

COMMENT

A New Marxist Paradigm?

Joseph McCarney

I agree with a great deal in Gregor McLennan's review of Jon Elster's *Making Sense of Marx* (RP42), and most of all with his idea of the book's importance. He may well be right in thinking it 'likely to dominate discussions of Marx and Marxism for the next decade'. There is also likely to be widespread assent to his view of it as 'the flagship for a new armada of Marxist analytical scholarship and reassessment'. The names of the other captains in the armada would have to include those McLennan mentions of G. A. Cohen and John Roemer. Here, one might suppose, is the long-awaited marriage of analytical philosophy and Marxism. Elster's book may not be the last word on all, or any, of the themes and findings of the new school, but it is surely the best general guide and compendium. As such, its publication does not simply mark the height of current academic fashion, but is an event of real importance on the intellectual scene.

Against this background there is one aspect of McLennan's review with which I would like to take issue. It is his tribute to the 'fair-minded feel' to the book, and his claim that Elster is 'sympathetic to the Marxist project'. The book does not feel in the least fair-minded to me. On the contrary, it could serve as an anthology of varieties of critical unfairness. On the evidence of it, Elster could be regarded as sympathetic to the Marxist project only in so far as that is compatible with a marked lack of sympathy with the project's founder. In amplifying these remarks, I shall not be engaging directly with the central theses of the book. It cannot be too strongly emphasised that nothing here is a substitute for that vital task. It will, however, be necessary to point to flaws in the details of some specific arguments. What is at stake in those cases is not for the most part of great moment in itself. Nevertheless, they provide clues as to the author's relationship to his subject which can supplement what is gained from formal statements of his programme and conclusions. In particular, they offer an invaluable perspective on issues of fairness and sympathy. Views on these issues must in their turn have implications for the book's reception, for they help to shape the context in which it is located and discussed.

The simplest kind of unfairness in Elster's reading is misrepresentation. Again and again the line of Marx's argument is bent, and always in the direction of making it untenable. A couple of examples will have to suffice here. Elster dismisses Marx's views on the antagonism between English and Irish workers with the remark: 'Ruling classes can exploit prejudices, but they cannot create them' (*Making Sense of Marx*, p. 22. All page references are to this work unless otherwise indicated). In the passage in question, however, Marx's claim was not that the antagonism was 'created' by the ruling classes but that it was 'artificially kept alive

and intensified' by them (pp. 21-22). The difference is crucial in its setting. The desire to refute what, on Elster's own showing, Marx does not hold is found elsewhere. Thus, for instance, he cites Marx's defence of Fourier and other 'organizers of labour': it 'was not their view, as Stirner imagines, that each should do the work of Raphael, but that anyone in whom there is a potential Raphael should be able to develop himself without hindrance'. This defence relies for its point on the assumption that the potential to be a Raphael is not universal. Yet Elster interprets it so as to fit with his belief that Marx's corpus as a whole never 'refers to differences in natural talents' (p. 88). Later the point is caricatured further. Elster attacks the 'Utopian' idea that 'everybody could be a Raphael' while referring to the earlier discussion in a way plainly meant to imply that the idea was held by Marx (p. 201). Yet the distinction between it and his actual view that everybody who could be a Raphael should be allowed to does not need labouring.

Another kind of unfairness, all too familiar when analytical philosophers turn to Marx, is the Stalinist smear. Elster notes that Marx found himself compelled, in his own words, to 'say to the workers and the petty bourgeois: it is better to suffer in modern bourgeois society, which by its industry creates the material means for the foundation of a new society that will liberate you all, than to revert to a bygone form of society...'. Elster comments: 'Substitute the peasantry for the petty bourgeoisie and primitive socialist accumulation for modern bourgeois society and you have the classic justification for Stalinism' (pp. 116-17). This procedure is so useful it seems a pity to stop there. Thus, substitute the unemployed and market forces and you have the classic justification for Thatcherism. The point is not just that Elster is indulging in the kind of uncontrolled analogizing he castigates when he thinks he finds it in Marx (see e.g., pp. 508-10). It is also that the analogy in this case is singularly inept. Stalinism did not, as Elster is well aware, rely on 'saying' to the peasants in an effort to persuade them of the need for sacrifices. It typically worked through coercion and terror. Moreover, its programme has to be conceived as pure loss of life and the amenities of life on the part of those who suffered it for the sake of a hypothetical future. The impression that Elster wishes to link Marx with such projects is strengthened a little later by a reference, on the basis of the same discussion, to his 'philosophy of history that allows one to regard pre-communist individuals as so many sheep for the slaughter' (p. 118). Some account should, however, have been taken of Marx's apparent belief that his recommendations will be of benefit to his audience themselves: their outcome 'will liberate you all'. It is understandable that someone writing at the present time

only to be won, if at all, by the travail of generations. But this would not have been so obvious to Marx writing in January 1849 in the midst of a European revolutionary upheaval. Elster's treatment of the case points to some of his chief weaknesses as a commentator: his abstract, formalising style of thinking and lack of feel for the specificity of the contexts in which intellectual positions are advanced; more generally, his lack of an active historical sense.

This blind spot may help to explain another feature of his method, the tendency to treat all of Marx's writings as one vast text to be assessed primarily for internal coherence. Thus, he assembles a number of passages in order to exhibit the inconsistencies in Marx's references to Christianity (pp. 506-08). The sources extend in time from the 1840s to the 1870s. They range from private notebooks to preparatory outlines to material published by Engels to works whose publication was overseen by Marx himself. Given this provenance, it is hardly surprising that inconsistencies can be found. The absence of any could only mean that one's subject had stopped thinking about the topic at an early stage. Elster shows no feeling for the heterogeneity of his evidence, nor any of the caution it should induce. This is all the more surprising since he had earlier quoted a remark that might have given him pause. It comes in a letter to Engels: 'Whatever shortcomings (my writings) may have, they have the advantage of forming an artistic whole, which can only be achieved through my method of never letting them into print before they lie wholly before me' (p. 42). This gives grounds for attending to the distinction between what Marx let into print and what he did not, and even between those categories and what was never intended for print in the first place. In this connection one may also note Elster's comment that Capital II is 'certainly one of the most boring works ever written by a major author' (p. 142). He is, of course, aware that the work we know by that title was put together by Engels, exercising considerable editorial discretion, from manuscripts left after Marx's death, and was not written by Marx to be read in its present form. In view of this, his comment is surely something of a cheap gibe.

The meanness of spirit shown here and elsewhere in the book will surprise those who know Elster's other writings. The various 'Replies' to critics, for instance, have a remarkable balance and liberality, being always ready to reshape a thesis in the light of objections, conceding a point where it seems necessary and holding the line firmly where it does not (Inquiry 23, 1980; Theory and Society 12, 1983). They are, in short, a model of how to conduct intellectual debate. It is true, and mildly amusing, that an astringent note tends to creep in when Elster is responding to critics outside the inner circle of the new 'Marxism'. Then one finds also the same favourite devices of the analytical movement as were applied to Marx. There is, for instance, the ingenuously pained admission of inability to understand: 'I confess my inability to make any interesting sense of Marx's article "On the Jewish Question"' (p. 504 note). In dealing with Anthony Giddens in particular, this device is made to work overtime (Theory and Society 12, 1983). Even in these cases, however, everything proceeds well within the conventional bounds of academic discussion. No doubt the contrast between them and that of Marx owes something to the decencies appropriate to arguing with contemporaries. But it would scarcely be to Elster's credit to take this as a complete explanation. Something must be due to the fact that in these debates he is confronting thinkers he respects as he does not respect Marx. At this point one comes near the heart of the problem of his book. For the attitude it reveals to its subject is best characterised as a kind of intellectual contempt. To

say this is not itself to criticise either Marx or Elster. The fact must nevertheless be acknowledged. The nature and basis of Elster's contempt are sufficiently shown in the tenor of his complaints. Marx has 'a cavalier attitude to the canons of explanation' (p. 35). There is an 'omnipresent bias of wishful thinking' in his work (p. 438). Most revealing and persistent of all is the charge of 'lack of intellectual discipline' (pp. 317, 390, 508). These habits of mind are naturally enough reflected in the detailed analyses, which are variously characterised by Elster as 'rambling', 'arbitrary', 'confused', 'incoherent', 'rather absurd', 'downright silly' and 'a conceptual jungle'. It may be said that he shows himself somewhat insensitive to the comic possibilities that arise, against this background, when he turns to authors of whom he approves, as when we are assured that '(G. A.) Cohen's approach is characteristically lucid' (p. 244). The incongruity here may oblige the reader to pinch herself to get things back in their true proportions, with Cohen as one of our ablest professors and Marx as what he professes.



The low regard Elster has for the subject of his book has a more serious aspect. For it may well be thought an odd qualification for the author of a study of more than five hundred pages. Moreover, the overwhelmingly negative tone of the study must give rise to the question of how such an intellectual pygmy could merit attention on this scale. It may be surmised that, in the course of the writing, Elster gradually became alive to the pressure of this question. At any rate, the final paragraph tries to strike a positive note, by indicating the sense in which he regards himself as a Marxist:

... speaking now for myself only, I believe, it is still possible to be a Marxist in a rather different (i.e. non-traditional, JM) sense of the term. I find that most of the views that I hold to be true and important, I can trace back to Marx. This includes methodology, substantive theories and, above all, values. (p. 531)

This is a useful check-list, and it should be asked how far the items on it will bear scrutiny.

Elster's account of Marx's methodological achievement is prominent among the aspects of his book that merits full-scale independent treatment. Even a brief glance is, however, enough to show that what he says about it amounts to the faintest of praise and what he could claim to have derived from it in a personal way is wholly mysterious. Marx's central contribution is taken to be the idea that uncoordinated actions may come to grief through the mechanism of unintended consequences (pp. 44, 48). This is the phenomenon which Elster, borrowing from Sartre, calls 'counterfinality'. It is one of the two main species of social contradictions discussed at length in his earlier work Logic and Society. The second is called 'sub-optimality', and involves the kind of intentional produc-

tion of suboptimal consequences of which the Prisoner's Dilemma is the paradigm. The contrast lies in the fact that, while suboptimality is a game-theoretic notion presupposing strategic rationality on the part of the players, counterfinality can arise only at a pre-strategic, pre-game-theoretic stage. This stage is, for Elster, the true home of Marx's methodological expertise. Thus: 'Although strategic interaction is crucial in economic life, both within and between classes, Marx took little explicit account of it'. Moreover, what he says is 'hardly more coherent and systematic than what may be discovered in Hobbes, Rousseau or Tocqueville', and he is 'sometimes confused' with respect to a 'crucial' element of it (pp. 14-15). Indeed, he scores badly for game-theoretic competence in general. Thus, he commits the cardinal error of violating the principle of 'mutual rationality' (p. 298). His inadequacy also shows itself in less basic, but still important areas, as in his 'narrow pre-strategic conception of power' (pp. 406, 421).

To see the force of this assessment, one has to invoke an idea that runs through Elster's work and is made most fully explicit in one of the sets of 'Replies' to critics referred to earlier. It is that the conceptual distinction between counterfinality and suboptimality 'corresponds to' the 'historical divide' between traditional and modern societies (*Inquiry* 23, 1980, pp. 216-17). It follows that while Marx's methodological contribution may be of use to the anthropologist or ancient historian, it can have little to offer the student of capitalism. It follows also that he himself lacked the conceptual tools needed to do justice to a central object of his social science, the formation and interaction of classes in modern societies. What actively interests Elster, as any acquaintance with his writings will show, is the application of game-theoretic insights to those societies, not the parametric predicaments of traditional actors. It now becomes difficult to see what could be of personal significance for him in Marx's method. Indeed, one might ask how Elster could possibly respect Marx, since he is a complete duffer at game theory. The truth of this matter is surely not hard to discern, and the only puzzle is why Elster should wish to deceive himself about it.

Faced with the claim that Elster finds some of Marx's substantive theories to be 'true and important', one can only ask 'what theories'? On almost any medium-sized topic one chooses, his verdict will be found to be harshly dismissive. Fleshing out some of the epithets listed earlier, one may note that Marx's views on 'man and nature' are said to be 'either rambling and incoherent, or inherently trivial' (p. 55). His discussion of religion is described as 'arbitrary and largely incoherent' (pp. 493-94). Going beyond the list, one may cite the assertion that the writings on international politics are 'largely devoid of theoretical interest' (p. 17). It is true that occasionally a less hostile conclusion is revealed, but even then what is chiefly remarkable is the grudging and patronising way it is framed. To take a representative case: Marx's 'sociology of economic knowledge was quite an impressive achievement, in spite of being flawed by its reliance on functional explanation and the labour theory of value' (p. 504). It would be easy to give further instances at this level. Instead, however, it may be more rewarding to deal in broad strokes with the two main divisions of Marx's substantive theorising, as conceived by Elster.

The first, the theory of history, is on Elster's presentation comprehensively vitiated by 'the a priori nature of his reasoning - the speculative, teleological nature of his reasoning - the speculative, teleological strand in his thought' (p. 432). The position as regards the second, economic theory, is sufficiently indicated

by noting that the two 'main pillars' of the analysis of capitalism as an economic system, the labour theory of value and the theory of the falling rate of profit, have both, according to Elster, 'conclusively been shown to be invalid' (p. 119). In general, his view of Marx's status as an economist is fairly caught in McLennan's focusing on the phrase 'a minor post-Ricardian' (p. 513). If one steps back from Elster's own account to ask what elements of substantive theory he could reasonably claim to take over from Marx, there seems only one serious candidate. It can be argued that he accepts some version of Marx's conception of classes and of modern society as structured by class divisions. The use to which he wishes to put these elements is accurately described by McLennan: 'he recommends that classical formulations be conceived anew as various possibilities and strategies in a game-theory-based model of collective action.' What is valuable in Marx is the grist the picture of classes supplies for the game theorist's mill, material he was incompetent to process himself. This is the substance of Elster's claim to be indebted to his social science. In addition, one must acknowledge the truth contained in the phrase 'above all, values' which was quoted earlier. Herein lies what is undoubtedly Elster's strongest link with Marx. 'Self-realization through creative work' is, for him, 'the most valuable and enduring element of Marx's thought' (p. 521). The genuineness of Elster's attachment to this ideal is not in question. Neither, however, should its significance for his view of Marx be overstated. The theme may serve to establish Marx as a minor post-Ricardian whose heart is in the right place, but it can add little to his stature as a thinker or social scientist.

The comparison with Kolakowski, Elster's predecessor as the chief interpreter of Marx to the academy, is instructive here. Without wishing to propound any cheap paradoxes, it should be pointed out that McLennan stands the truth on its head when he remarks that Elster 'does not Kolakowski-like, give the sense of delighting in finding fault'. This 'Comment' has tended to suggest that such delight may be seen as the main motive force of Elster's discussion. It would be quite unfair to view the first volume of *Main Currents of Marxism* in that way. It is true that the later volumes, on Marxism after Marx, are an accelerating intellectual disaster, but that is another matter. Kolakowski's reading, in contrast to Elster's, makes intelligible the claim of Marx's work to be an important intellectual achievement. In itself this is, of course, hardly surprising since the reading had been taken over wholesale from Lukacs. On it, Marx clearly emerges as a first-rank figure in the history of thought, as, at least, a major post-Hegelian. Moreover, it is plain that even, or especially, at his most hostile Kolakowski is struggling with what he believes to be a powerful and insidious poison whose effects he cannot be entirely sure of having eliminated from his own system. The condescending air, lit with flashes of irritation, that characterises *Making Sense of Marx* betrays no such inner struggle. There is normally little point in arguing about who is or is not a 'Marxist', and yet the term may not, even now, have lost all determinacy. That the book is the work of someone who regards himself, and is regarded by others, as in some sense deserving the label is just the kind of farcical touch in which Marx himself would have delighted and to which his pen could have done justice. The truth is that Elster treats Marx as a 'dead dog' and the most intriguing question that now arises is how well he gets away with it. If *Making Sense of Marx* fails to provoke sustained and systematic attempts at rebuttal, it can only be a sign that Marx's work has, for the time being at least, ceased to be a living force in the West. That is the best measure of the book's significance.