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ANOTHER MARXISM:
A DELIMITATION OF ANALYTICAL MARXISM

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Abstract: Gerald A. Cohen initiated Analytical Marxism in defending historical materialism on the basis of analytical philosophy and of logical positivism. This school of thought presented itself as an attempt to renew Marxism with non-Marxist methodological tools. John Roemer extended it in reconstructing Marxian economics with neoclassical tools and Jon Elster generalized it in interpreting Marxism with methodological individualism and Rational Choice Theory. This paper deals with the assumption that Analytical Marxism turned Marxism into its opposite.

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Keywords: historical materialism, analytical philosophy, logical positivism, neoclassical economics, rational choice

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Introduction

At the end of the seventies, in the English-speaking academic world, two schools of thought claimed themselves to be Marxist or close to Marxism: the “Social Structure of Accumulation” and “Analytical Marxism”. For a comparison between the two, you may look at Dumasy, Rasselet, 1999. The Social Structure of Accumulation, with Gordon, Bowles (who also participated in studies of Analytical Marxism), Kotz, Edwards, Reich... can be partly associated with the French Regulation School, 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 kept the interest in Marxism. However this school, under the initiative of Gerald A. Cohen, deals with Marxism with a different logic: it mainly 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 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.

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, in order to “reconstruct fragments of Marxism which can be salvaged as a social science” (Lock, 1990: 131, personal translation).

The present paper aims to assess Analytical Marxism with regard to its own objective to *reconstruct, recycle, reconceptualize, rejuvenate, restrict, rethink, make sense of* Marxism, verbs which have all been used in Analytical Marxist literature. We will try and clarify what Marxism can evolve into, when combined with epistemological tools that are traditionally presented as contradictory to it, and we will speculate upon the impact of such a perspective on the future of Marxist analysis. So we first present the methodological foundations of Analytical Marxism set by Cohen, then we display the way the school was constituted, and finally we deal with the two most accomplished authors of that methodological turn, namely John Roemer and Jon Elster.

1. Cohen’s interpretation of historical materialism: the methodological foundations of Analytical Marxism

Departing from dialectical materialism, Cohen set the foundations for a Marxism without a specific method. He studied historical materialism with tools of analytical philosophy and of logical positivism. He attempted to renew the way of thinking about Marxism. Within the Marxian theoretical corpus, he extracted the theory of history, on which he made a conceptual and analytical work. He did not judge the validity of historical materialism in comparison with real history, but on its conceptual consistency. In the traditional analytical way, he precisely defined the elements that constitute the theory beforehand, namely productive forces and relations of production, and then, as a logical positivist, he articulated them with theses, namely the Development Thesis and the Primacy Thesis.

1.1. Isolating the concepts: the hallmark of analytical philosophy

Before stating how the theory is structured, Cohen defined the concepts that appear within the Preface to the *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (Marx, 1971), from which the central ones are considered to be the productive forces and the relations of production.

He gave a strict definition of the productive forces, in claiming that “only what contributes materially within and to productive activity as Marx demarcates it counts as a productive force” (2000, 34). Within the productive forces, he separated the objective dimension - the means of production - from the subjective one - the labour power. Productive forces then correspond to the physical power of the producers and to the level of technology and of qualification, and the development of the productive forces is the growth in productivity. The development of the productive forces is first of all an issue of development of the labour power, since “this subjective dimension is more important than the objective or means of production dimension; and within the more important dimension the part most capable of development is knowledge” (1982, 29). For that reason, science is considered as a productive force, and the development of scientific knowledge is central to the development of the productive forces, so that “in its higher stages the development of the productive forces... merges with the development of productively useful science” (2000, 45).

Cohen drew a line between productive forces and relations of production. The relations of production are defined as “relations of effective power over persons and productive forces, not relations of legal property” (2000, 63), independently from the productive forces, since “the economic structure or base... consists of relations of production only: it does not include the productive forces” (1982, 29). The distinction between different kinds of relations of production is to be found in the mode of surplus making.

Cohen proposed an approach of society as an articulation between its inner elements, each of them being independently analysed beforehand, like he did with the productive forces and the relations of production. The social relations of production are the form of a given society, the social framework in which some development of the productive forces may occur. The economic structure wears the function of an envelope in which productive forces can develop: “there are as many types of economic structure as there are any kinds of relation of immediate producers to productive forces” (2000, 78). Those relations are the foundations of a society, on which a superstructure rises.

1.2. Articulating the theory with theses: the hallmark of logical positivism

Cohen articulated historical materialism with two theses, the Development Thesis - “the productive forces tend to develop throughout history” (2000, 134) - and the Primacy Thesis - “the nature of the production relations of a society is explained by the level of development of its productive forces” (2000, 134). Productive growth would be a permanent tendency, whereas social forms would be transitional. Social relations of production that exist in a given period constitute the social form which allows the development of the material productive forces, and the Development Thesis is the foundation for the Primacy Thesis, so that the productive forces are the driving force of history. Now let us study the logical structure with which Cohen built the Primacy Thesis.

The latter can be formulated as a deductive-nomological model: the level of development of the productive forces establishes which relations of production allow the development of the productive forces, and those relations of production are as they are because they allow the development of productive forces, then it can be concluded that the level of development of the productive forces explains the nature of the relations of production.

All the same, the infrastructure is primarily explanatory for the superstructure. Therefore the level of development of the productive forces explains the nature of the relations of

production, which in turn explains the nature of the superstructure. In Marx's words (1994, 128), "the amount of productive forces available to men determines social conditions". Productive forces are the driving force, since their endogenous evolution determines the nature and the transformation of the relations of production.

Then, it can be concluded that the elaboration of historical materialism which was proposed by Cohen keeps original content, but it allows a new form of presentation. Unlike Marx and Hegel, for whom the elements are defined by the relations they have between each other, Cohen previously defined the elementary concepts in order to display their relations. In doing so, he reproduced the foundations of analytical philosophy within the Marxist theory of history, initiating that way Analytical Marxism.

2. A new school of thought

In using the methods of analytical philosophy and of logical positivism for defending historical materialism, Cohen was used as a model for the Analytical Marxists. It is noteworthy that the scope of Analytical Marxism is hardly specific and we will display how it can be considered as a school of thought. We will display first how Analytical Marxism has been known as "Non bullshit" Marxism, and then how it is based on a positivist approach. Finally, we will see how such an approach led to a strong heterogeneity.

2.1. A "Non bullshit" Marxism

Under the influence of Cohen's book, and on the initiative of Elster, Cohen and Roemer, annual meetings were held each September as soon as 1979 until 2000. The 2001 meeting was cancelled because of the 9/11 events and in 2002, the group decided to move to an every-other-year frequency (see Wright, 2004). The group took the name of September Group, and sometimes of Non-Bullshit Marxism Group, referring to the general denial of dialectics by the authors. Pranab Bardhan, Sam Bowles, Robert Brenner, Alan Carling, Joshua Cohen, Andrew

Levine, Adam Przeworski, Hillel Steiner, Robert van der Veen, Philippe van Parijs and Erik O. Wright also took part in the September Group. It might be noted that Elster and Przeworski left the group during the nineties. The following authors, even if they did not directly participate in these meetings, can be associated to the topics and methodology that have been under progress: Michael Albert, Robin Hahnel, Stephen Marglin, David Miller, Richard Miller, Geoffroy E.M. de Ste Croix, Michael Wallerstein and Allen Wood.

The expression “Analytical Marxism” was used in seminars by Elster as soon as 1980, and it was first published by Roemer in *Analytical Marxism* (1986). That name was already used before: the school of “Analytico-linguistic Marxism” was constituted in Poland in the fifties (see Skolimowski, 1967, Nowak, 1998) - Analytical Marxism is not directly related to it, but they have in common a separation between scientificity and ethics - and a Japanese school, dealing with mathematical formalization of Marx’s works, is named “Analytical Marxism” too (see Takamasu, 1999).

Analytical philosophy presents itself as a way to break any complex whole up into simple elements, clearing all the redundant ones. Any ambiguous expression is replaced by logical forms. Analytical philosophy has been characterized as an “atomistic revolt against Hegelian holism” (Engel, 1997, 146, personal translation), considered as bullshit. For logical positivism, as Carnap – from the first Vienna circle – claimed, science is supposed to rebuild, with simple logical connexions, the concepts which are used to describe the world. In brief, analytical philosophy breaks complex wholes into their parties, and logical positivism puts them together. Correspondingly, the aim of Analytical Marxism is to “define a series of abstract concepts... and then [to] specify the ways in which these concepts can be combined to generate more concrete categories of social forms” (Wright, 1994, 112).

2.2. A positivistic 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). Marxism is studied as a research program, with a hard core and a protective belt which is tested and modified with the help of analytical philosophy and of logical positivism. Each theoretical part of Marxism is specifically analysed and criticized with the explicit or implicit objective to reconstruct Marxism. Wright displays four elements to specify “what is "Analytical" about Analytical Marxism” (1994, 178):

- “The commitment to *conventional scientific norms*” (1994, 181, italics are always in the original):

Marxism is assessed as a positivist social science, and the Analytical Marxists deny the traditional Marxist distinction with the “bourgeois” social science.

- “An emphasis on the importance of *systematic conceptualization*” (1994, 181):

Analytical Marxism is distinguished on the one hand by a strict definition of the concepts, like Cohen does on productive forces and relations of production, and on the other hand by the analysis of the interaction between the concepts. Complexity is viewed as a combination of simple elements.

- “A concern with a relatively *fine-grained specification of the steps in the theoretical arguments linking concepts*” (1994, 181):

Abstract models are used, with some degree of formalization. Simplification is used for identifying the central mechanism of a problem, and to clarify some assumptions.

- “The importance accorded to *the intentional action of individuals*” (1994, 182):

Such a feature is normative rather than methodological on the one hand, and it is less consensual on the other hand. Indeed, it would be incorrect to entirely associate Analytical

Marxism with methodological individualism, since some advocate it (Elster, 1982, Roemer, 1982, Przeworski, 1984), but some do not (Brenner, 1986, Wright, 1989, Cohen, 1982).

2.3. A theoretical heterogeneity

It is far from obvious that Analytical Marxism is unified in some substantive theories. It rather defines itself by what it does not agree with: Marx's theoretical corpus is judged as unclear and insufficiently refutable. There would be no specific Marxian methodology. Dialectical logic is condemned and replaced with formal logic. The labour theory of value and the law of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall are rejected. It must be noted that only Robert Brenner accepts the labour theory of value.

Marx's theoretical corpus is systematically tested. "There is probably not a single tenet of classical Marxism which has not been the object of insistent criticism at these meetings" (Elster, 1985, xiv). Different kinds of studies have been implemented: specific developments in the Marxist theory (Cohen, 2000, Roemer, 1982), empirical applications of Marxist concepts (Wright, 1985, Przeworski, 1985) and reconstructions of what Marx wrote (Elster, 1985, Wright, Levine, Sober, 1992). The core issue is to examine Marx's theory with non-Marxist methodological tools, mainly in social science and in 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 Marx will be more firmly established" (Introduction of "Studies in Marxism and Social Theory"). "Studies in Marxist Social Theory" (Cambridge University Press) is a collection in which Analytical Marxist books have been published since Elster, 1985. This introduction appears on each book of the collection. Analytical Marxism may then be synthesized as an "attempt... to preserve the classical research program 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). That is Cohen’s and Roemer’s work respectively, to which we can add Elster’s global approach.

3. Roemer and Elster: from an interpretation to a deconstruction

Under the light of Cohen’s epistemology, Roemer and Elster adapted Marxism to orthodox tools, namely neoclassical economics and methodological individualism respectively. Though Analytical Marxism cannot be reduced to these two authors, we will see how they undoubtedly represent the most accomplished part of the reorientation of the Marxian methodological corpus implemented by Analytical Marxism. On the one hand, if Marx’s theory can be summarized in a theory of history and a theory of economics, Roemer complements Cohen. On the other hand, Elster collects Marx’s work under a methodological individualist interpretation, as a step towards Rational Choice Marxism.

3.1. Roemer: Marxian economics revisited

For Roemer, since Marxian tools are one century old, they 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 as contemporary microeconomics is not Smithian, Marxism must live without Marx. For Roemer, Marxism is a question of language, and neoclassical formalization is the proper language. He acknowledged that his approach is not Marxian, 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, and no reference is made to Marx’s texts in support of his arguments. We will display then how he deconstructed the labour theory of value and how he transformed the theory of exploitation.

3.1.1. A deconstruction of the labour theory of value

Roemer assessed Marx's labour theory of value from a microeconomic point of view and he intended to reconstruct Marx's conclusions independently from it. Resting upon Morishima (1973) and Steedman (1977), he claimed that, because qualitative differences between different kinds of labour lead to their incommensurability, a labour theory of value is impossible to display. Since he claimed the impossibility of determining value objectively, returning back before the Sraffa debate (Sraffa, 1960), Roemer asserted that the price is determined independently from the value: "value cannot be defined prior to the operation of the market" (1981, 203).

Further, he claimed that the assumption of the subsistence wage, which he judged necessary for the labour theory of value to work, is tautological, and he replaced a "special" theory of the subsistence wage by a "general" theory of the "class struggle" wage. "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). Without subsistence as an objective criterion, he claimed that the issue of exploitation needs a normative justification. Yet, it is noteworthy that such a theory of subsistence wage was severely criticized by Marx when Lassalle proposed it - see Marx, 1970.

3.1.2. A transformation of the theory of exploitation

Following Morishima, Roemer built a theory of exploitation independently from the labour theory of value, in treating exploitation as an optimization process, so that in a subsistence economy, any individual is exploited if he works longer than it is necessary for producing a subsistence amount of goods, and he is an exploiter if he works less than the socially necessary labour time for producing these goods. Then he demonstrated that exploitation exists in capitalism, not directly because of the structure of capitalism, but because the capitalists work less than the socially necessary labour time, whereas workers and peasants

work longer than the socially necessary labour time. Exploitation may exist without exchange of labour, without accumulation of wealth, without surplus product, without transfer of surplus-value and without class relationship.

The issue of exploitation would rest upon optimization models. The issue is not an internal relationship between class and exploitation, but a theorem to be proved, the class-exploitation correspondence principle: those who optimise in selling labour force are exploited and those who optimise in hiring labour force are exploiters. Roemer replaced the extraction of surplus labour by property relations, and he claimed that exploitation can logically exist without any exchange of labour. Then he was led to the isomorphism theorem, where the capital market (“the island of credit market”) wears the same functions as the labour market (“the island of labour market”). Any agent would be exploiter or exploited in the same way as his fellow on the other island. Exploitation could occur through the exchange of commodities, and classes might exist with a credit market and without a labour market. The only condition is that the coercion is not situated on the point of production, but in the property relations. So the issue of exploitation would not be substantially related to labour and Roemer’s conclusion followed as: “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).

He also established a correspondence between Cohen’s historical materialism and his own theory of exploitation. With the help of game theory, he stated various specifications of the rules of retreat, corresponding to each game, namely to each form of exploitation: the feudal exploitation, the capitalist exploitation and the socialist exploitation. In going from feudal to socialist, a society crosses and removes various forms of exploitation, namely various forms of property relations. “Each revolutionary transition has the historical task of eliminating its characteristic associated form of exploitation” (1982, 21).

3.2. Elster: towards a Rational Choice Marxism

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 uncompromisingly censorious interpretation of all the aspects of Marx's theory, which led to Rational Choice Marxism.

3.2.1. A comprehensive and undialectical approach

In his substantial book (1985) and in some articles (1980, 1982), Elster gave a comprehensive critical reading of Marx's work. Being closely linked with the Anglo-Saxon intellectual tradition that gives primacy to intentional actions, he meticulously tested Marxian methodology, philosophy, economics, theory of history and theory of classes, under the light of methodological individualism. He mainly proceeded allusively: Marx "simply meant", "clearly has... in mind", "believed that" (1985, respectively 249, 261, 425), hence the provocative title of his main book: *Making Sense of Marx*. Actually, he did not make sense of Marx, but of his own interpretation. Refusing to take Marx's theory as a whole, he broke it up into an economic theory and a theory of history, separated itself 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 his claims. He considered that the main contribution of Marx in the methodology of humanities is the general idea of unintended consequences of intentional actions: "whether we refer to this method by the terms 'dialectics' and 'social contradictions' is, by comparison, a secondary matter" (1985, 48). He refused to take Marxist methodology as a whole and he claimed that Marx used various modes of explanation. He judged that some of his works are based upon methodological individualism, especially the theory of crisis stated in *Capital* volume III, and that, on this issue, Marx was antiteleological. Also he wrote that Marx resorted to functional

explanation, particularly in his theory of history, which only aim would be to justify any explanation in function of consequences that would be favourable to the advent of communism. Marx would have been teleological on that issue.

Even though he was clearly more censorious on the classical Marxist theory than Roemer, and than Cohen all the more, Elster 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” (1985, xv). While Elster and Cohen disagreed on such issues as methodological individualism and functional explanation, they shared the same epistemological background.

3.2.2. Marxism and Rational Choice: an unlikely encounter

Rational Choice Marxism, including Roemer, Elster and Przeworski, intended to make Rational Choice Theory, which is traditionally used for justifying and defending capitalism, a critical weapon against capitalism. Such a methodology has been compared with Marx’s: “what else did Marx do in *Capital* but subvert the classical political economy of his day by using it to draw anti-capitalist conclusions?” (Carling, 1990, 107)

Such a Marxism rests upon the assumption that a relatively strong proportion of Marx’s works, namely the works of his “maturity”, are based upon methodological individualism. So game theory is used in order to analyse 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, and individuals judge other individuals as rational.

Rational Choice Marxism led to relatively important results: it replaced dialectical materialism with methodological individualism and neoclassical economics, it claimed the labour theory of value as unsuited to a theory of exploitation, it asserted that an analysis in terms of relations of production is unsuited to the explanation of class formation, and that the interests of the capitalist class can fit 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 in throwing Marx into non radical field, so that Marx's theory seems to have lost his subversive character.

CONCLUSION

Analytical Marxism was initiated by Cohen's defence of historical materialism, in which dialectical materialism was replaced with some analytical reasoning, including functional explanation. It was carried on by Roemer's neoclassical reconstruction of Marxian economics, in postulating that Marxian concepts could be articulated with the assumptions of general equilibrium theory. It was generalized by Elster's use of methodological individualism in all aspects of Marx's theory, leading to Rational Choice Marxism, a kind of Marxism without Marx. Analytical Marxism is not homogeneous but is unified with its research subject, Marx's theory, and its central claim is that its specificity is not methodological but substantial. Having analysed every aspect of Marx's work in the light of non-Marxist methods, they concluded that most of the theory is deficient.

Analytical Marxism, a study of Marx's work by means of non-Marxist methodological tools, reached the conclusion that Marxism is scientifically flawed. Nevertheless, instead of questioning the tools that they used – analytical philosophy, logical positivism, methodological individualism, and 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 be without Analytical Marxism.

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