

Reconstructing Marxism, by Erik Olin Wright, Andrew Levine, and Elliot Sober. Verso: London and New York. 202 + xii pp. 1992.

These essays communicate a careful and sober rethinking of Marxist method in the social sciences by three well-informed Marxist scholars. They believe that the "crisis of Marxism" is a moment of renewal for Marxist theory, an opportunity to rid Marxism of excess doctrinal baggage it has accumulated over years of polarized political polemics, and to rediscover the "rational core" of Marxist social thought. Their foils are "analytical Marxism", particularly the work of Jon Elster and G. A. Cohen, which seeks to apply the techniques and dogmas of analytical philosophy to Marxist discourse, and the work of Anthony Giddens on the relation between economic evolution and political change, with some nods in the direction of the Althusserian school.

Most of the discussion concerns two issues: the problem of "historical materialism" as a theory of the historical sequence of modes of production from primitive communism through feudalism and capitalism to socialist communism based on an economic determinism understood as the primacy of the "forces of production"; and the methodological problem of forms of explanation social and historical phenomena

The authors decide, after a lengthy grapple with Cohen and Giddens, to reject "strong" historical materialism, which claims a necessary causal sequence of modes of production, arising from an independent and controlling tendency for the forces of production to develop and to shape social relations of production as well as the "superstructure" for a "weak" historical materialism that asserts only a shaping, not determining, role for the level of development of the forces of production in historical change.

The first of two chapters on the theory of historical explanation cautiously criticizes Elster's dogma of "methodological individualism" from an "anti-reductionist" position that affirms the importance of relations between individuals in explaining social phenomena. The second uses models from biology and statistics to explore the question of "primacy" or "asymmetry" in explanations, concluding that, there being no distinctive Marxist explanatory method, the problem of relative importance of causes is purely quantitative.

The conclusions reached in these essays are on the whole mild, sensible and, as the options are presented, persuasive. The authors' addiction to philosophic and sociological jargon, extreme caution in the formulation of hypotheses, involuted prose, and painfully slow movement toward minimally exciting conclusions, however, made it hard for me to read the book with real pleasure.

The spectacle suggests to me that the attempt to understand Marxism through the glasses of nineteenth century British rational empiricism, and its theocratic successor, analytic philosophy, wanders far off the track. The rational empiricist/analytical philosophy tradition gives itself undeserved and unchallenged methodological credit for the successes of modern physical and social scientific investigation, thereby disguising its own sterility and substantial irrelevance to the problems of scientific discovery. The version of Marxism that the analytical Marxists subject to their critical scalpels is more the product of misreadings, misunderstandings, and confusion over levels of abstraction than of a sympathetic understanding of Marx's intellectual project and contribution. As a result the discourse of analytical Marxism consists too much of shadow-boxing and fog-sculpting to make much of a contribution to our understanding of society and history.

The root of this problem lies in the inability of analytical philosophy to come to terms with Hegel's critique of logic and knowledge. Marx's methods of research, as well as his modes of argument and presentation, were deeply and instinctively Hegelian. A familiarity with Hegel's Logic and the Introduction Marx wrote to the Grundrisse, texts that are notably absent from the modern "analytical Marxist" debate, would help to clarify matters a lot.

Hegel begins his discussion of logic by distinguishing several levels of human thought about phenomena. The first level he calls "Understanding". In this way of thinking the world is a collection of independent things that get rearranged to produce the phenomena we observe. Understanding reaches its limits in circularity or infinite regress, precisely the analytical pitfalls that dog history and the social sciences. To get beyond this point, the human mind has to reconceptualize the tokens of Understanding as aspects of dynamic processes at a higher level. A glacial moraine, for example, can be thought of as a collection of rocks each moving deterministically according to the laws of mechanics, or, more helpfully, as a manifestation of a geological process taking place on a long time scale.

The central characteristic of this reconceptualization of phenomena is that it reveals the tokens or objects or categories of Understanding as *aspects* of a process that can be understood as a unity at a higher level of abstraction. Thus the categories of explanation are defined by their relations to each other as parts of a unified system. We understand the moraine and the icefield as defining each other and determining each other's development, and explain the phenomenon of the glacier in terms of topography and meteorology, not as a simple example of pure mechanics. This change of perspective cannot, of course, impugn the explanatory correctness of a

purely mechanical view, but it supplements it in a way that lets us know more about the phenomenon.

The rational empiricist/analytical philosophical tradition seems to have no language with which to come to grips with this decisive moment in theory formation and scientific discovery. This sometimes has comical effects, as in Popper's influential but inane account of science as a kind of medieval tournament in which hypotheses ride into town like mysterious foreign knights in order to challenge the existing champion through the joust of falsification. The history of sciences, natural as well as social, reveals how organic and endogenous the process of hypothesis and theory formation actually is. Hegel's model of scientific discovery is much more helpful. Of course, Hegel's model of discovery is not a cookbook for scientific advances, since it describes only the form and not the content of discovery. It will always appear to be true *ex post*, but can give us only formal guidance before someone's insight solves the problem. After the discovery the owl of Athena does take wing, and we say "of course, it's obvious that reconceptualization solves the problem. How could we have overlooked this idea for so long?"

The fruitfulness and power of Marx's work in history, politics and economics arose from his application of the Hegelian point of view to these human phenomena. Many of his discussions must be read, not as proposing mechanical hypotheses to explain phenomena, but as discussing the consequences of specific reconceptualizations of these phenomena as aspects of dynamic processes. Within these reconceptualizations a large number of specific hypotheses are possible, some crude, some subtle, some on the track and some off the track. The analytical reading of Marx, however, by ignoring this conceptual aspect of his work, makes the disastrous error of reifying and isolating concepts that make sense only as aspects of a unified and evolving conception.

Take, for example, the problem of whether forces or relations of production play the determining role in transformations from one mode of production to another. Cohen posits that the forces of production have an autonomous tendency to "develop", bringing them into conflict with the relations of production, which then appear as "fettering" the forces of production, thus creating a transformational crisis. For Cohen (and Wright, Levine and Sober) the "forces of production" are particular technologies, like computers, and the "relations of production" particular property relations, like slavery, each of which has its independent properties which can either fit together or conflict. For example, slave labor as a system of property rights might be incompatible with computerized technology. (The choice of example suggests that this way of thinking is naive and unhistorical. In the ancient world, for example, literate slaves monopolized a rather sophisticated information-processing system, and in the antebellum South literate and numerate slaves also had important roles as clerks and bookkeepers.) The mechanical model of exogenously developing forces of production running into inherent given constraints of relations of production goes off the rails almost immediately.

It makes more sense to read Marx from an Hegelian point of view in which the forces of production and the relations of production are two ways of talking about the same thing, namely the mode of production as a self-reproducing system. The exigencies of social reproduction itself constantly bring these two aspects of the mode of production into conflict, and the resolution of these conflicts shapes the institutions of the society. Literate slaves, for example, have little incentive to maintain the security and accuracy of their masters' records. In the ancient world this contradiction was resolved by the widespread practice of allowing slaves to save in order to

buy their own freedom, a system which gave strong incentives to the slave to retain the master's goodwill by faithful service. In the antebellum South the manumission system ran into strong prejudice and hatred of freed black slaves on the part of non-slaveholding whites, whose political support was vital to the slave-owning aristocracy. In neither case does it make sense to posit inherent properties either of technology or of relations of production outside the unified context of the mode of production as a whole.

The value of theory in this Hegelian sense does not lie in its role as a cookbook of possibly true hypotheses about the world, but in its power to point to interesting questions and areas for research, not to answer questions but to raise them. Historical materialism in this way of thinking is not a collection of mechanical hypotheses about the succession of modes of production, but a conception of historical change that establishes a research program. Marx's great historical contribution was to raise sharply the issue of the material, or economic base of power in social reproduction. His predecessor historians represented historical change largely in the theological, moral, and philosophical terms in which historical events appeared to their participants. Marx, like the geologist who stands back from the glacier and sees it as shaped by topological and climatological forces, saw the details of political and social change in a context of broad shifts in economic context. Thus Marx was able to show how the decline of serfdom, the spread of property relations in agriculture, and the growth of a world system of trade shaped and made possible the dramatic political, legal, and social events we regard as the transition from feudalism to capitalism.

To formulate this Marxian research program along Cohen's lines as a collection of covering laws ("Productive forces always tend to develop", "Social relations of

production always come to fetter the developing forces of production", etc.) manages at the same time to inflate it beyond defensible proportions and to diminish it by missing its main message. Marx did make an important step forward in suggesting ways in which we could fruitfully conceptualize the great social crises of history, for example, by looking at the tension between shifting bases of material wealth and existing structures of appropriation and distribution of that wealth. No one can doubt how profound the influence of that point of view and those questions has been in the writing of history in the last century and a half. The covering law account proposed by Cohen sacrifices the fertile program proposed by Marx and puts in its place a sterile, boring, and *prima facie* fallacious set of empirical generalizations.

The authors of *Reconstructing Marxism* pull the teeth from Cohen's "strong and inclusive" (and therefore unsustainable) version of historical materialism by retreating to a "weak and restricted" (and therefore sustainable but almost contentless) interpretation. So far so good, I suppose, but their reconstruction, while it puts historical materialism in a defensible form, leaves out the positive moment of Marx's method. The way to do this is not to engage in further abstract discussions of historical materialism, but to grapple with the real problem of interpreting our own history of the late twentieth century in recognizably historical materialist terms. In the end only the production of contentful and fertile explanations of real phenomena can resolve methodological debates.

The second half of the book addresses problems of social science method at a more detailed level, taking up the issues of methodological individualism and causal analysis in modern Marxist thought.

In their discussion of Jon Elster's proposals for a methodologically individualist Marxism I think the authors give away far too much valuable Marxian ground. They set

up a straw man they call "radical holism", a position that "relations among individuals are essentially epiphenomenal with respect to social explanations. They are generated by the operation of the whole and in their own right they explain nothing." (p 113) No one seems actually to hold this position ("It is difficult to find explicit defenses of radical holism in its pure form" (p 113)), and so it is costless to throw it to the Elsterian wolves. The authors themselves center their critique of methodological individualism on interaction effects, arguing that in models with interaction effects the whole cannot be reduced to the sum of its parts.

Again, this is fine as far as it goes, which is not very far, but does not seem to me to come to grips with the central incoherence of the methodological individualist position, the dialectical impossibility of constituting the individual. Methodological individualists have been much influenced by economic models, in which market outcomes compromise and regulate the conflicting aims of a large number of independent decision makers, who are usually referred to as "individuals". Those who are taken with the methodological potency of this procedure ought also to be aware of the inability of economists to locate these individual actors as concrete sociological, historical, or personal entities. The individual participants in a market may be firms, households, which themselves are shifting composites of individual persons, or even governments, cartels, or, in game theory, abstract coalitions, which are composites of firms and households. Economic theory freely reconstitutes the individual at whatever level is necessary for the theory in question to make sense. Surely no case can be made for the identification of the individual with the biological individual human being, who, from an economic point of view, is subject to unresolved conflicting pressures from a multiplicity of economic agents in which she plays a role as family member,



employee, shareholder, voter, and so on. Then what does it mean to reduce explanations of social and historical phenomena to statements about the behavior of individuals? Dialectically it means to constitute the individual at the appropriate level of abstraction to the problem. The economists in this case, seem surprisingly to be more consistent dialecticians than the Marxist philosophers.

The program of methodological individualism is in fact a philosophical one, as far as I can tell, motivated not by the search for explanation of real phenomena but for a resolution of the paradoxes of the concept of rationality. The central problems for an individualist are how to conceptualize a completely consistent and rational decisionmaker, and how to resolve the conflicts among linked but independent rational decisionmakers. Such commonplace phenomena as people avoiding temptation, overexploiting shared but unpriced resources, failing to compromise on shared contributions to collective consumption, and deadlocking in political conflict have a deeply paradoxical aspect from the perspective of rational actor theory. These paradoxes are a rich mine of topics for scholastic debate but touch only tangentially on the problems of history and society. Marx tended to dismiss this kind of thinking as "idealist", and perhaps he was on to something.

The authors take up the problem of the language of explanation in a long chapter on asymmetric causation. They reach the sensible conclusion that a lot of the controversy over primacy of causes of social phenomena both in political and academic contexts is carried on at cross-purposes because of a failure to specify questions sufficiently precisely. A revealing example (p 150) is a debate over whether class analysis or institutional analysis of the state is a better framework for the explanation of the introduction of social insurance programs in industrial capitalist countries in the first

part of the twentieth century. The authors point out reasonably enough that Marxist historical materialism provides a powerful explanation of the universal development of social insurance programs where urbanized wage-labor is the dominant form of organization of social production and its attendant insecurities and social pathologies (poverty, unemployment, occupational disease and disability, inability of the extended family to provide for the aging, and so forth) are endemic. In order to answer questions at a lower level of abstraction such as the relative timing of the introduction of such programs, causes at a different level of concreteness must be introduced, such as the bureaucratic development of the individual nation states, their federal or centralized character, and the like.

Again, a return to the Introduction to the Grundrisse might move the discussion forward. Marx there explains how our knowledge of concrete phenomena takes the form of a layered set of determinations at different levels of abstraction. It is possible to project Marx's conception onto the language of the modern theory of causation and explanation, as the authors painstakingly do. They argue that questions about the primacy or importance of causes ought to be translated into quantitative questions about the predictability of the connections between events, and the relative statistical importance of various possible ways that a given event can come about.

But any attempt to summarize a complicated analytical understanding of an event or phenomenon in a small set of numbers or a slogan about primacy is bound to distort and often to mislead. The knowledge that has been attained is contained only in the whole detailed analysis, which, if it is successful, should illuminate the chains of causation and their contingencies clearly. From a Marxian point of view, one important aspect of a social analysis should be the appropriate placing of the phenomenon in relation to

the social relations of production dominant in the situation. The issue of abortion rights in the U.S., for example, has a class dimension, as well as a gender dimension, and it is better understood from both perspectives together than from either one alone. Nor can one understand the abortion rights conflict without including the specific role of the Roman Catholic Church, and its relation both to class and gender in U.S. society. There is no honest way to reduce a complex analysis to quantitative or qualitative measures of the relative importance of causes. The only way to understand the relation of the causes is in the matrix of the analysis and the phenomenon itself.

The book ends with a look towards the future of Marxism. The authors see the crisis of Marxism primarily in terms of social science methodology. The authors characterize classical Marxism as asserting the unity of a triad consisting of class emancipation, class analysis, and scientific socialism. This unity, they argue, can no longer be sustained because of its methodological and philosophical weaknesses, so that we must be content with the more modest project of a social theory that gives "a more restricted account of particular social processes and tendencies".

The authors deal with the political crisis of Marxism revealed in the collapse of the socialist regimes of Eastern Europe and Russia in an astounding footnote: "It is ironic that the collapse of authoritarian state socialisms should be a stimulus for proclamations of the "end of Marxism" as a social theory by anti-Marxists and for self-doubt by Marxists and their sympathizers. From the perspective of *classical* Marxism, the collapse of these regimes and their return to a "normal" path of development is eminently predictable. If anything, the long detour from the Bolshevik Revolution to *perestroika* was a challenging anomaly to historical materialism. The

restoration of capitalist property relations in relatively underdeveloped industrial economies, on the other hand, actually corroborates the theory. *If Marx was right, socialism is not achievable until the forces of production have developed massively under capitalism, and further development is fettered by capitalist property relations. The attempt to construct revolutionary socialism by an act of will in violation of this "law of history" was therefore doomed from the start.*"(p 190, italics in original.)

In the early decades of the twentieth century Marxists were in the vanguard of understanding in social science and politics. In economics, for example, Marxists were far ahead of bourgeois social scientists in their development and understanding of theories of economic growth, financial and monetary evolution, price equilibrium and the history of economic thought. Politicians educated in Marxist ideas were effective (if not always successful), and seemed to take a genuine advantage from conceptualizing the political crises of their time in Marxian terms. In this period Marxism functioned as a tool to deepen people's understanding of reality, in fact to bring them into closer contact with reality. Marxists then had a pragmatic and realistic side that lent their intellectual and political efforts flexibility, imagination, and insight. By the end of the century, on the other hand, Marxism seemed to function as an opiate shielding Marxists from a confrontation with reality. Marxist economics, for example, became a methodological backwater in which the primary efforts were to protect Marxist discourse from real dialogue with bourgeois social science and insulate Marxist dogma from the evidence of historical changes in the social and economic structure of the world economy. The great Marxist political movements became so inbred and self-protective that they effectively preferred to commit suicide rather than adapt to the changing demands of the real society they confronted. The contemporary

preoccupation of Marxist social theory with method rather than content, with exegesis rather than discovery, reflects this degeneration.

I think Marxism degenerated because it got stuck on two hard problems that no one has been able to solve: the problems of achieving a viable socialist organization of production and a viable socialist political democracy, issues which the reconstructers of Marxism manage not to discuss at all. The crisis of Marxism is not methodological, but substantive. If Marxism has a future it lies in a return to an active, dialectical and pragmatic relation to the real world and its development, looking toward real solutions to these problems.

Biographical Sketch--Duncan K. Foley

Duncan K. Foley is the author of Understanding Capital: Marx's Economic Theory (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1986).