Rusticating Marx

No more Marxism on the Cambridge syllabus

In March the Philosophy Faculty at Cambridge removed a course on Marxism from its syllabus. This was in spite of significant opposition, including two student-led petitions. Along with another course on Power this constituted the entire coverage of non-liberal political philosophy, leaving coverage of questions about human society dominated by the liberal tradition.[1] At Cambridge, as elsewhere, political philosophy as a sub-discipline looks set to become the enterprise of writing footnotes to Rawls.[2]

In earlier decades courses on Marxism were not unusual, and research in the field considered credibly part of the philosophical enterprise. Neither is the case now; the seemingly inexorable decline has been marked by prominent departmental milestones, of which the loss of the Cambridge course is one, the ending of the federal University of London BA another.[3] It may be that the situation is better in departments with a continental orientation, where if nothing else Marx can always be smuggled in under the catholic auspices of 'critical theory', but these are in a minority in the UK system.

It was not always thus. It is a curious feature of the history of English language philosophy since Russell and Moore, generally not considered a radical affair, that Marx always found favour in some quarters. As partisan a positivist as A.J. Ayer was prepared to give Highgate Cemetery's best-known resident a hearing, on the basis that Marxism entailed historical predictions, which were subject to the test of empirical verification.[4] The ethos of postwar British philosophy was receptive to a certain understanding of Marx, namely a scientistic and historically determinist one, even if such a 'Marx' was a caricature. Marx's writings have always been dubiously situated with respect to the analytic–continental division in Western philosophy, a division whose clarity is in no way as great as the earnestness with which its boundaries are policed, and whose own material basis in the academy is long overdue critical investigation. The standard narrative about this division identifies Kant as the last shared ancestor of analytic and continental philosophy. Marx, like Hegel, postdates Kant, but pre-dates the cementing of the rival traditions, often reckoned to have taken place in the persons of Frege and Husserl. He awkwardly escapes the discipline's own self-narrative, and ever threatens to shatter the all too cosy symbolic order of the philosophical academy.

If this is so, how on earth did Marx end up on the syllabus in the first place? In large part by accommodating his work to the needs of disciplinary self-understanding. If the continental way of doing this was to foreground the Marxism which has something to say about culture, or about ideology, the analytic route towards an acceptable Marx assigned him to the drawer marked 'philosophy of science'. Marx's role was as the supplier of a philosophy of the social sciences, and in particular of a philosophy of history (history itself being construed scientistically).

Analytical Marxism, the project of reading Marx within the analytic tradition, came into its own in the mid-1970s through the efforts of G.A. Cohen and the so-called 'no-bullshit Marxism' group. The output of this group dominated the reading lists for Marxism courses in analytic departments. In particular, Cohen's *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence* was a permanent fixture. The Marx that emerged was technologically determinist, relatively unconcerned with human agency and the perfect ideological supplement to the kind of politics for which history was the forward march of progress, near complete in Eastern Europe. Absent from this Marx was any deep continuity with Hegel, whose influence was the despised 'bullshit'. A Humean distinction between facts and values ran through Analytical Marxism. Since no normative content was thought to be found in the scientific Marx, the justification for socialist politics had to be imported from elsewhere. More often than not, liberal political philosophy stepped into the breach.

To an extent, the limitations of Analytical Marxism are consequences of its time of birth. Soon after the crucial formative period of the mid-1970s, analytic philosophers became far more sympathetic to metaphysics, and so to notions such as internal relatedness, than had been typical when Cohen's ideas were taking shape. Similarly, new directions in ethics, such as Virtue Ethics, called into question the fact–value distinction and would have been possible conversation partners for Marxists interested in themes such as alienation. As it was, the literature on Marxism and morality concerned itself mainly with questions of justice, and so doffed its cap to the coming Rawlsian hegemony. But ultimately the undoing of Analytical Marxism, and more remotely the exit of Marx from the syllabus, came about not for intellectual but for political reasons.

Just as the Marx of Cohen et al. was filtering into, and shaping, the philosophy syllabus, socialism was faring less well. Marx, as the bulk of philosophers in UK universities had come to understand him, simply did not provide the resources to understand political defeat. If Marxism tells us that human agency has a purely accidental role in history, then the fact that a tussle between Margaret Thatcher and the NUM seemed to represent a point of inflexion for the fortunes of British socialism looks pretty embarrassing for the doctrine's proponents. Worse still, Analytical Marxism had a lot invested in the fate of the Eastern bloc. The events of 1989, then, did not bode well. It is striking that those analytic researchers on Marxism who produced second editions of books post-1989, the first edition of which had been published prior to that year, often felt the need to add apologetic postscripts situating their work in a post Cold War world. By contrast, nobody reissuing Adorno or Marcuse would have dreamt that any comparable apologia was needed.

Analytic philosophy had received a Marx whose claims were falsifiable by history, and history had done the job. He lingered in syllabuses such as those no longer taught at London and Cambridge. Robbed of a place among the philosophers of social science, the obvious place to reinsert Marx within the discipline was as a political philosopher. Here, however, there is a problem. Whether or not it acknowledges it, political philosophy as practised within the analytic tradition is not a disinterested enquiry into the ordering of society, even were such a thing possible. Rather, it engages a problematic with a clear basis in a particular political tradition, liberalism. The questions that dominate this problematic – 'How might the state be justified?' and 'What is the correct principle of distributive justice?' – are not ones with which the Marxian texts engage. What Marx would ask about these questions is why they arise, and what interests they serve. This sort of interrogation is not much favoured among analytic political philosophers, problematizing as it does controlling assumptions about rationality and impartiality, and so a state of incomprehension results. The widespread indifference with which Marx has been greeted by these political philosophers carries a tacit rebuke, 'we have nothing to learn from you'. Marx would, one imagines, wholeheartedly agree with them in their own terms.

How much does the Cambridge decision, and the wider pattern of disciplinary shift it represents, matter? I do not think that the contemporary university needs fewer people familiar with Marx. Nor is the dominance of the liberal tradition within analytic political philosophy welcome – not only Marx, but also non-liberal feminist and postcolonial politics, LGBTQ liberation, and much else besides suffers from its censorious determining of the syllabus. There is, however, a case to be made that Marx is better off not being shoved into a slot for which he is not fitted. Could he flourish elsewhere?

Perhaps Marx belongs on the margins of an increasingly neoliberal academy. He might be more at home shouting through the window at the seminar, 'You're asking the wrong questions.' To be sure, there is nothing in Marxism, whose political goal is the movement of the immense majority in the interests of the immense majority, that warms to the currently fashionable courting of the marginal for its own sake. But the margins of the university are not the same thing as the margins of society. It may yet be that Marx will find a more rewarding home than the philosophy syllabus.

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Notes

1. For a report, see Lucy McMahon, 'Erasing Marx in the Name of Liberalism?', *Cambridge Student*, 2 March 2015, www.tcs.cam.ac.uk/comment/0033983-erasing-marx-in-the-name-of-liberalism.html.
2. On the inadequacies of Rawlsianism, by a Cambridge philosopher in the wake of the syllabus decision, see Lorna Finlayson, 'Brand v. Rawls', www.lrb.co.uk/blog/2015/03/05/lorna-finlayson/brand-v-rawls.
3. The syllabus lives on online: www.ucl.ac.uk/philosophy/LPSG/Marx.htm.
4. Ben Rogers, *A.J. Ayer: A Life*, Vintage, London, 2000, p. 132.