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Analytical Marxism

Published in Dutch as « Analytisch marxisme »
in *Vlaams Marxistisch Tijdschrift* 21 (1), maart 1987, pp. 41–44 ;
and in German as « Analytischer Marxismus »
in *Kritisches Wörterbuch des Marxismus Band 1*, Wolfgang Fritz Haug (ed.),
Berlin: Das Argument, 1994, pp. 202–205.

Analytical Marxism is a cross-disciplinary school of thought which attempts to creatively combine a keen interest in some of the central themes of the Marxist tradition and the resolute use of analytical tools more commonly associated with « bourgeois » social science and philosophy.

Marx is often interpreted as having used a « dialectical » mode of thought which he took over, with modifications, from Hegel and which can be contrasted with conventional, « analytical » thinking. Marx himself may have said and thought so. But according to analytical Marxists, one can make sense of his work, or at least of the main or best part of it, while complying with the strictest standards of analytical thought. This need not mean that all of what is usually called "dialectics" should be abruptly dismissed. For example, the study of the typically « dialectic » contradictions which drive historical change constitutes a challenging area for the subtle use of analytical thought (see Elster 1978).

The resolute option for an analytical mode of thought does, however, imply that the research programme stemming from Marx should by no means be conceived as the development of an alternative "logic", or of a fundamentally different way of thinking about capitalist development, or about social reality in general. It rather consists in practising the most appropriate forms of standard analytical thought — using conventional conceptual analysis, formal logic and mathematics, econometric methods and the other tools of statistical and historical research — in order to tackle the broad range of positive and normative issues broached in Marx's work. Analytical tools may have been developed and extensively used by « bourgeois » social science and philosophy. This does not make them unfit, analytical Marxists believe, to rigorously rephrase and fruitfully develop some of the central tenets of the Marxian tradition.

Thus, the techniques characteristic of Anglo-American analytical philosophy can be used to clarify the meaning of key Marxian concepts as well as the epistemic status of the central propositions of the Marxian corpus and their logical relations with each other (see e.g. Cohen 1978). Formal models resting on assumption of individually rational behaviour, as instantiated by neo-classical economic theory and the theory of strategic

games, can be used to understand the economic and political dynamics of capitalist societies (see e.g. Przeworski 1981, Carling 1991). And the careful checking of theoretical conjectures against carefully collected and interpreted historical data can be used to test Marx's grand claims about transitions from one mode of production to another (see e.g. Brenner & al. 1984). Making use of these tools does not amount to taking on board all the statements they have allegedly helped establish in the hands of conservative philosophers and social scientists. Nor is it meant to serve dogmatic defence of any particular claim Marx may have made. Rather, analytical Marxists view a competent, inventive and critical use of these tools as an essential ingredient of any effective strategy both for refining and correcting Marx's claims and for challenging the political status quo.

The areas in which analytical Marxists have been active range from medieval history to socialist economics and from philosophical anthropology to empirical class analysis. The issues about which they have been involved in the liveliest controversies include :

(1) Are the central propositions of historical materialism to be construed as functional explanations, i.e. as explanations of institutions by references to the functions they perform? If so, are such explanations legitimate in the social as well as in the biological realm ? (See Cohen 1978; Van Parijs 1981; Elster 1983.)

(2) Is it possible, indeed is it necessary, for a Marxist to be committed to methodological individualism, i.e. to the view that all social-scientific explanations should ultimately be phrased in terms of actions and thoughts by individual human beings? Or are there some admissible « structuralist » Marxian explanations which are radically irreducible to an individualistic perspective? (See Elster & al. 1982, Elster 1985; Roemer ed. 1985.)

(3) Is there any way of salvaging from the ferocious criticisms to which it has been subjected the so-called theory of the falling rate of profit, i.e. Marx's celebrated claim that capitalist economies are doomed to be crisis-ridden, owing to a systematic tendency for the rate of profit to fall as a result of the very process of profit-driven capital accumulation? If the criticisms are compelling, what are the consequences both for the methodology of Marxian economics and for Marxian crisis theory? (See Roemer 1981; Elster 1985; Van Parijs 1993.)

(4) Can one vindicate the labour theory of value, i.e. the claim that the labour time required to produce a commodity is the ultimate determinant of its price, against the numerous objections raised against it. If not, does this have any serious consequence for positive Marxian theory, bearing in mind that Marx himself considered this theory essential to the explanation of capitalist profits. And does it have any serious consequence for Marxian normative theory (if any), bearing in mind that Marx's concept of exploitation is usually defined in terms of labour value? (See Steedman 1977; Roemer 1981; Cohen 1989.)

(5) Does Marx leave any room for ethical statements, i.e. statements about what a good or just or truly free society would be like, as distinct from

statements about how a society could be more rationally organised or about what it will turn out to be by virtue of some inexorable laws of history? Or should one instead ascribe to him a consistently immoralist position and, if the latter, can such a position be defended? (See Wood 1981; Elster 1985; Cohen 1989)

(6) Can the concept of exploitation — commonly defined as the extraction of surplus labour, or as the unequal exchange of labour value — be made independent of the shaky labour theory of value? Can it be extended to deal with late-capitalist or post-capitalist societies, in which the possession of a scarce skill, or the incumbency of some valued job, or the control over some organizational asset may be at least as consequential as the ownership of material means of production? Can such a more or less generalized concept of exploitation provide the basis for an empirically fruitful concept of social class? By providing a precise characterization of what counts as an injustice, can it supply the core of an ethically sensible conception of justice? (See esp. Roemer 1982; Wright 1985; Wright & al. 1989.)

(7) How can the Marxian commitment to equality (if any) be rigorously and defensibly formulated? Could the egalitarian imperative that motivates the demand for the socialization of the means of production also be satisfied by an equal distribution of the latter, or by a neutralization of the impact of their unequal distribution on the distribution of welfare? To what extent is this imperative compatible with every individual owning (in some sense) herself, as taken for granted, it would seem, in the typically Marxian idea that workers are entitled to the full fruits of their labour? (See Roemer 1994; Cohen 1995.)

(8) After the collapse of East-European socialism, is it possible to reshape the socialist project in a way that takes full account of the many theoretical and practical objections that have been raised against it? Can a system be designed in which the social ownership of the means of production can be combined with the sort of allocative and dynamic efficiency commonly ascribed to capitalist labour and capital markets? (See Roemer 1994a.) Or should the radical alternative to capitalism as we know it rather be found in a « capitalist transition towards communism » through the introduction and gradual increase of an unconditional basic income or in a highly egalitarian redistribution of privately owned assets? (See van der Veen/ Van Parijs & al. 1986; Bowles/ Gintis & al. 1998.)

The boundaries of analytical Marxism are unavoidably fuzzy. Defined by the combination of a firm interest in some of the central themes of the Marxist tradition and the unhibited use of rigorous analytical tools, it extends far beyond, but is strongly associated with, the so-called « September Group » founded in 1979 by the Canadian philosopher G.A. Cohen (Oxford) and the Norwegian social scientist Jon Elster (Columbia) The group has crystallised an attitude into a movement, by endowing it with a name, a focus and a target for criticisms (see Roemer ed. 1985 and 1993; Nielsen & Ware eds. 1989). Having started with a critical inventory of Marx's heritage, it gradually took a more prospective turn, with a growing emphasis on the

explicit elaboration and thorough defence of a radically egalitarian conception of social justice (see Cohen 1995 and 1999; Van Parijs 1995; Roemer 1996) and a detailed multi-disciplinary discussion of specific reforms (see Van Parijs ed. 1992; Roemer 1998; and the volumes in the « Real Utopias Project » directed by Erik O. Wright). This development has arguably brought analytical Marxism considerably closer to left liberal social thought than to the bulk of explicitly Marxist thought.

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