Analytical Marxism: Socialism without class struggle

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Gil Hyle reviews Analytical Marxism by Tom Mayer
Sage Publications, California, 1994, £12.99

This is a useful book; I didn‘t agree with a word of it. It explains Analytical Marxism with admirable clarity. It is Analytical Marxism itself which is clearly unworthy of admiration.

This academic trend is influential wherever institutions of Higher Education purport to teach Marx. It embodies a viewpoint consonant with the views of the ?democratic left? successors to Stalinism. For this reason a critique of the main errors involved is valuable?and Mayer‘s book assembles them for us.

Analytical Marxism was founded in 1978, when Gerry Cohen published Karl Marx? Theory of History: a Defence. At ?rst sight his book appeared to many as a restatement of Marx?s views that was both faithful and original. However, a closer analysis of Cohen‘s central theses reveals an altogether different picture.

Take Cohen‘s Development Thesis for example. Here is a theory formulated in such a way as to sound like Marx. Cohen‘s assertion that ?the productive forces tend to develop throughout history? (p29) seems entirely correct, even to the point of banality.

But what Cohen is in fact suggesting is not simply that human beings have always faced material scarcity (which is a fact), but that because we are rational beings we have always sought to overcome this by developing the forces of production (which is not a fact).

Similarly, Cohen‘s Primary Thesis states that, ?the level of development of the productive forces explains the nature of the productive relations?. (p29) This turns out to mean for Cohen, not only that relations of production take on a form consistent with the capacity of the society in question to transform nature (which is a fact), but also that the form taken will be the one which allows the optimal use of the available forces of production (which is not a fact).

Rational
In each case the problem with Cohen‘s approach is his attempt to portray the causes of revolutionary change as being the same as rational judgements. This is not an authentic summation of Marx‘s historical method.

Marx‘s materialist conception of history was a generalisation which identified the common fundamental patterns of change in all human societies characterised by relative material scarcity.

Marx was always clear that the general materialist conception of history explains why such revolutionary
changes in modes of production occur, but does not seek to generalise a single pattern as to how they occur. Marx recognised that the manner in which revolutions in the mode of production happen varies depending on the mode of production concerned, depending on specific contradictions in each process of production.

The logical error in Cohen's argument is to assume that because there is a unified general pattern of change in history, there must therefore be a similarly simple and general material cause of that pattern running throughout history. (i.e. human beings? supposedly rational pursuit of efficiency to reduce scarcity).

This search for a teleology in history is false and idealist; it ignores the fact that the general explanation of why modes of production change can only be identified by abstraction from the more complex realities which determine how each revolution occurs.

The real purpose of such mechanical ?humanist? rationalism is to avoid recognising that it is the working class which is necessarily the agent of revolutionary change in capitalist society.

To arrive at this conclusion Cohen somehow suggests that the overthrow of capitalism occurs simply because people come rationally to recognise that the old form of society is no longer optimally efficient. In this way socialism is portrayed as something that anyone from any class could, in principle, sign up to.

As Marx pointed out, those who would ascribe to him the excessive generalisation of identifying of single mechanism of social change both ?atter and shame him by the absurd ambition of the theory they link to his name.

Debate

Within Analytical Marxism there has been a debate as to whether social revolution is caused by the exploited perceiving that society is either inefficient (Cohen) or inequitable (Roemer). This debate is sometimes posed as the development of the forces of production versus the class struggle as the basic cause of revolutionary changes in modes of production.

Cohen had at least argued that history develops in accordance with attempts to optimise mankind?s exploitation of nature. But his work declined in popularity in the early 1980s as John Roemer advanced an alternative foundation for the tradition. Roemer focused on history as a process of ?successive elimination of inequalities considered to be exploitative? (p112).

This too was a caricature of Marxism. Just as Marx?s rejection, indeed ridicule, of Auguste Comte?s rationalism proves his opposition to Cohen?s central errors, so in his writings on Proudhon and John Stuart Mill we ?nd devastating criticism of Roemer?s view of exploitation and the general pattern of historical development.

Roemer, like Cohen, uses a Marxist term to articulate his argument: ?exploitation?. This is a word which Marx employed not in the general sense of meaning inequity, but in the specific technical sense of meaning the appropriation of surplus value. But Roemer means by it a distribution of output disproportionate to labour input, something common to all class societies and, implicitly, something morally reprehensible.

This whole approach to socialist theory is wrong. Roemer focuses on this moral concept of ?exploitation? because his ideal society is one in which each person receives an equal measure?a utopian and unrealisable goal which is little more than a ?socialist? variation of the bourgeois ideal of equality and freedom. Marxists however, aim not merely for a more equitable distribution of the social product, but for a transformation in the mode of production.
The abolition of private property in the means of production and the conversion of these into a planned economy of the associated producers alone enables a communist society and culture to be built. With this will come a progressive withering away of social classes, the division of labour, and the remains of the state.

A planned administration of things rather than the coercion of people, material wealth for all on the basis not of equal rations, but from each according to their ability, to each according to their needs? this is the perspective outlined by Marx and Engels. This serves to demonstrate how far removed Roemer is from classical Marxism and its communist goals.

Flawed
But there is far more to the errors of Analytical Marxism than this. Its much vaunted methods of deduction are equally flawed, as an example from Roemer will demonstrate.

Roemer aims to deduce that exploitation?defined merely as some people working more than the socially necessary labour time?occurs in essence because of uneven property relations.

He argues for this first by producing a model of an analytically simple economy in which exploitation does not occur. Then he adds uneven property relations to his model and shows how through this addition exploitation now occurs.

The conclusion drawn is that because disproportionate distribution has been generated in his model by adding uneven property ownership, a proportionate, just, distribution can be derived by removing uneven property ownership. This sounds terribly egalitarian. In reality it leads to a disastrous reduction of the socialist political programme to one of market socialism.

The deduction, of course, is flawed. The non-exploitative model created by Roemer has been artificially rigged. Roemer assumes that the individuals in his model operate on the basis of private maximisation of their utility. He also assumes that capital exists in this non-model economy as an independent input into production, without prior labour costs: capital without exploitation.

Thus Roemer includes in his premises a number of assumptions based on characteristics which are specific to certain modes of production. The legal category of private property is a reflection, a form of appearance, of these characteristics. So Roemer invalidates his conclusion that it is the uneven property form rather than the nature of the mode of production which causes uneven distribution. The whole method of using a model in this way turns out to be no more than a conjurer?s trick.

On the basis of this (invalid) deduction of exploitation from uneven private property, Roemer then has to go on to show how in history each overturn of a mode of production can be understood as an elimination of a type of uneven property relations. Thus there is supposedly an unbroken thread of continuity between bourgeois revolutionary politics and the politics of the labour movement. But he has defined his concept of exploitation only by ignoring the specific character of modes of production.

He gives his economic models characteristics that are superficially similar to historical economies. In his model of each society (Subsistence, Feudalism, Capitalism, ?Socialism?) exploitation arises from unequal ownership of something (respectively: natural resources, labour, capital, productive skills).

Mayer tries for a few pages to show the vaguest of parallels between Roemer?s models and historical reality, but his limp efforts depend on ignoring the fact that Roemer?s models assume forms of property ownership, labour markets and economic agency which simply did not exist in the societies to which Mayer tries to relate them.
So Roemer’s argument is neither logically sound, nor historically applicable. In response to Roemer’s nineteenth century predecessors, Marx pointed out that the whole argument is historically false. It is not the ownership of property but the social division of labour which causes the cost of reproducing labour to vary from the amount of labour embodied in the products of labour.

Consequently it is not just the forms of ownership that need to be modified to achieve significant change, but the whole mode of production. Unfalsified by Roemer, the Marxist theory of history leads to directly communist, not market socialist, conclusions.

Yet Roemer believes that the moral argument for reducing uneven distribution is conceptually simpler, and more robust? (p175) than the Marxist advocacy of the revolutionary interests of the working class. His suggestion is that Marxist theory should drop its specific allegiance to the interests of the working class.

What he cannot do, however, is produce any realistic model of revolution in which this conceptually simple and robust argument ever has or ever could shape or articulate the views of the social forces necessary to overthrow an entire mode of production. Mayer admits that Analytical Marxism may not yet have produced what he calls a plausible emancipatory project? (p227). Indeed!

Links
Ostensibly Analytical Marxism is not a political current. It has no links to any party and its own organisation is minimal? an annual meeting and a pattern of mutual academic reference. But there are clear political influences on this school of thought, which in turn determine the class nature of their conclusions.

The first is the pervasive individualism of late twentieth century ideology; a retreat in the face of the forward march of neo-liberalism in the 1980s. Thus the Analytical Marxists’ call for socialist theory to establish credible microfoundations amounts to a demand to reduce everything to an aggregation of rational decisions by individuals.

The second major influence is Stalinism. Analytical Marxism emerged alongside the Eurocommunist drive to rescue Stalinism through its social-democratisation, as the structuralist fashion in academic Marxism was ending, and at the same time as a new wave of free market ideas were being articulated to justify a new wave of assaults on the working class.

By reformulating Marxism as a declassed theory, Cohen fitted in well with the approach of those within the Stalinist parties who were trying to reduce working class politics to a search for the protection of liberal and religious opinion against Thatcher and Reagan’s attacks. What the Analytical Marxist claim to be Marxist really re?ects is that the Stalinist tradition these people grew up in and learned their politics from was one in which Marx was already an empty icon.

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