Introduction

G.A. Cohen, Jon Elster, John Roemer – without question, these are prolific writers with an impressive series of articles and books, who have become a significant presence in commentaries and discussions of Marxism in recent years. My first inkling, though, that more had emerged on the scene came from a 1983 article by John Gray (passed on by a sceptical friend); for the 1983 article hailed the emergence of ‘a powerful new school of Analytical Marxism, led by such outstanding figures as G.A. Cohen, Jon Elster and John Roemer, with whose works the future of Marxism, if it has any, must henceforth be associated’. ¹

Is there indeed such a school? The evidence on the existence of some such self-defined group is overwhelming. In his Making Sense of Marx, Elster notes that Cohen’s Karl Marx’s Theory of History came as a ‘revelation’: ‘Overnight it changed the standards of rigour and clarity that were required to write on Marx and Marxism.’ Accordingly, he notes, a small group of like-minded colleagues formed and began a series of annual meetings in 1979. Their discussions were decisive for the shaping of Elster’s book – and,

¹ Gray 1983, p. 1461.
in particular, the contributions of Roemer (subsequently stated in his ‘path-breaking’ *A General Theory of Exploitation and Class*) were ‘crucial’.

In turn, Roemer begins the latter book by noting his particular indebtedness to Cohen and Elster, indicating among those who were helpful several others who also appear on Elster’s list. Mentioned on both lists, Erik Olin Wright corroborates the existence of the group, its annual meetings and its orientation toward ‘analytical Marxism’ in the preface to his recent book, *Classes*; in addition, he testifies that its ‘new ideas and perspectives have had a considerable impact on my thinking and my work’. Finally, definitively embracing the self-designation of ‘analytical Marxism’ is Roemer’s new collection by that name—a collection which includes three essays each by Roemer, Elster and Cohen plus individual efforts by several others.

So, what do the adherents themselves see as the constituent elements in analytical Marxism? For Wright, the central intellectual thread is the ‘systematic interrogation and clarification of basic [Marxian] concepts and their reconstruction into a more coherent theoretical structure’. Similarly, as noted, Elster identified ‘rigour and clarity’ as the underlying principle in the formation of the group. The most explicit self-description of analytical Marxism, however, comes from Roemer in his Introduction to his collection: ‘analytically sophisticated Marxism’—pursued with ‘contemporary tools of logic, mathematics, and model building’ and committed to ‘the necessity for abstraction’, to the ‘search for foundations’ of Marxian judgements, and to ‘a non-dogmatic approach to Marxism’. An impressive set of elements, to be sure. Where do we apply for candidate status in this analytically correct fellowship?

More than rigour, however, sets analytical Marxism apart—as John Gray’s praise for this ‘powerful new school’ makes clear. For, hailing the early

---

2 Elster 1985, pp. xiv–xv. Elster especially thanks Cohen and Roemer for their comments. He does not identify other group members but, included among those thanked for pre-publication help are Pranab Bardham, Robert Brenner, Lief Johansen, Serge Kolm, Adam Przeworski, Ian Steedman, Robert van der Veen, Philippe van Parijs and Erik Wright.

3 Roemer 1982. These include Lief Johansen, Serge Kolm and Erik Wright.

4 Wright 1985, p. 2. Wright identifies among the members of the group Cohen, Roemer, Elster, van Parijs, van der Veen, Brenner, Przeworski and Hillel Steiner.

5 Roemer 1986a. Included in this collection are essays by Bardham, Brenner, Przeworski, Wright and Allen Wood.

6 Wright 1985, p. 2.

7 Roemer 1986a, pp. 1–2.