

Analytical Marxism: Self-Ownership and Distributive Justice

It [Marxism] sets out to refute the proposition that ideas govern the course of history, but the very extent of its own influence on human affairs has weakened the force of its thesis. For in altering the hitherto prevailing view of the relation of the individual to his environment and to his fellows, it has palpably altered that relation itself, and in consequence remains the most powerful among the intellectual forces which are today permanently altering the ways in which men think and act.

Isaiah Berlin, *Karl Marx: His Life and Environment*, 1939

Why should we study Marx today? We do not have to go far to find an answer, considering Marx's influence on the history of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It would be highly limiting to attempt to come to an understanding of the social, political, and economic shifts and upheavals, both in theory and in practice, that have occurred in the last 150 years without having a better than rudimentary understanding of Marx's writings. More widely, Marx's work is seminal to political and economic thought today, not for the accuracy of its predictions nor the precision of its claims, although even here Marxian failures, such as the labor theory of value, have been nothing if not instructive. We do not discount Plato because the *Republic* has never been realized (not that we necessarily would want it to be) and we do not push Descartes's *Meditations* to the side merely because he invoked the pineal gland to account for the connection between the mind and the body. Beyond the study of Marx to ascertain his place within the Enlightenment tradition of political thought and as a philosopher on his own terms of considerable depth and systematic vision, his intellectual influence on the fields of the social sciences and political philosophy today is immeasurable, particularly as a critique of capitalism and its concomitant form of life. Those concerned with the commodification or pricing of that which might seem more suitably assessed by noneconomic forms of value; the prevalent notion of "the market" or "the invisible hand" as the natural arbiter and authority over not only what is efficient, but also what is just; and/or the fundamental relationship between equality of resources and freedom, are indebted to the work of Marx, and will find nothing if not inspiration in his writings to counter contemporary apologists for exigencies intrinsic to societies based in capitalist economic systems.

Among the many schools of thought that are either self-proclaimed or considered to be Marxist in orientation, what follows here is an introduction to one contemporary academic development in social and political thought that has come to be termed Analytical Marxism, and a subsequent discussion of one aspect of Marx's thought that is central to contemporary debates in political philosophy with regard to distributive justice – namely, self-ownership. Analytical Marxism began as a development in the late 1970s and early 1980s among a group of scholars in philosophy, politics, sociology, economics, and history, all with the general shared belief that Marx's body of work still constitutes a framework within which questions can be asked to fruitful ends. However, they also agreed that this framework is both at times inscrutable on its own terms and has become burdened over time with a range of methodological problems and

commitments that seriously undermine its explanatory potential.¹ Problems of justice, theories of history, normative political theory, and economic crises are of concern to Analytical Marxism, along with a general commitment to identifying, explaining, and criticizing hierarchies of dominance and subordination in human society with particular regard to economic systems.

Analytical Marxism is analytical, first and foremost, in its commitment to the standards of clarity, precision, and rigor that distinguish Anglo-American 20th-century analytical philosophy from the often metaphorical, if not vague, language associated with the 19th- and 20th-century philosophy of continental Europe. This stylistic preference is accompanied by (1) a commitment to conventional scientific norms in the elaboration of theory and the conduct of research; (2) a careful attention to definitions of concepts and to the logical coherence of interconnected concepts; (3) specification of the steps in theoretical arguments linking concepts and the use of explicit, systematic models; and (4) importance accorded to the intentional action of individuals within both explanatory and normative theories.²

In the early 1970's, prior to the rise of Analytical Marxism, John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* ushered in a renewed interest in normative political philosophy. Within that theory, and subsequently revised in Rawls's *Political Liberalism*, Rawls propounds two principles of justice. The first is that each person has an equal claim to a fully adequate scheme of equal basic rights and liberties, which scheme is compatible with the same scheme for all; and in this scheme the equal political liberties, and only those liberties, are to be guaranteed their fair value. The second principle – also called the “difference principle” – is that social and economic inequalities must satisfy two conditions: they are to be attached to positions and offices open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity, and they are to be to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged members of society. In its concern with hierarchies of dominance and subordination that are particularly economic in nature, Analytical Marxism has engaged with the Rawlsian framework as a whole, but has focused on the second condition of the second principle – that social and economic inequalities are to be of the greatest benefit of the least advantaged members of society. It is that engagement which will exercise us here.

Recall that within the Marxian framework, a member of a social class belongs to it by virtue of his position within the social relations of production. A worker is defined as a producer who has nothing to sell but his own labor power, while an owner is in possession both of the means of production (e.g., machinery) to put labor power to use and the resources to purchase that labor power. Also recall from Professor Shapiro's lecture in subunit 3.4.4 that the Marxian labor theory of value has been roundly discounted as an economic theory of how value is created, prices are determined, and profit is made. What is of importance for our purposes, however, is Marx's invocation of

¹ These scholars, at different periods of time, have included: G. A. Cohen, John Roemer, Adam Przeworski, Jon Elster, Phillipe von Parijs, Erik Olin Wright, Robert Brenner, Robert-Jan van der Veen, Hillel Steiner, Samuel Bowles, Thomas Piketty, and Joshua Cohen.

² Wright, Erik Olin, “What is Analytical Marxism?” in *Interrogating Inequality: essays on class analysis, socialism, and Marxism*, Verso, 1994, pp. 181–82.

self-ownership – that even if we own nothing, we own ourselves, and that because of a need to survive, a worker is compelled to sell his labor power under an owner’s terms. Considered through a focus on hierarchies of dominance and subordination of the economic variety, what is important is the initial inequality in the distribution of productive assets and resources, and the distributional consequences that result from that initial inequality. This initial inequality is what constitutes, on the one hand, the source of the compulsion of the worker, and on the other hand, the freedom to contract and to continue to accumulate resources on the part of the owner.

As Shapiro states, Marx’s labor theory of value is a secularized version of Locke’s notion that we own, or have an entitlement to, what we make by mixing that which we own – ourselves, and hence our own labor power – with that which we do not own. But as the Locke scholar James Tully has claimed, too much focus has been placed on the mixing metaphor of Locke’s theory, and too little on what Tully calls the workmanship model.³ Locke believed that those who make something have property rights with respect to what they make just as God has property rights with respect to human beings because he is their maker. Human beings are created in the image of God and share with God, though to a much lesser extent, the ability to shape and mold the physical environment around them. In concordance with Tully, Shapiro comments that even if we reject the labor theory of value, it is hard to abandon the workmanship model and the sense of individual entitlement to external things that goes with it, and that it is not until the work of Rawls that we find anyone who is willing to radically question workmanship and the self-ownership postulate. Why Rawls must do so we will come to see through an explanation of Marx’s failure to do the same.

As mentioned earlier, in the Marxian critique of capitalism, the exploitation of workers by capitalists – meaning the appropriation without return by capitalists of part of what workers produce – derives entirely from the fact that workers lack access to physical productive resources and must therefore sell their labor power to owners. Capitalist appropriation is rooted in an unfair distribution of rights in external things. The appropriation has its causal origin in an unequal distribution of productive resources, and it suffices for considering it unjust exploitation because it springs from this initial unjust inequality.⁴ Here it would seem that Rawls’s difference principle – where, in the name of justice, inequalities are allowed only to the degree to which they benefit the least advantaged – would come in handy. Otherwise, redistribution is required for the sake of establishing equality of condition.

It is important, however, when operating within the Marxian framework, to recall that the mere mention of justice and injustice is problematic. Allen Wood writes that when capitalist exploitation is described as an “injustice,” the implication is that what is wrong with capitalism is its mode of distribution. When the appropriation by capital of the

³ Tully, James, *A Discourse on Property: John Locke and his adversaries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

⁴ Cohen, G.A., “Self-ownership, Communism, and Equality,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes*, Vol. 64, (1990), p. 28.

worker's labor is thought of as "unjust," the claim being made is that the worker is being given a smaller share of the collective product of society than he deserves according to the juridical or moral rules and practices which govern distribution, or at least, which *should* govern distribution. It is therefore being suggested that the answer to capitalist exploitation is to be found in the proper regulation of distribution by means of the promulgation and enforcement of laws, the making of political decisions, and the stricter adherence by individuals to correct and appropriate moral precepts. Wood writes:

Such a conception of what is wrong with capitalist exploitation is, however, entirely mistaken according to Marx. Distribution, he argues, is not something which exists alongside production, indifferent to it, and subject to whatever modifications individuals in their collective moral and political wisdom should choose to make in it. Any mode of distribution is determined by the mode of production of which it is a functional part. The appropriation of surplus value and the exploitation of labor are not *abuses* of capitalist production. . . . Exploitation belongs to the essence of capitalism. . . . It cannot be removed by the passage or enforcement of laws regulating distribution, or by any moral or political reforms which capitalist political institutions could bring about. Moreover, any "reforms" of capitalist production which proposed to take surplus value away from capital and put an end to the exploitation of the worker would themselves be injustices of a most straightforward and unambiguous kind. They would violate in the most obvious way the fundamental property rights derived from the capitalist mode of production, and constitute the imposition on it of a system of distribution essentially incompatible with it.⁵

Earlier it was said that, as understood within the Marxian framework, capitalist appropriation is rooted in an unfair distribution of rights in external things. Appropriation has its causal origin in an unequal distribution of productive resources, and it suffices for considering it unjust exploitation because it springs from this initial unjust inequality. Wood says in effect that reforms of a redistributive variety – such as that which would be required under a Rawlsian second principle – to address an initial unjust inequality would themselves be injustices by violating the fundamental property rights derived from the capitalist mode of production. What Wood is addressing here is that redistribution constitutes a violation of the principle of self-ownership – that every person is entitled to full private property in their own person and powers, and that each person has an extensive set of moral rights over the use and fruits of his body and capacities. Self-ownership goes two ways: I am not fully mine if someone has a claim to a portion of the income that my labor power generates, while at the same time, I am not fully mine if I am required to lend my assistance to anyone else, or to transfer all or part of what I produce to anyone else, either directly or through state-imposed redistribution. What is ironic is that in endorsing the principle of self-ownership, the Marxist critique aligns itself to varying degrees between what has been termed right-wing libertarianism, which claims that self-ownership entails unlimited original rights in external natural resources, and left-wing libertarianism, which holds to an egalitarian line with respect to initial

⁵ Wood, Allen, "The Marxian Critique of Justice," *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (Spring, 1972), pp. 268–69.

shares in external resources. Regardless, the Marxist critique's association with libertarianism is not a comfortable one. Although it might seem plausible that the egalitarian line of left-libertarianism with respect to initial shares in external resources would address the inequality over resources and the means of production between owners and workers, there is yet another problem – one of which Marx was entirely aware.

In “The Critique of the Gotha Program,” Marx asserts that in the first phase of communist society the economy will distribute goods according to the norm “to each according to his labor contribution”:

Within the cooperative society based on common ownership of the means of production, the producers do not exchange their products; just as little does the labor employed on the products appear here as the value of these products, as a material quality possessed by them, since now, in contrast to capitalist society, individual labor no longer exists in an indirect fashion but directly as a component part of the total labor. The phrase “proceeds of labor,” objectionable also today on account of its ambiguity, thus loses all meaning. . . . Accordingly, the individual producer receives back from society – after the deductions have been made – exactly what he gives to it. What he has given to it is his given quantum of labor.

But one man is superior to another physically or mentally and so supplies more labor in the same time, or can labor for a longer time; and labor, to serve as a measure, must be defined by its duration or intensity, otherwise it ceases to be a standard of measurement. This equal right is an unequal right for unequal labor. It recognizes no class differences, because everyone is only a worker like everyone else, but it tacitly recognizes unequal individual endowment and thus productive capacity as natural privileges. . . . Thus, with an equal performance of labor, and hence an equal share in the social consumption fund, one will in fact receive more than another, one will be richer than another, and so on.⁶

Capitalist inequality is not solely the result of inequality between workers and owners with regard to external resources, and thus could not be solved by an egalitarian approach to shares in initial external resources. On the basis of “the luck of the draw,” so to speak, in terms of one's talents and inclinations, and in holding that a person's productive capacity is something over which he enjoys a natural privilege – i.e., the principle of self-ownership – increased inequality would obtain and the cycle of exploitation would begin, regardless of the initial equality of external resources. Under Rawls's difference principle, the resulting inequality would only be tolerated where it served to benefit the least advantaged, meaning it would be necessary to press the talent of the naturally better endowed into the service of the poorly endowed for the sake of establishing and maintaining equality of condition. Yet to take such action in

⁶ Marx, Karl, “Critique of the Gotha Programme,” in *The Portable Karl Marx*, ed. Eugene Kamenka, (Penguin, 1983) pp. 538–39.

adhering to Rawls's difference principle, the principle of self-ownership must be relinquished.

Rather than abandon the principle of self-ownership, Marx's answer to this difficulty is to invoke a move to a higher form of communism, wherein desired and necessary superabundance allows labor itself to dissolve into "life's prime want," and work is intrinsic to self-fulfillment and undertaken as a matter of unconditional preference. Cohen writes:

At the high material level of abundance, the incentive of reward for labor contribution is no longer necessary, and so it is not now necessary to maintain the writ of self-ownership. But the same thing that makes it unnecessary to maintain its writ also makes it unnecessary to reject the principle itself. When labor is life's prime want, it is performed both without the remuneration enjoined by the principle of self-ownership and without the coercion which presupposes rejection of that principle.⁷

Cohen explains that Marx's famous principle, "From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs," is not an imperative, but part of communism's self-description: given superabundance and that labor is life's prime want as a good in itself, the unconstrained exercise of the ability of each not only allows but also promotes satisfaction of the needs of all. Superabundance dissolves the incentive of reward for labor contribution, and with it the possibility of unequal rewards for unequal labor contribution.

However, as Professor Shapiro explains in the 3.4.4 lecture, the notion of superabundance has been shown to be untenable. Without it, the Marxian framework is fettered by its failure to repudiate the principle of self-ownership and the consequent inequality that results from differentials between personal talents, attributes, and capacities. Analytical Marxism has been able to show where Marx might have, like Rawls, abandoned the principle of self-ownership as a fundamental plank in his framework, and has come to focus on addressing inequalities that result not merely from the distribution of external resources, but from differentials associated with the social and natural lottery in personal talents and other factors such as place of birth – factors that can be considered as matters of luck or chance that privilege some over others in an arguably unjust manner.

Consider that in Marx's higher phase of communism, an egalitarian distribution is not achieved by force: no one is under pressure or compulsion to abandon or revise what they want because of the wants or needs of other people. Conflicts of material interest dissolve, and equality obtains in a voluntary fashion. Analytical Marxism has come to explore ways in which equality of this voluntary sort might obtain in modern societies characterized by a lesser abundance than Marx's higher phase of communism. Although sympathetic to Rawls's abandonment of the principle of self-ownership, Analytical Marxism takes issue with the Rawlsian framework as a whole and particularly

⁷ Cohen, p. 36.

with the difference principle. To speak in concrete terms, the difference principle can be presented in the form of what is called the incentives argument, which holds that, primarily as a consequence of genetic and other luck, some people are capable of producing more than others are, and it is right for them to be richer than others if the less fortunate are better off as a result. One line of attack against the incentives argument is that it is fundamentally disingenuous. Cohen, for instance, writes:

my disagreement with Rawls and the Rawlsians is the nonliberal socialist/anarchist conviction that Karl Marx expressed so powerfully in his essay “On the Jewish Question,” when he said that “human emancipation” would be “complete” “only when the actual individual man . . . has recognized and organized his own powers as *social* powers so that social force is no longer separated from him as a *political* power”; thus, only when he has “taken back into himself the abstract citizen” so that freedom and equality are expressed “in his everyday life, his individual work, and his individual relationships.”

The ideal liberal society is not the same as the ideal socialist society. In the ideal socialist society, equal respect and concern are not projected out of society and restricted to the ambit of an alien superstructural power, the state. If the right principles are, as Marx thought, the ones that are right for real, everyday, material life, and if they are practiced in everyday life, as the socialist ideal utopianly envisages that they will be, then the state can wither away.⁸

Cohen argues that the difference principle can be used to justify paying incentives that induce inequalities only when the attitude of talented people runs counter to the spirit of the difference principle itself: they would not need special incentives if they were themselves fully committed to the principle.⁹ Under this picture, those who are more talented commit a kind of extortion: they are unwilling to perform those tasks which they are entirely capable of performing unless they are paid a premium to do so. The difference principle means giving to those who already by chance *have*, assigning the most to those who are already favored by nature. Although benefits accrue to the worst off more so than would be the case without the difference principle, inequality becomes more entrenched. In this manner, according to Cohen, the difference principle is merely an expedient measure to regulate a predominantly selfish type of character formed by a capitalist economic system, and does not qualify as a basic principle of justice.

Summary

- The study of Marx today is important in three respects. First, it is crucial in coming to an understanding of the social, political, and economic upheavals that have occurred over the past 150 years. Second, as a philosopher in his own right, Marx is invaluable in terms of his influence on the Enlightenment tradition of political thought and the social sciences. Third, many schools of contemporary

⁸ Cohen, G.A., *Rescuing Justice and Equality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), p. 1.

⁹ Cohen, “Incentives, Inequality, and Community,” *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values* (University of Utah), pp. 268-69.

social and political thought have found inspiration in and have drawn upon Marx's works, and continue to do so.

- Analytical Marxism began as a development in the late 1970s and early 1980s among a group of scholars in philosophy, politics, sociology, economics, and history, all with the general shared belief that Marx's body of work still constitutes a framework within which questions can be asked to fruitful ends.
- One aspect of Marx's framework where Analytical Marxism has come to focus is the principle of self-ownership – that every person is entitled to full private property in their own person and powers, and that each person has an extensive set of moral rights over the use and fruits of his body and capacities.
- Within the Marxian framework, the principle of self-ownership becomes problematic as society progresses from a capitalist to a socialist system; although an initial equality of material resources obtains in a socialist system, the principle of self-ownership would entail unequal compensation for unequal work as a result of unequal talents and capacities. The principle places Marx in the rather uncomfortable company of both right- and left-libertarianism.
- The principle of self-ownership is not seriously challenged or relinquished until the work of John Rawls as embodied in his difference principle, where inequalities are only tolerated when they are to the benefit of the worst off.
- Although sympathetic to Rawls, Analytical Marxism takes issue with the Rawlsian framework and particularly the difference principle. The argument is made that the difference principle is not a principle of justice, but merely an expedient measure to provide incentives to those who are already better off in society.