

Chapter 6 is a slightly revised version of "Marxism and Methodological Individualism" (Levine, Sober and Wright), *New Left Review* 162 (1987), pp. 67–84.

Chapters 7 and 8 appear here for the first time.

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*Erik Olin Wright*  
*Andrew Levine*  
*Elliott Sober*

## Marxism: Crisis or Renewal?

It has become commonplace nowadays to speak of a crisis—and even of the end—of Marxism. This dire forecast can hardly be explained just by the cultural hegemony exercised by Marxism's ideological opponents. Real conditions—internal theoretical developments, changes in intellectual culture and, above all, transformed political circumstances—contribute to the impression that this once central tradition of radical social theory and practice is in a process of collapse.

Certainly, extraordinary changes have taken place in societies once ruled by Communist parties officially identified with Marxism. A few years ago, the "Marxism" of these parties was the official ideology of a third of the planet. Now, with Communist parties everywhere renouncing much of their previous theory and practice, and with their role in the societies they once ruled becoming increasingly precarious, Marxism appears to have fallen victim to the fate it officially forecast for its rivals—it has been swept, apparently, into the "dustbin of history".

Moreover, the major part of the left in advanced capitalist countries and even in much of the Third World appears to have largely shed its historical affiliation with the Marxist tradition. Not only have Marxist revolutionary aspirations been marginalized, even as distant political objectives within most progressive movements, but programs for social reform inspired by Marxist understandings of the social world and Marxist visions of ideal social arrangements no longer shape left political practice.

These transformations, compounded by developments internal to Marxist theory and to the intellectual culture in which it exists, have led many Marxists to turn away from the Marxist tradition or to move "beyond" it. Thus many of those who have remained on the left have

gravitated towards one or another form of "post-Marxism".<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, among radicals who continue to identify with Marxism, there is no longer any firm consensus on what Marxism is. Of course, there have always been doctrinal divisions among self-identified Marxists. But there was once a common core of theoretical agreement: the labor theory of value provided a critical tool for analyzing capitalism; historical materialism supplied a proper account of epochal historical change; class structure and class struggle were fundamental explanatory concepts. This essential core is now itself contested. Many who identify with the Marxist tradition today reject the labor theory of value, are skeptical of historical materialism's plausibility and regard classes as only one of many determinants of state policies, prevailing ideologies and other traditional Marxist explananda.

This declining intellectual consensus, coincident with the collapse of authoritarian state socialist regimes, has fostered the sense of crisis that has now become pervasive. However, recent years have also witnessed considerable theoretical innovation and progress. We believe that, on balance, the current period is much more a time of theoretical maturation than imminent senescence; and that, so far from approaching its natural death, a reconstructed Marxism, less grandiose but also far sounder than any of its ancestors, will emerge from this period of theoretical transformation.

The essays in this book aim to further this process of reconstruction. As such, they occupy a particular historical location. Very generally, they fall within the intellectual current that has come to be known as "analytical Marxism".<sup>2</sup> Analytical Marxism emerged in the 1970s as an

1. The term "post-Marxism" has come to designate a theoretical-political posture that sees itself transcending Marxism rather than categorically opposing it. *Post-Marxists* are therefore quite different from many of the *exploitation-Marxists* of the 1950s, who in abandoning Marxism often became militant anti-communist apologists for capitalism. Representative examples of post-Marxist work include, Jean L. Cohen, *Class and Civil Society: the limits of Marxian critical theory* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1982); Michael Albert and Robin Hahnel, *Marxism and Socialist Theory* (Boston: South End Press, 1981); Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: towards a radical democratic politics* (London: Verso, 1985).

2. Some representative works within the analytical Marxist theoretical current are: G.A. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History: a defense* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978); John Roemer, *A General Theory of Exploitation and Class* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982); Adam Przeworski, *Capitalism and Social Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Erik Olin Wright, *Classes* (London: Verso, 1985); Robert Brenner, "The Agrarian Roots of European Capitalism", in T.H. Aston and C.H.E. Philpon, eds, *The Brenner Debate* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 213-327; Jon Elster, *Making Sense of Marx* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Sam Bowles and Herbert Gintis, *Democracy and Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1986); Andrew Levine, *Arguing for*

alternative to the Marxisms that had existed in the West for most of this century. Since the demise of what is now called "the Marxism of the Second International" around the time of the First World War, Marxism as an intellectual tradition existed primarily either as Communist Party orthodoxy or as a heterogeneous mix of tendencies identified as "Western Marxism".<sup>3</sup> Analytical Marxism has developed as a way of furthering what, in Chapter 8, we call the Marxist agenda, while trying to avoid the limitations of both these styles of Marxist theorizing.

Within this current, analytical philosophy, empirical social science and neoclassical economic analysis have been joined with traditional Marxist theoretical and political concerns. As a strategy for reconstructing Marxism, analytical Marxism above all aspires to clarify rigorously foundational concepts and assumptions and the logic of theoretical arguments built on those foundations. Of course, nearly all theorists, and certainly all Marxists, share these aims to some extent. But like analytical philosophers generally, analytical Marxists place these values at the very center of their intellectual project, sometimes to the virtual exclusion of other objectives characteristic of earlier Marxisms. In particular, analytical Marxists are impatient with vague programmatic schemes of an all-encompassing sort and with views that elude precise formulation. As analytical Marxism has emerged as a distinct current, sweeping philosophical pronouncements have given way to more modest but tractable theorizing. Positions have been carefully elaborated, assessed, revised and, in some cases, abandoned. In consequence, many traditional Marxist claims have been shown to be vulnerable or unsustainable, and the theoretical line of demarcation between Marxism

*Socialism*, 2nd edition (London: Verso, 1988) and *The End of the State* (London: Verso, 1987); Richard W. Miller, *Analyzing Marx: morality, power and history* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984); Joshua Cohen and Joel Rogers, *On Democracy* (London: Penguin, 1983); and Allen Wood, *Karl Marx*, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981).

3. We use the term "Western Marxism" in the widely accepted sense introduced by Merleau-Ponty and made more current by Perry Anderson. See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Adventures of the Dialectic*, trans. Joseph Bien (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973), pp. 30-58; and Perry Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism* (London: NLB, 1976). Roughly, the term denotes that current of theorizing that runs through the work of Georg Lukács, Karl Korsch, Antonio Gramsci, the "critical theorists" of the Frankfurt School (Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse et al.), existentialist Marxists (Sartre, Merleau-Ponty), structuralist Marxists (Althusser, Balibar), and so on. Politically, Western Marxism has opposed the official Marxism of the Soviet Union and the Western European Communist parties—though, in some cases, only implicitly. Philosophically, Western Marxism is shaped in varying ways by "continental" philosophical currents—neo-Hegelianism, above all—and tends to focus programmatically on grand reconstructions of Marxist philosophy.

and some of its traditional rivals has been somewhat blurred. We believe, nevertheless, that the Marxist theoretical project is advanced by this process of clarification, deflation and reconstruction.

Analytical Marxism has its roots in English-speaking intellectual culture, and its content is conditioned by historical circumstances peculiar mainly to North America and Great Britain. There have never been mass political movements identified with Marxism anywhere in the English-speaking world. Philosophers, social scientists and historians who have identified with Marxism within these countries have therefore been less directly involved in significant political events than has been common for Marxists elsewhere. In addition, in the United States particularly, Marxist theory was, for many years, effectively repressed and marginalized. Thus English-speaking Marxism, throughout its history, has existed in much more of a political vacuum than official Communism or Western Marxism in many other parts of the world. To be sure, by the 1970s, pressures supporting the exclusion of Marxist theory from university culture had largely subsided in the United States. But this liberalization only reinforced the "academic", politically disengaged character of Marxist theory in the English-speaking world.

While Marxism in Britain and the United States has been peripheral to the principal Marxist theoretical currents of the twentieth century, it has not been altogether excluded. Great Britain has long had a flourishing tradition of Marxist historical writing, and there have been important Trotskyist and independent Marxist theorists in the United States and elsewhere. Official Communism and every strain of Western Marxist theory have had proponents, and many of the great Western Marxists have lived as refugees or emigrés in English-speaking countries. On balance, though, there has not been a continuing Marxist intellectual tradition, and what did exist was largely extinguished in the period preceding the 1960s. Thus analytical Marxism, in so far as it is rooted in English-speaking culture, represents a new departure, if not quite a fresh start. It is, in the main, a consequence of the New Left movements of the 1960s and their continuations.

For want of an indigenous tradition, it was necessary, at first, for these political movements to *import* Marxism from Western Europe. In the late 1960s and into the 1970s, continental European Marxism had a tremendous impact on radical intellectuals in Britain and the United States. These importations have exhibited a remarkable tenacity. For nearly a decade, Althusserian Marxism in Britain and the United States survived the demise of the Althusserian project in France, and critical theory in the Frankfurt School tradition still flourish among some philosophers, literary scholars and legal theorists.

Some radicals—not all of them Marxists—continue to look to France and Germany for intellectual sustenance. In recent years, however, intellectual life in Europe, particularly in France, has veered even more sharply to the right than has English-speaking intellectual culture, and Marxism has declined even more dramatically as a dynamic theoretical practice. Where Marxism had once been hegemonic in Europe, theoretical work came increasingly under the influence of theorists of culture, language and power (e.g. Foucault and Derrida) who were at odds with Marxist positions. If Marxist intellectuals in the United States and Britain were to contribute to a positive reconstruction of Marxism (rather than simply join in its demolition), it was unlikely that they would find their inspiration in the theoretical fashions that were current in Europe.

By the end of the 1970s, however, there had been nearly fifteen years of intensive theoretical development among British and American radical intellectuals, and an increasing awareness of the limitations not just of Communist orthodoxy, but of Western Marxism too. It was also evident that a substantial body of work had already been produced, owing no clear allegiance to either tendency. It was in this context that some writers who would now be deemed analytical Marxists came to see themselves as proponents of a new intellectual research program.

From the point of view of the Marxist tradition, perhaps the most controversial feature of analytical Marxism is its wholesale embrace of conventional scientific and philosophical norms. Throughout its history, Marxism has had a problematic relation with "science". On the one hand, some Marxists have been expressly hostile to scientific values, viewing science—or at least the positivists' view of science—as a means for ideological domination and an enemy of human emancipation. On the other hand, Marxists who have declared themselves "scientific socialists" and claimed for Marxism the status of a full-fledged "science of society" have often seriously transgressed scientific norms. "Scientific Marxism" has too often masked a rigid ideology in which all the answers were known in advance, a Marxology that canonized the classical texts and isolated central Marxist claims from revision or transformation. Instead of constituting a theoretical apparatus capable of learning new things about the world, self-styled scientific Marxism has often been a closed system of thought that reaffirms itself through selective observation and interpretation. We, like analytical Marxists generally, reject both of these positions.

The view that Marxism should, without embarrassment, subject itself to the conventional standards of social science and analytical philosophy implies a rejection of the thesis that Marxism as a social theory deploys a distinctive methodology that differentiates it radically from "bourgeois

social science". Such methodological claims involve a familiar list of contrasts: Marxism is dialectical, historical, materialist, anti-positivist and holist, while bourgeois social theory is undialectical, ahistorical, idealist, positivist and individualist. Some of these specific ideas are addressed in the essays that follow, particularly in Chapters 5 and 6. Analytical Marxists are quite skeptical of the value of such claims, believing them to be generally grounded in obscurantist assertions rather than coherent arguments.<sup>4</sup>

It would be difficult to overestimate the role obscurantism has played in defending claims for Marxism's methodological distinctiveness. Consider, for example, the idea that Marxist theory, in contrast to rival views, is *dialectical*. It is notoriously unclear what this widely repeated claim means. The additional assurance that Marx somehow set the dialectic "on its feet" hardly helps; and neither do the other characterizations that commentators have proffered. Aficionados can, of course, identify and produce dialectical explanations. Arguably, Marx himself did precisely that. Moreover, it does seem that the skillful use of dialectical metaphors can serve worthwhile heuristic purposes. But it is one thing to be fluent in a suggestive idiom, something else to deploy a distinctive methodology.<sup>5</sup>

This is not to say that all of the specific elements traditionally subsumed under the expression "Marxist method" should be rejected out of hand. The point is that in order to be useful, such elements have to be translated into a language of causes, mechanisms and effects, rather than left as elusive philosophical principles. Take the notion of "contradiction", a key element of the purported dialectical method. One way of explicating this concept in conventional causal language is to treat a contradiction as a situation in which there are multiple conditions for the reproduction of a system which cannot all be simultaneously

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

5. To support this dismissive assessment, it would be necessary to analyze purported examples of dialectical reasoning—an arduous task that is beyond the scope of this work. For now, we will assert that dialectical accounts either restate what could perfectly well be expressed in less esoteric ways, or else they are unintelligible. If there were in fact a distinctive and explanatorily useful dialectical method, it ought by now—after the best efforts of so many for so long—to have become more apparent. That it has not is good (if not conclusive) reason for holding that there is no dialectical method at all. What there is, at best, is a way of organizing and directing thinking at a pre-theoretical level, which, in some cases, facilitates the discovery of insights that can be well expressed in terms consonant with the norms of scientific culture. We take the view propounded by R. Lewontin and R. Levins, in *The Dialectical Biologist* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985) to exemplify this modest interpretation of the utility of "dialectical thinking".

satisfied. Alternatively, a contradiction can be viewed as a situation in which the unintended consequences of a strategy subvert the accomplishment of its intended goals.<sup>6</sup> Or finally, a contradiction can be viewed as an underlying social antagonism that produces conflicts: if a social relation has certain properties, which have an intrinsic tendency to generate conflict, one might say that the conflict is generated by a contradiction. There may be advantages or disadvantages to each of these formulations. In all of these cases, however, "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 is essential if the explanations generated using the element are to be scientifically intelligible.<sup>7</sup>

One result of freely deploying the intellectual resources of mainstream philosophy and social science is that analytical Marxism tends to blur received understandings of what distinguishes Marxism from "bourgeois" theory. In consequence, the analytical current can serve as a *means for exiting from* as well as a *means for reconstructing* Marxist theory. The strong antipathy to mainstream methodological principles characteristic of much traditional Marxism acted as a kind of cognitive barrier to intellectual cooptation and dilution of radical commitment. Once that barrier is removed, it is much easier gradually to slide away from the core substantive preoccupations and arguments of the Marxist tradition. The Marxism in analytical Marxism is thus more precarious than it was in earlier currents of Marxist thought.

We believe that the risks entailed by this precariousness must be taken if Marxism is to remain a relevant and powerful part of radical intellectual and political culture. In the end, however, the only justification for this orientation is the results it provides. Like other research programs, analytical Marxism cannot be justified a priori. We hope that the essays that follow will provide at least a partial vindication of our stance.

6. This is the meaning of contradiction preferred by Jon Elster. See his book, *Logic and Society* (New York: John Wiley, 1978), as well as *Making Sense of Marx*, for discussions of this view of contradiction.

7. The same arguments can be made for the methodological claims of "structuralist" Marxism. Structuralist methodology is either perfectly standard, despite its self-representations, or else wildly implausible, as would be conceded nowadays by many of its former adherents. To defend this claim would also require an arduous analysis of purported structuralist explanations: those of Althusser and his co-thinkers and their disciples throughout the world, particularly in Britain and the United States during the gestation period of the analytical Marxist current. In lieu of the requisite investigation, it is worth noting that, when pressed to elucidate methodological positions, structuralists, like traditional dialecticians, advert to vague and unhelpful metaphors of dubious cogency.