Marcuse

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In this chapter I shall be reviewing the claims of "analytical" or "rational-choice" Marxism and using Marcuse's work to put criticisms of it into better words than mine. This project entails a good deal of stipulative argument to identify the school and its tenets and a certain amount of imaginative reconstruction to put Marcuse into a dialogue with them and their views. As a manipulative narrator I intrude to make this possible, and the reader is further burdened with an introspective account of why it was exciting for me to read Marcuse in the 1960s.

My justification for this exercise is the claim that practicalities in politics can turn on abstract issues in philosophy; specifically, that a fictive encounter between "my Marcuse" and the analytical school will dramatize the political timidity that analytical or rational-choice theory instantiates. It is an interesting question why this encounter has to be fictive. The answer is that the analytical school signally fails to engage on its own behalf with the issues that Marcuse handled so well. I hope that this essay will stimulate analytical Marxists to recognize that their presuppositions must be defended, not just stated, and that they must engage with their critics, not just dismiss them.

Analytical or Rational-Choice Marxism

Much of Marcuse's work reads well now, and it also read well in the 1960s. Or so it seems to me. It also seems that the reasons why this is so in both time frames are similar but not identical. As context changes, so do readings, and so do judgments.

In particular since the mid-1970s, analytical or rational-choice Marxism has come on the scene, beginning (for me) in the very early 1970s with G. A. Cohen's occasional conference and seminar papers given at Oxford and no doubt at numerous other venues. The magnum opus that appeared in the late 1970s had been, so I understood then, some ten or fif-
teen years in the making. At first glance British analytical philosophy, as done by Cohen, seems to have little in common with the “empirical” social science of Jon Elster and the economic model-building of John Roemer, the two other leading lights of the school. Indeed there are very significant differences in general methodology and particular views. But all three of these writers followed a methodology presumed to be subsequent to, even unconnected with, the approach followed by Marx. The self-characterization of the analytical axis deserves quotation and comment:

The books in the series [Studies in Marxism and Social Theory] are intended to exemplify a new paradigm in the study of Marxist social theory. They will not be dogmatic or purely exegetical in approach. Rather, they will examine and develop the theory pioneered by Marx, in the light of the intervening history, and with the tools of non-Marxist social science and philosophy. It is hoped that Marxist thought will thereby be freed from the increasingly discredited methods and presuppositions which are still widely regarded as essential to it, and that what is true and important in Marxism will be more firmly established.

I recall finding this advertisement arrogant and ungenerous at the time it was published—indeed, when the publishers were circulating it for comments on the idea of doing the series—and it still strikes me that way. What price methodological pluralism after those snidely coded messages? What is this methodology that is “dogmatic or purely exegetical”? What are the methods and assumptions that are “increasingly discredited”? And what exactly are the “tools of non-Marxist social science and philosophy”? It seemed to me then, and it seems so now, that there are certainly competing accounts of these “tools” based on competing accounts of social science and of science as such, not to mention more specific controversies. Moreover, it is a large presumption that there is some alternative “Marxist” social science and philosophy, when in fact there are dialectical-materialist, Lukácsian, Althusserian, Gramscian, and numerous other variants, even empiricist ones. What is going on when so much that is unspecified is treated so dismissively? This is exclusionary
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language and does not count for much, so I think, in describing and justifying the analytical or rational-choice approach to the noninitiate.

But since the 1980s the situation has changed for the better, as analytical or rational-choice Marxism has a defender, Alan Carling. Carling is willing to argue the case without the intellectual arrogance and imperialism displayed by the founders, but with an ability to assess what he sees as the strengths and at least certain sorts of weaknesses. He rightly points to the use of what amounts to rational-choice models in Marx’s own work, as does Elster: “Rational action is, essentially, action that optimizes in the light of incentives and constraints.” He admits the tendency of rational-choice “explanations” to collapse into rationalizations and the failure of rational-choice theory to explain exploitation based on differences of gender. Yet even his work does not confront the so-called grand issues that must necessarily arise, although some are touched on in the critical essays collected by Ware and Nielsen. But Marcuse could be usefully revisited as a way of highlighting these issues, and I propose here to reread him to develop a number of criticisms of analytical or rational-choice Marxism.

Grand Theory

Marcuse’s work now looks prophetic. Analytical or rational-choice social theory, including the “Marxist” school, appears to be a manifestation of a good many things he rejected and an inversion of what he recommended. Marcuse questioned the terms of this type of political theory, namely, that theorizing begins with an assumption that individuals may be conceptualized quite apart from and in necessary opposition to “society”; that in their activity as human agents they are “free to choose”; and that their world is one of scarcity and competition. The theoretical terms that analytical or rational-choice theorists promote, however abstractly, presume that material consumption is the sum and limit of life, that collective action is alien and difficult for human individuals, and that a balance of supply and demand represents such harmony as can be achieved in society. Whatever Marxism there is in the analytical or rational-choice school, it is not in their assumptions, which are rather those of theorists taking the “economic approach.”
Unlike analytical or rational-choice theory, in which theorists (with their facts or factual assumptions) and politicians (with their values or goals) pursue separate careers (or at least separated functions), Marcuse’s work presents the theorist as a political agent in the very act of theorizing. It is clear for Marcuse that theory is aimed at the polity, not at disengaged specialists; and science itself, whether “social” or otherwise, is conceptualized as a political activity: “No matter how one defines truth and objectivity, they remain related to the human agents of theory and practice, and to their ability to comprehend and change their world.”

Puzzles and paradoxes are not his starting point, as they frequently are for analytical and rational-choice theorists; indeed, he forswears any “escape into . . . that which is only academically controversial.”

Marcuse’s notion of a scientific problem is really a large-scale political critique—specifically, waste and maldistribution in the contemporary economy and elitism and mystification in contemporary politics. His proof that these are problems is ostensive rather than deductive; the reader is encouraged through example to begin to assess the world differently. Perception for Marcuse is contextual, and his discursive accounts promote a reconceptualization of politics, society, and economy, such that the reader begins to perceive anew. Moreover, it is clear what the result of theorization is supposed to be: judgment and action. Humans do not merely live for themselves in the present and attend to the future as more of the same. They explore self-development and engage in reinvention of the collective context. They are capable of creative thought and social innovation, and that is what theory is intended to encourage.

In theorizing, Marcuse is above all attentive to language, to the way it is used, or could be used, to structure experience, to reveal possibilities, to exercise power, to manipulate, and to mystify. His approach to political discourse is hermeneutic, historical, critical, and creative. In particular he is excellent in his description of the way that elites can maintain power by defining or redefining terms, by divorcing “present” from “past” experience, by pretense and inversion: most notably, his allegations that a “false neutrality” has infected our moral vocabulary and that Orwellian language has become commonplace.

It was easy for some Marxist critics to connect Marcuse with the idealist tradition in German philosophy and to wonder what kind of Marxism he was using—whether in fact his work did not represent in method and
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substance just what Marx had rejected when he and Engels settled “ac­
counts with our erstwhile philosophical conscience.” Was not his work
emotional, unrigorous, nonmaterialist, unscientific? Where were the ab­
stract theorizations of Marx’s economics and the empirical propositions
of his theory of history?

Reading Marx

Marcuse’s work made it possible to read Marx differently: The “philoso­
phical,” interpretive, exploratory Marx was not just the early Marx. The Marx of the 1844 Manuscripts had only recently come into English in
the early 1960s; this was the “humanist” Marx, who philosophized about
life, labor, history, and the human condition. The “determinist,” “scien­
tific” Marx was presumed to be the later Marx, though how much later
was a matter of debate. Humanists, structuralists, and anticommunists
were all agreed on two Marxes, one philosophical and one scientific,
though there were opposing views on which was the more significant or
interesting.

Marcuse’s own views were certainly different, and they certainly influ­
enced me. He linked the early to the late Marx in a very balanced and
straightforward way, seeing the propositions concerning commodities
and labor in Capital as developmental specifications of the theory of ali­
enation in the 1844 Manuscripts. He put a sharp boundary between
Marx’s work and nineteenth-century positivism; I note now that Engels
did not appear in the index to Reason and Revolution at all! Marcuse’s
approach made it possible for me to see a continuity in Marx’s thought,
between the substance and the method. The Grundrisse and Capital were
for me just as philosophical, just as exploratory, and just as sensitive to
the power of linguistic representation in society as anything done by the
early Marx, in fact, more so. Rather than read Marcuse as an idealist who
Hegelianized Marx, I read them both as linguistic philosophers of power,
as hermeneutic social scientists, as politically committed theorists, and as
historical researchers, well aware that whatever “present” we have is nec­
essarily an interpretation of the past. Indeed, all social phenomena are
historical, and all investigation is interpretation:
Analysis uncovers the history in everyday speech as a hidden dimension of meaning—the rule of society over its language. And this discovery shatters the natural and reified form in which the given universe of discourse first appears. The words reveal themselves as . . . the terms which society imposes on discourse, and on behavior. This historical dimension of meaning can no longer be elucidated by examples such as “my broom is in the corner” or “there is cheese on the table.”

In my view the famous “guiding thread” in Marx’s 1859 “Preface to a Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy” is not the centerpiece of Marxism, as Cohen presumes at the outset of his less than “purely exegetical” book; nor can the best of Marx’s work be captured in terms of “causal-cum-intentional” explanations from whatever text, as Elster argues. This is not to say that the 1859 “Preface” is meaningless, or that there are no propositions in Marx, falsifiable, false, or otherwise, or that nowhere in his work does he isolate problems and produce explanations. Rather, I am saying that by example as much as in substance, Marx’s work represents a critical view on commercial society, a powerful method of discursive analysis, and a source of inspiration for a social science that delves beneath the surface of commonplace presumptions concerning what a problem is and what an explanation might look like: “For the scientific subversion of the immediate experience which establishes the truth of science as against that of immediate experience does not develop the concepts which carry in themselves the [political] protest and the [ethical] refusal. The new scientific truth which they oppose to the accepted one does not contain in itself the judgment that condemns the established reality.”

In short, after reading Marx in the light of Marcuse, I found that Marx was not as he seemed, that conventional social science was dully narrow, and that politics was not what people said it was. Moreover, why had Marx for so long been presented as an “empirical” social scientist (but not a very good one), why would the social science of the 1960s, and even now, not let go of this perception, and why was it that empirical social science attracted the funding?

Reading Marcuse

Because of his background in philosophical idealism, which after all Marx praised for “developing the active side,” the connections between
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Marcuse and the “linguistic turn” in philosophy—and ultimately some aspects of poststructuralist and postmodern strategies in political theory—should not be difficult to make. This is true despite Marcuse’s stringent criticism of “ordinary language” philosophy. His complaint was not that attention was focused on language but that what counted as problematic language and, even more, what counted as the language of philosophical enlightenment about a problem were drawn too narrowly and unimaginatively around the doings of “Joe Doe,” “Richard Roe,” and other hypothetical and wholly uncritical characters. The conjunction of linguistic turn (in its Germanic manifestations) with Kuhn’s revisionist view of science was foreshadowed in Marcuse’s discussion of “one-dimensional thought”: “This real context in which the particular subjects obtain their real significance is definable only with a theory of society. For the factors in the facts are not immediate data of observation, measurement, and interrogation. They become data only in an analysis which is capable of identifying the structure that holds together the parts and processes of society and that determines their interrelation.”

But perhaps surprisingly, there are even more precise moments of pre-science from Marcuse. He made human nature a historical phenomenon and human biology a cultural one. This seems remarkably close to postmodern theorizations of social science and Foucauldian theorizations of the body. Marcuse noted the intimate connection between our very being and the technological apparatus that surrounds us; we cannot live without our machines or our activity of machine making and artifact consumption. Donna Haraway’s theory of the cyborg seems to say much the same thing. Similarly, Marcuse’s analysis of the cultural power of concepts, particularly concepts of the body, is informed by a sense of the way that social power has worked to change our bodily “biology” in the history of civilization. His view that exploitation in advanced capitalist societies is not only hidden but “transfigured,” in particular that “happiness and fun” are manufactured commodities, prefigures the validatory fantasies that Baudrillard observed in the United States—Disneyland is there to make the rest of the social environment seem real.

I hope the reader does not begin to think that Marcuse can now be made to say anything whatsoever. Despite his politics of the oppressed, of dialogue, and of coalition, I do not, for example, see him as a significant contributor to feminist thought or to the politics of gender and sexual-
ity—not that he was especially insensitive or unaware but rather that the issues are not impressively explored, so it seems to me. Perhaps others have read him as inspirational in that context; I did not.

Reading Marxism

Analytical or rational-choice Marxists, though advertising themselves as a school, are not themselves unified by interest, method, or politics; in fact, as with many intellectual schools, there are famous disputations, most notably Elster and Cohen on "functional explanation." But the similarities in their work, both methodological and substantial, raise the obvious issue: Given their overwhelming continuities with the assumptions of analytical philosophy and rational-choice theory, in what sense are they Marxists? After all, even Marxism as a concept is not limitlessly flexible; no concept is, otherwise it would be useless. And what is it that separates writers in the school, at least in their eyes, from non-Marxist analytical philosophers, empirical social scientists, formal modelers, game theorists, strategic analysts, and economists with a sociological perspective?

Methodologically, I think there are certain continuities with Marxism, that is, with Marx's writings as interpreted by Engels when he attempted to assimilate Marx's work to empirical science, physical and social. In that view, "ideal" concepts reflect "material" facts in a causal model confirmed by observation, or, more weakly, intentional explanations of human behavior may be conceptualized without a full account of the causal mechanisms presumed to be involved. Having attempted to distinguish Engels's reading of Marx, and Engels's interpretive framework for reading Marx, from alternative readings, especially the traditional Marxist one, I feel entitled to make this connection. Marx's own practice, as I explain later, was somewhat different.

In terms of the agenda of problems in which the analytical and rational-choice school is interested, however, there is considerable continuity with Marx and a break with conventional analytical philosophy and rational-choice theory, insofar as these problems are approached in a more open-minded and sympathetic way. A list of issues explored would include class formation, class struggle, exploitation, historical transitions
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in economic activity and political structures, typical and even individual responses to economic constraints among political agents, class consciousness, the defining features of capitalism, the development of a socialist critique of commercial society, medium- and long-term alternatives to contemporary social organization, national and international perspectives on political change, and no doubt numerous others. In terms of an agenda, the school is Marxist, and so was Marx. Methodologically, though, Marx is not a Marxist—in my view. And neither was Marcuse. But analytical or rational-choice Marxists are methodologically close to Engels, when he fancied himself a scientist.

One clue as to why this should be so is that analytical and rational-choice theorists generally are not particularly interested in ideology, that is, how concepts are formed and used to mislead, constrain, exclude, discourage, cut off inquiry, make possibilities invisible, and render potentialities nonexistent. Exposing what it is to be ideological, unmasking specific configurations of ideological thinking, was the driving force of Marx's critical social science; that ideology was an important weapon in the class war was for him a major hypothesis. An empiricist epistemology, according to which thought is always a reflection of something, negates the investigative and hermeneutic qualities in Marx's theorizing. Marx's contribution to the theory of ideology was not to have one in the sense that some thought is or is not "ideological," as if that were interesting in itself, but rather to use the insight that concepts construct and constrain our activities in society. An unmasking or unveiling analysis, conducted in theoretical form, could reveal the way that power is instantiated and operates through, for example, religious, economic, or political discourse. For Marx, concepts were themselves essential to the human social world, not merely a way of referring to some presumed extraconceptual reality.

Reading Theories

Analytical and rational-choice theorists are representative of an empiricist understanding of social science, in that they take and construct concepts as if language were transparent to "reality." Thus they see ideology as a category, if they see it at all, rather than as a strategy to unmask, to unveil, to "show that which this reality prevents from being." In the em-
Terrell Carver

Epistemologist view, as I see it, observation has an epistemological priority over generalities and abstractions, and social theory is reduced to propositions that are supposedly testable against "experience." Marcuse’s characterization of "positivism" poses similar criticisms and points to the political sterility that it enforces. He states that positivism is "(1) the validation of cognitive thought by experience of facts; (2) the orientation of cognitive thought to the physical sciences as a model of certainty and exactness; (3) the belief that progress in knowledge depends on this orientation. . . . Philosophic thought thus turns into affirmative thought; the philosophic critique criticizes within the societal framework and stigmatizes non-positive notions as mere speculation, dreams or fantasies." 29

Discursive theorizing—in which concepts are analyzed as at least potentially suspect and then probed for their potential relationship to structures of power—is thus rejected by analytical or rational-choice theorists in favor of "explanation." These explanations are atomistic and historyless in analytical and rational-choice theory, even when the evidence is supposedly historical, as the transmission of knowledge among social agents over time never features in their frameworks. By contrast, Marcuse wrote, "historical concreteness militates against quantification and mathematization on the one hand, and against positivism and empiricism on the other." 30

Analytical and rational-choice Marxism fails to locate the theorist and audience in a political context; moreover, the model of the human being that is employed is essentially a mechanistic one, and the operative notion of explanation is deterministic. 31 Are these the appropriate models to apply to human action? Do analytical and rational-choice Marxists apply these models to themselves and their own actions? What is the political role of their theorizations? I think we should be told.

The use of economic models merely distances the problem. Are the assumptions of empirical "rational utility maximization" hypotheses about all individuals, typical individuals, probable actions in statistical numbers, ideal-typical representations, or what? They certainly do not represent anything exploratory—hence the reference to "assumptions." Nor do they represent concepts used by human agents in any important sense; they seem more like programming than thoughts. Marcuse complained of a "false neutrality" in politics; I would complain of a "false clarity" in social theory. Marcuse characteristically wondered, "Are exactness and
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clarity ends in themselves, or are they committed to other ends?” Logical rigor, mathematical modeling, and propositional reductionism merely disguise the emptiness of the analytical or rational-choice exercise. What is the substance of this work? How can there be explanation without the transmission of ideas through history? What model of psychology or agency is actually doing the explaining? What is supposed to happen when analytical or rational-choice explanations are actually produced? What is the purpose of rational-choice theory and analytical philosophy? Marcuse stood for communication and action in society in order to identify and produce a future that was at least potentially different from the present in significant ways. Social science as contextless “knowledge” was definitely not his desideratum.

Conclusion

Science exists in the human context, and the human context is political. Otherwise what purports to be science is ideological, in the sense that it masks or veils the potentialities of human existence in a politically complicit way. In analytical and rational-choice Marxism, a whole realm of analysis is rendered invisible. It is still hard work demystifying the familiar, deriving knowledge from concepts, and connecting the scientific with the political. But reading Marcuse is a good way into the struggle: “The desideratum is rather to make the established language itself speak what it conceals or excludes.”

Notes

12. Ibid., 199.
19. Ibid., 186–89.
20. Ibid., 190.
29. Ibid., 172.
30. Ibid., 142–43.
34. Ibid., 195.
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