

What is Analytical Marxism?

In recent years there has been an unmistakable decline in consensus among those people who see themselves as working within the Marxist tradition over the core theoretical postulates of Marxism itself. Of course, there has always been deep and often bitter debate within the Marxist tradition. Such divisions in the past, however, generally revolved around a common core of theoretical, if not political, agreement – the labor theory of value as the basis for analyzing capitalism; historical materialism as the basis for analyzing epochal historical development; class structure and class struggle as the basis for understanding the state and ideology. At present this core itself is much harder to discern, and there is certainly sharp disagreement over every one of its elements. There are now many theorists who consider themselves to be Marxists who nevertheless reject the labor theory of value as a satisfactory way of understanding capitalism, who are skeptical about the idea that historical materialism constitutes a plausible theory of history, and who see classes as only one of a variety of determinants of the state and ideology.

Now, one might argue that anyone who rejects these classical core elements of Marxist theory should not rightfully call themselves Marxists. There is, after all, a venerable tradition in the history of Marxism to draw lines of demarcation between true Marxists and phoney Marxists. The latter might use Marxist rhetoric, but they have abandoned Marxism itself. Alternatively, and I think more constructively, it could simply be recognized that Marxism is not a unified theory with well-defined boundaries, but a family of theories united by a common terrain of debate and questions. There has always been a plurality of Marxisms; what is new, perhaps, is the degree of theoretical and methodological heterogeneity that exists on this intellectual terrain.

Given this decline in intellectual consensus among Marxists over many of the core elements of their own theoretical tradition, it is certainly easy to see why many commentators consider this a period of profound

theoretical crisis within Marxism, if not necessarily the mortal crisis proclaimed by the Right. However, it is equally a period of considerable theoretical vitality and innovation in which significant progress is being made in clarifying a whole set of problems. While it may at times be difficult to distinguish “crisis” from “dynamic change,” I believe that the Marxism which will emerge from the present period of theoretical transformation will not only be more powerful theoretically than the Marxism of the heyday of the New Left, but will also be of more political relevance.

In this chapter I want to look at one particular strand of new theoretical development that has emerged rather forcefully as a tendency in the context of this internal turmoil in the Marxist tradition, particularly in the United States and Great Britain. This is a tendency that has come to be known as “Analytical Marxism.” While Analytical Marxism is by no means the only vibrant intellectual current in contemporary Marxism, it does offer, in my judgment, the most promising general strategy for reconstructing Marxism.

The Emergence of Analytical Marxism

In the aftermath of the student movement and radical politics of the 1960s and early 1970s, Marxism entered the university in the developed capitalist democracies in an unprecedented way. Although, with few exceptions, Marxism never became a dominant perspective in academic departments, it nevertheless gained intellectual influence and even a measure of respectability in a wide variety of academic fields – history, sociology, education, political science, and economics, among others.

Analytical Marxism emerged in the late 1970s as one intellectual tendency within this newly influential academic Marxism.¹ It grew out of a belief that Marxism continued to constitute a productive intellectual tradition within which to ask questions and formulate answers, but that this tradition was frequently burdened with a range of methodological and metatheoretical commitments that seriously undermined its explanatory potential. The motivation for trying to rid Marxism of this burden

1. The term “academic Marxism” is often used pejoratively, suggesting politically disengaged careerism and intellectual opportunism. While the expression does embody a certain irony, since Marxism is above all a social theory committed to transforming the world rather than simply reflecting on it from the ivory tower, I do not mean to impugn the motives of Marxists who work in the university by referring to them as “academic Marxists.” Rather, this expression reflects the historical reality that in the present period, Marxism is most rigorously articulated and elaborated within academic disciplines rather than within revolutionary movements as such.

was the conviction that the core ideas of Marxism, embodied in concepts like class, exploitation, the theory of history, capitalism, socialism, and so on, remained essential for any emancipatory political project.

As a self-conscious school of thought, Analytical Marxism began in 1979 when G.A. Cohen, a Canadian philosopher working in Britain, Jon Elster, a Norwegian political scientist, and a number of other scholars from several countries organized a meeting in London to discuss a range of theoretical issues in contemporary Marxism. This gathering subsequently became an annual event. After the third or fourth year, basically the same people have attended each year, with occasional additions and subtractions (Jon Elster and Adam Przeworski left the group in the early 1990s), to discuss each other's work. After fifteen years, in 1994, the group consists of G.A. Cohen, John Roemer, Robert Brenner, Philippe Van Parijs, Robert Van der Veen, Pranab Bardhan, Hillel Steiner, Sam Bowles, and myself.² The term "Analytical Marxism" was first publicly used by the group in 1986 with the publication under that title of an anthology of essays written largely by members of the group.³

The substantive concerns of this collection of people are quite wide-ranging – including such things as class structure, the theory of history, the problem of ideology, normative political theory, basic concepts of Marxian economics, social democracy and electoral politics, economic crisis, trade unions and the state. Theoretically, there is considerable internal disagreement over virtually all issues within this group. In the course of the group's first fifteen years of meetings, there have been debates over such things as the relevance of the concept of exploitation, methodological individualism, the nature of economic crisis in advanced capitalism, the ethical critique of "capitalism between consenting adults," the centrality of class struggle to historical transitions, Marxism

2. Some of the most important works published by the people affiliated to the group include: G.A. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History: a defense*, Princeton 1978; John Roemer, *A General Theory of Exploitation and Class*, Cambridge, Mass. 1982; Adam Przeworski, *Capitalism and Social Democracy*, Cambridge 1985; Erik Olin Wright, *Classes*, London 1985; Bob Brenner, "The Agrarian Roots of European Capitalism," in *The Brenner Debate*, T.H. Aston and C.H.E. Philpon, Cambridge 1985, pp. 213–327; Jon Elster, *Making Sense of Marx*, Cambridge 1985; Phillippe Van Parijs, *Evolutionary Explanation in the Social Sciences: an emerging paradigm*, Totowa, N.J. 1981; Sam Bowles and Herbert Gintis, *Democracy and Capitalism*, New York 1986. Analytical Marxism is by no means restricted to the people who participate in the annual London meeting. Work by other scholars in the Analytical Marxist mode would include Andrew Levine, *Arguing for Socialism*, London 1984 and *The End of the State*, London 1987; Richard W. Miller, *Analyzing Marx. morality, power and history*, Princeton 1984; Joshua Cohen and Joel Rogers, *On Democracy*, Harmondsworth 1983.

3. *Analytical Marxism*, ed. John Roemer, Cambridge 1986. The term itself seems to have been coined by Jon Elster in a seminar around 1980.

and feminism, and the economic feasibility of reforming the welfare state through a system of unconditional grants of income to all citizens. On none of these theoretical problems was there thorough consensus in the group. And, equally, the political positions are quite diverse – from fairly traditional commitments to revolutionary democratic socialism to the Greens to what might be termed left-wing libertarianism.⁴ Given such substantive, theoretical and political diversity, what is it that unites this group of theorists and defines the essential core of Analytical Marxism?

What is "Analytical" about Analytical Marxism?

There are four specific commitments that I think characterize Analytical Marxism and justify considering it a distinct "school" of contemporary Marxist thought:

1. A commitment to *conventional scientific norms* in the elaboration of theory and the conduct of research.
2. An emphasis on the importance of *systematic conceptualization*, particularly of concepts that are at the core of Marxist theory. This involves both careful attention to definitions of concepts and to the logical coherence of repertoires of interconnected concepts.
3. A concern with a relatively *fine-grained specification of the steps in the theoretical arguments linking concepts*, whether the arguments be about causal processes in the construction of explanatory theories or about logical connections in the construction of normative theories. This commitment to elaborating the details of arguments is reflected in one of the hallmarks of Analytical Marxism: the use of explicit, systematic models of the processes being studied. The nature of these models may vary quite a bit, from formal mathematical models to less formal causal models. But in each case there is a belief that the possibility of theoretical advance is enhanced when we are able to generate systematic explicit models of the processes under study.

4. At one point in the history of the annual London meeting there was a serious disagreement, sparked by tensions generated by this political diversity, over whether or not there should be any political-ideological criteria for "membership" in the annual meeting. After considerable discussion of the matter it was decided that the essential principle of the group's cohesion was the possibility of constructive dialogue among the participants rather than actual adherence to a set of political positions.

4. The importance accorded to *the intentional action of individuals* within both explanatory and normative theories.

It would be arrogant to suggest that Marxism entirely lacked these elements prior to the emergence of Analytical Marxism as a self-conscious school. There have certainly been Marxists attentive to each of these issues, and there are Marxists attentive to them today who for one reason or another distance themselves from Analytical Marxism. What makes Analytical Marxism distinctive, then, is the extent to which these principles are brought to the forefront and systematically applied to the construction and reconstruction of theory.

In what follows, we will look at each of these points in turn, illustrating them with examples of specific work by Analytical Marxists. This will help to clarify what is analytical about Analytical Marxism. After this, we will briefly turn to the problem of what remains Marxist about it.

The commitment to conventional scientific norms

Marxism as a theoretical tradition has always had a rather peculiar relation to "science." On the one hand, there has always been a strong current within Marxism which is quite hostile to the canons of conventional science. Particularly in the strand of Marxism associated with the tradition of Critical Theory, positivism and claims to scientificity are often looked upon as instruments of ideological domination rather than emancipatory knowledge. On the other hand, the type of Marxism that has enthusiastically embraced the label "scientific socialism" and claimed the status of a full-fledged "science of society" has often been guilty of the most serious abuses of scientific norms. Self-styled "scientific Marxism" has often taken the form of a rigid ideology with pre-given answers to all questions, functioning more like a secular theology than a scientific discipline: Marxism became Marxology; classical texts were canonized; and the central arguments of the "science" were impervious to transformation. Instead of constituting a theoretical apparatus capable of learning new things about the world – the hallmark of a scientific theory – scientific Marxism has often been a closed system of thought continually reaffirming itself through its own selective observations and interpretations. Marxism has thus either been hostile to science or adopted a particularly distorted and unscientific identification with science.

Analytical Marxists are committed to the view that Marxism should, without embarrassment, aspire to the status of a genuine social science. Marxism should not be absolved from the standards of science even if it

accepts other standards of evaluation and relevance in addition to strictly scientific ones.

Such a commitment to scientificity leaves unspecified exactly what is meant by "science," and this is, of course, a hotly contested issue in philosophy. Generally speaking, I think, most Analytical Marxists adopt what can be loosely described as a *realist* view of science.⁵ This involves the following basic view of the scientific enterprise: science attempts to identify the *mechanisms* which generate the empirical phenomena we experience in the world. Our observations of those phenomena are simultaneously shaped by two kinds of mechanisms: mechanisms internal to the process of observation, and mechanisms which directly generate the phenomenon in question. Because of this duality, it is in general impossible inductively to discover truths about mechanisms simply from raw empirical "facts," since those facts are necessarily selected by the observation process itself. This implies a rejection of what might be called the naïve empiricist view that we can gather facts about the world and use them to generate scientific knowledge without theoretically informed principles of selecting the objects of our observation. In this specific sense, observations cannot be theory-neutral, and therefore our theories cannot simply be inductive generalizations from raw "facts."⁶ But Analytical Marxists would also reject the anti-realist view that our observations are wholly constituted by the categories of thought, by the discourses we use in describing the world. Scientific theories attempt to construct explanations based on real mechanisms that exist in the world independently of our theories even though the selection of observations of those mechanisms and their effects depend in part upon the theories themselves.

There are three important implications of the general acceptance of conventional scientific norms by Analytical Marxists: first, Analytical Marxists tend to be quite skeptical of traditional Marxist claims to a distinctive "Marxist Methodology"; second, they tend to emphasize the importance of empirical research joined to systematic theoretical models

5. The issue of scientific realism, particularly of the sort advanced here, has not been explicitly discussed within the Analytical Marxist group. While I think that this general perspective on the philosophy of science is quite consistent with the general strategies of analysis one finds among Analytical Marxists, the arguments advanced here should not be viewed as generally held by Analytical Marxists. The account of realism which I discuss here is based on the work of Roy Bhaskar, *A Realist Theory of Science*, Sussex 1978 and *The Possibility of Naturalism*, Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey 1979.

6. The argument that our theories shape what we choose to look at – by framing our questions and the choice of which facts to observe – does not imply that the actual observations we make *given these principles of selection* are necessarily "biased" or distorted by our theories. "Facts" can be "objective" in the sense that anyone who used the same principles of selection would come up with the same facts.

for the advance of scientific knowledge; and third, they try to be open to continual reassessment of their own theoretical positions, acknowledging their theoretical failures as well as arguing for their successes.

There is a long tradition among Marxists which claims that Marxism has a distinctive method which differentiates it radically from "bourgeois social science." Such claims involve a familiar list of contrasts: Marxism is dialectical, historical, materialist, antipositivist, holist, while bourgeois social theory is undialectical, ahistorical, idealist, positivist and individualist. Analytical Marxists are quite skeptical of the value of such claims.⁷ This is not to say that all of the specific elements that are traditionally subsumed under the expression "Marxist method" are rejected out of hand. Analytical Marxists, for example, have found ways of including notions of contradiction and even dialectics in their arguments. But when they do so they are generally quite careful to show how these complex ideas can be translated into a language of causes, mechanisms, and effects.

Take the notion of "contradiction." One way of explicating this concept is to treat it as a situation in which there are multiple conditions for the reproduction of a system which cannot all be simultaneously satisfied. Or, alternatively, a contradiction can be viewed as a situation in which the unintended consequences of a strategy subvert the accomplishment of its intended goals.⁸ In either case, "contradiction" is not treated as a philosophically driven way of interpreting the essence of a process, but as a way of explicating the interactions among a set of causal mechanisms. This kind of translation of an element of Marxist method into a language of causal mechanisms would be characteristic of Analytical Marxism.

The second implication of the embrace of conventional scientific norms is a commitment to the importance of systematic empirical research. This is not to say that all Analytical Marxists are themselves directly engaged in empirical research. Some are primarily concerned with normative political theory, and do not engage in empirical research at all. Others are concerned with explanatory models, but are primarily preoccupied with the elaboration of the logic of the models themselves. Nevertheless, most Analytical Marxists feel that an essential element in the elaboration of theories is the systematic confrontation with empirical

7. Perhaps the strongest statement of this skepticism was made by Jon Elster in the first chapter of *Making Sense of Marx*, where he categorically denounces all such claims to a distinctive Marxian method, which he identifies with the unfortunate influence of Hegelian philosophy on Marx's work.

8. This is the meaning of contradiction preferred by Jon Elster. See *Logic and Society*, New York 1978, as well as *Making Sense of Marx*, for discussions of this view of contradiction.

research. This has led to the development of a number of substantial research projects by Analytical Marxists. My own research, for example, has involved conducting closely replicated social surveys on class structure, class biography and class consciousness in fifteen countries: the United States, Sweden, Norway, Finland, Denmark, Britain, West Germany, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, Spain, South Korea, Taiwan and Russia. The central objective of this research has been to develop strictly comparable micro-level data on class and its effects in this set of countries so that we could systematically explore variations in the causal interconnections among class-related variables across different macro-historical contexts.⁹ Other empirical research projects by Analytical Marxists include Robert Brenner's research on the transition from feudalism to capitalism, Adam Przeworski's project on social democratic party politics, and Joel Rogers' research on the interaction of the state and the labor movement in American history. While none of these projects is based on a belief in simple empirical "tests" of complex theoretical ideas, they all affirm the conventional scientific view that theoretical advances depend in part on their engagement with relevant data from empirical research.

Finally, one of the striking properties of the work of Analytical Marxists is the extent to which they take seriously the problem of revising their own theoretical positions in the light of debate and criticism. Cohen's work on the Marxist theory of history has gone through a number of significant transformations in the light of issues raised in discussions of his original formulations. Roemer first developed a comprehensive concept of exploitation and then, in the context of critical discussions of his framework, moved on to question the very relevance of exploitation so defined for understanding and criticizing capitalism. And in my own work, my treatment of class structure has gone through at least two significant reconstructions in response to debates within class analysis.¹⁰ The commitment to science, therefore, means that Analytical Marxists treat their arguments as needing to be continually subjected to criticism and revision rather than as constituting definitive embodiments of "truth."

9. The scope and initial results of this project are briefly reviewed in my essay, "The Comparative Project on Class Structure and Class Consciousness: an overview," *Acta Sociologica*, vol. 32, no. 1, 1989, pp. 3-22.

10. For the revisions of Cohen's views on the theory of history, see *History, Labor and Freedom*, Oxford 1989. Roemer's questioning of the relevance of exploitation can be found in his essay "Should Marxists be Interested in Exploitation?" *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, no. 14, 1985. The trajectory of my views on class structure is reviewed in my essay, "Rethinking, Once Again, the Concept of Class Structure," the concluding chapter of *The Debate on Classes*, London 1989.

Conceptualization

One of the distinctive signatures of work by Analytical Marxists is the amount of energy devoted to the elaboration of basic concepts. A great deal of time is spent defending specific definitions, discussing alternative criteria, examining the logical interconnections of concepts, puzzling over inconsistencies, and so on. Let me give you an example from my own work, the definition of the "middle class," to illustrate this concern with conceptualization.

Here is the problem: Marxian class concepts are built around a polarized notion of class relations. There are capitalists and workers, lords and serfs. What does it mean to occupy a middle-class location within such polarized relations? Traditionally, Marxists have dealt with this problem by treating the "middle" class as a residual – any location that cannot be firmly situated within the bourgeoisie or the proletariat is, by default, in the "middle class." I wanted a positive specification of this kind of class location. In my work, I proposed two basic solutions. The first was to treat the middle class as those locations in the class structure which were simultaneously in two or more classes. Managers, for example, could be thought of as being simultaneously in the bourgeoisie and in the proletariat. I referred to such positions as "contradictory class locations." The second solution argued that capitalist societies consisted of multiple forms of exploitation, not simply capitalist exploitation proper. For example, following the work of John Roemer, I argued that the control over certain kinds of skills could constitute a mechanism of exploitation. The middle class, then, was defined as locations which were exploited capitalistically but were exploiters through some subordinate mechanism of exploitation.¹¹

Many other examples of this kind of intensive work on concept formation could be given: John Roemer's work on exploitation; G.A. Cohen's analysis of forces of production or the meaning of "proletarian unfreedom"; John Elster's discussion of the concept of "solidarity"; Joel Rogers and Joshua Cohen's analysis of "democracy"; Andrew Levine's analysis of "freedom."¹² In each case there is the assumption that a necessary condition for the development of powerful theories is the

11. The logical structure of these two conceptualizations and the problems which each encounter are extensively discussed in my essay, "Rethinking, Once Again, the Concept of Class Structure," the concluding chapter in Erik Olin Wright and others, *The Debate on Classes*, London 1989.

12. See Roemer, *A General Theory of Class and Exploitation*; Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History*, chapter 2, and "The Structure of Proletarian Unfreedom," in Roemer (ed.), *Analytical Marxism*; Elster, *Making Sense of Marx*, chapter 6.2; Cohen and Rogers, *On Democracy*; Levine, *Arguing for Socialism*.

elaboration of logically coherent concepts. It is in part from this preoccupation that Analytical Marxism gets its name: the analytical coherence of concepts is essential for the explanatory power of theories.

Elaboration of explicit models

One of the striking characteristics of Analytical Marxism has been the use of explicit abstract models, sometimes highly formalized as in game theory, other times somewhat less formalized as causal models. Many Marxists (as well as non-Marxist radicals) find such models objectionable on the grounds that they involve such dramatic simplifications of the complexity of real world situations that they cannot possibly deepen our knowledge of the world. Analytical Marxists counter such objections on several grounds.

First, the fact that models constitute simplifications of complexity is not in and of itself a failing, but a virtue. This is precisely what we want a good theory to do: to get to the heart of a complex problem by identifying the central mechanisms involved.

Second, the essential structure of a formal model is to create a thought experiment of some process. That is, one is forced to specify the underlying assumptions of the model, the conditions which are treated as parameters, and the ways in which the mechanisms work. The clarity forced upon a theorist by making explicit such assumptions and arguments is desirable. Furthermore, since in real-life social situations it is generally hard to construct real experimental conditions for revealing the operation of causal mechanisms (or even, through comparative methods, quasi-experimental designs), thought-experiments are essential to give plausibility to the causal claims we actually make about any concrete problem.

Finally, it is generally the case that lurking in the weeds behind every informal causal explanation is a tacit formal model. All explanatory theories contain assumptions, claims about the conditions under which the explanations hold, claims about how the various mechanisms fit together. The difference between what Analytical Marxists do and what many historical and empirical Marxist researchers do, then, may be basically a question of the extent to which they are prepared to put their cards on the table and articulate the causal models in their theories.

To get a sense of how Analytical Marxists actually use these kinds of models to engage Marxist questions, it will be useful to look in some detail at two prominent examples: Adam Przeworski's analysis of social democracy, which relies on elements of rational choice theory, and G.A.

Cohen's reconstruction of Marx's theory of history, which is built around functional explanations.¹³

Adam Przeworski develops a general theoretical model of the historical trajectory of social democratic politics in capitalist societies. He argues that once bourgeois democratic institutions are in place, social democratic parties face a series of dilemmas when selecting a political strategy. The first dilemma is whether or not to participate in elections at all. If they participate, they risk incorporation into the machine of state domination; if they abstain from participation, they risk political marginalization. Second, if they decide to participate, they face a dilemma rooted in their electoral base. If they attempt to be a pure working-class party, then they can adopt a consistent set of pro-working-class policies, but they will never get an electoral majority (since the working class is never a majority of the population); if they seek alliances with various segments of the middle class, then they dilute their working-class base and ultimately alienate their working-class support.¹⁴

Przeworski then shows, using formal mathematical models, that given: (a) the distribution of the population into the class structure, and (b) the historical legacy of past strategies on the patterns of loyalty to and defection from parties by people in different classes, then (c) it is possible to define the maximum and minimum levels of the total vote that are available to the social democratic party at any given time. These define what could be called the "Gramsci bounds" on electoral strategies: the limits of what is possible under the historically embodied constraints. The cumulative effect of past strategies and current structures, then, is an historical trajectory of changing possibilities. Przeworski develops mathematical models of this trajectory of limits for various countries, and then an empirical investigation of the actual trajectory of electoral outcomes that occur within these limits.

A second example is G.A. Cohen's analysis of classical historical materialism. Cohen's task is to try to see what kind of explanation is represented by the Marxist theory of history. He wants to reconcile a number of distinct theses: (1) that the level of development of the forces of production determines the form of social relations of production; (2) that the economic structure (the totality of all relations of production) determines the political superstructure; (3) that the relations of produc-

13. See Przeworski, *Capitalism and Social Democracy*; Adam Przeworski and John Sprague, *Paper Stones*, Chicago 1986; and Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History*.

14. The third dilemma occurs if a working-class socialist party were to get elected: should the party try to enact reforms within the constraints of capitalism, in which case it risks abandoning its socialist project; or should it try to initiate a transition to socialism, in which case it risks retaliation from capitalists and accompanying severe economic disruption which, in turn, would erode its electoral base?

tion explain the development of the forces of production; and (4) that the superstructure explains the persistence of the economic structure. Cohen argues that these propositions can be made consistent only if they are linked together through a series of functional explanations. Thus, for example, he argues that for statements (2) and (4) above both to be true, the word "determines" in statement (2) must mean "functionally explains." The superstructure must be functionally explained by the economic base in the following way: the superstructure takes the form that it does because the economic base needs it in order to be reproduced. This may or may not, of course, be a plausible theory either of the relationship between economic and non-economic institutions or of historical development; but it is the necessary form of the argument if the specific elements of the theory as developed by Marx are to be internally consistent.

What is striking in both of these examples is not mainly the abstract substantive claims which they make. After all, Przeworski's argument could be basically viewed as an example of Marx's famous statement that "Men make their own history, but under circumstances not of their choosing," applied to the specific problem of socialist electoral politics. And Cohen's analysis is directly based on Marx's analysis of the "dialectical relation" between forces and relations of production. What is novel in this work is the rigor of the effort at specifying the details of the mechanisms which underlie these more abstract claims. This not only enhances the depth of our understanding of the abstract arguments themselves, but makes it much easier to identify their weaknesses and reconstruct them in light of empirical research.

The importance of choice

The feature of Analytical Marxism that has caused the most controversy, perhaps, is the self-conscious use by certain Analytical Marxists of rational actor models, including mathematical game theory.¹⁵ This has led some people to rename Analytical Marxism "Rational Choice Marxism," and to characterize it as embodying a general commitment to methodological individualism (i.e. to the methodological claim that all social phenomena are in principle explainable exclusively with reference to individuals and their attributes).¹⁶

15. Rational actor models of various sorts have played a particularly prominent role in the work of Jon Elster, John Roemer and Adam Przeworski. Elster, in particular, has argued for the privileged status of such models. See especially Elster's defense of methodological individualism in the introduction of *Making Sense of Marx*, pp. 3-8.

16. See, for example, Alan Carling, "Rational Choice Marxism," *New Left Review*, no. 160, 1986.

This identification of Analytical Marxism with methodological individualism is, I believe, mistaken. Indeed, a number of Analytical Marxists have been explicitly critical of methodological individualism and have argued against the exclusive reliance on models of abstract rationality as a way of understanding human action.¹⁷ What is true, however, is that most Analytical Marxists take quite seriously the problem of understanding the relationship between individual choice and social processes. This does not imply that social processes can be *reduced* to problems of individual intentionality, nor does it imply that instrumental rationality is the ubiquitous basis for intentional action; but it does mean that social theory should systematically incorporate a concern with conscious choice. One way of doing this is through rational actor models of various kinds.

Now, it is certainly possible to acknowledge the usefulness of the intellectual discipline of constructing formal models, and yet reject rational choice models as simply being stupid models. Particularly given the historical identification of rational actor theory with neoclassical economics, what is the attraction of this particular kind of model to many Analytical Marxists? I think the attraction lies in the importance most Analytical Marxists give to a particular analytical task, namely elaborating what is sometimes called the *micro-foundations* of macro-structural theory – that is, analyzing the mechanisms through which individuals come to act the way they do within a set of structurally defined social relations. Whatever else one might want of a social theory, if we want to understand the mechanisms through which a given social cause generates its effects, we must try to understand why individuals act the way they do. And in this context, rational actor models and game theory provide a systematic strategy for analyzing one particularly salient aspect of individual action: action that results from conscious choices in which the costs and benefits are assessed over a range of feasible alternatives within a set of social constraints. If you believe (a) that at least in some important social contexts actors make conscious choices, and (b) that when they make choices they take into consideration the expected consequences of their actions, and finally, (c) that in assessing such consequences they take into consideration the choices of other actors – that is, that they act strategically, not just rationally – then something like game theory and rational choice theory would be an appropriate part of one's repertoire of analytical techniques.

17. See, in particular, "Marxism and Methodological Individualism," Andrew Levine, Elliott Sober, and Erik Olin Wright, *New Left Review*, no. 162, 1987, reprinted as chapter 6 in Erik Olin Wright, Andrew Levine, and Elliott Sober, *Reconstructing Marxism*, London 1992. See also the exchange in *Socialist Review*, vol. 19, no. 2, 1989, between Michael Burawoy and Adam Przeworski over the problem of micro-foundations of macro-theory.

The difference between the way Analytical Marxists deploy these kinds of models and the way neoclassical economists and political scientists deploy them lies not in the internal logic of the models themselves, but in the kinds of problems they are used to address and the ways in which the "conditions of existence" of the models are specified. Thus, for example, John Roemer uses rational choice theory to explore the problem of exploitation. In his analysis, the central conditions faced by actors are particular systems of property relations which give different actors monopolies over particular kinds of resources. He then uses the formal mathematical models of rational choice theory to show how exploitation is generated out of such conditions. So while Roemer adopts the formal mathematical apparatus of "bourgeois" models in his work, he asks different questions from neoclassical economists and he characterizes the environment of rational choice in a very different way. As a result, he comes to very different conclusions: far from generating optimal distributional consequences in a market environment, Roemer concludes that individual optimizing strategies systematically generate exploitation and classes.

To be sure, there are limits to the explanatory capacity of formal models built around rational action. Thus, most Analytical Marxists would agree that these kinds of models need to be supplemented in a variety of ways with other kinds of explanations in the construction of social theory. Examples include such things as functional explanations in G.A. Cohen's analysis of the theory of history; subintentional causal explanations in Jon Elster's analysis of the cognitive underpinnings of ideology; and institutional-structural explanations in my work on class formation and Robert Brenner's work on economic crisis. One of the innovations of Analytical Marxism, then, is the attempt to link systematically, within a Marxist theoretical agenda, these sorts of explanatory strategies with the analysis of individual rationality and choice.

What is "Marxist" about Analytical Marxism?

I have stressed in these comments what is "analytical" about "Analytical Marxism." One might ask, when all is said and done, what about it remains "Marxist." Analytical Marxists reject claims about the methodological distinctiveness of Marxism; they adopt the full repertoire of "bourgeois" scientific practices; and they constantly question the core concepts and traditional theses of Marxism. What, then, is Marxist about this theoretical enterprise? I would emphasize three things in answer to this question.

First, much of the work of Analytical Marxists self-consciously works

on Marxism as a theoretical tradition. The typical intellectual strategy is to take some core theme or argument in Marxism, establish the necessary conditions for this argument to be sustainable, and then reconstruct the argument in light of the plausibility of those conditions.

Second, the broader agenda of theoretical and empirical questions which Analytical Marxists pose are generally firmly rooted in the discourse and traditions of Marxism. The topics of research – the transition from feudalism to capitalism, the relationship of class structure to class consciousness, the dilemmas of socialist politics, the conditions for solidarity and fragmentation of the working class – clearly take their intellectual coordinates from the Marxist tradition. Even if the *answers* to these questions may deviate considerably from classical Marxist answers, the questions themselves are characteristically Marxist.

Third, the language used to frame answers to these questions is also deeply embedded in Marxist discourse. Class, ideology, consciousness, exploitation, the state, and so on constitute the conceptual repertoire of Analytical Marxism much as they do that of Marxism in general. As Alvin Gouldner has argued, Marxism should be considered what he called an “ideal speech community,” an intellectual terrain of dialogue rather than a body of consensually accepted theses. Analytical Marxists work on this terrain and share in this dialogue even if they transform many of the traditionally defended theses.

Finally, and perhaps most problematically given their political heterogeneity, Analytical Marxists broadly share the core normative orientation of Marxism in general. In varying degrees, their work is animated by a commitment to values of freedom, equality, and human dignity, and generally they are sympathetic to some conception of democratic socialism as the institutional vehicle for the realization of these values. While these values may be shared by many post- or non-Marxist radical intellectuals, the linkage between these values, on the one hand, and the theoretical agenda of questions and debate, on the other, systematically anchor Analytical Marxism in the Marxist tradition.

Explaining what it is about Analytical Marxism that makes it Marxist does not, of course, constitute an argument for why one should bother with such an arduous effort at reconstructing Marxism with the intellectual tools of modern social science. Quite apart from a general skepticism about the virtues of science, many radicals are even more skeptical about the virtues of Marxism. Putting the two together might seem a particularly diabolical medicine, more likely to poison than to invigorate radical thought. Why should a radical attempt to revitalize Marxism in this way?

I cannot, in this chapter, provide anything approaching a systematic defense of Marxism as an intellectual tradition within which to produce radical theory. And I should add that not all the theorists who engage in

Analytical Marxism would regard such a defense as particularly important. Some participants in the intellectual project of Analytical Marxism regard Marxism as simply one of a variety of sources of ideas, concepts, and tools. Indeed, they may not actually consider themselves to be “Marxists” of even a weak persuasion. While they may find the intellectual task of analytically reconstructing Marxism to be a productive one, it is not out of any deep commitment to Marxism as such. It is thus possible to “do” Marxism (make contributions to the reconstruction of Marxist theory) without “being” a Marxist (having a general commitment, political and theoretical, to the Marxist tradition).

In these terms I am among the more intransigently Marxist of the Analytical Marxists. My defense of Marxism as a theoretical tradition, therefore, should not be taken as characteristic of Analytical Marxism as such.

There are two basic reasons why I believe Marxism remains an essential theoretical framework for radical analysis: (1) The *questions* that are at the heart of Marxism continue to be critical for any plausible political project for radical social change; (2) the *conceptual framework* for tackling those questions continues to produce new and insightful *answers*.

First, the questions: there was a time in which many Marxists claimed that Marxism constituted a fully comprehensive scientific theory of all facets of social life. The central mechanisms postulated within Marxism were thought not simply to explain the central dynamics of capitalism as a system of production or the basic possibilities for class formation, but to explain everything else of importance as well.

Few Marxist theorists today argue for such grandiose explanatory pretensions for Marxism. Rather, at the core of Marxism is the problem of explaining the development of forms of domination and exploitation that are rooted in the social organization of production, particularly in the historical epoch of capitalism, in order to understand the possibilities for the radical transformation of such systems of domination and exploitation. Marxist theory is preoccupied with understanding the potentials and dilemmas of, and constraints on, radical social change imposed by the system of class relations. In the case of capitalism, this means that Marxism attempts to construct a scientific theory of the possibility of socialism, where socialism is understood as the central social form through which capitalist exploitation and domination can be transcended.

In these terms, Marxists have a distinctively *Marxist* interest in ideology, the state, culture, gender, race, etc., only in so far as these bear on the problem of understanding class relations and their potentials for radical transformation. Of course, the *people* who are Marxists may also

be, for example, feminists, and thus have an interest in gender relations because of a desire to understand the development of gender oppression and the potentials for its transformation independently of the relevance of such concerns for class as such. But Marxism as a theoretical structure does not itself have anything *systematically Marxist* to say about this. (Or, perhaps more precisely, once Marxism has been shorn of insupportable explanatory claims – such as the claim that male domination is to be entirely explained functionally by its role in reproducing class domination – then Marxism as such does not theorize the essential mechanisms that produce and reproduce gender relations.)

Marxism in this sense is “sex-blind.” This, however, is not in my judgment a weakness of Marxism; it is a theoretical advance that there is now more precision in its range of theoretical relevance and explanatory capacities.¹⁸ Of course, there may in the future be further scientific advances in which some more general theoretical structure is capable of fully integrating Marxist accounts of class mechanisms and feminist accounts of gender mechanisms into some more comprehensive theoretical system. But there is no necessary reason to believe that this will be possible, and in any case, until such theoretical synthesis occurs it is appropriate to consider class and gender to be distinct mechanisms, each requiring their own set of concepts and explanations.¹⁹

One might well ask why a person committed to understanding gender oppression or race oppression should care about the Marxist questions. If Marxism – or, at least, Analytical Marxism – no longer pretends to provide a comprehensive explanation of gender domination, why should feminists be interested in Marxism? I believe that a concern with class-based domination and exploitation should be central to the theoretical agenda of political radicals even if their commitments are more preoccupied with problems of race or gender or some other dimension of social life. In so far as projects of radical social change confront constraints embedded in the system of property relations – for example, day care costs money, the availability of these resources depends upon taxes, the

18. Feminists often criticize Marxism for being sex-blind, whereas I think that the sex-blindness of Marxism may actually enhance its usefulness for feminists. Marxism should not be a variety of feminism, attempting somehow to subsume the specificity of gender oppression within its concepts. The various attempts, for example, to treat male domination as a species of class domination have largely obscured rather than clarified the relationship between gender and class. It is one thing for feminists to criticize Marxists for being sex-blind in the sense of not recognizing the importance of gender mechanisms in answering the questions which they ask; but it does not follow from this that Marxist concepts as such should be systematically gendered.

19. This argument endorses a variety of what is sometimes called a “dual systems” approach to the relation of class and gender, although I would prefer to call it a “dual mechanisms” approach, since I do not want to insist that class relations and gender relations are each fully integrated into some encompassing “system.”

tax base depends upon investment under the control of capitalists – then radicals in general need an understanding of class mechanisms. Marxism is still the theoretical tradition which, in my judgment, has most comprehensively explored those mechanisms.

It is not enough, of course, to defend the Marxist tradition for asking important questions. For Marxism as a theoretical perspective to be relevant today, it is also important to defend the conceptual framework for producing answers to the questions it asks. At the core of the Marxist tradition is a set of relatively familiar concepts: class structure, exploitation, class struggle, class formation, mode of production, economic structure, the state, ideology. Each of these concepts has come under systematic scrutiny in recent years, and as a result there has been considerable progress in specifying their explanatory potentials. As a result, while Marxists have generally narrowed their explanatory pretensions over the past decade or so, there has also been a complementary deepening of the answers to the questions they pose using this repertoire of concepts.

The theoretical contributions by the participants in the series on “Production and Democracy” in the *Socialist Review* amply illustrate this vitality of the Marxist tradition.²⁰ Michael Burawoy’s work on the labor process and factory regimes has significantly advanced our knowledge of the mechanisms through which cooperation is forged within production by showing how the adaptive strategies of workers and the responses of capitalists jointly shape a set of “rules of the game” within which the interests of workers and capitalists are coordinated.²¹ Sam Bowles and Herb Gintis’s work on the political nature of exchange relations in capitalism has given much more precision to the role of power in a competitive economy by showing how control over assets inherently generates asymmetries of power within exchange.²² Adam Przeworski’s work on social democracy, discussed earlier, has powerfully illuminated the dilemmas posed to working-class politics in democratic capitalism by

20. Michael Burawoy, “Should We Give Up on Socialism?” *Socialist Review*, vol. 19, no. 1, 1989, pp. 58–76; and “Marxism without Micro-foundations,” *Socialist Review*, vol. 19, no. 2, 1989, pp. 53–86; Adam Przeworski, “Class Production and Politics: a reply to Burawoy,” *Socialist Review*, vol. 19, no. 2, pp. 87–111; John Roemer, “Visions of Capitalism and Socialism,” *Socialist Review*, vol. 19, no. 3, pp. 93–100.

21. See Michael Burawoy, *The Politics of Production*, London 1985. Michael Burawoy has, at times, distanced his own work from “Analytical Marxism,” first, because he doubts the usefulness of formal rational actor models, and second, because he is generally skeptical about the hard claims to “science” made by Analytical Marxists. Nevertheless, in spite of these disclaimers, I believe that his work does satisfy the four criteria for Analytical Marxism which I laid out at the outset of this chapter. For an exchange between Michael Burawoy and myself on the status of Marxism as a science, see *The Debate on Classes*, London 1990, Part II.

22. Sam Bowles and Herbert Gintis, “Contested Exchange,” *Politics & Society*, 1990.

showing how democratic institutions force socialist parties to choose between an erosion of socialist ideals (if they seek class alliances to expand their electoral base) or permanent marginalization (if they remain faithful to radical visions of working-class interests). And my own work on class structure, I believe, has helped to deepen our understanding of the middle class within advanced capitalist societies by analyzing how this class is constituted as a contradictory location within class relations. This body of work testifies to the continued capacity of research using Marxian conceptual tools to produce new answers to enduring questions.

The Impact of Analytical Marxism

The challenges facing the Marxist tradition of social theory today are of an unprecedented magnitude. Many people on the left have proclaimed Marxism moribund, seeing its core concepts and theoretical arguments as increasingly irrelevant either as a guide to understanding the world or to changing it. Analytical Marxism constitutes one significant response to this challenge. It argues that in order to revitalize Marxism and reconstruct its theoretical power, it must enthusiastically adopt the most sophisticated tools of contemporary social science. And, if Marxism hopes to play an active role inside the academy in countering the ideological dominance of conservative and liberal currents of social research, it has to adopt the methodologically most powerful weapons available or risk permanent isolation and marginalization.

Has this strategy worked? What kind of real impact has Analytical Marxism had, either in the university or in the broader world of radical politics? Analytical Marxism is only about fifteen years old as a self-consciously constituted perspective, and thus it is probably premature to try to make a systematic assessment of its effects. Furthermore, as a partisan advocate of Analytical Marxism, it would in any case be hard for me to weigh the evidence dispassionately. Nevertheless, I think that there are at least some indications that this approach to Marxist theory has begun to have some impact beyond its immediate circle of supporters.

In spite of the decline worldwide in Marxist scholarship, the work of Analytical Marxists is increasingly appearing in publications around the world oriented towards progressive audiences outside the academy, and Analytical Marxist ideas are beginning to have an influence on public discussions on the left.²³ In more academic terms, a number of journals

23. Translations of Analytical Marxist work have appeared in Italian, Spanish,

have devoted considerable space to articles and symposia revolving around Analytical Marxist work, and numerous publications have appeared containing extended critiques of Analytical Marxism, which is also an indicator that it is becoming more influential.²⁴ At a more institutional level, several of the central advocates of Analytical Marxism have gained positions of considerable institutional importance within the universities in which they work.²⁵

Whether this institutional presence constitutes "success" or "co-optation," of course, is a matter of debate. There are many radicals who will accuse this new breed of Academic Marxists of careerism and opportunism.²⁶ It is certainly the case that assuming these kinds of institutional roles does pose risks and may both reflect and generate serious compromises of political commitments. The same can be said about the basic methodological strategy of Analytical Marxism: just as adopting the political weapons of capitalist democracy risks incorporating socialists into the normal regulative functions of the capitalist state, so adopting the scientific practices of conventional social science risks neutralizing the revolutionary aspirations of Marxism. Above all, there is the risk of narrowing the field of legitimate questions to those that are tractable with these sophisticated tools. Statistically rigorous data anal-

Swedish, French, German, Dutch, Portuguese, Russian, Chinese, Polish, Hungarian, Korean, and Japanese. As an example of Analytical Marxist ideas entering general discussions on the left, in the recent publication by the British Communist Party, *Facing the Future*, there was an explicit discussion of the concept of "contradictory class locations," although there was no attribution of the concept.

24. Two issues of the journal *Politics & Society* have been devoted entirely to discussions of Analytical Marxist work – one issue on John Roemer's analysis of class and exploitation in 1985 and a second issue on Sam Bowles and Herbert Gintis's work on contested exchange, in 1990. *Critical Sociology*, the *Berkeley Journal of Sociology* and *Theory and Society* have each contained symposia on problems of Analytical Marxism, while one whole issue of *The Canadian Journal of Philosophy* was devoted to Analytical Marxism in 1989. The *Socialist Review* has recently published a series of essays within this perspective, and numerous Analytical Marxist articles and critiques of Analytical Marxism have appeared in the *New Left Review*, *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, *The Review of Radical Economics*, and other journals. Examples of books containing extended critiques of Analytical Marxism include G. Carchedi, *Class Analysis and Social Research*, London 1987; Paul Kamolnick, *Classes: a Marxist Critique*, Dix Hills 1988; Stephen Resnick and Richard Wolff, *Knowledge and Class*, Chicago 1987.

25. Examples include Robert Brenner, the director of the Center for Comparative History and Social Theory at UCLA; John Roemer, the head of the Program in Economics, Justice and Society at the University of California, Davis; and myself, director of the A.E. Havens Center for the Study of Social Structure and Social Change at the University of Wisconsin. While none of these centers can be considered "Institutes of Analytical Marxism" – they all try to serve the needs of a relatively broad progressive community in their universities – they nevertheless represent a much higher level of institutional support for this kind of theoretical enterprise than existed in the past.

26. Russell Jacoby, in *The Last Intellectuals*, New York 1987, makes this kind of accusation in a particularly strident and unsympathetic way.

ysis tends to restrict investigations to problems that are easily quantifiable; rational choice theory tends to direct attention to those problems of strategic interaction that can be formally modeled within the repertoire of game theory models. Such potential restriction on the domain of inquiry imposed by the choice of scientifically rigorous methods poses serious threats to the political vitality of radical thought.

These risks need to be acknowledged, and resisted. But to respond to them by refusing to build enclaves of radical scholarship within leading universities robs Marxism of the capacity to play an effective role in the academy; and to cope with these risks by rejecting these analytical and scientific methods altogether undermines the ability of Marxism to enhance its theoretical understandings of the world in ways which will enable it, once again, to play an effective role in politics as well.

Marxism as Social Science

In 1989, the *Berkeley Journal of Sociology* invited a number of people to comment on an exchange between myself and Michael Burawoy which had been published in the 1987 issue of the journal.¹ The original exchange revolved around the scientific and theoretical status of my book *Classes*. In an interview with a group of graduate students at the University of California, Berkeley, which was published as the opening item in the dialogue between myself and Burawoy, I had defended the attempt in that book of pursuing Marxist questions with quantitative research techniques. Burawoy criticized my position, arguing that my vision of science was inattentive to the social conditions for the production of knowledge and that this had especially critical implications for my aspirations to produce a science that was faithful to Marxism as an emancipatory theory. I then replied, defending a version of scientific realism and arguing that academic Marxism, isolated to some extent from the pressures of popular struggles, had the potential of making certain distinctive kinds of contributions to knowledge relevant for emancipatory projects of social change.

The 1989 *BJS* symposium on this earlier exchange included commentators who were much more hostile to the whole enterprise of trying to build a serious Marxist social science. In this chapter, I engage two themes that emerged in different ways in a number of the contributions to the symposium: first, the claim in several of the essays that the exchange between myself and Michael Burawoy was simply a rehash of the old-fashioned debate between "scientific" and "critical" Marxism; and second, the claim that the preoccupations of our debate are largely

1. See Erik Olin Wright, "Reflections on Classes," and Michael Burawoy, "The Limits of Wright's Analytical Marxism and an Alternative," in the *Berkeley Journal of Sociology*, vol. XXXII, 1987. This exchange was subsequently reprinted as chapter 2 in my book, *The Debate on Classes*, London 1989.