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# A Brief History, Scope and Peculiarities of ‘Analytical Marxism’

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*Abstract:* The issue of the paper is to describe and to evaluate analytical Marxism, a school of thought which occupies a particular position in radical theory. It has presented itself as an attempt to renew Marxism with the tools of non-Marxist philosophy (analytical philosophy), epistemology (logical positivism), and social science (methodological individualism). The main authors are Gerald A. Cohen who defended historical materialism on the basis of analytical philosophy, John Roemer who reconstructed Marxian economics with neoclassical tools and Jon Elster who interpreted Marxism with methodological individualism. Rational Choice Theory plays an important role in analytical Marxism. This paper deals with the idea that analytical Marxism seems to have turned Marxism into its opposite.

*Keywords:* *Marxism, historical materialism, analytical philosophy, neoclassical economics, rational choice*

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## Introduction

Beyond its diversity, it seems a consensus exists that radical economics is unified by its critique of capitalism – which corresponds to an implicit or explicit reference to Marx – and of mainstream economics that supports it, whether it is neoclassical or Keynesian<sup>2</sup>. During the sixties and the seventies, with the demonstration by Sraffa (1960) of the existence of an objective theory of value, and its substantive extensions by other authors, a powerful critique was developed against neoclassical economics. This was a critique of its inner logic, but its supporters did not give any reply. During the seventies, Marxian economics started to revive, and in the United States, at the end of the decade, two schools of thought claimed themselves to be Marxist or close to Marxism: the “Social Structure of Accumulation” and “Analytical Marxism”<sup>3</sup>. The main authors of the Social Structure of Accumulation are Gordon, Bowles (who also participated in studies of analytical Marxism), Kotz, Edwards, Reich... This school can be partly associated with the French Regulation School, and it is also linked with theoretical grounds other than Marxism, like Keynesianism and institutionalism. Its subject is mainly the integration of political and ideological institutions in the Marxist theory of crises, and it is in keeping with the core tradition of radical economics, in so far as they use Marxist tools for an analysis of contemporary capitalism.

From this tradition, analytical Marxism has kept the interest in Marxism, but it uses it more as a theoretical framework to be tested itself than as a tool for analyzing capitalism. Thus, this school can be partly associated with radical economics, in the sense that it deals with Marxism, but with a different logic: it does not use Marx’s theory in order to study capitalism, but it studies Marx’s theory itself. This paper focuses upon analytical Marxism for epistemological reasons and because those studies, that deal with all the humanities, economics, sociology, history, philosophy, political science, were widespread and submitted

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<sup>2</sup> See Roberts 1992b: 2.

<sup>3</sup> For a comparison, see Dumasy, Rasselet 1999.

to intense debates and arguments. It is noteworthy that this school was born on the eve of a period marked both by a relatively strong revival of conservatism, especially in the United States and in Great Britain, and by a loss of influence of Marxism. Analytical Marxism has presented itself as an answer to the widespread claim that Marxism is dead.

Although it offers a relatively strong diversity, analytical Marxism derives its own unity not only from its subject, Marx's theory, but also from its use of traditional academic methods that are not from Marx. It conceives Marxism mainly as a set of cognitive tools, enabling the setting up of a research program with multiple entries, with no specific methodological foundation, and this leads to many internal debates. The object of analytical Marxism is to determine the core and the periphery of the Marxist research program<sup>4</sup>, in order to "reconstruct fragments of Marxism which can be salvaged as a social science" (Lock 1991: 131, personal translation).

The present paper aims to assess analytical Marxism with regards to its own objective to *reconstruct, recycle, reconceptualize, rejuvenate, restrict, rethink, make sense of*<sup>5</sup> Marxism. We will try and clarify what Marxism can evolve into, when combined with epistemological tools that are traditionally presented as contradictory to Marxism, and we will speculate upon the impact of such a perspective on the future of Marxist analysis.

So this paper presents the foundations of analytical Marxism, determines its scope, brings out its specificity and looks at authors who undoubtedly constitute its hard core. It deals with Cohen, who is the pioneer of analytical Marxism with his analytical defence of historical materialism, and studies the way in which he set the epistemological foundations of analytical Marxism. Then, it presents the results reached by John Roemer, the originality of which is to achieve an unlikely connection between Marxian economics and neoclassical economics, partially founding his studies on Cohen's epistemological assumptions. Next, we analyse how Jon Elster developed an overall approach by basing himself explicitly upon Cohen's and

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<sup>4</sup> William Shaw evokes a "socio-scientific research program" (1986: 209).

<sup>5</sup> All these words have been used in the analytical Marxist literature.

Roemer's studies. He went even further and seemed to present Marx as self-contradictory. Finally this paper deals with Rational Choice Marxism, the most influent subset of analytical Marxism, as a field of confrontation between two paradigms that are traditionally considered as irreconcilable enemies.

## **I The specificity of analytical Marxism: the denial of any methodological specificity of Marxism**

If there is a single professor in the United States who teaches political economy and admits himself a Socialist, that professor is a needle which I have been unable to find in our academic hay-stack. (Sinclair 1924: 436)

These words were pronounced in the twenties by an American scholar – corresponding to the whole English-speaking academic world – and they still seemed to be topical in the late seventies, when Perry Anderson wrote that no “major body of Marxist theory [has ever been written even though] the working class [in Great Britain] has remained industrially the most powerful of the world” (1979: 102). Two years later, Elster observed “a curious fact... the absence of an English Marxism” (1981: 745, personal translation). It seemed that academic traditions in English-speaking countries kept American and British intellectuals far from Marxism.

### **1. The birth of a school of thought**

Things changed with the publishing of Cohen's book *Karl Marx's Theory of History: a Defence* in 1978, to which the emergence of analytical Marxism corresponds. Peter Singer wrote the following year that

most of the analytical philosophers think the application of the standards of clarity and rigor to which analytical philosophy aspires sufficient to torpedo Marx's claims to philosophical greatness. Most Marxists show their implicit agreement with this view by spurning the

standards of analytical philosophy. Cohen attempts to defend Marx by using analytical standards of clarity and rigor to derive a tenable theory of history from Marx's words. (1979: 46)

In the wake of Cohen's book, Elster, Cohen and Roemer took the initiative of organizing annual meetings, which were held each September from 1979 until 2000<sup>6</sup>. The group took the name of September Group, and sometimes of Non-Bullshit Marxism Group<sup>7</sup>, referring to the general denial of dialectics by the authors. Besides Cohen, Elster and Roemer, academics who have taken part in the September Group are Pranab Bardhan, Sam Bowles, Robert Brenner, Alan Carling, Joshua Cohen, Andrew Levine, Adam Przeworski<sup>8</sup>, Hillel Steiner, Robert Van der Veen, Philippe Van Parijs, and Erik O. Wright. A few authors did not directly participate in these meetings but can be associated with topics that have been discussed: Michael Albert, Robin Hahnel, Stephen Marglin, David Miller, Richard Miller, GEM de Ste Croix, Michael Wallerstein, Allen Wood.

The scientific content of analytical Marxism is characterized by a strong diversity and little unity emerges from the group. The expression "Analytical Marxism" was used in seminars by Elster as early as 1980, and appeared as the title of a book by Roemer in 1986. Actually, that term had already been used before. The school of "Analytico-linguistic Marxism" was formed in Poland in the fifties<sup>9</sup>. Analytical Marxism is not directly related to it, but they have in

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<sup>6</sup> The 2001 meeting was cancelled because of the 9/11 events, and the group decided in 2002 to move to an every-other-year frequency. See Wright 2004.

<sup>7</sup> "And when a set of Marxists or semi-Marxists, who, like me, had come to abhor what we considered to be the obscurity that had come to infest Marxism – when we formed, at the end of the 1970s, a Marxist discussion group that meets annually, and to which I am pleased to belong, I was glad that my colleagues were willing to call it the Non-Bullshit Marxism Group" (Cohen 2002: 323).

<sup>8</sup> Elster and Przeworski left the group during the nineties.

<sup>9</sup> For further information see Skolimowski 1967, Nowak 1998.

common a clear separation of scientificity and ethics. A Japanese school, dealing with the mathematical formalization of Marx's work, is named "Analytical Marxism" too<sup>10</sup>.

Analytical philosophy presents itself as a way to decompose any complex set of elements into single elements, clearing up all the redundant ones. Any ambiguous expression must be given a logical form. Analytical philosophy can be defined as an "atomistic revolt against Hegelian holism" (Engel 1997, personal translation). The aim of logical positivism, according to Carnap, member of the first Vienna circle, is for science to rebuild, with simple logical connexions, the concepts which are used to describe the world. Analytical philosophy breaks complex wholes up into their different parts, and logical positivism puts them together. According to Erik Olin Wright, the aim of analytical Marxism is to

define a series of abstract concepts... and then specify the ways in which these concepts can be combined to generate more concrete categories of social forms. (1994: 112)

## **2. A critical reading of Marx**

Originally, analytical Marxism can be defined by what it is not, and by what it is opposed to. That is one reason why there is such diversity. It must be acknowledged that there is hardly any positive theory or methodological principle which is accepted by everyone. Some, like Bowles and Van Parijs, do not claim themselves to be Marxists<sup>11</sup>. Nevertheless, everyone agrees to the following:

- They attribute a lack of clarity and of rigor to Marx.

[The Preface] what is hardly more than a sketch of a theory has been effectively frozen into a dogma, immune from this often facile but sometimes trenchant criticisms levelled against it, and impervious to theoretical elaboration, or even clarification. (Levine, Wright 1980: 47)

- They privilege formal logic over Hegelian logic, i.e. dialectical logic, which is unanimously rejected, because it would reduce the intelligibility of Marxism<sup>12</sup>.

Analytical Marxism rejects any reference to dialectics. (Hervier 1995: 98, personal translation)

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<sup>10</sup> See Takamasu 1999.

<sup>11</sup> "I have never defined myself as a Marxist" (Van Parijs 1997: 17).

- They deny any methodological specificity to Marxism. To their minds, the peculiarity of Marxism rests in its ideas about the world.

In contrast to what is generally admitted, authors such as Jon Elster, John Roemer, Adam Przeworski and G.A. Cohen have argued that what is distinctive in Marxism is its substantive claims about the world, not its methodology, and the methodological principles widely held to distinguish Marxism from its rivals are indefensible, if not incoherent. (Levine, Wright, Sober 1987: 67-68)

- They are all critical of the labor theory of value and of the law of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall.

I know of no analytical Marxist, Cohen included, who accepts the law of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall, which is central to Marx's theory of crises in Capital volume III, and of only one, Brenner, who still holds the labour theory of value expounded in volume I to be true. (Callinicos 1987: 68)

Analytical Marxists differ on many points. Yet, their common objective is to build a scientific theory of society that could be useful for human emancipation. The initial objective of analytical Marxism is not to recreate the content of Marxism, but to modify its methodological corpus. In doing so, Marxism would prosper again, having got rid of its Hegelian legacy. In other words, analytical Marxists strive to combine the methods of "modern" social science with the core concepts of classical Marxist thought, assuming that such a combination is possible without denying or distorting Marxist insights. Analytical Marxism has often been considered as post-Hegelian Marxism. Indeed, whereas Marx kept the dialectical structure of Hegelianism and denied its idealistic content, analytical Marxism denies both the structure and the content of Hegelianism. At least during the first years, it was rather an anti-Hegelian and post-Althusserian Marxism since it applied a traditional methodology to Marxist philosophy, instead of finding its own specificity<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> According to Frege, member of the first Vienna circle, any theory is analytical when it begins with definitions and when it is contradicted by its own negative; any logic is always true, and dialectics goes against logic.



Marxism is considered as a neutral social science, and as such it is being reconstructed with the methodological tools of analytical philosophy, of logical positivism or of neoclassical economics. A specific feature of analytical Marxism is to question the specific methodological foundations of Marxism, which contradicts orthodox Marxism. Against Lukàcs – “the orthodoxy in terms of Marxism refers... exclusively to the method” (1960: 257, personal translation) – the answer is heterodox: “Marxism should be distinguished from other social thought, not by its tools, but by the questions it raises” (Roemer 1988: 176). Cohen asked three sets of questions:

What do we want? What... is the form of the socialist society that we seek?

Why do we want it? What exactly is wrong with capitalism, and what is right about socialism?

How can we achieve it? What are the implications for practice of the fact that the working class in advanced capitalist society is not now what it was, or what it was once thought to be?

(1988: xii)

All the contributions of analytical Marxism endeavour to answer at least one of these sets of questions.

### **3. A fragmentation of Marx’s work**

There is clearly not one feature of Marxist theory that has not been criticized in the September Group. The work of analytical Marxism covers many different topics, within a large theoretical field. It includes particular developments within the Marxist theory (Cohen 2000a, Roemer 1982a), empirical applications of Marxist concepts (Wright 1985, Przeworski 1985), reconstructions of what Marx wrote (Elster 1985a, Wright, Levine, Sober 1992), but never canonical statements of what ‘real’ Marxism is supposed to be.

The books in the series are intended to exemplify a new paradigm in the study of Marxist social theory. They will not be dogmatic or purely exegetical in approach. Rather, they will

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<sup>13</sup> Althusser intended to “discover what type of philosophy could best correspond to what Marx wrote in Capital... [I]t will not be a Marxist philosophy, it will be a philosophy for Marxism” (Althusser 1994: 37-38, personal translation).

examine and develop the theory pioneered by Marx in the light of the intervening history, and with the tools of non-Marxist social science and philosophy. It is hoped that Marxist thought will thereby be freed from the increasingly discredited methods and presuppositions which are still widely regarded as essential to it, and that what is true and important in Marxism will be more firmly established. (Presentation of “Studies in Marxism and Social Theory”<sup>14</sup>)

Analytical Marxism does not consider Marxism as one theory but as a set of theories that are more or less related to each other.

Rather, a number of distinct theories, logically independent and of unequal importance, can be imputed to Marx. (Elster 1978: 70)

Such an approach has led to various debates and reconstructions, always centred around the work of Marx in his so-called “maturity”. Analytical Marxism might therefore be summarized as an

attempt [...] to preserve the classical research programme by (a) reconstructing the theory of history along non-Hegelian lines and (b) replacing the classical labour theory of value with contemporary general equilibrium theory. (Carling 1997: 770)

Such a definition corresponds to the work of Cohen and Roemer respectively.

### Who are the analytical Marxists?

- **Cohen** initiated the constitution of analytical Marxism. He built up a defence of historical materialism with the standards of analytical philosophy and of logical positivism, as a sequence of causal explanations between different elements, which were precisely defined beforehand. His approach is mainly concerned with logical and linguistic analysis.
- **Roemer** is undoubtedly the analytical Marxist who is the most responsible for theoretical innovations, and his work has been much debated for this reason. Whereas

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<sup>14</sup> “Studies in Marxist Social Theory” (Cambridge University Press) is the collection in which analytical Marxist books have been published since Elster 1985a. This presentation appears in all the books of the collection.

Cohen presented a defence of Marx's theory of history, Roemer tried to reconstruct Marx's economic theory and he explicitly attempted to adapt it to contemporary tools in using neoclassical methodology (general equilibrium, game theory).

- **Elster** is the most accomplished author of this methodological turning point. He stands up for methodological individualism (not all the analytical Marxists do) and his work concerns the techniques of explaining the choices, strategies and actions of the actors. More generally he criticizes every aspect of Marx's theory and attempts to develop a reconstruction by way of the Rational Choice Theory.

## **II Cohen's interpretation of historical materialism: the methodological foundations and birth of analytical Marxism**

Departing from dialectical materialism, Cohen laid the foundations of a Marxism without a specific method. He studied historical materialism with the traditional tools of philosophy – analytical philosophy – and of science – logical positivism. He attempted to renew the way of thinking Marxism.

Cohen and his co-thinkers have casually crossed the supposedly impassable border between Marxism and the academic mainstream in philosophy and social theory. (Callinicos 1989: 3)

### **1. A favourable reception in English-speaking universities**

In *Karl Marx's Theory of History*, Cohen used the methods of analytical philosophy in order to defend historical materialism.

This book defends historical materialism [with] those standards of clarity and rigour which distinguish twentieth century analytical philosophy. (Cohen 2000a: ix)

Using these methods opened the doors of the English-speaking academic world to Marxism, as it weakened the resistance from radical academics who criticized Marxism for the lack of rigor of Marxian dialectics. This book was favourably received among English-speaking

academics, especially by those who were to become his fellow analytical Marxists. Elster and Roemer gave evidence to that:

With his vigorous and rigorous book, each page of which deserves passionate comments, [Cohen] leads us into a whole new world. The atmosphere that we breathe here is not the stagnant atmosphere of the endless scholastic discussions that almost ruined Marxism. It is the air of the mountains. It is rare but we can see clear and far. (Elster 1981: 756, personal translation)

Cohen's book did something that had not been done before: it defined the theory of historical materialism as a set of claimed theorems following from a set of postulates, and it subjected the validity of the postulates and the inferences drawn from them to the scrutiny which has come to be the hallmark of analytical philosophy. (Roemer 1994: ix)

The book served as an impulse and rallying point for the meetings of the September Group. It became the founding document of analytical Marxism based on a large consensus rather than on scientific argument. As Carling maintains:

Marx's theory as a whole is not strictly monolithic, and the healthy parts may be recovered by striking out the diseased. Such a claim now receives considerable substantive support from the work of G.A. Cohen across broad stretches of Marx's theoretical project. (1984-1985: 408)

Yet, this book remained quite unrecognized in continental Europe – it has not even been translated into French or German. The importance of the book is based less on its theoretical propositions, which were not new, than on the mode of exposition and defence which was used by Cohen:

- He did not use a specific vocabulary.
- He gave special attention to the formulation of sentences.
- He asserted his intention to write in a clear and simple way.

## 2. Articulating historical materialism with its theses

Cohen made a precise and detailed examination of the Preface of *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (Marx 1971: 21, henceforth referred to as Preface). He selected one component of the Marxian corpus, namely, historical materialism, of which he made a systematic study and a conceptual analysis. It is noteworthy that Cohen does not support the whole content of Marxism, since he claimed in the same book that

[t]he theses of the labour theory of value are not presupposed or entailed by any contentions advanced in this book. (2000a: 423, stress in the original)

and elsewhere that

the labor theory of value is not a suitable basis for the charge of exploitation laid against capitalism by Marxists. (1979: 338)

Besides, more than just a principle that any researcher has to respect, such a stress on clarity and rigor is central to the intellectual construction of Cohen. To Marx, history is the conjunction of different elements, namely, the history of the development of productive forces, the history of the class struggle, and the history of men and women acting according to their own interests. Cohen attempted to articulate these statements with his own instruments, having an explicit aim: to renew the debate on Marxism. In doing so, he used statements that he took from the Preface:

In the *social production* of their life, men enter into definite relations... *relations of production* which correspond to a definite stage of development of their *material productive forces*. The sum total of these relations of production constitute the *economic structure* of a society, the real basis, on which rises a *legal and political superstructure*, and to which correspond definite *forms of social consciousness*... At a certain stage of their development, the material productive forces of society come in conflict with the existing relations of production... From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an epoch of social revolution. With the change of the *economic foundation* the entire immense superstructure is more or less rapidly transformed... No social formation ever

perishes before all the productive forces for which there is room in it have developed; and new, higher relations of production never appear before the material conditions of their existence have matured in the womb of the old society itself. (Preface, stress by us)

He identified some concepts that he considered as essential – “social production”, “relations of production”, “material productive forces”, “economic structure”, “legal and political superstructure”, “forms of social consciousness”, “economic foundation”. He brought them together into three sets – productive forces, relations of production, superstructure – and showed the interactions between them. He articulated his defence of historical materialism around two theses:

- ***The Development Thesis***: the productive forces tend to develop throughout history. This thesis is based on assumptions about nature (scarcity) and men (intelligence and rationality).
- ***The Primacy Thesis***: the productive forces have an explanatory primacy over the relations of production – which form the economic basis – and the economic basis has an explanatory primacy over the superstructure. In other words, the productive forces select the relations of production which allow them to develop, and the economic basis selects the superstructure which allows its stability.

The Primacy Thesis may be stated as a deductive-nomological model:

- The level of development of the productive forces determines which relations of production could allow the development of the productive forces

AND

- The relations of production which allow the development of the productive forces exist because they allow the development of the productive forces.

THEN

- The level of development of the productive forces explains the nature of the relations of production.

### 3. A technological determinism?

One of the main criticisms which were addressed to Cohen concerns his technological determinism. He was criticized for having privileged the technical and scientific area over the political, conscious and subjective activity, namely, the class struggle. So his theory was characterized as teleological, in that history would tend towards an inexorable end. For Marcus Roberts, one of his most incisive critics,

it still seems quite appropriate to identify Cohen's interpretation of Marx's theory of history as a technological determinist one: for him it is 'man's' preoccupation with technological development that is the ultimate determinant of the 'course of human history'. (Roberts 1996: 234)

Indeed, for Cohen, the development of knowledge is central to the development of productive forces, so that

in its higher stages the development of the productive forces merges with the development of productively useful science. (1978: 45)

In other words, Cohen did not question the transformation from rationality to action. Even while he tried to move away from Althusserian structuralism<sup>15</sup>, his interpretation was influenced by such a legacy, notably concerning the small place that it gives to human action. It has been claimed that Cohen's theory corresponds to a structuralist-type economic determinism, even if it has a humanistic component, with assumptions on human nature (rationality and intelligence). It was criticized for not sufficiently questioning the existence of class capacities that could transform the economic structure as soon as this structure impedes the development of productive forces. He seemed to assume that the interest in social change and the capacity of class to undertake change increase simultaneously. According to Levine and Wright, Cohen

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<sup>15</sup> "It is perhaps a matter regret that logical positivism, with its insistence on precision of intellectual commitment, never caught on in Paris" (2000a: x).

fails to understand the specificity of the role of social structural constraints in the formation of class capacities. (1980: 68)

He seemed to defend a “theory of historical inevitability” (Wright, Levine, Sober 1992: 53), a “transhistorical choice Marxism” (Roberts 1996: 81) and he could be accused of teleology, but he pretended to avoid such a pitfall by using the functional explanation, which claims that the presence of an item in a body is explained by the functions that it fulfils in this body. Such an explanation would give scientificity to Cohen’s account.

#### **4. An original resort to functional explanation**

To Cohen “the central claims of historical materialism are functional explanations” (1982: 7), which means that “the economic structure has the function of developing the productive forces, and the superstructure the function of stabilizing the economic structure” (1980: 129). Because the relations of production modify the level of development of the productive forces, it would mean that the existence of the former is functional for the latter. For Cohen, functional explanation is necessary to link the Development Thesis and the Primacy Thesis. He has been accused of functionalism, notably by Elster, but he claims that he is not a functionalist, since he does not support functional explanation in itself, but as a necessary mode of explanation of historical materialism.

I did not come to associate historical materialism with functional explanation because I thought functional explanation a good thing and I therefore wanted Marxism to have it. I began with a commitment to Marxism, and my attachment to functional explanation arose out of a conceptual analysis of historical materialism. (Cohen 1982: 33)

Functional explanation is not peculiar to social science, since many biological explanations are functional. Cohen used it as a consequence law in which the reason why consequences are explanatory is that they are favourable to the body to be explained. So it is from a methodological point of view that Cohen has been original. He did something that had never been done explicitly before, in using functional explanation to defend historical materialism.



He considered that, within the framework of analytical philosophy, functional explanation is the only way to save Marxism from being taken over by the ruling ideology, and by the intellectual hegemony of methodological individualism.

I believe, moreover, that there is no viable alternative construal of the central claims of historical materialism, so that if my defence fails, historical materialism fails. Hence the cost incurred by Marxism, if I am wrong, is considerable. (1980: 129)

Until the mid-nineties, Cohen never particularly proclaimed himself an analytical Marxist. It seems that his book was not intended to build a school of thought, but merely to defend historical materialism. Until the mid-nineties, he rarely used the term “Analytical Marxism”. A rare occasion is the following:

I belong to a school of thought which has been called *analytical Marxism*. (1990: 363, stress in the original)

### **III. Roemer’s reconstruction of Marxian economics: the development of analytical Marxism**

Roemer used similar epistemological tools in Marxian economics than Cohen did in historical materialism. After initiating the use of neoclassical economics by radical economists<sup>16</sup>, he wrote three major books – the first on the economic foundations of Marxism (1981), the second and central one on exploitation and historical materialism (1982a), and the third which links the first two together with normative philosophy (1988) – in which he made a critical examination of the Marxian theory of value and of the law of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall, and in which he redefined the theory of exploitation with the help of neoclassical economics and game theory. He replaced the nature of the labor process by the differential property of the productive resources, he established an analytical and unnecessary relation between class position and exploitation, he showed an equivalence between the labor market and the capital market and he explored the forms of exploitation in the USSR.

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<sup>16</sup> See Roemer 1979

## 1. A further distancing

Roemer claimed that, since they are one century old, Marxian tools do not fit contemporary social science. He judged that any science which does not overcome its own founders is degenerating, and as well as physics forgot Galileo and contemporary microeconomics is not Smithian, Marxism must live without Marx.

I will rephrase the challenge in a language that I hope is comfortable to contemporary students of these questions, so that they will not have to battle with the linguistic and logical oddities of Marxist discourse. It is unfortunate, I think, that these oddities are preserved in much modern Marxist debate, because they unnecessarily dissuade those who do not already share the ideas from becoming acquainted with them. (Roemer 1988: 7)

For Roemer, Marxism is a question of language, and neoclassical formalization is the language to be used. Yet, he acknowledged that his approach is not a Marxian one for three reasons:

- His analysis is not explicitly historical.
- The concepts that he uses are not explicitly from Marx, but they are generalizations of Marx's concepts.
- No reference is made to Marx's texts in support of his arguments.

Referring to Lafargue<sup>17</sup>, and particularly basing himself on Morishima<sup>18</sup>, Roemer wanted to use mathematics in order to turn Marxism into a science. In *Foundations of Analytical Marxism* (1994), he defined Marxism as a hypothetico-deductive model, namely a set of theorems and premises subjected to rigorous examination, and he blamed the Marxists to be frequently guilty of functionalist mistakes. That is the reason why he tried to establish that microfoundations fit with Marxism.

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<sup>17</sup> "A science is only developed when it has acquired the capacity to use mathematics" (1891: 13, personal translation).

<sup>18</sup> "I believe we should recognize Marx as a mathematical economist" (1974: 612).

The avoidance of microeconomic analysis can lead to functionalism. If one does not investigate the mechanism by which decisions are made and actions carried out, one can too easily fall into the error of claiming that what is good or necessary for the preservation of the economic order comes to prevail. (1981: 114)

His approach is in terms of equilibrium.

Many classical Marxist arguments do not appear here or have been radically revised, because I think they are wrong. It is the case of the rate of profit. [...] The Marxism that I present here is articulated by contemporary economic tools, that is neoclassical economics. (1981: vii)<sup>19</sup>

He further confirmed such a claim: “The neo-classical model of a competitive economy is not a bad place for Marxists to start their study of idealized capitalism” (1986: 192) and he explained that in the following way: “Knowing no other method, I use the equilibrium method.” (1981: 10)

## **2. Deconstructing the labor theory of value**

Indeed, one purpose of my analysis is to show that those who are interested in the political and social ideas that Marxism stresses should not take the circuitous and misleading route of the labour theory of value. (Roemer 1988: 9)

Generalizing Morishima’s fundamental Marxian theorem – a positive exploitation is a necessary and a sufficient condition for the system to have a positive growth capacity and to ensure positive profits to the capitalists – Roemer claimed that any commodity can be exploited, and therefore that any commodity can play the role which is played by the labor force in Marx’s theory. To that end, he formulated a generalized theorem of exploitation of commodities: there is a profit if and only if each produced commodity has the feature of exploitability when it is used as a reference to calculate the incorporated value. For instance, he distinguished the rate of exploitability of labor force (Surplus labor per unit of labor force / Amount of labor required to produce that unit) and the rate of exploitability of corn (Surplus

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<sup>19</sup> See Morishima: “Our aim is to recognize the greatness of Marx from the point of view of modern advanced economic theory” (1973: 7).

corn per unit of corn / Amount of corn required to produce that unit). So he claimed that it is not for scientific reasons that Marx chose labor as a reference, but for normative reasons on the one hand (it is an inalienable commodity which considers relations between men, because all are endowed with it), and in order to fit in with historical materialism on the other hand (history is the history of class struggle).

Roemer judged Marx's labor theory of value from a microeconomic point of view, isolating the labor of each individual or of each class – taken as an individual entity – instead of considering the socially necessary labor time as an average of social labor, and he intended to reconstruct the conclusions of Marx's theory of value independently from that theory. Referring to Morishima (1973) and Steedman (1977), he claimed that qualitative differences between various kinds of labor lead to their incommensurability and that, for that reason, a labor theory of value cannot be established. A theory of exploitation must therefore be elaborated independently from the microeconomic concept of individual labor values.

Neoclassical equilibrium theory was used to reconstruct Marxist concepts in a way that purges them of what I think is the principal weakness of the Marxist analysis, namely, the labor theory of value. (Roemer 1988: 172)

Since he claimed the impossibility of determining the value objectively, ignoring by that the debate around Sraffa, Roemer asserted that the price is determined independently of the value.

Thus, value cannot be defined prior to the operation of the market. (1981: 203)

He still used Morishima's conclusions, according to which Marx confused the price system set up by competition, with the value system corresponding to the amount of labor which is necessary for the production. Roemer also claimed that the assumption of the subsistence wage, which he judged necessary for the labor theory of value to function<sup>20</sup>, is tautological, and he replaced a "special" theory of the subsistence wage by a "general" theory of the "class struggle" wage.

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<sup>20</sup> See Morishima 1974: 614: "under the assumption that each worker is paid wages only at the subsistence level (this is Marx's basic assumption)" (Morishima 1974: 614).

Once this replacement is made, Marx's implicit motivation for using the labor theory as an exchange theory, at *some* level of abstraction, dissolves. (1981: 203, stress in the original)

Without subsistence as an objective criterion, Roemer claimed that the issue of exploitation needs a normative justification.<sup>21</sup>

### **3. Refuting the law of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall**

Roemer supports the claim that Marx's view was formulated in microeconomic terms, especially in *Capital* volume III, as opposed to a functionalist tendency, according to which everything prevails which is good for a system or which is necessary for the death of a system – like the structural contradictions of capitalism. This means that it is necessary to search for the mechanism of decision-making and of the implementation of actions.

Because the technique of exploring the “microfoundations” of economic behavior may seem to many Marxists to be a neoclassical (and hence forbidden) methodology, it should be emphasized that this is not the case. (Roemer 1981: 114)

For instance, Roemer maintains that Marx explains the fall in the rate of profit as a macroeconomic phenomenon resulting from the competitive behavior of atomized economic units: in order to maximize their individual profit, capitalists substitute capital for labor, which leads to an increase in the organic composition of capital and then to a fall in the rate of profit. Roemer criticized this theory for its technological determinism. According to him, the so-called dogmatism of the increase in the organic composition of capital and of the fall in the rate of profit has prevented Marxism to develop creatively. Referring to Okishio's results (1961), Roemer claimed that technical improvement, in allowing an increase in the rate of exploitation, allows for more than a compensation of the increase in the organic composition of capital, so that the fall in the rate of profit is thwarted. The tendency of the rate of profit to fall is therefore not a structural feature of capitalism, and since this theory cannot be supported by structural elements, it can only be based on moral considerations. Roemer's

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<sup>21</sup> Yet, such a theory of “subsistence wage” was severely criticized by Marx when Lassalle proposed it. See Marx 1970.

microfoundational approach seems not to consider the role of competition between firms in the fall of the rate of profit and, contrary to Marx, he maintains:

What has been shown here is that if the rate of profit does fall under competitive capitalism, it must be due to an increase in the real wage. (1981: 108)

It seems that this issue is the only theoretical element on which all analytical Marxists agree.

#### **4. A transformation of the theory of exploitation**

Roemer straightaway separated scientific analysis from normative issues, with a preference for the latter.

I have chosen to concentrate on the equity issue, at the expense of an analysis of efficiency, because I believe it is perceptions and ideas about justice that are at the root of people's support for or opposition to an economic system. (1988: 3)

In separating a technical conception of and an ethical approach to exploitation, he came closer to contemporary radical theories in political philosophy, and he abandoned the scientific and objective aspect of the question of exploitation, which is based on the labor theory of value. For Roemer, the Marxian theory of exploitation is best conceived as a normative theory.

##### **4.1 Exploitation without labor**

As a result of the reconstructions described above, Roemer worked out a general theory of exploitation, in which the theory of capitalist exploitation is a special case. Distinguishing coerced exchange of labor (slavery, feudalism) and non-coerced exchange of labor (capitalism, socialism), he explained how the same kind of enrichment process might exist in both cases. His theory is intended to explain what he judged as a relation of exploitation in so-called socialist states, which appeared to him as a failure in the Marxist theory. This led him to claim that, in order to have a valid theory of exploitation, the assumption of the private ownership of the means of production must be dropped. Therefore, the institutional reasons for the Marxian exploitation would be the existence of competitive markets and of a differential ownership in the means of production, rather than a straight expropriation of

labor. In the context of a differential ownership of the means of production, the existence of competitive markets is sufficient to lead to exploitation and classes, without the requirement of an exchange of labor.

Following Morishima, Roemer tried to build a theory of exploitation independently of the labor theory of value and he treated exploitation as an optimization process. In a subsistence economy, any individual is exploited if he works longer than the labor time socially necessary to produce a subsistence amount of goods, and he is an exploiter if he works less than the labor time socially necessary to produce these goods. He then demonstrated that exploitation exists in capitalism, not directly because of the structure of capitalism, but because capitalists work less than the socially necessary labor time, whereas workers and peasants work longer than the socially necessary labor time. So exploitation may exist without any exchange of labor, without accumulation of wealth, without a surplus, without a transfer of surplus-value and without a class relationship. For Roemer the issue of exploitation is based on optimization models. Furthermore, if the agents are differently endowed with regards to their personal labor force, it might happen that rich producers are exploited, if a worker is endowed with a relatively strong personal labor force and if he is well paid but less than the value incorporated in his labor force, and conversely that poor producers are exploiters if they have a low wage, but higher than the value incorporated in their labor. Such a possibility would refute the correlation between exploitation and wealth. Therefore, instead of an internal relationship between class and exploitation, we have a theorem to be proved: the class-exploitation correspondence principle. Those who optimise in selling their labor force are exploited and those who optimise in hiring the labor force are exploiters. Roemer replaced the extraction of surplus labor by property relationships, and he claimed that exploitation can logically exist without any exchange of labor.

[T]here is a decided superiority of our formulation of capitalist exploitation in the game-theoretic manner to the Marxian formulation in terms of surplus-value: the game-theoretic formulation is independent of the labor theory of value. (1982a: 20)

So, for Roemer, the existence of any exploitation is conditioned by the initial endowment within the property relationships. He then developed the isomorphism theorem, in which the capital market (“the island of credit market”) has the same functions as the labor market (“the island of the labor market”). Any agent is exploiter or exploited in the same way as his fellow agent on the other island. Exploitation may occur through the exchange of commodities, and classes may exist with a credit market and without a labor market. The only condition is that the coercion is situated in the property relationships instead of being at the point of production, which is secondary. So the question of exploitation is not substantially related to the labor market and Roemer drew the following conclusion:

If the exploitation of the worker is an important concept, it is so for normative reasons – because it is indicative of some injustice and not because the exploitability of labor power is the unique source of profits. (1988: 54)

## **4.2 Exploitation and historical materialism**

Roemer tried to show a correspondence between historical materialism and his theory of exploitation. He claimed a continuity of Cohen’s approach.

Fortunately, there has been a renaissance of analytical work on historical materialism recently; worth special mention [is] the superbly clear account and defence of historical materialism of Cohen. (Roemer 1982a: 264)

Admitting that economic development is linked with the nature of the relations of production, he associated a peculiar form of exploitation with each mode of production. He conceptualized the notion of a socially necessary exploitation and he applied his model to different kinds of exploitation: feudal exploitation, capitalist exploitation and socialist exploitation. Capitalist exploitation corresponds to Marxian exploitation (without any obvious constraint) and feudal exploitation corresponds to neoclassical exploitation (with obvious constraint).

Each revolutionary transition has the historical task of eliminating its characteristic associated form of exploitation. (Roemer 1982a: 21)



He listed various specifications for the rules of retreat from the game, each of them corresponding to a specific form of exploitation, i.e. feudal exploitation, capitalist exploitation, and socialist exploitation. Going from feudal to socialist, any society goes through and eliminates various forms of exploitation, i.e. various forms of property relationships.

- Feudalism corresponds to feudal, capitalist, and socialist exploitations.
- Capitalism corresponds to capitalist and socialist exploitations.
- Socialism corresponds to socialist exploitation.

Each revolution has the function to eliminate a certain form of exploitation. The removal of capitalism is a necessary but insufficient condition to the “free development of all”. Then the communist revolution should abolish socialist exploitation through the establishment of the principle “to each according to his needs”. Then no objective reason would lead to privilege labor as a reference, and the straightforward reason would be its relation with historical materialism, which claims that history is the history of class struggle.

Clearly, then, historical materialism directs us to construct a theory which views people as exploited, and not corn, as the most efficacious research program. (Roemer 1982a: 284)

The labor theory of value could not be justified independently of historical materialism and as a result there would be no way to assert the validity of the labor theory of value as an objective theory. For Roemer the autonomy of any theory of value, and of the labor theory of value in particular, is a myth, and since he assumes that the Marxian economic theory rests is based upon that, he clearly stands out as a critique of it.

Roemer’s theory puts into relief the existence of a sharp discrepancy between analytical Marxism and radical economics, since it makes a big use of neoclassical economics as a neutral instrument, whereas radical economics defines itself in opposition to neoclassical economics, which is characterized as ideological. With all the criticism that neoclassical

economics has been subjected to during the sixties and seventies, which made it seem old-fashioned, it might seem strange that Roemer used it as a powerful instrument, especially to present Marxism. The low explanatory content of the theory, the conceptual incoherence of the general equilibrium theory, the existence of intransitive choice, the specialized character of the contemporary world economy are some of the points that prevent the general equilibrium theory from providing macroeconomics with solid microeconomic foundations, and make problematic the extensive use of it by Roemer. It seems that he ignores the debate about the inconsistency of neoclassical economics which preceded the birth of analytical Marxism. It might be true that Roemer opened the way for radicals to use neoclassical economics<sup>22</sup>.

#### **IV. Elster's methodological individualistic interpretation of Marx: a general critique**

Besides Cohen and Roemer, Elster is the third initiator of analytical Marxism. Whereas Cohen presented a defence of historical materialism, and whereas Roemer elaborated a reconstruction of Marxian economics, Elster developed an interpretation and an uncompromising critique of all the aspects of Marx's theory.

##### **1. A comprehensive and undialectical approach**

In his wide-ranging book (1985a) and in some other articles, Elster presented a comprehensive critical reading of Marx. All aspects of the theory were put under scrutiny. Since Elster is closely linked with the Anglo-Saxon intellectual tradition, which gives primacy to intentional actions, he meticulously tested the Marxian methodology, philosophy, economics, theory of history and theory of classes in the

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<sup>22</sup> We can note that certain contemporary radicals make some use of neoclassical economics (see Lee, Keen 2004), but it is not a general phenomenon. Many radicals like the Social Structure of Accumulation still firmly oppose its use.

light of the Rational Choice Theory. Yet, he neither made a defence nor a reconstruction of Marx's work, but presented his own deciphering of it. He mainly proceeded allusively: Marx "simply meant", "clearly has... in mind", "what I think Marx did have in mind", "Marx believed that" (1985a: respectively 249, 261, 270, 425), hence the title of his main book: *Making Sense of Marx*. Elster did not actually make sense of Marx, but of his own interpretation of Marx. Refusing to take Marx's theory as a whole, he broke it up into an economic theory and a theory of history which is itself separated into a theory of economic history (the relation between productive forces and relations of production) and a theory of class struggle.

Elster blamed Marxism for Hegelianism, for scientism and for a lack of evidence in its claims. He considered that the main contribution of Marx to the methodology of humanities is the general idea of the unintended consequences of intentional actions.

Whether we refer to this method by the terms 'dialectics' and 'social contradictions' is, by comparison, a secondary matter. (Elster 1985a: 48)

Refusing to consider Marxist methodology as a whole and claiming that Marx used various modes of explanation, Roemer judged that a part of Marx's work was based on methodological individualism, especially the theory of crisis stated in *Capital* volume III, and that on this issue Marx was antiteleological. He also held the opinion that Marx resorted to functional explanation, above all in his theory of history whose only aim would be to explain any event according to the consequences that would be favourable to the advent of communism (what is desirable is possible and inescapable); Marx would have been teleological on that issue. Even though Elster was clearly more censorious of the classical Marxist theory than Roemer, and even more than Cohen, he equally claimed a legacy of the latter:

I am sure there are many ideas that I believe to be my own that actually originated with him. (1985a: xv)

While Elster and Cohen disagreed on methodological issues such as methodological individualism versus functional explanation, they shared the broader framework of analytical philosophy.

## **2. Against functional explanation**

In the early eighties, shortly after the publication of Karl Marx's Theory of History, a fruitful debate took place on that point within analytical Marxism and in particular between Cohen and Elster. On the one hand, Cohen defended the use of functional explanation in historical materialism while, on the other hand, Elster pleaded for methodological individualism – in general and specifically in Marxism – as an assumption without any further scientific justification. The debate can be presented as follows: In the light of analytical philosophy and logical positivism, what is the proper method for explaining Marxism?

On the one hand, in trying to remain within a Marxist framework, Cohen took functional explanation and used it in order to advocate historical materialism. On the other hand, from a framework outside Marxism, Elster criticized functional explanation, as a critique of Marxism. He equated functional explanation and functionalism, and blamed functionalism as a feature of “the non-sense of the methodological choices of Marx and Marxism” (1985b: 627). For Elster historical materialism is a technological conception of history, a disembodied theory. He criticized Marxism for an insufficient integration of the class struggle and the development of productive forces.

There is no hint of any mechanism by which the class struggle promotes the growth of the productive forces. (1985a: 318)

He judged that the contradiction between relations of production and productive forces is just one contradiction among others, and that the problem with a superficial interpretation of historical materialism lies in the claim that relations of production, as soon as they are out of date, naturally disappear and are replaced by superior ones, without any social or political struggle. On the one hand, Cohen presented an internal analysis for historical materialism: he

searched for the explanatory mode that could fit historical materialism. Since he refused dialectical materialism, he needed functional explanation to keep consistency. On the other hand, Elster made an external critique: he seemed to have equated functional explanation with dialectical materialism (such a confusion is found in Lange 1962 as well), and functionalism with Hegelianism, and favored instead methodological individualism, intentional explanation, and game theory. Elster considered functional explanation as *arbitrary*, since everything could be used to vindicate capitalism<sup>23</sup> or the advent of communism, as *ambiguous* on the distinction between short term and long term, and above all as *inconsistent* because of the lack of any intentional actor to prove the beneficial long-term consequences. On that point Cohen maintained that historical materialism is in the Lamarckian stage of its elaboration, since the mechanism for its explanation exists, but has not been discovered yet:

It is... not implausible to suggest that historical materialism may be in its Lamarckian state.

(1980: 134)

Elster made this comment:

If Marx was Buffon in Marxism, Cohen is Lamarck; let us wait for Darwin. (1981: 754, personal translation)

Elster blamed Cohen for having a primitive view in the philosophy of science, a view he described as naïve verificationism in the same way the Vienna circle was criticized by Popper who looked for refutations and invalidations. Elster criticized Cohen, as Popper did with the first Vienna circle, for not being able to specify any mechanism that would justify their observation-based claims. All the same, Elster's conclusion was that Marxism is unscientific because it cannot be refuted. His advocacy for causal-intentional explanation was precisely aimed at giving a justification of methodological individualism and of game theory. Thus we can link post-positivist analytical Marxists to Elster, and post-Althusserian analytical Marxists to Cohen.

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<sup>23</sup> He refers to Jessop who wrote that "everything that happens in a capitalist society necessarily corresponds to the needs of capital accumulation" (1977: 364).

### 3. For an individualistic theory of history

Further on in the debate Cohen stated that historical materialism is articulated with a causal functional explanation and a non-intentional explanation, and Elster admitted that methodological individualism and functional explanation are not necessarily inconsistent, considering the existence of an implicit mechanism linking them, which explains why particular events occur. Thus the opposition between causal explanation and functional explanation disappears, since a functional explanation may be dealt with as a subset of a causal explanation. Elster's and Cohen's positions are simply two faces of the same coin. They both assert that Marxism must avoid dialectics and implement the tools of analytical philosophy and logical positivism in order to be intelligible. We can claim that Elster and Cohen have the same approach, but with different forms of specification.

Elster criticized Cohen for presenting a teleological view of history and for a lack of clarity – notably a confusion between productive forces and relations of production. He talked about a “conceptual jungle” (1985a: 300) in that historical materialism would have both a teleological explanation (unproductive relations of production disappear) and a causal explanation (the productive forces explain the relations of production). Elster blamed functional explanation – which he attributed to historical materialism – for being teleological and for resulting in a speculative philosophy of history. He therefore advocated a rejection of this theory of history which does not take individuals into account, since the contradiction between productive forces and relations of production is not sufficient to motivate a revolutionary action. Whether productive forces need, at a given time, new relations of production for furthering their optimal growth would be an *ad hoc* explanation. Marx, for instance, advocated capitalism as an unconscious agent for improvement and suggested a mechanism for it – the satisfaction of individual interests – but, according to Elster, he could not explain the reasons for the coincidence between individual interests and historical improvement, and he only replaced Leibniz's God and Hegel's Spirit by Humanity.

Concerning Hegel, Elster talked about “disembodied intentions, actions in search of an actor, verbs that are attached to no subject” (1985a: 109). He accused Marx of never having given any explanation for the mediating role of the class struggle in the contradiction between productive forces and relations of production. He then demanded the search for the microfoundations of collective action as a necessity. His conclusion was presented as self-evident:

It is not possible today, morally or intellectually, to be a Marxist in the traditional sense.

(1985a: 531)

Actually, it seems that Elster refuted his own interpretation of Marx and that his theory has striking similarities with non-radical economics: he uses mainstream instruments for an analysis whose content could fit into radical theory. Moreover, his use of Rational Choice Theory in his analysis of Marx is a part of what is known as Rational Choice Marxism.

## **V. Rational Choice Marxism: an explosive encounter**

Rational Choice Marxism, that includes Roemer, Elster and Przeworski, intended to use Rational Choice Theory, traditionally used to justify and defend capitalism, as a critical weapon against capitalism. Such a methodology was compared with the one that Marx used in the case of classical political economy. As Carling wondered:

What else did Marx do in *Capital* but subvert the classical political economy of his day by using it to draw anti-capitalist conclusions? (1990: 107)

### **1. Cohen overtaken by game theory**

Many analytical Marxists criticized Cohen and rejected historical materialism as a general theory of history. However the assumption of rationality that Cohen proposed was general enough to serve as a justification of Rational Choice Marxism. That is one of the reasons why many authors turned to a special analysis of the capitalist mode of production, especially of

class action and class formation. Such a theoretical basis favored the use of game theory. As Roemer asserted:

[T]he key propositions of historical materialism require reference to the specific forms of class struggle, and that understanding of such struggle is elucidated by game theory. (1982b: 513)

Unlike what has been stated on various occasions, analytical Marxism is not Rational Choice Marxism<sup>24</sup>, but Rational Choice Marxism is a subset of analytical Marxism. Such a confusion may be explained by the fact that the term analytical Marxism systematically appeared in a general way with the establishment of the foundations of Rational Choice Marxism.

Rational Choice Marxism was elaborated notably against the utopia and the irresponsibility attributed to the orthodox Marxism of the Second and Third Internationals by Elster and Roemer. They criticized that Marxian orthodoxy for its methodological collectivism, for its functionalism and for its dialectical method that are supposedly drawn from Hegel. With Althusser they fiercely condemned the Hegelian reversal. They claimed that methodological collectivism would give an ontological independence to collective subjects since the laws of development would be more explanatory than individuals: It would correspond to a disembodied intentionality, a teleology. They considered furthermore that formal logic is violated by dialectical logic, what would prevent understanding.

The combination of the neutrality claimed by analytical philosophy on the one hand, and the defects attributed to functional explanation on the other hand, may lead to the search for the microfoundations of Marxism. Instead of a dialectical interaction between individuals and society, Rational Choice Marxism gives an exclusive causal primacy to individuals. In fact, with Rational Choice Marxism, Marxism gave up its own objective, that is, to understand how a society works in its historical determinations. Rational Choice Marxism then appears as an unintended consequence of Cohen's analytical defence. He was undoubtedly a defender of historical materialism and an opponent to the neoclassical theory, and he probably never intended his defence to be used as a model for Rational Choice Marxism. But the limits of his

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<sup>24</sup> For instance, Wright and Brenner are analytical Marxists, but they are surely not Rational Choice Marxists.



approach lay in his methodological assumptions whose consequences he did not consider. In leaving some gaps in his own explanation, especially by not sufficiently justifying the Development Thesis, he got exposed to the charge of technological determinism and allowed his critics to assimilate his theoretical lacunae as defects of Marxism.

## **2. A central role to the individual actor**

For Elster game theory is necessary for Marxism in that only game theory can explain the movements of class struggle. Whereas for Cohen class struggle is an expression of the interplay between productive forces and relations of production, with a primacy to productive forces, Elster gives an exclusive primacy to the individual agency. Such a standpoint can be seen as a scientific revolution in the Marxist research program. As Przeworski puts it:

I am persuaded that we should fully embrace the game-theory approach to the understanding of economic phenomena and that we should limit the role of production models to the specification of technical relations that constitute constraints of game models... I see this procedure as a revolutionary breakthrough for the Marxist method. (1982: 302, 306)

Such a Marxism is based on the assumption that a relatively strong proportion of Marx's work, namely, the work of his so-called "maturity", was based upon methodological individualism. So game theory is used in order to analyze the processes of social interaction, with the following postulates:

- A social state depends on the actions that are chosen by individuals.
- A social structure does not entirely determine the individual actions.
- Individuals choose the actions which lead to the best results.
- Individuals judge other individuals as rational.

So the rational actor works as an embodied structure, representing the laws of history and the transhistorical logic of development. In historical materialist terms, feudalism was a fetter to the development of productive forces since it discouraged the individual initiative, whereas

capitalism, thanks to competition, leads to specialization, innovation, and accumulation.

Rational Choice Marxism obtained relatively important results:

- Dialectical materialism is replaced by methodological individualism and by neoclassical economics.
- The labor theory of value is unsuited to the theory of exploitation.
- An analysis in terms of relations of production is unsuited to the explanation of class formation.
- The interests of the capitalist class can fit in with the interests of the working class.

With rational choice analysis, the analytical Marxists definitely crossed the theoretical border between radical economics and non-radical economics by throwing Marx into the non-radical field. Marx's theory then lost his subversive character.

## **Conclusion: towards a normative leap**

Analytical Marxism was initiated by Cohen's defence of historical materialism, in which dialectical materialism was replaced with functional explanation. It was carried on by Roemer's neoclassical reconstruction of Marxian economics, assuming that Marxian economic concepts could be articulated with the assumptions of general equilibrium theory, despite their flawed character. It was generalized by Elster's use of methodological individualism in all aspects of Marx's theory, such a use leading to Rational Choice Marxism, a kind of Marxism without Marx. Analytical Marxism is not a homogeneous theory but is unified with its research subject, Marxism. The central claim of analytical Marxism is that the specificity of Marxism is substantial and not methodological. Having analyzed every aspect of Marx's work in the light of non-Marxist methods, they concluded that most of the theory is deficient. Therefore, going beyond game theory, the discussions focused on normative issues and intended to claim the superiority of socialism over capitalism. Roemer considered exploitation as a moral issue, separating the theory of exploitation from any scientific

explanation of capitalism as a specific social system. So, from an attempt to renew Marxism, analytical Marxism resulted in a theory of social justice, which Roemer summarized clearly, in asserting that

[i]t is not at all clear how analytical Marxists will differ from non-Marxist philosophers like Ronald Dworkin, John Rawls and Amartya Sen. (1986: 199)

The separation between scientific and normative issues, which was already sketched in *Karl Marx's Theory of History*, and the historical context which might lead to an easy assimilation of the dislocation of the Soviet Union with the death of Marxism, led to the eruption of normative issues. Such a normative turn was theorized in Cohen's two latest books, *Self-ownership, Equality and Freedom* (Cohen 1995) and *If You're an Egalitarian How Come You're So Rich?* (Cohen 1999).

Lacking the determination of the 'objective' optimum, 'analytical Marxism' is reduced to the big jump towards the ethical imperative. (Bensaïd 1995: 180, personal translation)

Analytical Marxism, a study of Marx's work by means of non-Marxist methodological tools, reached the conclusion that Marxism is scientifically flawed. Instead of questioning the tools that they were using – analytical philosophy, logical positivism, methodological individualism, general equilibrium – the analytical Marxists postulated that those tools are efficient and that Marxism is separated from its own method. Since such a premise needs arguments in order to be acknowledged and since these arguments were not developed by the authors, it is still possible to claim that Marxism survived analytical Marxism, and that the future of Marxism will probably be without analytical Marxism.

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