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# A FUTURE FOR (ANALYTICAL) MARXISM?

BOOK REVIEW OF:

**A Future for Marxism? Althusser, the Analytical Turn and the Revival of Socialist Theory.** *Andrew Levine.* Pluto Press, London, 2003, pp. xii + 188.

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Abstract: Andrew Levine analyses the theoretical legacy of recent Marxist schools, focusing in particular on analytical Marxism (AM). He argues that AM is uniquely suited to provide the foundations for a revival of Marxist theory. In this paper, Levine's reconstruction of the core of Marxism and his analysis of the trajectory of AM are critically discussed. Although the theoretical contribution of AM should not be overlooked, some objectionable methodological and theoretical tenets of AM, and in particular of Rational Choice Marxism, are discussed, which help to explain the demise of the school. Various directions for further research are suggested, which emphasise the importance of structural constraints and endogenous preferences.

Keywords: Analytical Marxism, methodological individualism, rational choice theory, endogenous preferences, structural constraints.

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*A Future for Marxism?* is a remarkable book. It raises many issues at the heart of socialist theory and politics, such as the philosophical foundations of a socialist project, the role of Marxism for the reconstruction of socialist thought, and the legacy of the main recent schools of Marxist thought. It analyses deep philosophical issues with exemplary rigour, clarity, and political passion.

First, Andrew Levine broaches the main ideologies emerged from the French Revolution – conservatism, liberalism, and socialism – which have dominated the theoretical and political stage since. Scientific socialism and Marxism are placed in this theoretical background, and the defeat of Marxism is seen as coterminous with the retreat of all the ‘Enlightenment Left’ and with the “loss of faith in progress or, more precisely, in a better world that differs in kind, not just degree, from our own” (p.10). Then, Levine provides a critical appraisal of the experience of the New Left, which is also an interesting biography of a generation of radicals. This theme runs throughout the book, whose very structure replicates Levine’s own intellectual trajectory, from structuralist Marxism to analytical Marxism (hereafter, AM). The analysis of the latter schools of Marxist thought is the core of the book. Unlike previous approaches, they did not aim “to produce a proletarian philosophy” (p.58): by the time the New Left emerged, this seemed no longer plausible in a world “without a proletariat or its functional equivalent” (p.72). They aimed “to discover the authentic core of Marxist theory, and then reconstruct Marxism on that basis” (p.58). Their achievements, suggests Levine, should be the starting point for the revival of socialist theory.

Due to space constraints, it is impossible to discuss all the issues raised in this dense and stimulating book. This review focuses on AM, for two reasons.

First, AM raises a number of substantive and methodological issues that are central in the social sciences. Second, the main aim of the book “is to try to make sense of what [AM] meant, of what it continues to mean, and of what it could mean in the years ahead” (p.xii). The core contention is that AM is uniquely suited to provide the foundations for a revival of Marxism, because analytical Marxists, “more than their traditional or contemporaneous rivals, ‘discovered’ ... what remains vital in the Marxist tradition” (p.x). This claim rests upon (i) the reconstruction of a distinctive, rational core of Marxist theory based on AM contributions; and (ii) an explanation of the demise of AM as a Marxist school, despite (i). These two arguments are analysed in turn.

#### THE CORE OF MARXIST THEORY

Levine identifies three core components of Marxist theory. The first, and foremost, is Marx’s theory of history, or historical materialism (HM), which detects “an endogenous process that supplies history with a determinate trajectory from one *mode of production* or *economic structure* to another” (p.33). The fundamental contribution of AM, emerging from Cohen’s (1978) seminal book, and the subsequent debate, according to Levine, is the reconstruction of a rigorous version of HM, articulated into two main theses. The first states that the level of development of productive forces functionally explains the nature of the economic structure. The second states that “*economic structures* ... [functionally] explain *legal and political superstructures and also ways of thinking or forms of consciousness*” (p.151). Levine interprets HM as “a theory of historical possibilities opened up by the development of ‘productive forces’” (p.164), with an important role for class struggle. HM is an account of a *possible* communist

future, which can “unify what would otherwise be a motley of well-meaning, but mainly reactive, causes into a movement with a serious prospect of changing life for the better” (p.171). HM is thus “the foundational theory of scientific socialism, ... the core upon which any future Marxism must build” (p.34).

The second component is Marx’s theory of the state. In Marxist theory, states are class dictatorships expressing the rule of the economically dominant class; to each economic structure, there corresponds a different form of state. The proletarian state is the only state whose historical aim is to eliminate the need for states. The socialist revolution should establish “institutions that are progressively self-effacing” (p.162). This notion is incompatible with “the statism endemic to all strains of modern political philosophy, including liberalism” (p.163).

Third, Levine identifies “self-realization, autonomy and community – and, more ambivalently, equality” (p.170) – as normative values typical of Marxism. They do not amount to a distinctive ideology, because “the normative commitments of socialists are hardly different from those of the majority of nonsocialists” (p.27), but “there may be a distinctive Marxist way of putting these valuational commitments together” (p.170).

Levine’s analysis is careful, rigorous and, on the whole, persuasive. Two questions immediately arise, though: are these the *only* defensible parts of Marx’s theory? Do they define a framework that can promote a progressive research program in explanatory social science? These questions are crucial to understand whether the reconstruction of the core can provide the foundations for a revival of Marxist theory, or instead it is bound to remain a brilliant but sterile logical

exercise. Levine's answer to them is strictly linked to his account of the demise of AM as a Marxist school. This is the least convincing part of his argument.

Levine oscillates between two explanations. Neither of them is entirely compelling and – as presented – they seem *prima facie* contradictory. On the one hand, he notes that “ideas of political consequence are always historically situated and conditioned by their context” (p.viii). Indeed, he provides a thorough analysis of the political, intellectual, and social climate of the Anglo-Saxon world in the 1960s-70s, and of its influence on AM's birth and initial development. There is no equally satisfactory analysis of the context in which AM waned, and of its influence on AM theorising. Levine claims that the facts on the ground – most notably, the absence of a revolutionary agent – “eventually helped to quash even these new ventures in Marxist philosophy” (p.73), but this is little more than a suggestion. There are also some scattered remarks concerning the dynamics spurned by the academicisation of Marxism and the *déformations professionnelles* induced by “the professional culture and disciplinary styles to which analytical Marxists held themselves accountable” (p.141), which, according to Levine, have influenced them “despite their own findings” (p.166). These issues may have been relevant, but *per se* they beg more fundamental questions.

On the other hand, Levine argues that “it was philosophy, more than anything else, that did Marxism in” (p.vii). AM contributed to the demise of Marxism as a distinct intellectual tendency “not just in acquiescence to the spirit of the age, but for reasons grounded in arguments” (p.122). Yet he does not explain the philosophical arguments that have led many analytical Marxists to conclude “that there is nothing distinctive to ‘Marxism’ at all” (p.vii). No

reference is provided to AM work in which the core elements of his account are challenged. Actually, according to Levine, the explanatory pretensions of HM have been deflated, but the theory is essentially sound and “no analytical Marxist ever provided good reasons to think that a political theory consonant with historical materialist positions ... would somehow be untenable” (p.147).

Levine does briefly discuss some AM work in the social sciences. He argues that “[t]hanks to the work of John Roemer and others, Marxist political economy ... collapsed into [neoclassical economics, and] Marxist sociology suffered a similar fate” (p.136). The specific issues raised by Levine, however, only concern a specific approach *within* AM, and thus cannot explain the trajectory of AM as a whole. This distinction has not a mere definitional, or historical, interest. Given the theoretical and methodological heterogeneity of analytical Marxists, it is crucial to evaluate AM’s legacy and its role for the future of Marxism. The lack of a rigorous definition of AM and of a proper distinction between alternative approaches within AM is a major shortcoming of the book.

#### ANALYTICAL AND RATIONAL CHOICE MARXISM

There is no set of substantive propositions that define AM as a school. There are, however, some common traits that characterise a style of theorising: a core tenet of AM, and its main departure from classical Marxism, is the denial of a specific Marxist methodology, dialectical or otherwise (pp.130-32). More precisely, Wright (1989, 38-9) proposes the following definition.

DEFINITION 1. AM is defined by the analysis of Marxist issues and:

C1. “A commitment to *conventional scientific norms*.”

C2. “An emphasis on the importance of *systematic conceptualisation*.”

C3. “A concern with a relatively *fine-grained specification of the steps in the theoretical arguments linking concepts*.”

C4. “The importance accorded to *the intentional action of individuals*.”

These four commitments and the rejection of a specific Marxist methodology are neither trivial nor uncontroversial. Definition 1 is sufficiently general, however, to allow for a wide range of methodological and substantive positions. In fact, in order to find the minimum common denominator of AM, it does not include the most contentious axioms endorsed by some of its most prominent practitioners, in particular Jon Elster, Adam Przeworski, and John Roemer. *Rational Choice Marxism* (hereafter, RCM) can be defined as follows.

DEFINITION 2. RCM is defined by C2, C3, and a commitment to:

C1'. The use of “state of the arts methods of analytical philosophy and ‘positivist’ social science” (Roemer 1986C, 3-4).

C4'. Methodological individualism (hereafter, MI) and rational choice theory.

Definition 2 does not apply to all analytical Marxists. For example, Cohen’s reconstruction of HM relies on functional explanations, and Wright (1989) endorses a realist view of science and rejects MI.

The distinction between AM and RCM may help to resolve the tension arising from Levine’s simultaneous emphasis on timeless, rational arguments and on extra-theoretical factors in the explanation of the demise of AM. In fact, Levine implicitly adopts Definition 1 (pp.130-32), but the only rational arguments discussed relate to C1’ and C4’ (pp.141-44, 169-70). He argues that C4’ and mainstream economic models are inconsistent with Marxist valuational



commitments, because the latter are not amenable to formal modelling, imply noncapitalist institutional arrangements, and are at odds with individualistic approaches. Mainstream economic tools naturally lead to a liberal normative outlook and a focus on distributive justice, rather than self-realisation, autonomy, or fraternity. Thus Levine can be interpreted as suggesting that internal theoretical developments have been important for the demise of RCM, whereas extra-theoretical factors (largely unexplained in the book) have played a more relevant role in the evolution of AM. This suggestion may be somewhat schematic but it seems reasonable, given the wider range of methodological and substantive positions consistent with Definition 1.

It can be objected that Levine's analysis does not convincingly explain why C1' and C4' are problematic from a Marxist perspective: it may clarify why RCM gave up some communist ideals, but it has no bearing, for instance, on HM and the theory of the state. Besides, normative issues are in a relevant sense not central to Marxist theory, as argued by Levine himself (for instance, at pp.20, 137). Normative issues aside, though, C1' and C4' do have relevant implications for social theory. They incorporate strong assumptions that are not neutral with respect to the orientation of research efforts and to the substantive results obtained. Methodologically, by Definition 2 the only parts of Marx's theory that "make sense" are those that can be analysed within a MI perspective, or, more narrowly, with "rational choice models: general equilibrium theory, game theory and the arsenal of modelling techniques developed by neoclassical economics" (Roemer 1986B, 192). From this perspective, it is hardly surprising that although

Marx was “committed to [MI], at least intermittently” (Elster 1985, 7), he appears methodologically inconsistent in that he does not support C1’ and C4’.

As for substantive Marxian propositions, RCM typically reaches two kinds of conclusions. Some are considered either wrong or impossible to conceptualise consistently with C1’ and C4’, and thus are discarded. Roemer (1986A) disposes of much of traditional Marxist economic theory. After a long journey through Marx’s writings, Elster (1986B, 60) concludes that “Today Marxian economics is ... intellectually dead”; together with scientific socialism, dialectical materialism, and the theory of productive forces and relations of production (Elster 1986B, 186ff). Other concepts and propositions can be analysed according to C1’ and C4’. Yet “if one accepts the methodological validity of individualistic postulates, most if not all traditional concerns of Marxist theory must be radically reformulated. Whether ... the ensuing theory will be in any distinct sense ‘Marxist’, I do not know” (Przeworski 1985B, 400). For instance, Elster (1985) and Przeworski (1985A) analyse some features of the symbiotic interaction between classes in a game-theoretic framework, but at the cost of a substantive shift in meaning and political implications. Roemer (1982) provides microfoundations to the Marxian concepts of exploitation and class thanks to – or, possibly, at the cost of – an almost exclusive focus on asset inequalities.

Levine does not provide a critical analysis of RCM results in explanatory social theory and it is unclear whether this part of the legacy of AM is deemed relevant for the future of Marxism. This is unsatisfactory and it undermines his main arguments. First, some results cast doubts on Levine’s reconstruction of the core of Marxism. For instance, Elster (1985) and Przeworski (1985A) challenge

the Marxist theory of the state. Furthermore, according to Levine, the latter is built on the idea that “[a]mong the classes whose interests stand opposed, ... [s]ome (usually one) are in a position to take unfair advantage; to *exploit*, the others” (p.156). This seems inconsistent with Roemer’s claim that Marxian exploitation theory has no positive or normative relevance and it “merges now with a much broader class of egalitarian theories of distributive justice” (Roemer 1986A, 88).

Second, and more important, according to Levine, RCM has shown that Marx’s positions are remarkably translatable “into terms that bear scrutiny according to the most demanding disciplinary standards in [mainstream] philosophy or in appropriate social science” (p.132). Yet, after the translation, “Marxism became a voice among the others in ongoing debates” (p.132). In many areas of Marxist thought, “the operation succeeded (more or less), but the patient died” (p.132). RCM results suggest that Marxism has no role to play in the social sciences: its valuable insights have been incorporated into the mainstream, the rest should be discarded. But then, given the absence of a proper critique, if not the implicit acceptance of RCM results, Levine’s claim that Marxism may still be relevant for the progress of social sciences is unwarranted. It may be true that, thanks to their Hegelian roots, “Marx’s explanatory projects evince a concern with the whole that is uncommon in mainstream economics and sociology. This focus may yet prove crucial to gaining knowledge that would otherwise be inaccessible” (p.170). But this claim is left unexplained, and so are its methodological and substantive implications. A generic ‘concern with the whole’ may entail the rejection (or at least weakening) of C1’ and C4’, but it does not indicate a precise direction for further research and it is a priori unclear that it can lead to reconsider

RCM results. Equally vague are Levine's other two "lines for further research" (pp.169-71): the idea that a 'concern with the whole' may yield original insights in normative theory, and the emphasis on the implications of HM for forms of consciousness and cultural issues. So, the reconstruction of some core issues in Marxist theory may be an important contribution of AM; but, what next?

#### WHITHER (ANALYTICAL) MARXISM?

An exhaustive analysis of the methodological and philosophical issues raised by C1' and C4' is beyond the boundaries of this review. In what follows, a more focused perspective is adopted and some key problems of C1' and C4' are shown by analysing two specific issues that are arguably central in the social sciences, namely the structural constraints to individual choice and the social formation of individuals. As argued below, both issues play an important role in Marxist theory and the introduction of structural constraints and endogenous preferences allows for the revision of RCM results. This indicates a clear line for further research that may depart from existing RCM models, but is consistent with Definition 1 and with Levine's reconstruction of the core of Marxism.

The issue of structural constraints relates to the problem of generalising individual-level predicates to group-level predicates, which may result in a fallacy of composition. As acknowledged by RCM, fallacies of composition are central in the social sciences as "agents tend to generalize locally valid views into invalid global statements, because of a failure to perceive that causal relations that obtain *ceteris paribus* may not hold unrestrictedly" (Elster 1985, 19), leading to social contradictions. In this case, though, the group as a whole faces a constraint that no individual member faces, which suggests at least that MI be refined, because the

analysis of the whole cannot be strictly reduced to the analysis of its parts. Within AM, this issue forcefully emerges in Cohen's (1983) discussion of proletarian unfreedom. Cohen argues that proletarians are not forced to remain in their class: they are individually free to improve their social condition. To generalise such freedom, however, would involve a fallacy of composition, because it is not possible for all proletarians to exit their class within capitalist relations of production. Therefore, knowledge of group-level properties and constraints "is prior in the explanatory order to understanding the conditional and contingent state of the individuals" (Lebowitz 1994, 167). Social structures have explanatory autonomy in that agents' powers depend at least in part on their position in social relations and, in general, both individual and structural constraints shape agents' choices. In their analyses of classes, Przeworski (1985A) and Roemer (1982, 1988) suggest that a purely individualistic approach is adequate, whereby "a person acquires membership in a certain class by virtue of choosing the best option available subject to the constraints she faces" (Roemer 1988, 9). This conclusion seems unwarranted. Veneziani (2005) argues that Roemer's results depend on severe restrictions on agents' choices, such as the impossibility of saving, which guarantee the reproduction of the social structure by fiat. Therefore, structural constraints are in effect built into individual constraints. More importantly, in the light of Cohen's (1983) analysis, the individualistic approach arguably provides a one-sided account, which may explain why an individual remains in a given class, but not the structure of social classes.

Next, MI requires individuals to be logically prior and their attributes not to be socially determined, or else structural features would play a fundamental

explanatory role, via their effect on preferences and beliefs. The causes of the attitudes and beliefs that determine action should themselves be nothing but the actions and properties of individuals. The very distinction between individual and social predicates is problematic, however, because “the individual-level predicates relied on by the individualist have built into them salient features of the relevant social context” (Weldes 1989, 361). Many RCM assumptions, such as individual optimisation or the existence of labour markets and enforceable property rights, arguably presuppose certain social relations. Moreover, even within given social relations, many individual attributes are socially determined.

RCM acknowledges the importance of the social formation of individuals. Przeworski questions the view of “undifferentiated, unchanging, and unrelated ‘individuals’” (Przeworski 1985B, 381) typical of rational choice theory. The first step of Elster’s three-tiered theory of social scientific explanations requires the “causal explanation of mental states, such as desires and beliefs” (Elster 1985, 5). According to Roemer (1986B, 201), crucial to Marxism, and to AM, is “a commitment to the malleability of human preferences, to the social formation of the individual”. There is no theory of preference formation in RCM, however. Preferences are assumed to be exogenous for theoretical or technical convenience. “[O]nce the issue of the formation of preferences has been settled, then the most convincing and fundamental explanation of a social phenomenon is ... one that explains [it] as the result of individuals pursuing their interests ... subject to the constraints they face” (Roemer 1989, 378). The formation of preferences is treated as secondary, at least methodologically. For instance, although endogenous preferences seem crucial, to understand collective action, due to the importance of

solidarity and class consciousness, Elster's game-theoretic analysis abstracts from this issue. "Game theory takes preferences as given, and has nothing to offer concerning preference formation" (Elster 1982, 480, n.46). If preferences can be taken as exogenously given, though, it is unclear in what sense the social formation of individuals is deemed crucial. Conversely, if endogenous preferences are central to Marxism, it seems odd to draw general conclusions on Marx's propositions based on models that take them as exogenously given. Besides, Rational Choice Marxists usually do not discuss the adequacy of this assumption.

In many parts of Marx's theory, endogenous preferences and structural constraints do seem of essential relevance. In the next paragraphs, two examples are briefly discussed to illustrate this point. First, consider Cohen's reconstruction of HM, in which historical progress is ultimately driven by the development of productive forces. This view relies on a notion of transhistorical "rational adaptive practices" of human beings, who face conditions of relative scarcity and "possess intelligence of a kind and degree which enables them to improve their situations" (Cohen 1978, 152). Scarcity and rationality lead to a tendency for productive forces to develop and, eventually, to the transition from one mode of production to the other. This interpretation has been criticised due to its technological determinism and to a rather reductive view of human agency. It is thanks to the introduction of structural constraints and endogenous preferences that Levine develops a less determinist interpretation of HM, in which class struggle and human agency play a more relevant role. Because "the content of both rational action and scarcity ... are not given for all the time, but are instead endogenous to the social system; ... determined by the relations of production themselves"

(Levine and Wright 1980, 62), technological determinism seems inadequate to explain historical progress. Only under specific structural conditions is the interest in material advantage tied to an interest in productivity-enhancing investment. Indeed, Brenner (1986) argues that Cohen's interpretation cannot explain the transition from feudalism to capitalism because pre-capitalist social formations lacked such conditions and rent extraction was the dominant activity.

Next, consider Przeworski's (1985A) critique of the Marxist theory of class struggle. According to him, if socialist parties enter the electoral game, neither socialist governments nor the working class will seriously challenge capitalist rule. In fact, faced with any serious attempt to redistribute resources, capitalists would cease to invest, leading to economic crisis and a subsequent decrease in workers' welfare, based on a profit squeeze mechanism whereby "if profits are not sufficient then eventually wages or employment must fall" (Przeworski 1985A, 43). This argument is not entirely convincing. If  $P^e$  is some measure of "sufficient" profits for capitalists, the profit-squeeze mechanism is consistent with a wide range of values of  $P^e$ . Indeed, Mohun and Veneziani (2006) argue that a short-run profit-squeeze cycle can be detected in the post-war US data, but the cycle itself shifts widely over time, which suggests a change in  $P^e$ . But then the theoretically and empirically interesting issue is arguably *not* the profit squeeze mechanism, but the determination of  $P^e$  as the product of social, political, and economic conditions. Thus, the extent to which we can redistribute the results of market activity "without defeating our aim ... varies inversely with the extent to which self-interest has been allowed to triumph in private and public



consciousness” (Cohen 1994, 10). Without an analysis of  $P^c$ , Przeworski’s argument may be formally correct, but its explanatory power seems limited.

In general, that “individual identities and thus preferences are continually molded by society” (Przeworski 1985B, 384) is a key issue in the analysis of political processes. Individualistic views of history cannot properly “explain how actions of individuals produce new conditions ... Today, the apparatus of game theory can at best elucidate isolated, singular events that occur under given conditions. It has nothing to say about history” (Przeworski 1985B, 401). Similarly, it is unclear whether standard rational choice theory can provide a fully satisfactory explanation of major political processes.

Although this discussion is far from exhaustive, these examples should suggest that the analysis of endogenous preferences and structural constraints is a promising line for further research that may lead to reconsider RCM results. To acknowledge the importance of these issues blurs the dichotomy between holism and MI, and raises doubts on standard models of agency. Although this research project is likely to depart from existing RCM models, it does not entail the rejection of formal models, or even neoclassical tools, let alone the repudiation of micro-analysis. The introduction of structural constraints and endogenous preferences is consistent with Definition 1 and with Levine’s central contention concerning the relevance of AM for the future of Marxism, and it may provide the first outline of a research program in explanatory social theory that builds on, and is complementary to, the rational core of Marxism identified by Levine.

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