a skill. Bai seems to want to have it both ways. Politics both is and is not a skill.

Something further needs to be said, before turning to the Mencian assumption, about Bai's views about labor and politics. Bai thinks that the political class ought to be insulated from those subject to the daily grind, that the ideal education for politics is an education *in* politics. He suggests in Chapter 3 that there ought to be a hierarchy of legislators, with steps in political office comprising the practical part of a political education. Every step up the meritocracy is a step further away from specialized labor. One might (in my view rightly) think—and I will not argue in detail for it here, other than to say "look and see"—that such a political education separated from the details of life and labor is precisely one of the factors that lead consistently to the dangerous and elitist features of the political class, their incomprehension of people's lives, the lack of compassion and humaneness that the political class shows for the "hoi polloi." In contrast, something closer to a proper political education comes from different kinds of political action that occur in and through workplaces and other social spaces. It may be true that there is some role for career politicians, let alone for bureaucrats and the rest of the apparatus of the administrative state. But I think it politically dangerous and shortsighted to suggest that politics *in its purest* is to be separate from work and labor. A view like Bai's, that politics is for the great and noble and not for the ordinary, does not and cannot have room for a politics *of* the ordinary, of social movements, of resistance, which (I suggest) is the kind of transformative modernist politics that we need to theorize and practice.

So, Bai's central arguments against democracy either point in the direction of capitalism as an explanation for democracy's ills or, without some other premise (the Mencian assumption), do not cut against democracy as opposed to other forms of governance. We must thus turn to the Mencian assumption: that, while all are equal in moral potential, all are nonetheless unequal in moral actuality. Importantly, this assumption is separable from the (correct) claims that Bai endorses as part of the Confucian package, that the actualization of moral potential is a social process, that it involves practicing those moral capacities, that an education is necessary to actualize them, and that it is (at least partially) the responsibility of government to provide that education and the resources and time necessary to actualize those capacities. And,

it must be emphasized, Bai treats this claim as a political claim, not a metaphysical claim. In that it is akin to Rawls's political conception of the person as rational and reasonable, and it plays a similar grounding role in the account.

Yet *no argument is given for this grounding assumption.* "We have to consider this a basic assumption," Bai says, ". . . a fact of life" (48). And it holds irrespective of the education and institutional structures provided by the state: "for reasons unspecified . . ., in spite of the equal opportunities offered by the government and the equal potential of all people, in reality, people differ, and the majority of the people will fail to develop their potential adequately" (47-48). That is, the Mencian assumption cuts deeper than Bai's earlier (empirical) claims about the nature of work and so on, which were contingent on social structures. It is a grounding assumption that, it seems, has to be accepted for things to get off the ground. We have an unargued for assumption that is not only sufficient in itself to ground Bai's Confucian meritocracy, but, it seems, might even be necessary (given the grounding role that it plays in Bai's other arguments against democracy). At its highest, the Mencian assumption is argued for as the best explanation of the ills of democracy. But if there is any plausibility to the explanation involving capitalism that I have raised above, then the Mencian assumption cannot enjoy default status as the *best* explanation. Some further argument must be given.

So here are two questions for Bai. First, what reason do we have to accept this Mencian assumption, especially if we have an alternative explanation (in capitalism) for the ills of democracy? Second, what does it even mean for humans to have "equal moral potential," if it is a given that not everyone can (indeed that most people cannot) actualize that potential?

Let me say a little more about the second question, having said a bit about the first. Why is it important to Bai to have the equality part of the Mencian assumption, even if it is limited to potentiality? One important role that it plays is in resisting the slide to authoritarianism by grounding the democratic and human rights elements of Bai's proposal. For if humans did not have even equal moral *potential*, then on what grounds are we distinct from the "beasts," and why ought

government be for the people rather than for the fully developed human beings? So, one role of the claim to equal moral potential is that it descriptively grounds a normative goal for human beings: to actualize that potential is what it is to be human.[26] And to support people in achieving that goal is one of the functions of the state, hence why it cannot be an authoritarian state interested only in the self-interest of the few.

Yet, Bai simultaneously claims that it may be rational to choose to be politically uninvolved, to prefer private interests to the public good (66). Indeed, it is rational for the majority of people—those who do not have the right moral development—to do so.[27] It follows that it is rational to choose not to be fully human, at least for those who (in some sense) *cannot* actualize their human potential—a claim that seems to require further explication. So, again, the question arises: what does it even mean to speak of a potential that (in the vast majority of cases) *cannot* be actualized, even given the ideal conditions for its actualization? Let us assume that the relevant social conditions for actualization of that potential are met—a general civic education, time and resources and so on, so that government is not at fault for the failures to reach that potential—yet many do not reach that potential. Is that their fault? Does it mean that, really, they did not have that potential, since the conditions were met for its actualization but it was not actualized?[28]

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26 In turn, this grounds some of Bai's later hierarchical claims about *xia* and *yi* states in the international order. *Yi* states are those that are not humane in the sense that they have not actualized this moral potential. For the sake of space, I leave aside concerns that I have about this reintroduction of the notion of "civilization" in this context, though I think that there is something to be said for Bai's appropriation of the Confucian notion of circles of compassion for cosmopolitan purposes.

27 Yet compare Bai (2020, 68): "To satisfy the political needs of each citizen includes satisfying his or her need to participate in politics."

28 One may be worried that here Bai is reminiscent of the old colonialist chestnut: if you (the colonized) are given all the right conditions, including the right education and the right opportunities and everything else, and *still* you refuse to become (like "us") properly civilized/free/virtuous, then—even if you are "human" in the sense that you *could* be civilized/free/virtuous—you are recalcitrant; your situation is your own fault; and "we" are justified in ruling over "you" for your own benefit. Bai does not go so far and I do not think he would endorse explicitly this line of thought. But there is that direction to the argument, reflected also in Bai's arguments for animal rights (it befits

There are other confusing uses of the term "potential." For example, Bai rightly argues for a basic civic education for all, on the basis of each person having equal moral potential. That civic education is meant to reveal those suitable for politics. Yet after that civic education is complete, Bai speaks of further education and resources to be provided, conditional on a citizen being "interested in and [having] *potential* for participating in politics" (68, emphasis added). What does that latter use of "potential" refer to? It cannot be the moral potential everyone has equally, for that was the ground for the initial lot of basic civic education. So that use of "potential" must seemingly refer to some *further* potential, distributed *unequally*, that only some citizens have for the *actual* practice of politics. Are there "potential" potentials? Degrees of potentiality, like there are degrees of actuality?

I've argued in this section that taking seriously the role of capitalism as a disanalogy between the SAWS modernity and European modernity provides an alternative explanation for the ills of democracy. At the very least, it means that the Mencian assumption cannot simply be plonked down as the default explanation for these ills. And given that (at least to me) it is unclear what the notion of "equal moral potential" in the Mencian assumption means (though I understand the functional role it plays; what it is meant to do in the theory), it seems that the Mencian assumption faces further challenges that must be met.

III. Capitalism and the Challenges for Confucian Meritocracy

I argued in the last section that capitalism as a disanalogy between Bai's two modernities undermines his arguments against democracy. I will argue in this section that it undermines his positive proposal for meritocracy. In essence, the argument is that meritocracies under capitalism become apologies for unjust hierarchies. And while Bai recognizes in principle that there are potentials for corruption (using the term broadly and not just to refer to official corruption) of his

"us" humans to treat animals well, because we are harmed when we harm them) and of the international community's responsibility to protect ("you" are inhumane, so we must protect you from yourself), of which one ought to be at least a little suspicious.

Confucian meritocracy, he still idealizes meritocracy in a way that he does not do for democracy. So, my argument is in one way an argument from consistency: in comparing institutional alternatives, we ought not be realists about one and idealists about the other.[29]

Let me make this argument through an analogy with Dalit philosopher B. R. Ambedkar's critique of M. K. Gandhi's philosophical reclamation of the hierarchical Vedic social structure of *varna*. *Varna* is the classical form of caste division in Vedic thought, contained in the early Vedic texts.[30] It is a system of fourfold division into broadly occupationally based castes (Brahmin "scholars," Kshatriya "warriors," Vaishya "merchants," Sudra "laborers") on the basis—like Bai's Confucian meritocracy—of the differing qualities and capacities of individuals. It also shares a kind of organic holism with Bai's Confucianism, insofar as that differentiation is justified on the basis that different people can contribute different kinds of skills to society considered as a whole. And, again like Bai's Confucian meritocracy, Gandhi's proposed reclamation of *varna* (as distinct from the historical and existing practices of caste) is based on some conception of the moral equality of all. The structure of Ambedkar's critique of Gandhi may thus shed some light on potential problems with Bai's Confucian proposal.[31]

I do not mean to deny the many and deep differences between Bai's Confucianism and Gandhi's Hinduism, including the (metaphysical) basis of the differentiation and their conceptions of equality. But the structural analogy with which I am concerned is not undermined by those differences. Let me note those differences quickly before proceeding.

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[29] Another way of framing this objection is that Bai (quite unobjectionably, as a methodological stance) takes a non-ideal theoretic attitude toward democracy: democracy as it operates in existing non-ideal conditions. But he does not hold the same conditions fixed when he puts forward his meritocratic alternative. This is not meant to be an argument against ideal theory. It's perfectly acceptable (though in my view, purpose dependent) to make certain idealizing assumptions in one's theory. But then the same courtesy ought to be applied to other theories.

[30] For the oldest extant texts, see Olivelle (1999). That edition has a useful introduction on the dating of the texts. See also Olivelle (2010).

[31] I do not suggest that the specific *details* of Ambedkar's critique also hold, though there may be some analogies that I do not pursue.

The first difference is in the nature and ground of the hierarchy. Gandhi's conception of *varna* was based in the karmic doctrine of rebirth on the basis of one's thought and action in past lives. One's *varna* in this life is based, at least in part, on "the influence of previous lives and heredity. All are not born with equal powers and similar tendencies" (Gandhi 1932, 226).[32] This is of course a metaphysical ground for inequality that runs deeper than Bai's Confucian kind, which is political, not metaphysical. But Bai's Confucianism, like Gandhi's belief in karma, still holds that the relevant inequalities are fixed in the sense that they cannot be rectified by even collective human action.

Bai might argue that, unlike Gandhi's metaphysical dogma, his view holds that people have equal moral potential, and that moral differences arise only in this life. So, one is not born into a caste but can, through one's own actions, determine where one ends up in this life. There are two important points here. First, Gandhi, in proposing his idealized reclamation of *varna*, was intending to reform the existing caste by birth system in India, in which each person was born into a specific caste defined by hereditary occupation (*jati*).[33] So, like Bai's proposed Confucian meritocracy, Gandhi's view was specifically set against a hereditary model of caste inheritance. Karma is not equivalent to the caste one inherits at birth. Second, Gandhi's reclamation of *varna* involves an assessment of a person's *existing* virtues and character as the basis for the division.[34] So, for practical and epistemic purposes as distinct from the metaphysics, how one receives one's differentiation is this-worldly.

A second difference is in the kind of moral equality that characterizes Gandhi's and Bai's views. An essential part of Gandhi's reclamatory project was to remove *actual* hierarchies in moral value between

32 For reasons of space, I leave aside the question of whether karma of past thoughts and actions is determinative and where, if anywhere, a conception of freedom plays a role in Gandhi's thought.

33 The relation of *jati* to *varna* is a complicated one. The British colonial government categorized all *jatis* into the fourfold *varna* categories for census purposes beginning with the 1901 Decennial Census. See Dirks (2002).

34 This is so even if one's virtue and character are determined to whatever degree by one's karma.

castes. It is for this reason that Gandhi insisted on the term *harijan*, meaning "children of God," to describe the "untouchable" Dalits. All *varna*s were equal and equally human, if functionally differentiated, for Gandhi. This is of course different from Bai's notion of equality in moral *potential* and his normative and degreed notion of humanity, which is possessed unequally by people. So, both insist on some kind of inequality against the backdrop of some other, normatively important, kind of equality. And both see their projects as resisting Western intellectual imperialism by returning to an autochthonous philosophy. One way to put the critique is to ask whether that distinction can be maintained, or whether (at least under certain social conditions) inequality of one kind has a tendency to spread psychologically and institutionally into inequality of other kinds.[35]

The part of Ambedkar's critique of Gandhi that I want to draw on is the claim that his notion of *varna* is, under existing economic and social conditions, *indistinguishable from caste*.[36] For Ambedkar, Gandhi too quickly isolates an idealized religious ethics from the larger social context. And that in turn means that Gandhi is blind to the way in which his idealized differentiated social structure, when embedded in existing social conditions with existing social and economic institutions, will take a form shaped by those conditions and institutions and be corrupted by them. So, for Ambedkar, caste is not just a religious and ethical issue, to be addressed through religious and ethical reform. Caste, for Ambedkar, is "more than a religious system. It is also an economic system which is worse than slavery . . . not only a system of unmitigated economic exploitation, but . . . also a system of uncontrolled economic exploitation" (Ambedkar [1945] 2014, 197).[37] Ambedkar continues: "Those who believe that Untouchability

[35] Cf. the argument, made by Miranda Fricker among others, that certain kinds of prejudices are domain-insensitive: they "track" their objects across different domains (Fricker 2007, 27-28).

[36] I am leaving aside much of Ambedkar's critique that is specific to the Indian context, and which has to do with the specific forms that caste takes, both in Hindu religious doctrine and in Indian colonial society.

[37] Ambedkar is using "religious" here in a narrow and modernist sense, as delimiting a particular social sphere from others. He also used "religious" in a deeper sense, to pick out what is fundamental to one's being in the world, to one's outlook on things.

will soon vanish do not seem to have paid attention to the economic advantages which it gives to the Hindus" (Ambedkar [1945] 2014, 197). Ambedkar's broad point is that we cannot (either for theoretical or practical purposes) isolate one kind of institution from the broader web of institutions and structures in which it is embedded. To extend the analogy to a critique of Bai's view, we cannot theorize how a Confucian political meritocracy would work without understanding its (possible) interactions with other existing institutions (unless they too are to be changed)—in particular, for my critical purposes, capitalism. Without transformative change to those economic and social institutions with their concomitant ways of thinking, even a Confucian meritocracy will be corrupted and fall into a simple oligarchy.

Ambedkar's argument is twofold, one part methodological and one part substantive. The methodological point is that Gandhi is engaging in a kind of ideal theory. He is proposing an idealized order, the proper functioning of which relies on abstracting away from relevant features of our existing social structures.[38] Ambedkar's criticism is that to do so misconstrues how that idealized order will function once those features are reintroduced into the analysis. Bai already accepts some version of this claim. He accepts, for instance, that introducing various meritocratic changes to political institutions will require transformation of educative and other cultural institutions. And he gestures towards the possible corrupting effects of continuing corporate money on his meritocratic institutions. Yet with regard to the basic structure of economic institutions and their concomitant moral psychology of self-interest and competition, he seems on the one hand remarkably

38 To be fully fair to Gandhi, he is not putting forward an ideal theory in anything like the sense in which Rawls was putting forward an ideal theory. His ideals are intended to work a spiritual transformation in life as a whole and not simply to be goals that we need a separate "non-ideal" theory in order to achieve. In that light Gandhi was perfectly right (from his perspective) to ignore (or, better, not to compromise to) the non-ideal conditions and the surrounding institutions. That was all to be transformed through the spiritual action of *satyagraha*. See Mantena (2012b). Perhaps Bai also has a further story about how the Confucian spiritual transformation central to his view is to spread throughout the entire system; if so, that would be a fascinating and very important addition to the moral psychology of politics to which the second half of his book is dedicated.

sanguine about some of their possibilities while recognizing, on the other, the damaging political effects of overweening self-interest—which is precisely one important cause of the ills of democracy on Bai's account.[39] Not only is there an inconsistency in the boundary conditions of his theory (meritocracy can utilize the benefits of self-interest, but democracy cannot), but Bai does not extend as fully as he ought the important Confucian insight that political institutions are not isolated from other social institutions, but are rather *systematically interconnected* with them.

The substantive claim is that economic institutions foster ways of thinking and feeling that affect the operation of political and social institutions. Specifically, capitalism corrupts whatever existing hierarchies it finds. It turns them into means for exploitation and oppression. For Ambedkar, the introduction of a wage labor economy to colonial India, in addition to whatever other ills it caused, led to exploitation along caste lines. It led to the hoarding of opportunities and resources by those who already had greater opportunities and resources—quite literally, forms of cultural capital in addition to economic capital. In these ways, caste serves as a basis for economic exploitation. It justifies (in practice) differential educational oppor-

[39] Bai's arguments here strike me as particularly weak. For example, he argues in passing that competition can be good for well-being, on the basis of one unpublished study and with reference to one theory ("tournament theory") in workplace economics, the technical results of which hold at best only under limited conditions (where absolute outputs cannot be easily measured, ordinal ranks can be easily assigned and reward granted solely on the basis of rank, where the participants are of equal ability, and participants are striving against each other and not for some common good) that do not seem easily to hold of Bai's conception of politics or of political office. After all, if the conditions that define tournament theory hold, then political officers must be motivated not only solely by the receipt of pay, but by pay *differentials*—their own comparative (and not even absolute!) self-interest with respect to others. There must be the possibility of exit from one political organization and entry to other similar organizations; and the larger the organization size—huge, in the case of government—the larger the reward differentials must be, which in turn, according to other studies, lowers performance, motivation, and collaboration. So, unless we would like government to be structured and to function like the highest echelons of corporate governance, we ought to be skeptical of the applicability of tournament theory in the way Bai suggests. In short: do we want politics to be a tournament between holders of political office? See, e.g., the results summarized in Connelly et al. (2014).

tunities, and different political rights. The interpretations of religious doctrine that license it also, through the operation of formally equal laws, lead to substantively differentiated and oppressive effects in terms of access to social goods. So, in Ambedkar's view, one cannot get rid of the problematic hierarchies that comprise caste without wider transformative change to legal and political institutions, to forms of education, to village structures and structures of work, and to economic structures.[40] And at bottom, this is because capitalism fosters self-interestedness and competition, and existing hierarchies become easier means of seeking one's self-interest, albeit at the expense of others. We come to see all others as competitors; all of us are locked in zero-sum games for scarce resources.[41] So, in practice, meritocracy, without deeper economic and social reform, in practice reinforces existing hierarchies.[42]

Of course, as I have said, Bai is rightly concerned by the possibility that Confucian talent-based meritocracy may fall into or perpetuate other unjust or exclusionary forms of hierarchy. Bai defends against this possibility by emphasizing several elements of his view. First, the hierarchy must be *open*. There must be social mobility between classes, and admission to the upper class on talent alone. Second, Confucian

40 There are deeper philosophical and strategic issues here about the process of reform, issues that generalize beyond caste to the removal of other oppressive hierarchies. I do not have the space to get into these here, but in short, Ambedkar argues that political reforms are needed to empower the lower castes and Dalits. This includes special rights and affirmative action for substantively fair political representation. But this political process requires the legal enshrinement of caste categories, which, at the social level, reiterate existing caste relations. Yet social and religious change is impossible without those political reforms—again, a way in which institutions in different spheres of society are systematically interconnected.

41 This is not to say that all forms of competition are necessarily bad. But the conditions under which competition can be a noble force are not the ones that hold in (or hold only in highly insulated sectors of) a capitalist society. So, we may admit, with Aristotle in Book IX of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, that there are forms of friendship that are based on healthy competition with equals, where the prize for competition is tempered by the close relationships one has with one's friends and where, consequently, self-interest becomes a far weaker motive.

42 See the extensive literature on this, e.g., Markovits (2019), Scanlon (2018), Guinier (2016), and Morton (2019). Of course, the direct applicability of these arguments and studies is limited by the fact that they focus on a broader economic and social meritocracy, and not to the specifically political meritocracy for which Bai argues. But there seems to be no reason in principle against extending these arguments.

meritocracy, like any political ordering, must be supported by the right kind of education so that the reasons for that political ordering and the benefits it brings can be widely known and accepted. What is essential here is that the meritocracy be a true meritocracy able to be endorsed by all who participate in it, and not merely a formalistic sham that reiterates substantively a fixed hierarchy. Third, Bai argues for certain institutional responses to protect against unjust use of elite power.

Let us look at these lines of possible response. I will begin with the institutionalist response, which is interesting for distinct reasons concerning the instability of liberal democracy and of Confucian meritocracy, before turning to the responses specific to Confucian philosophy.

Bai's institutionalist solutions to elite corruption take the form of checks and balances from the popular house and increasing factions and diversity among the elite to prevent accumulation of power (89-90). These proposals are interesting because they point to a deep tension in Bai's form of mixed government, one that reflects also a deep tension in liberal democracy that arguably does some important explanatory work in explaining the ills of democracy. I sketch this line of argument for the sake of that interest.

As Russell Hardin and others have pointed out, checks and balances are institutionalized forms of *distrust*.[43] We (here, the citizens) distrust those with power and consequently institute methods of restraining the exercise of that power so that it serves the interests that it is meant to serve. Such institutionalized distrust is essential to liberalism. Yet, at the same time, Bai insists that we (at least we *ordinary*, non-elite citizens) must place our trust in elites; after all, they receive certain powers and privileges that we do not, on the basis of their virtues and education.[44] And what is to stop us resenting that power and that privilege if we do not trust them? (In a sense, further, we must trust *blindly*, for we do

43 See, e.g., Hardin (2002). See also the essays in Hardin (2004).

44 See Bai (2020, 84): "It is crucial to the Confucian hybrid regime that people be instilled. . . with a sense of respect for moral and intellectual excellence and acceptance of the rule of the wise and virtuous so as to abdicate willingly their right to participate when they consider themselves incompetent. Chinese peasantry in the past and many Western voters before the age of populism and cynicism had respect for authority, and they did not find it unacceptable that the experienced and knowledgeable had more authority."

not have the virtue or the knowledge to understand the measures they are taking; else we would also be one of the elites.) So, there is a need to balance these two necessary features of Bai's system—the distrust characteristic of liberalism and the trust characteristic of elitism.

I do not say that this cannot be done or that there is a contradiction (as opposed to a tension) here. After all, the same problem faces liberal democracy—we must trust those whom we elect to represent us, and yet distrust of them is institutionalized in the form of party politics, the separation of powers, veto powers, constitutionalized rights protections, and so on. We might think (in a manner consistent with Bai's story about the rising distrust of "the age of populism and cynicism") that this tension, or at least mismanagement of this tension, contributes directly to the ills of liberal democracy—especially where this populism and cynicism is in a sense quite justly driven by the failures of technocratic and elite governance to do what is just and right in the face of vested interests and all the other governance challenges of scale and complexity that Bai rightly notes. But—and this is a genuine question—are there new mechanisms in Bai's interesting Confucian combination of liberal distrust and democratic *and* meritocratic trust that might help manage this tension better? If so, they would be additional important lessons for political institutions today.

I turn now back to Bai's non-institutionalist responses, which do the bulk of the heavy lifting. One line is to insist that the relevant Confucian meritocracy is one of wisdom and virtue. Thus, by definition, those with the relevant merit will not be self-interested and will not fall prey to the psychological traps that befall the ordinary folk in a capitalist system. No doubt this is in some sense possible, but it seems, in light of the above critique, just to be table-thumping. It abstracts away from the features of our system that seem most stable—for instance, that power corrupts, and that absolute power corrupts absolutely, or that the more one becomes involved in formal politics and policy-making, the less one retains the kinds of connection to community and to the people directly affected by one's policy decisions that ought properly to inform one's decision-making.

What about Bai's insistence on the role of a proper and ongoing political education? As much as I too have a faith in the power of

education, it cannot overcome by itself the cultural and psychological power of the system as a whole, especially where education is not ongoing but rendered distinct from one's work. (This is becoming more and more apparent in the form that educative institutions are now taking. We may insist that a better education would be . . . better, but it is increasingly unclear how such a counter-cultural institution can exist without radical change to our economic system and the values and psychology it enshrines.) This holds especially true of Bai's proposed kinds of formal practical education through holding office, which involve, in my view, precisely the wrong kinds of education. As I suggested in the last section, politics is not, or at its best ought not to be, a specialized enterprise, a "labor of the mind" as distinct from a "labor of the muscles." Rather, it ought to be connected deeply to one's daily labor. It is no accident that many of the most important social and economic progressive developments of the last two centuries across the world have come because of unionization and the politics of organized labor.[45]

Bai may focus on his claim that the Confucian hierarchy is not a fixed hierarchy, but one characterized by mobility and openness. But so too some insist that the existing "meritocracy" that, say, characterizes the Ivy League universities in the United States is one characterized by mobility, or, more generally, that the United States is in principle a meritocracy, even though *actual* mobility is next to non-existent.[46] The theoretical insistence does nothing without some confrontation with the reasons why meritocracies become corrupted and some account of how Bai's version is actually to resist these influences. And in

[45] I do not mean to underplay the problems and wrongs that unions have historically contributed to, including gender- and race-based oppression and some of the problems of disrespect and anti-intellectualism that Bai is concerned with. But these are problems caused by a *lack* of democracy and inclusion and not of over-inclusion. Ambedkar, for one, was very sensitive to these problems with union politics and with socialist politics more generally.

[46] Compare Bai (2020, 86n5, emphasis added): "the *apparent* mobility offered hope to the peasant and other people of the lowest strata of the traditional Chinese society, and they could—perhaps over the efforts of a few generations—first move up to the level of propertied men (landlords and wealthy merchants) and go from there to the elite ruling class."

the face of this lack of an account, Bai's claims about the benefits of upward mobility, even while he recognizes that the picture of upward mobility in classical Confucianism is "perhaps too rosy" and even that upward mobility is, for whatever unspecified reason, by and large across societies just not the case, sounds not a little like special pleading. After all, the meritocratic myth and the myth of upward mobility for a while now have played the ideological role of maintaining stability by redirecting discontented energies toward individualized goals rather than social change: "don't worry that you're heavily exploited, working for someone else's gain, and left without any kind of safety net—if you *just work hard enough*, you'll get ahead! And then it'll be your turn to exploit others for *your* own gain." While I do not disagree with Bai that hope is important and can provide a sense of purpose and motivation to people (especially those who may not have many other grounds for purpose and motivation), those hopes do have to be grounded in actual possibility. And given Bai's Mencian assumption—that only the few can achieve this hope—this hope of upward mobility that most cannot achieve becomes, almost definitionally, a *false* hope.

I hope that this claim about the ideological function of upward mobility does not strike the reader as an unfair one to make, against Bai's expressed intentions. Even if we were to accept, as a matter of stipulation, that a Confucian meritocracy would have a higher degree of class mobility than exists now or existed in historical Confucian society, Bai's arguments for upward mobility rely precisely on its ideological function (though, of course, he does not use this term) in stabilizing the political system. Even where upward mobility is only "apparent," Bai says, Confucian hierarchy "allows the possible resentment of the lowly to be vented by encouraging them to turn their resentment regarding their lowly status into a drive to strive for a higher status. This venting *doesn't threaten the stability of the hierarchy and prevents a 'slave revolt' from disrupting the status quo*" (106, emphasis added). Bai treats resentment in Nietzschean terms as a psychological mechanism to be redirected. Those on the bottom feel resentment at those higher—this is just the way things are. In doing so, he pushes to one side the *normativity* of resentment: that it can point to legitimate grievances that the "low" have against the "high." Of course, if Bai's Confucian

meritocracy indeed perfectly serves justice, then the resentment of the "low" would be unjustified. But if Bai accepts (as he does and ought) that virtue is not the only solution to bad governance, then resentment need not be something merely to be redirected and shuttled away. It could be (as it is, at least ideally, in the criminal justice system, for instance) a *just* emotion, one that can point out injustice and help address it.

It is to Bai's credit that he sees the deep connections between moral psychology and political institutional structures. My comments in this last section have in part followed Bai in that vein, and have sought to extend his moral psychology of politics beyond the "positive" attitudes of compassion, respect, and hope to the "negative" attitudes of distrust and resentment. And I have sought to complicate Bai's analysis of the political role (and the political dangers) of self-interest and competitiveness. It's worth sketching in closing what I am not saying, in arguing that Bai's multiple modernities analogy is undermined by his failure to take into account capitalism.

First, I am not arguing for the need for revolution. Indeed, we need to get past the dichotomy of total revolution *or* limited reform, a dichotomy inherited from Western modernity and its temporality. But I am insisting that our political imagination ought to encompass far-reaching and transformative changes to our social structures.[47] And I take Bai to be a fellow traveler here, to be a philosopher who also has such a wide political imagination—one of the signal virtues of his book.

Second, I am not arguing that there is nothing that can be learned from Bai's multiple modernities analogy. I think it is exceptionally interesting to read Confucianism not in comparison to the Greek ancients, as is more common, but as modern thinkers, though I admit to a certain sympathy for modernizing interpretations in general. And I think there is much to pursue, both in relation to the Confucian moral psychology of humaneness and compassion and how that moral psychology relates to the "political, not metaphysical" reading of the Confucian texts.

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47 I don't have the space to set out my own views here. But see Unger (1997, e.g., 61-63) on the distinction between revolution and reform and "transformation."

Third, I am neither arguing that there can be no case made for hierarchies, though of course my sympathies quite clearly lie elsewhere, nor that egalitarianism ought to be construed as some kind of default. It may be that some hierarchies are unavoidable, and a challenge is how to make them as minimal and as temporary as possible. And I take seriously the challenges, articulated (and responded to) by Bernard Williams and others, to some general and abstract notion of equality.[48] There is work to be done there. But such arguments should not be made by plonking down some conception of human nature.[49]

Fourth, in focusing on the ways in which capitalism fosters a moral psychology of self-interest, I do not mean to claim that *only* capitalism does this, or that self-interest is something outside human nature, forced on us by unnatural capitalism. One thing to take from the Confucian tradition is its emphasis on the *malleability* of human nature. We can put this (in an un-Confucian way) by saying that humans have no nature, that the concept of human nature plays only a false and constraining role in limiting human possibility. Or we can put it (in a more Confucian way) by saying that human nature contains many potentials, many possibilities for development, both good and bad, and that capitalism fosters certain of those possibilities at the expense of others. If we take seriously the claim central to the Confucian tradition —that human nature is actualized socially—we cannot simultaneously claim that some potential in human nature will out in the same form *no matter what.* How we structure our societies shapes who we are, as

48 See Williams (1973, 230-49).

49 It may be that, in the end, such arguments boil down to unargued-for assumptions. At one point, Bai invokes a hope in the benefits of meritocracy and a hope in the virtues of elites (90). It seems fair, correspondingly, to think that at the heart of democracy lies a hope in the agency of ordinary people, a hope expressed clearly by James Baldwin in saying to Audre Lorde that "we are the only hope we have" (Baldwin and Lorde 1984, 74). Such a hope is also expressed in other anticolonial and humanist thinkers, sometimes coupled with a vastly different and more expansive conception of human nature to Bai's. Compare Du Bois ([1920] 2007, 68): "Infinite is human nature. We make it finite by choking back the mass of men, by attempting to speak for others, to interpret and act for them, and we end by acting for ourselves and using the world as our private property." Du Bois begins *Darkwater* with a Credo, the first belief of which is in "the possibility of infinite development" of "all men." It may be that this hope is unjustified. But we ought at least have the respect for others to test that hope before we discard it.

much as who we are structures our social forms.

There is much to like about Bai's wonderful book. My disagreements with much of Bai's positive picture do not lessen my own respect for the theoretical erudition and detail with which he draws together the vast array of resources and ideas that he marshals. *Against Political Equality* is a rich work that displays admirably the virtues of cosmopolitan thought informed by historical sensitivity. I have learnt much from it, and I hope that the criticisms that I have sought to articulate in this paper express the deepest compliments that (I think) one can give a work of philosophy: that it is interesting, that it provoked one to thought, that it compelled one to respond deeply to it.

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