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New Essays on Analytical Marxism

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New Essays on Analytical Marxism

Edited by
Robert Ware & Kai Nielsen

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How Marxism Is Analyzed: An Introduction*

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I Analytical Marxisms and Their Methods

What has come to be called 'analytical Marxism' is to be celebrated when properly understood. It is a phenomenon that has engaged some of the best people in philosophy, political science, economics, sociology, and other disciplines. In the last fifteen years there has been a blossoming of analytic studies on Marx and on Marxism in the mainstreams of academic disciplines, with the first impetus coming from philosophers who had been working in the analytic tradition. During the previous sixty years of analytic philosophy virtually nothing was said about Marxism. It was not even considered worthy of philosophical attack. Bertrand Russell, who did write on Marxist topics, confined his considerations on Marx to popular texts. Karl Popper, who did take Marxism seriously philosophically, concentrated on criticisms which were in any case ignored by analytic philosophers. For some, this just reinforced the rejection of analy-

* I am grateful to Kai Nielsen for helping me to clarify and correct several points in an earlier draft.

tic philosophy, a rejection that in Anglo-American circles was most persistent in the British journal *Radical Philosophy* and the American journal *Telos*, both of which looked to the thriving work of European Marxists.

Then in the early 70s, work began to appear in analytic philosophy using all the rigor and conceptual clarity that characterized that tradition and applying it to central topics in Marx's writings. Most notable in those very early days were G.A. Cohen's article on historical materialism (Cohen, 1970) and Allen Wood's article on Marx's moral theory (Wood, 1972). These were followed quickly by numerous articles and books on both of those subjects. In 1978 alone there were three important books with an analytic approach published on historical materialism: the books by Cohen, Shaw, and McMurtry. Around the same time, work in Marxist moral theory was flourishing, with important articles in collections by Arthur and Shaw (1978), Marshall Cohen, et al. (1980), and Nielsen and Patten (1981). All along, many of the established journals in analytic philosophy were publishing articles on various topics in Marxism. Numerous collections of articles were also being published, partly spurred on by the 1983 centenary of Marx's death. Now in 1989 there are already six volumes in the series that promotes a 'new paradigm,' *Studies in Marxism and Social Theory*, edited by G.A. Cohen, Jon Elster, and John Roemer. Publication in 'analytical Marxism' continues unabated.

This bustle of research and flurry of publication called 'analytical Marxism' must be properly understood, however. Analytical Marxism is certainly a phenomenon, but it is a mistake to think of it as anything like a movement or school. It is equally wrong to think of it as a theory or even a 'paradigm,' whatever is meant by that overworked term. The alternative names that have been suggested for this phenomenon themselves indicate the fragmentation of the work. Besides 'analytical Marxism' we have 'game theoretic Marxism,' 'neo-classical Marxism,' and 'rational choice Marxism,' depending on the author considered or the focus of attention. In this section I argue that there are different analytical Marxisms with differences of approach, method, and, to some extent, content.

The differences of approach can be seen clearly in the early self-descriptions of the leading contributors. G.A. Cohen was clear that

he was working within the constraint of 'those standards of clarity and rigour which distinguish twentieth-century analytical philosophy' (Cohen, 1978, ix) and it is Elster's assessment that Cohen did this admirably (Elster, 1985, xiv). In a similar vein, Richard Miller tries to show that 'Marx should be a classic for modern philosophy, including analytic philosophy' and correspondingly that 'the tradition of detailed, abstract and imaginative analysis in English-speaking philosophy has an enormous contribution to make to Marxist social theory' (Miller, 1984, 4 and 6; see also Miller, 1983).

Many of the contributors in this volume would agree with this aim of Marxist analysis. After all many of them have been strongly influenced by the dominant tradition in English-speaking philosophy known as 'analytic(al) philosophy,' and if nothing else they want to preserve the rigor and clarity of that tradition. Indeed, that is about all that remains that is distinctive of analytical philosophy, which began with the analysis of meaning, concepts, or language in Bertrand Russell, Ludwig Wittgenstein, J.L. Austin, and Gilbert Ryle. It is a small irony that now when many in the tradition are writing about 'post-analytic philosophy' or going 'beyond analytic philosophy' many doing Marxist philosophy are happy to speak of analytical Marxism. It is a way to designate this phenomenon of doing Marxism using the high standards of clarity and argument that are the aim of English-speaking philosophers.

'Analysis' means something quite different to the social scientists, however. The social scientists emphasize tools and models. For example, in Roemer's introduction to *Analytical Marxism*, he claims that its practitioners use the 'contemporary tools of logic, mathematics, and model building' (Roemer, eds, 1986, 1). It is particularly the mathematics and model building that is important, in his view, for 'schematizing, simplifying, and modelling' (1; see also his introduction to Roemer, 1981). Or as the statement about the series, *Studies in Marxism and Social Theory*, claims, the books will use 'the tools of non-Marxist social science and philosophy.' This is the self-description of the social scientists. (It should be noted that almost all of the work in this series is by social scientists.)

Generally, philosophers do not use mathematics and model building, especially in studying Marxism. There are no special tools for philosophy at all. Perhaps there was a time when logic might have

been thought of as a tool. This is the sort of thing found in the writings of the logical positivists, but their appeal to tools of logic and linguistic analysis has long since been abandoned. For several decades, so-called analytical philosophers have emphasized 'the style of analytic philosophy, its conceptual resourcefulness, clarity and tolerance for detail' (Miller, 1984, 172). This is the self-description mentioned above of philosophers working in analytical Marxism.

If there is anything left to analytical philosophy, it is not a method, much less its tools, but a style emphasizing detail, clarity of interpretation, and rigor in argument. Originally in Russell and the early work of Wittgenstein there was a concern with the analysis of meaning (language or concepts) or matter. However, since the later work of Wittgenstein almost half a century ago which attacked his earlier 'analysis,' most have been persuaded that there are no atoms for philosophical analysis. This has been reinforced by W. V. O. Quine's attack on semantic analysis. Whatever the truth is in these matters, most philosophers who continue the tradition at all do not think there are linguistic or conceptual atoms to be analyzed. The history of philosophical analysis of this kind has run its course. Contemporary 'analytical' philosophy does, however, emphasize conceptual interpretation and exegesis. Emphasis on the details of implications and arguments is also distinctive, as is the case in much of the Marxist analytical philosophy.

It is difficult to find any contemporary method of analysis used in philosophy. At most there is a concern with details of meaning and of conceptual and logical implications. Whatever analysis is in the social sciences (they do not have histories of analytical movements), it is quite different from anything in philosophy past or present. For an economist like Roemer, analysis involves the application of mathematical models using the equilibrium method of neoclassical economics, about which he has no great confidence (Roemer, 1981, 10). What is more widespread amongst the social scientists is the interest in the analysis of social phenomena into individual action using some form of methodological individualism. In various ways this is found in the work of Elster, Przeworski, and Taylor. All of them have called for work in the microfoundations of individual rational choice using what has now come to be called

'rational choice theory.' (I return to this much discussed part of analytical Marxism in Section III.)

This does lead to a certain amount of agreement about content but more amongst the social scientists than the philosophers. For one thing, it is almost universal now amongst contemporary philosophers to be anti-foundationalist. It is widely thought to be misguided to think that there are any basic principles or foundations, a mistake deriving from Descartes. There are no foundations that can secure all other claims in a theory or that are preliminary to all other investigations. All theorizing must develop in coherence with the rest of our thinking. Second, many of the analytical Marxist philosophers have rejected or attacked various forms of methodological individualism, most notably Miller (1978), Cohen (1982), Ruben (1985), and Levine, et al. (1987). Unlike the social scientists, the philosophers, in general, are not enamoured of individualistic microfoundations. But it is also true that there are few things on which analytical philosophers agree, a characteristic generally true of analytical Marxist philosophers as well.

In many ways the analytical Marxism done by philosophers is not the analytical Marxism done by social scientists. (I suspect there are also differences to a lesser degree between disciplines in the social sciences themselves.) The differences between philosophers and social scientists are exhibited in the two important analytical Marxist texts on Marx's writings: the philosopher Allen Wood's *Karl Marx* (1981) and the political scientist Jon Elster's *Making Sense of Marx* (1985). The former is much more exegetical and conceptual while the latter emphasizes rational choice theory. It is understandable but no less amazing that Elster in his comprehensive *Making Sense of Marx* has virtually nothing to say about analytical Marxist philosophers other than Cohen and indeed does not even include most of the philosophical works mentioned above in his long bibliography. It is misleading to say in the series statement to that book and others that there is a new 'paradigm,' an overworked and ambiguous term, anyway. There is no one theory of analytical Marxism, not even one way of doing analytical Marxism. It is certainly not a movement, either theoretical or practical, with a core set of beliefs. Those who engage in analytical Marxism have all sorts of beliefs and approaches.

Still, analytical Marxism(s) is an important phenomenon. The mere existence of Marxism as an area of investigation, especially in philosophy, is important in itself. An enormous amount of work is being done in a significant area previously ignored. I think the articles collected in this volume show the value and high quality of work that can be produced. It is also important that despite the differences of approach indicated above there is important interdisciplinary work that brings diverse approaches in contact. (The interdisciplinary work is pursued in a very practical way in annual sessions in England attended by central figures in philosophy and the social sciences.) The work in this volume exemplifies this interdisciplinary contact. Although most of the contributors to this volume are philosophers, a significant portion of their work deals with the social scientists' analytical Marxism. There are also important contributions by social scientists. There is no school of analytical Marxism, but on the other hand the phenomenon has brought together diverse views and approaches more than any Marxist movement has.

Even in philosophy, analytical Marxism is a phenomenon rather than a school, or at most an approach with a distinctive style. Attention to rigor and detail is now pursued in practically every way, and virtually any form of theorizing and any position at all can be considered and assessed according to the standards of such theorizing. All theoretical methods are possible subjects for philosophical investigation with rigor and detail. These can include the methods and tools of social scientists, although as I have said these have not been the concern of analytical Marxist philosophers.

It is thus a misconception of analytical philosophy to say, as Paul Ricoeur is quoted as saying, that 'there is no method of discourse available between analytical philosophy and Marxism' (*The Guardian* [London: Tuesday, August 23, 1988]). The work that I have referred to above and the papers by analytical philosophers in this collection show that Marxism is as good a subject for analysis as any other. Some may think that there is an inconsistency between the concern for analysis and detail and the concern in Marxism for a synthesis of the whole, but it is clear that Marx is not included among those who have thought so. Marx often wrote about being analytical, even down to the 'minutiae.' (For example, see Marx, 1976, 90 in the preface to the first edition of *Capital*, vol. I.) Whatever notion

of analysis there is in analytical philosophy, it is so broad that we can say with Mao Zedong that a dialectical approach 'means being analytical about everything' ('A Dialectical Approach to Inner-Party Unity,' *Selected Works of Mao Tsetung*, Vol. 5, 514). If there is an inconsistency between dialectical thinking and analytical thinking, I do not know anywhere that it has been shown. It is another question, which I discuss below, whether there are adverse tendencies in analytical approaches.

On the other hand, it must be recognized that few analytical Marxists give any importance to dialectics except as a very abstract way of talking about interrelations and change. This is one place where there is widespread agreement among analytical Marxist philosophers and social scientists. Many would include the dialectic, or at least most applications of it, among the 'increasingly discredited methods' alluded to in the series statement. There is at least a difference of attitude here between analytical Marxists and classical Marxists of various kinds. (For a sympathetic discussion of dialectics, see Wood's *Karl Marx*. Under one interpretation of dialectics, Elster also thinks it is an important Marxist contribution to preserve. See Elster, 1985, 37-48.) The neglect of dialectics will be enough for some to eschew analytical Marxism. Arguments that this neglect has led to serious mistakes are found in the papers by Sayers and by Mandel in this volume. I personally think that the questions of methodology are still too obscure on both sides to establish any inconsistency or logical faults of either method. I also think both approaches can be legitimate, although again it is important to know the tendencies of one's tools and methods.

II What Is Left of Marxism After Analysis?

Some would say that there is little more than mere remains of Marxism after analysis. Some of the practitioners of analytical Marxism encourage this impression. Roemer is not sure that the work he supports should be called Marxist (Roemer, ed., 1986, 2). Elsewhere he says 'that the lines drawn between contemporary analytical Marxism and contemporary left-liberal political philosophy are fuzzy. This indicates there is a common core' (Roemer, ed., 1986, 200).

Elster's judgment is more severe and extreme. Among the things that he thinks Marx was wrong about and that should be rejected are 'scientific socialism, the labor theory of value, the theory of the falling rate of profit, the unity of theory and practice in revolutionary struggle, and the utopian vision of a transparent communist society unconstrained by scarcity' (Elster, 1986, 4; see also 188-94). The salient question (the question that Levine and Norman discuss in this volume) is what is living in Marxism according to analytical Marxism. If the answers are those of Roemer and Elster, it is not surprising that many would find analytical Marxism anti-Marxist. (See Schweickart [1988], Lebowitz [1988], and Burawoy [1989] among others.) However, this judgment is misplaced.

Such a general assessment is usually made with regard to the social scientists among whom there is more unity and agreement. As I remarked above, there is little if any common content in the writings of different analytical Marxist philosophers. Practically any claim made by one author is challenged by another. This becomes clear if one looks widely at the literature. Those who follow analytical approaches, especially in philosophy, take up virtually any claim as an object of investigation. Certainly all of the views above that Elster wants to reject have been defended by one philosopher or another using an analytical approach. So in the phenomenon of analyzing Marxism, most things remain and most are attacked. Some of this contentiousness and diversity of views can be seen in the essays in this volume, although not all of the contributors would identify themselves as analytical, or even as philosophers.

The prominence and comprehensiveness of Elster's *Making Sense of Marx* can mislead one into thinking that his views are those of a school but they aren't. There are deep differences even amongst those who meet annually and publish in the series of studies in Marxism and social theory. The debate between Cohen and Elster on functionalism and methodological individualism is perhaps best known. Taylor has also challenged Elster's individualism (*Inquiry* 1986, 3-10). Przeworski has challenged Roemer's account of class conflict (Przeworski, 1985, 223-38). The differences are much greater when you look more broadly at the literature available, including now the essays collected here.

There are still undeniably some positions that are widely, if not universally, held by Marxists using analytical approaches, especially Marxist social scientists. I have already mentioned the widespread rejection of dialectics. The labor theory of value is also commonly eschewed. And particularly amongst social scientists it is widely held that some form of rational choice theory based on methodological individualism should be applied. These positions are not universally held, but I think it should be recognized that their prevalence can have an effect on the direction of continuing research. I turn now to some issues in methodological individualism and rational choice theory, which have been the focus of so much attention in the literature. They are also topics of several articles in this volume.

Methodological individualism takes many forms (see Levine, et al., 1987 and Schmitt and Cunningham in this volume). On Elster's view, it is the reductionistic 'doctrine that all social phenomena . . . are in principle explicable in ways that only involve individuals' (Elster, 1985, 5). An ontological reason for advocating individualism is that the constituents of anything to be socially analyzed are apparently individuals. They are said to be the relevant units, the atoms, for any investigation (see Roemer, 1981, 7). A similar point is made by Elster when he says that by looking at individuals we 'reduce the time-span . . . between cause and effect' (1985, 5). Not only are individuals the atoms, but they are also seen as the only real units of social cause and effect. Thus, Elster says (Elster, ed., 1986, 3) that collectives or supra-individuals do not make rational choices, they do not decide, or presumably do anything else of interest to the social scientist. Maybe not, but no argument is given for this claim. Elster seems to be committed to saying that collectives, e.g. parliaments, cannot literally make decisions and that teams cannot win games, since only individuals do things. (I criticize this ontological stance in Ware, 1988). It is not even clear that social entities are constituted by individuals (Ruben, 1985), but even if they are, it is questionable that they are the only relevant units for theorizing.

Discussions on this topic too often seem to turn on a false dichotomy of there being only individuals or only societies with their structures. Surely it is plausible that many social institutions and other entities of different complexities should be part of the explanation. (This is sometimes suggested by Przeworski, especially in his joint

work with John Sprague. See Przeworski, 1985, 99-132. See also Taylor's work in Taylor, ed. [1988] and *Inquiry* [1986], Carling [1986], Lash and Urry [1984], and Hindess [1984] on this view.) There will undoubtedly also be other things, for example the climate, that will have explanatory impact on what happens in a society. Not everything that happens will be completely explained by the choices and actions of individuals. The point made by Levine, et al. (1987) is important. Even if societies can be ontologically reduced to individual atoms, it does not follow that explanation of social action can be reduced to explanation of individual action. Psychology is widely thought to be supervenient on physiology but not reducible to it. There is no one physiological description for each psychological description. That serves as a model for the relation between sociology and individual psychology (see Levine, et al., 1987 and Kincaid, 1986).

This leads to a methodological reason for individualism. Individualism in analytical Marxism began with a concern about crude functionalism in Marxism, the view that if something serves the ruling class then it consequently exists for that purpose. Explanations cannot be derived so simply. It may be that the mass media, for example, serve the bourgeoisie and that the existence of the mass media is accounted for by their function, but if so we need to know why or how. According to Elster, we need to know the mechanisms behind something happening. It was Cohen's argument that we do not always have to know the mechanisms or 'elaborations,' as he prefers although we may assume that there are some. It can be agreed that we can enrich our understanding by knowing the mechanisms, but it does not follow that they are only individuals or even in any way *micro*-mechanisms (*pace* Roemer, 1981, 7f and Elster, 1985, 5, but in accord with much of his explanatory practice). To know how something happens is not necessarily to know what happens with the atomic parts. That is true only if reduction is established, but it is implausible that social theory can be reduced to individual psychology. As we know from other sciences, enriching a science usually does not involve ontological reduction and often cannot be done by giving atomistic laws. But this debate both about the natural sciences and the social sciences is far from settled.

This call by the Marxist analytical social scientists for microfoundations is meant to establish the generality of rational choice explanations of social phenomena, of explanations that depend only on the rational behavior of individuals. Such rational choice explanations are frequently put in terms of self-interest and/or distribution. Even when put in the most general terms of preferences, it is not at all plausible that such rational choice explains everything. Of course self-interest (as well as other-regarding interest) of rational individuals will frequently be relevant, and in the case of some actions may be all there is. It is certainly plausible to consider how anyone might look after him- or herself. Popkin (1988) shows how incentives can be important without showing that rational self-interest is the only source of explanation. Little (this volume) also shows the importance of rationality in social explanation, along with many other factors. It is not plausible to make rational choice the whole of one's theory, however, as often seems to be the case.

Two challenges to the view that all individual behavior is the result of rational choice come immediately to mind. One might be called the Hobbesian challenge because of Hobbes' challenge: read thyself. This was his challenge to those who might doubt his view that people are always self-interested. When I read myself, however, I do not find the sort of thing that either Hobbes or the analytical social scientists claim is the whole of our nature. Nor do others appear wholly rational and self-interested. It was Hobbes who should have looked again. A second challenge to rational-choice theory might be called the paying-rider challenge. Rational-choice theory, with its constraints, has given us the clear and difficult problem of the free-rider. It is clear that it is often to my benefit to be a free-rider. But then the question immediately arises of why there have been so many people who have seemingly acted against their interests, why so many find it reasonable to dissent or even join a revolutionary movement. This raises questions about the explanatory adequacy of the theory itself. (See Ripstein, this volume.)

It has to be recognized that there are many factors other than rationality that explain human behavior. Elster mentions some of them: 'habit, tradition, custom. . . duty' (Elster, ed., 1986, 23). There are also non-rational, but nonetheless human, responses such as reacting out of depression or rising up in anger. Marx certainly

thought there is more than rationality when he talked about the courage and self-sacrifice that workers would need in class struggle. Several different factors may be involved in any one adequate explanation. Furthermore, it is not out of the question that there will also be non-intentional human behavior, for example responses of fear and nervous reaction, particularly in times of social struggle. Rational choice is surely not the only explanation of behavior. And if the point is that it is sometimes an explanatory factor, no one in their right mind would disagree. It is commonly held by rational-choice theorists that people 'by and large, behave rationally' (Elster, ed., 27), but it may be that it is closer to the truth to say that they behave rationally by and by. In any case, it is inappropriate to restrict explanations of behavior to rational choice.

As Elster admits, 'voting behaviour provides one of the strongest cases against the omnipotence of rational-choice explanation,' but he also suggests that rational-choice theory will be most useful in 'medium-sized decisions, when the alternatives differ somewhat but not greatly' and less useful in strategic and urgent decisions (Elster, ed., 1986, 14 and 20). It would seem that rational-choice theory will be less useful in the large-scale social events of the sort on which Marxism focuses. Those are also the events where strategy, urgency, and emotion are prominent. In explaining individual action, any Marxist account should look to rational choice, but many other factors as well. Of course, even then the explanatory role that there might be for collectives, institutions, and social structures should not be excluded.

III Some Research Tendencies

Any theorizing, including Marxist theorizing, will have certain research tendencies which we would be well advised to consider. We may not be able to decide whether methodological individualism is right or to what extent we should use rational-choice explanations, but we should be more conscious of where our research programs are taking us. As I have suggested above, there is more than one research program in the phenomenon of analytical Marxism. Many 'analytical Marxists' do not accept either methodological individu-