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Kai Nielsen

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WHAT IS ALIVE AND WHAT IS DEAD IN MARX AND MARXISM A LA ELSTER

Kai NIELSEN

RÉSUMÉ : L'article se propose de distinguer ce qui est vivant et ce qui est mort chez Marx et dans le marxisme, par un examen des distinctions proposées par Jon Elster. Si les critiques du matérialisme historique par ce dernier sont le plus souvent solides, l'auteur entend néanmoins mettre en évidence les aspects du marxisme qui demeurent valables après l'effondrement du fondamentalisme marxiste.

SUMMARY : An effort is made to sort out what is alive and what is dead in Marx and Marxism. This is done by way of critically examining Jon Elster's sorting. Elster, a major analytical Marxist, has provided what is arguably the most thorough and sophisticated sorting of Marx and Marxism we have to date. That notwithstanding, I contend that there are rational reconstructions of historical materialism and functional explanation that withstand Elster's critique but I further contend that, even if Elster's critique on both accounts is sound, along with his critique of such familiar notions as the labour theory of value, the falling rate of profit and methodological holism, that what Elster finds to be wheat and not chaff in Marx and Marxism is sufficient to keep socialism on the political agenda. There remain important viable elements of a Marxian theory of society after the collapse of Marxist Fundamentalism.

Jon Elster seeks to determine, as many others have before him, what is alive and what is dead in Marx.¹ My concern here is to explicate and critically examine his sorting out of Marx and the prospects for Marxism and to say something about where this leads us.

1. Jon ELSTER, *Making Sense of Marx* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985). For a briefer account, see Jon ELSTER, *An Introduction to Karl Marx* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986). For another attempt at so sorting out Marxism, see Richard NORMAN, "What is Living and what is Dead in Marxism?" in Robert WARE and Kai NIELSEN, eds., *Analyzing Marxism* (Calgary, AB: University of Calgary Press, 1989), 59-80. All references to *Making Sense of Marx* are given in the text. Other references are made in the standard way.

I

Elster remarks that the “revolutionary transition from capitalism to communism was the core of Marx’s life and work.” (513) His interest in the labour theory of value, in historical materialism, in class structure and in precapitalist societies was all instrumental to that. In making his assessment of Marx the “whence, whether and how of that transition” is the center of Elster’s concern. Marx, Elster claims, and I agree, believed “capitalism to be an inhumane, unjust, wasteful system — and in all these respects at the opposite pole of the communist society that he believed to be imminent and inevitable.” (513) How close was Marx to the mark about this? Most people, given “the death of communism,” would think he was very far from the mark indeed. But before we rush to judgment, let us first see what Marx was claiming here and something of its rationale.

Let us in doing so first consider Marx’s analysis and critique of capitalism. Elster believes that it contains powerful insights and diagnoses of capitalism but he also thinks that Marx’s principal value here lies in his work as an economic and social *historian* and not as a *systematic economic theorist*. Elster believes that Marx made a very great contribution to socioeconomic history and critique, particularly in Volume I of *Capital*. There his portrait of the capitalist factory and of entrepreneurs was probing and multifaceted. He insightfully studied the “interplay of property relations, power, technology and rational decision making.” (514) He also analyzed how the capitalist system with its system of firms works and how within that system the productive forces grow. Marx accurately analyzes, Elster adds, how these economic developments were “shaping and being shaped by class, the class struggle, and its continuation into politics by other means.” (514) He also showed in his analysis of ideology how “the beliefs entertained by the economic agents about the workings of the economic system also stand in a double causal relation to that system — being both endogenous products of it and a factor in its reproduction.” (514)

Elster believes that Marx’s insightful description, analysis and critique was marred by bad theoretical underpinnings, namely the labour theory of value, teleological conceptions inherited from Hegel, methodological collectivism and the reliance on functional explanation. (514) *Capital*, at times, appears mysteriously with a will of its own and the factory laws appear, as if by magic, to meet the needs of capital. “The invisible hand upholding capital is one of the two main forms of teleology in Marx, the other being the necessity of the process that will ultimately destroy it.” (514) Marx indeed wants to be scientific but in these matters at least he fails for such teleological conceptions are in reality deeply metaphysical. Indeed they are, Elster claims, a carryover from a religious age. They are hardly something that goes with a scientific worldview. Or so Elster sees it.²

2. Elster’s view is, I think, fundamentally mistaken here. Marx indeed inherited a Hegelian vocabulary but, as I think Andrew Levine convincingly argues, Marx actually breaks free of Hegel’s or any teleological reading of history. History has no meaning or end in Marx’s account but epochal change predictably will go in a certain direction and this can be, Marx claimed as part of a theory of historical trends, empirically ascertained. Historical materialism may be false, but it is not, as Elster takes it to be, a bit of teleological metaphysical nonsense. For Elster’s articulation of this see his *Making Sense of Marx*, 107-18. See Andrew

However, in looking at Marx's charges against capitalism these problems, plus whatever difficulties there may be in the labour theory of value, can, Elster believes, be safely set aside. Elster remarks that

Marx's charges against capitalism can be summarized on three counts. First, it is *inhuman*, by leading to the alienation of men from their species-powers. By these powers Marx meant the creative activities that men are uniquely able to engage in, by virtue of their intelligence, language and tool-making ability. Marx believed that the deployment of these powers was the ultimate goal and the ultimate good both for mankind and for individual men. His arguments for this view have partly a utilitarian flavour: the development and use of one's abilities is the most deeply satisfactory activity one can engage in. Partly they are of an Aristotelian kind: men should realize their essence or inherent purpose, which is to be creative. Capitalism, on the one hand, is an immense step forward for mankind, permitting, as it does, an unprecedented expansion of the species-powers. On the other hand, it has disastrous effects for the all-sided development of the powers of the individual human beings. This is alienation: the frustration of the most profound need of men, the need to use one's talents and abilities. It is unclear whether Marx also believed it to be the most deeply felt need of men. Sometimes alienation means not only lack of self-realization, but lack of consciousness of this lack. At other times it means a subjectively experienced state of frustration. It is not simply frustration at being unable to do what one wants to do. It is, more centrally, frustration of wants that could feasibly be realized in the actual state of society. Also, it is a collective phenomenon. In earlier societies men have also been frustrated individually, in the sense that each of them may have had wants that could feasibly have been realized at the expense of others. Capitalist alienation is the fact that need satisfaction on a large scale is possible, yet is not carried out. To the extent that this gap is perceived by the members of society — for which they must know both their need and the objective possibility of fulfilling it — it is an immense lever for action. (515-16)

Is not Marx right here in claiming that by now the productive forces are sufficiently developed such that, with a change to a socialist system, far greater need satisfaction is possible than is possible under capitalism and that that gives us a very good reason for condemning capitalism? Elster also takes it, as does G.A. Cohen and Rodney Peffer, that Marx condemned capitalism for being an unjust socio-economic system.³ Elster puts what he takes to be Marx's critique as follows and proceeds to raise some questions about it:

Next, Marx believed capitalism to be a profoundly *unjust* system. This is a controversial interpretation, since in the Marxist tradition justice has been a bourgeois category, to be

LEVINE, "Review of Elster, Making Sense of Marx", *Journal of Philosophy* 83, n° 2 (1986), 721-28. See also Kai NIELSEN, "Afterword: Remarks on the Roots of Progress" in Robert WARE and Kai NIELSEN, eds., *Analyzing Marxism*, 523-34. For a rational reconstruction of Marx's historical materialism which treats it as a scientific non-teleological theory of epochal social change free of (to be pleonastic) metaphysical extravagance, see G.A. COHEN, *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defense* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978); G.A. COHEN, *History, Labour and Freedom* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1988); Kai NIELSEN, "On Taking Historical Materialism Seriously," *Dialogue* 22, n° 2 (1983), and Debra SATZ, "Marxism, Materialism and Historical Progress" in WARE and NIELSEN, eds., *Analyzing Marxism*, 393-424.

3. G.A. COHEN, *History, Labour and Freedom*, 286-304; R.G. PEPPER, *Marxism, Morality and Social Justice* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990). I have similarly argued in my *Marxism and the Moral Point of View* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1989).

debunked rather than employed. Yet I believe that Marx's theory of exploitation, and notably the frequent characterization of profit as theft, only makes sense if we impute to him a theory of distributive justice. The central principle is that each should receive proportionally to his contribution, assuming his ability to contribute. Unfortunately his labour theory of exploitation is ill-defined, for a reason that also invalidates the labour theory of value. When labour is heterogeneous, the contributions cannot be measured on a common scale. Moreover, if one attempts to reformulate the principle in terms of hours of labour time, irrespective of the nature of the labour, one comes up against the problem that different forms of work have different degrees of disutility and hence ought to be rewarded accordingly. And if, as with the labour theory of value, one disregards these problems of aggregating and comparing different forms of labour, it can still be shown that the contribution principle is not an ethically attractive one. It is possible to generate counter-intuitive situations in which the poor exploit the rich, if the former prefer leisure so much that they do not need even what little capital they have. This shows that in the standard cases where exploitation is morally condemnable, it is so by virtue of something else than the contribution principle. Also one can imagine cases in which exploitation is due to different endowments rather than to different supply curves of labour, but yet not obviously morally wrong. The endowment structure could have resulted from different time preferences. Some people could save and accumulate more capital than they could work themselves. If they offer others, who have preferred immediate consumption, to work for them and earn more than they would otherwise have done, how could anyone object? Freely undertaken and mutually beneficial arrangements that arise in a situation with initially equal endowments cannot be condemned on grounds of the contribution principle.

I do not think this objection is very relevant in present-day capitalism, since one would have to be in bad faith to argue that the differences in endowments are largely due to voluntary choices to save rather than to consume. Nor does it constitute a telling objection to Marx's views. He would certainly have dismissed it, on the grounds that in a society that had overcome alienation no one would freely undertake to work for others, since this would undermine the fundamental value of self-realization. The objection gains full force, however, against any proposal to create a feasible, non-Utopian communist society. Consider the following passage from a novel by Wassily Grossman, quoted by Alec Nove in *The Economics of Feasible Socialism* :

"I wanted since childhood to open a shop, so that any folk could come in and buy. Along with it would have to be a snack-bar, so that the customers could have a bit of roast meat, if they like, or a drink. I would serve them cheap, too. I'd let them have real village food. Baked potato ! Bacon-fat with garlic ! Sauerkraut ! I'd give them bone-marrow as a starter... A measure of vodka, a marrow-bone, and black bread of course, and salt. Leather chairs, so that lice don't breed. The customer could sit and rest and be served. If I were to say all this out loud, I'd have been sent straight to Siberia. And yet, say I, what harm would I have done to people ?"

What harm indeed ? and who would have been harmed if he had hired a few waiters and a cook, who would rather work for a wage in a restaurant than in a workers' cooperative ? Would the Socialist Police have to step in and forbid such contracting to force the workers to be free ? (516-17)

No harm obtains here when this is just taken by itself and is suitably constrained, but, as G.A. Cohen remarks in discussing Nozick's Wilt Chamberlain case, socialists, once they have achieved or are on the road to achieving an egalitarian, classless society,

must guard against situations that could lead to an inegalitarian society with the reemergence of classes and the domination and inequalities of power that involves.⁴ We should, of course, avoid being paranoid over such matters but Elster, and Alec Nove as well, are, to put it mildly, a bit too blasé about the chain of causes that may be set in effect here. Cohen is more on the mark here.⁵

To return to Marx's grounds for criticizing capitalism, the third such ground on Elster's reading of Marx (a reading which is unproblematic as an interpretation of Marx) is that Marx criticizes "capitalism because it was inherently, and needlessly, irrational and wasteful." (517) On what basis did he make these charges? First, he thought market mechanisms were a very inefficient way of coordinating economic decisions. Capitalism is a crisis ridden system with booms and busts where during crises "capital goods lay idle, workers go without jobs and goods are produced that meet no effective demand." (517) Moreover, technical changes will only be utilized where it is profitable. Where, for example, labour saving devices are not profitable, they will not be used though they could be of considerable value to the workers. Elster agrees that these are possible sources of inefficiency but goes on to remark that before we use these inefficiencies to reject capitalism we must have good reason to believe that socialism or some other alternative to capitalism can be less inefficient. "It needs," as he puts it, "to be shown that another system is possible that lacks these defects and yet has all the other advantages of capitalism, notably the relentless incentive to search for new techniques" and its equally relentless and related drive to develop the productive forces. (518) If there is no viable alternative system in the offing that would develop the productive forces we must, Elster has it, if we are rational, just put up with capitalism, its evident ills to the contrary notwithstanding, until we have in sight a well articulated and soundly conceived conception of an alternate system that could be plausible exemplified in circumstances which are empirically feasible. Marx, however, thought another system — namely a socialist organization of society — was in the offing that would be superior along all these dimensions: superior with respect to the search for new techniques, in the criteria for selecting them and in the efficiency with which they are used. (518)

Is Marx right here? Moreover, and distinctly, even if socialism is not quite as efficient as capitalism, given that it, unlike capitalism, is, if it is a genuinely democratic system, not an inhumane system, ought we not, if we believe that, to prefer it at least in situations where through a considerable development of the productive forces, extensive wealth has been securely attained?⁶ Of course, if socialism is, and must continue to be, grossly inefficient that is a different matter. But if it is just somewhat less efficient, particularly in a circumstance where the productive output and capacity of the society is already high, should we not accept that somewhat lesser efficiency

4. G.A. COHEN, "Robert Nozick and Wilt Chamberlain: How Patterns Preserve Liberty" in John ARTHUR and William SHAW, eds., *Justice and Economic Distribution*, 2nd Edition (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1991), 221-27. See also COHEN, *History, Labour and Freedom*, 255-85.

5. *Ibid.*

6. See my *Marxism and the Moral Point of View*.

for a society freer of alienation with more autonomy and more equality ?⁷ But to achieve this need should we do completely without markets ?⁸

Marx was tough-minded about misery and the lack of need satisfaction under capitalism. He realized that that had been the order of the day throughout history and that without developed productive forces it was under most conditions inescapable. Its continued existence becomes scandalous, as Marxians believe it is now, and Marx believed it was during his time, "only when the objective possibility emerges of a society in which the full and free use of one's powers is within the reach of all." (518) As Elster puts it, "Marx's standard of comparison was counterfactual, not actual. He compared the fate of workers in actually existing capitalism with what it would be under more rationally organized relations of production." (510) Elster puts the point powerfully.

Alienation and "the contradiction between the productive forces and the relations of production" are defined as gaps between what is actual and what is possible. Alienation, broadly speaking, is predicated on the basis of a possible better *use* of the productive forces, and the contradiction on the basis of a possible faster development. Actually, the two phenomena are closely related. By suppressing alienation, free rein will be given to the creative abilities of the members of society. Some of them will spontaneously choose scientific and technical work as vehicles for self-realization, with unprecedented productivity growth as the outcome. But, to repeat, this is only possible on the technical basis created by capitalism itself. It is the ladder that humankind kicks out from under itself when it is no longer needed. (518-19)

II

Self-realization through creative work is, Elster claims, "the essence of Marx's communism." (521) Marx, as Elster put it, knew that this was the good life for human beings. (521)⁹ His passionate desire and the underlying object of his striving was to make this life, which he himself lived and exemplified, a possibility for everyone. He "was appalled by the miserable, passive, negative existence led by mid-nineteenth century workers. At work they were mere appendages of the machines they operated ; at home they were too exhausted to lead any sort of active life." (521) This, he clearly saw, is not a life for human beings. And he raged against its existence, using all his talents to try to bring it to an end.

7. *Ibid.* and my *Equality and Liberty: A Defense of Radical Egalitarianism* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Allenheld, 1985).

8. Alec NOVE, *The Economics of Feasible Socialism* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1983); David SCHWEICKART, *Capitalism or Worker Control?* (New York: Praeger, 1980); Ernest MANDEL, "In Defense of Socialist Planning," *New Left Review* 159 (Sep/Oct 1986), 5-36; Alec NOVE, "Markets and Socialism," *New Left Review* 161 (Jan/Feb 1987), 98-104; Ernest MANDEL, "The Myth of Market Socialism," *New Left Review* 169 (1988), 108-20; and Jon ELSTER, "The Market and the Forum: Three Variables of Political Theory" in Philip PETIT, ed., *Contemporary Political Theory* 193-215.

9. Jon ELSTER, "Self-Realization in Work and Politics: The Marxist Conception of the Good Life" in Jon ELSTER and Karl Ove MOENE, eds., *Alternatives to Capitalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 127-58.

What is a creative, active life of self-realization? Let us come at this indirectly. To bring it about, whatever exactly it is, Marx argued, it was necessary to destroy the social order that stood in the way of this being a possibility for more than an elite few and to fight to bring into existence a world — namely communism — in which this would be possible for everyone. It is this very element of Marx's thought that Elster believes to be the most valuable and the most enduring. (521) Yet Marx's vision here, Elster has it, needs a certain kind of correction: a friendly amendment so to say. What Elster has in mind here can be seen from the following observations. And this requires a more careful specification of what the creative, active life of self-realization comes to. Marx tended to think of creativity as almost exclusively an intellectual creativity. We need, in good pragmatist fashion, though hardly out of step with Marx's underlying intentions, to broaden this. There is a good bit of creative work that is the work of the hand as well as the head. To be a superb cook or a very good carpenter are also achievements that make for self-realization. We need to supplement Marx's creations of the mind with William Morris's creations of the hand.¹⁰ But this still is in the spirit of Marx and would surely be a view to which Marx would be sympathetic.

As sympathetic as Elster is to this self-realizationist or perfectionist view of Marx's (assuming that is Marx's view), Elster is also concerned skeptically and critically to probe it. He asks the following set of questions and, with them in the forefront of our attention, raises objections to Marx's account here, not with the intention of demolishing the ideal, but "to provoke needed reflections on the forms in which and the limits within which it can be carried out." (522) Elster asks

1. Are there inherent limits on the extent to which the ideal of self-realization can be satisfied? (522)
2. Could the ideal come into conflict with other values to which Marx also subscribed? (522)
3. Does it come into conflict "with unalterable facts about human nature and societies"? (522) Is its failure (putative failure) here why Marx's vision is so distant from actually existing socialisms?

Reflecting back on a series of problems that emerge here, Elster remarks that "to evaluate these difficulties we need to distinguish what is irredeemingly utopian in Marx's thought from what is not, or at least is not known to be," so irredeemingly utopian. (526) What Elster takes to be the most unrealistic elements are as follows and they are, understandably enough, elements of Marx's thought that Elster thinks we ought to set aside.

10. William MORRIS, *News from Nowhere* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978) and his *Political Writings* edited by A.L. Morton (London: Lawrence Wishart, 1979). See also E.P. THOMPSON, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* (London: Merlin, 1977).

1. That under communism there will be full material abundance such that “when everyone had taken what they wanted something would be left over of each and every good.” (526)¹¹
2. All individuals, given the full flourishing of communism, will have the same inborn capacities (both quantitatively and qualitatively). (526)

We will never get anything close to what is claimed in 1 and 2, Elster claims, and it is dangerous folly to think we might. But what Elster entirely fails to see is that these are hyperboles gesturing in the right direction. Why take Marx to be an idiot? Here, as elsewhere, in examining a person’s views a principle of charity is a good methodological rule if we want to understand the thinker in question.

Elster now articulates ideas which he regards as less utopian “but still almost certainly false.” (526)

1. People will, under communism, develop a superior form of altruism in which they would be willing to sacrifice not only their material welfare but their personal development to “society.” (526) [I am not so sure that is Marx’s or a Marxian idea. But I let that pass here.]¹²
2. Individuals can *fully* develop and use all their potential abilities so as not to become identified or obsessed with any one of them. (526) [I am not sure that is *possible* and even, if so, desirable. See G. A. Cohen here.]¹³
3. In communism social decision-making will occur without conflict by unanimous approval or election. (526)
4. We will be able, in communism, to achieve full coordination of economic activities by means of a central-master plan. (526)¹⁴

Elster remarks that he thinks that all these claims go so much against both the best theoretical knowledge we have available and actual experience that it would be foolhardy to set in motion or try to set in motion a process of social change and attempted social construction on the assumption that they are true. Human beings are malleable but not that malleable. (526) I have suggested above, parenthetically, that it is not so obvious that Marx held 1 and 2 above but the central thing here is that Elster is plainly justified in believing all four of these beliefs to be false and that it is important not to lose sight of the fact that they are false.

11. *Contra* Elster, it seems to me we should keep it as a heuristic, as something to be approximated, though not something we can actually expect to achieve. But it gives us a picture of what an ideally good and just life and world would be. It gives us a sense of what we should orient ourselves toward.

12. For some reasons for being skeptical about this see Andrew Collier on collectivism versus individualism in Marx. Andrew COLLIER, “Scientific Socialism and the Question of Socialist Values” in J. MEPHAM and D.H. RUBEN, eds., *Issues in Marxist Philosophy* 4 (Brighton, England: Harvester Press, 1981), 3-41.

13. For some reasons for not thinking it desirable and for why it is readily excisable from a conception of Marxism see G.A. COHEN, *History, Labour and Freedom*, 132-54.

14. For reasons for believing that to be unrealistic see Alec NOVE, *The Economics of Feasible Socialism*. See also ELSTER, *Making Sense of Marx*, 449-58.

Elster remarks that there are other claims of Marx's which seem utopian, given our present circumstances, but need not be so in improved circumstances. And they are, he asserts, claims that are well worth defending.

1. Marx believes that incentive problems are not nearly as strong as most defenders of capitalism believe. There is much work that involves the use of our capacities and the use of these capacities is inherently enjoyable. Given security and a reasonable "salary" people will work without incentives. (527)
2. The demand for positional goods and status would be less given security and a situation in which there are no losers.
3. Alternative technologies permitting decentralized small-scale production processes would be less alienating and could be, while keeping up the productive capacity of the society, more systematically developed.

Beyond that, Elster defends, at least as a heuristic, but also something which is plausible, and as well as plausibly Marx's view, a strongly egalitarian conception of how society should be ordered and how human relations could and should be developed. What we should support is "the general ideal of equal self-realization, at least if the equality is that of material prerequisites for self-realization rather than of the extent to which it actually is assured." (527) This self-realization is facilitated by autonomy in the workplace which we would have in workers' cooperatives and the like. But these are typically small scale operations. What of large scale industry: steelworkers, electrical workers, the post office, the airlines and the railroads? How could they not be centrally planned and, if centrally planned, how could we avoid in their very operation subordination? It need not be as extensive as it is now or take such dehumanizing forms but it seems utterly unrealistic to think we could avoid all subordination. Would we not need managers and the managed and, with that, hierarchically ordered work relations? In some of these industries at least some planners must be central planners, planning from commanding heights. Alec Nove, one of the most probing critics of the Soviet model of central planning for the whole economy, stresses that in certain areas central planning is essential and efficient but he also points out that it does lead unavoidably to hierarchical work relations.¹⁵ So we cannot, in the blanket way that Elster does, assert that central planning is out. (527) But Elster is right nonetheless in showing that central planning poses a problem about the autonomy and equality of workers. What sort of tradeoffs should be made here? Nove, for example, thinks they will be considerable. But what we cannot expect, in the way that Marx expected, is a state of affairs among cooperative producers in communism where things will be spontaneously coordinated "much as the cells in a body work together for the common good, each of them reflecting the whole from its point of view." (527) Elster comments "No such society will ever exist; to believe it will is to court disaster." (527) Is he not right about that? But, if he is, what, if anything, does this imply for ideals of equality? Elster defends both egalitarianism and an egalitarian Marx but how, if he is right here about work, is egalitarianism possible? I do not deny that it is and I

15. Alec NOVE, *The Ethics of Feasible Socialism* and his "The Role of Central Planning under Capitalism and Market Socialism" in Jon ELSTER and Karl Ove MOENE, eds., *Alternatives to Capitalism*, 98-112.

have argued for a form of egalitarianism.¹⁶ But the at least apparent need for some forms of subordination in the work process in complex societies indeed poses a problem for an autonomy respecting egalitarianism that should to be squarely faced.¹⁷

III

Elster next turns to talk of revolution and its prospects. He remarks first off:

The advent of communism requires two conditions. First, the productive forces must be developed to a level at which communism is viable, in the sense that it will immediately or ultimately overtake capitalism. Secondly, the workers (and possibly their allies) must take political power and set up communist relations of production. The second condition in turn subdivides into two. The workers must have an opportunity to take the power, that is the ruling class must not be able to repress them by force. Also, they must be motivated to the bid for power. The last, finally, can be further split into two conditions. The workers must be frustrated or unhappy with their life under capitalism; and they must believe that communism is a viable, superior alternative. (528)

Elster contends that Marx never produced an account of how all these conditions can come together in the course of capitalist development. Elster does, however, try to reconstruct an argument from Marx's various remarks. It is clear that Marx believed that the productive forces would continue to develop and that at some stage of their development they "would create the conditions under which further growth of the productive forces is best promoted by communist relations of production." (528) It is a problem, though by no means an insuperable problem, to say what those conditions are, but it is not to this question that Elster turns his attention in the last chapter of his *Making Sense of Marx* where he tries most decisively to sort out what is dead and alive in Marx and Marxist theory and practice. He is concerned there instead with the possibilities of making and sustaining a revolution.

He notes that there is the problem of premature revolution: the mistake of bidding for power before the productive forces are sufficiently developed. However, let us suppose the objective conditions obtain in which a communist revolution is viable: a revolution first setting up socialism as a transition stage to communism. Suppose the falling rate of profit has dropped to such a point that there are severe financial difficulties, bringing labour unrest and a political-economic climate in which a not inconsiderable number of the ruling class are getting skeptical about whether the capitalist system is still worth defending. Elster remarks that conditions such as these may be *necessary* conditions but they are far from *sufficient* for revolution. There will in these circumstances be no large scale desertions from the ruling class simply because the system is working badly and a better alternative — speaking across the society — has become available. Even with their skepticism and jitters, something that is (to put it mildly) far from being a reality now, but was not always so distant from reality

16. NIELSEN, *Equality and Liberty* and my "Justice, Autonomy and Laissez-Faire," *Windsor Yearbook of Access to Justice* 10 (1990), 400-21.

17. *Ibid.*

and with their realization that jitters-producing situations may return, the capitalists and their allies still continue, jitters or no jitters, to have their class interests. Even if the class arrangements are not what they used to be they will still tend to stick with them, tattered though they be, rather than lose them. Moreover, there is the central question — the really crucial question here — of the revolutionary motivation of the working class itself. It is not sufficient to bring them into the streets to start the revolution to recognize that better arrangements for human living are now possible and that their lives are not what they could be with the move to socialism. What would be *sufficient*?

Elster goes at this indirectly by considering three charges against capitalism along with their parallel communist alternatives. Alienation (to state the first one) is pervasive in capitalist societies. But what about alienation as a *motivation* for revolution? If it is *subjective* alienation — the *sense* of a lack of meaning in their lives — it is anything but clear, with the level of consumption made possible in advanced capitalist societies and with the pervasiveness of the consciousness industry, that workers in such societies very extensively, pervasively and non-intermittently have this sense of a lack of meaning or have it strongly enough to chance their arm with a revolution. Here the cultural analyses of the Frankfurt School are not unuseful. Consider now *objective* alienation, namely the lack of a sense of meaning in one's life. Suppose workers have that to a high degree. Still, Elster argues, there is no good reason to think that this will turn them into revolutionaries. He puts the matter thus: "Communism in Marx's vision represents a way of life totally different from capitalism. It is not a question of higher consumption levels, but a shift away from (passive) consumption altogether. To appreciate the joys of active creation one must already have experienced them, which is something few have had a chance to do in capitalism. To feel the attraction of communism one must be there already." (529) This response of Elster's seems to be weak. It is, in a pejorative sense, too philosophical, too abstracted from an empirical consideration of the deprivation of needs in capitalism as something that would be a key source of objective alienation and, if persuasively articulated, say, by Marxian theoreticians, it could lead to a sense that there could be another way for humans to live together that would be better.¹⁸ There is in short a lack of meaning there caused by need deprivation and people can come to see why. My worry is over whether their frustration is strong enough to motivate workers to make a revolution given all the risks involved.¹⁹

Elster next considers the *motivational* force of a *sense* of justice and injustice. He considers this quite apart from the question of whether we have an adequate theory of justice or can have. Does a deep and persistent sense that a state is unjust provide the knell for its doom? Elster remarks "In my view, the political, social and economic history of the last few centuries makes good sense when understood in this perspective. This history has been a somewhat uneven, but still basically continuous process of

18. See here the essays in Chapter 4 of Richard EDWARDS, Michael REICH and Thomas WEISSKOPF, eds., *The Capitalist System*, 3rd Edition (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1986), 118-65.

19. Kai NIELSEN, "Marxism, Ideology and Moral Philosophy," *Social Theory and Practice* 6, n° 1 (Spring 1980).

increased democracy, pointing towards, but not reaching, communism as understood by Marx. The driving force has been the almost irresistible legitimacy of the notion of self-government. Once formulated and advocated, it acquires a compelling force that makes all attempts to resist it appear as retrograde and hopeless, even in the eyes of resisters. Tactics and strategy then concern the timing and form of the changes not their ultimate necessity.” (529)²⁰ This seems to me right. Is it?

Some will say, as Elster points out himself, that such reasoning gives excessive importance to normative conceptions and pays insufficient attention to immediate interests in the shaping of motivations. » (530) The sense of injustice just by itself is not likely, the objection continues, to be strong enough to create revolutionary motivation. In addition we have to believe that the chances for a successful revolution are reasonably good and that the injustices cannot be rectified by reforms. Even then, when this is firmly believed by workers, particularly in situations where their condition is not desperate, just plain fear is a very powerful factor in keeping workers from taking a revolutionary turn. For revolutionary activity to take place the chances must be reasonably good and the evils very great and probably personally pressing as well. However, in less stringent conditions motivations generated by a sense of injustice can only generate more gradual changes. These changes might in turn put the proletariat at some later date in a position to make revolution. But it might also lead instead to their co-optation and integration into capitalist society. The reforms might come to be felt to be sufficient: to be a good enough approximation to justice. Things are bad and could be better but even so they have more to lose than their chains so, they understandably reason, the risks are too great to chance their arm with revolution. Still, there might be persistent pressure for change if only of a reformist sort fueled by a very real awareness of the injustices of capitalism.

I do not think in discussing these matters that Elster gives sufficient attention to the power of *ideology*: to the ability of the consciousness industry to keep the belief alive that, unfortunate as it is in many respects, a reformed capitalist order is the best thing we can reasonably hope for given human nature and the real world situation. The spectacular failures of the once actually existing socialisms, of course, help out. Here he is not as perceptive as the Frankfurt School. Things to be examined here in thinking about the sustaining power of that ideology are (1) the nature of actually existing socialisms now collapsing or collapsed; (2) the claims widely made in capitalist society that even in theory socialism cannot be both democratic and acceptably efficient; and (3) problems of moral relativism or nihilism: postmodernist disenchantment. Justice, such postmodernists believe, is an essentially contested concept. Moreover, in such context we also need to think about free-rider problems. There might be quite objective public bads and still it would not be irrational to be a free-rider.

Finally, Elster considers capitalism's *inefficiency* as a motive to bring it to an end. (530) There are tricky arguments here about whether in the contemporary world the

20. Jürgen HABERMAS, *Legitimation Crises*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1975); Claus OFFE, *Disorganized Capitalism* (Cambridge, MA MIT Press, 1985); and Kai NIELSEN, "Legitimation in Complex Societies: Some Habermasian Themes," *Annals of Scholarship* 7, n° 1 (1990), 51-89.

best feasible forms of socialism are more efficient than the best feasible forms of capitalism.²¹ There is surely reason to be skeptical here on the socialist side. Moreover, where we are, as we actually are, in capitalist states that are not on the edge of breakdown and are functioning, albeit unjustly, with some reasonable efficiency, as most Western societies are now, our comparisons are likely to be counterfactual and that poses problems. We are not comparing realities with realities or models with models but realities with models.²² That is not exactly kosher. Moreover, that something like this is happening is easily seen and, this being so, it is not likely to effectively motivate revolution.

We can — to argue this a bit — conceive of a situation where things could be organized better than they are now which we then compare with our actual situation which in developed capitalist societies many people would dub not great but still grudgingly acceptable. There is dissatisfaction but it is not so great that it will motivate revolution particularly when all people have to compare it with is a model. The actually existing socialisms, either in memory or in insecure living reality, are hardly attractive. So all that is available is a model. Moreover, it is not their fragility that makes them unattractive but what they are or were when they seemed like forever. And it also remains the case that for a not insignificant number of them our rich capitalist societies yield for many people (including workers) in their very imperfect actuality something, in varying degrees, approximating a decent living. Workers have, unlike the proletarians of the *Communist Manifesto*, some stake in the society. Here people, and Elster thinks reasonably, will be rather risk averse.

In the choice between a satisfactory actual situation and the prospect of a hypothetically superior alternative, almost everybody will take the former, for two reasons. First, the situation will always be clouded in some uncertainty. The communist theoreticians may tell the workers that communism will be statically and dynamically more efficient than capitalism, but in the absence of demonstrated superiority the arguments will be tenuous and meet with scepticism. Secondly, even assuming that such arguments are accepted, the revolution involves transition costs that may make the workers shy away from it. It does not seem justified to ask them to sacrifice themselves and their children for the sake of their grandchildren, when they could all live a reasonably good life under capitalist conditions. Hence the inefficiency of capitalism will provide motivating power only when accompanied by absolute hardship and misery, so that the workers have nothing to lose but their chains. If the cause of this misery also has the effect of destroying the morale of the ruling class, it will provide the opportunity as well as the motivation for revolution. The cause might well not have that second effect, in which case an attempted revolution will prove unsuccessful. Also, even if it has that effect and the revolution succeeds, the objective conditions for communism might not be present. Indeed, there are good reasons for thinking that they will not be present, since the development of the productive forces to the requisite level will rarely go together with hardships at the requisite level. (530-31)

21. Allen BUCHANAN, *Ethics, Efficiency and the Market* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Allenheld, 1985); David SCHWEIKART, *Capitalism or Worker Control?*; and John ROEMER, "Market Socialism: A Blueprint," *Dissent* (Fall 1991), 562-69 and his "Can there be Socialism after Communism?" (unpublished manuscript).
22. This is well discussed by Andrew LEVINE in his *Arguing for Socialism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984) and in his "On Arguing for Socialism — Theoretical Considerations," *Socialism and Democracy* 2 (Spring/Summer 1986), 19-27.

The actually existing socialisms in the world together with the formerly existing socialisms engender, and not without reason, skepticism about the efficiency of socialism and people are understandably wary of going for socialism when all we have to go on is a model even if it is a model defended by careful explication and arguments.²³ But even more importantly Elster's final remarks in the above quotation have some considerable force. Where, on the one hand, the conditions of misery, oppression, degradation and the like are strong enough to motivate revolution (as it does in South and Central America and Africa) the productive forces are not sufficiently developed to make a revolution anything other than premature; where, on the other hand, the production forces are sufficiently developed for socialism to become a viable possibility the proletariat has already been bought off as far as revolutionary activity is concerned: their conditions of life are just sufficiently tolerable to make them unwilling to chance their arm for revolution. This is a crucial and disheartening dilemma for present day revolutionaries.

Elster puts the essential matter forcefully as follows:

Two specters haunt the communist revolution. One is the danger of premature revolution, in a combination of advanced revolutionary ideas and miserable conditions in a country not yet ripe for communism. The other is the risk of preempted revolutions, of reforms introduced from above to defuse a dangerous situation. The last century has seen many examples of what appear to be premature revolutions, although it could be that this judgment is itself premature. It is also likely that in the absence of the many reforms designed to prevent revolution, some revolutions would have occurred -- prematurely or not. There has not been a single unambiguous instance of the kind of revolution that Marx advocated. True, it is not impossible that some existing communist countries at some later date will overtake capitalism, and hence retroactively justify the revolution, but there are no rational grounds for believing that this will happen. In one sense, therefore -- the sense that to him was the most important -- Marx's life and work were in vain. (531)

IV

Now consider Elster's final remarks on how and in what ways it is or is not possible and desirable in our time to be a Marxist.

It is not possible today, morally or intellectually, to be a Marxist in the traditional sense. This would be someone who accepted all or most of the views that Marx held to be true and important -- scientific socialism, the labour theory of value or the theory of falling rate of profit, together with other and more defensible views. But, speaking now for myself only, I believe it is still possible to be a Marxist in a rather different 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. The critique of exploitation and alienation remains central. A better society would be one that allowed all

23. Note references in the preceding note.

human beings to do what only human beings can do — to create, to invent, to imagine other worlds. (531)²⁴

After what he believes to be a devastation wrought by him on many traditional, and not infrequently central, Marxist beliefs, Elster strikes a selectively upbeat note in the above quotation. Yet it is a feeling hard to sustain if we take (as we should) both the world and Elster seriously. Since *Making Sense of Marx* was first published (1985), the prospects for socialist revolution, even then remote, have grown even more remote and many would judge not just remote but plainly undesirable as well. Capitalism is everywhere triumphant or at least nearly so and that in the face of the continuing grave ills (including economic irrationalities) in capitalist societies. In the 1960s there was extensive anti-capitalist critique at least in intellectual circles; the critique has largely subsided but the ills that generated the critique in the first place remain and indeed in some respects are even exacerbated. But there is little talk of challenging capitalism now.²⁵ The prospects for socialism, to say nothing of communism, seem very bleak indeed.

However, I think it is a mistake to think that Elster has been coopted and that in this, from a socialist point of view, disheartening climate he has abandoned the Left and become what used to be called a capitalist roader. He has indeed been hard on Marxist Fundamentalism, and rightly so. Moreover, and not unreasonably, he has questioned some central Marxist claims and in doing so he has, I believe, too quickly rejected some of them, most notably historical materialism (tying it unnecessarily to a teleological conception of the world and of history) and the use of functional explanations which are also causal explanations. I think Andrew Levine, G.A. Cohen and Allen Wood have shown how we can interpret, with perhaps a bit of rational reconstruction, Marx so as to avoid Elster's criticisms of these fundamental Marxist conceptions.²⁶ But be that as it may, and even if Elster's critique is well taken here, what is left of Marx, on Elster's view, still leaves us with grounds for a Left critique of both capitalism and liberalism without throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

Marx's understanding of the class structured nature of capitalist society and of the destructive domination of social life by the capitalist class remains intact on Elster's reading of what is alive in Marx as well as a conception of a socialist alternative as a feasible possibility for which it is worth struggling. It is not only that on Elster's

24. This frequently commented on passage should be compared with the final passages of his critical notice of Leszek Kolakowski's volumes on Marxism. ELSTER, "Clearing the Decks," *Ethics* 9, n° 4 (July 1981).

25. It is interesting, and indeed significantly so, how culturally speaking this has been put on the back burner. The political transformation of such a widely read and widely applauded cultural journal as the *New York Review of Books* is striking and instructive. During the first years of its existence, when it regularly published Noam Chomsky and Andrew Kopkind, it had a radical Left liberal orientation. Now it is almost exclusively a voice, subtle and interesting as it is, for mainline establishment liberals. Chomsky and Kopkind now (and indeed for some considerable time) never appear in its pages. It remains, nevertheless, an important cultural journal but it does monitor and follow the *Zeitgeist*.

26. Andrew LEVINE, "Review of Making Sense of Marx," *Journal of Philosophy* LXXXIII, n° 12 (Dec 1986), 721-28. G.A. COHEN: "Functional Explanation: Reply to Elster," *Political Studies* 28, n° 1 (1980), "Functional Explanation, Consequence Explanation and Marxism," *Inquiry* 25, n° 1 (1982), *History, Labour and Freedom*, 3-179. Allen WOOD, "Historical Materialism and Functional Explanation," *Inquiry* 29, n° 1 (March 1986), 1128.

understanding capitalism is exploitative and destructive of human potential but that there is a feasible historically achievable alternative to it. Capitalism is not an inevitability of social life in modern societies. It is not the only or even the best social formation compatible with modernity.

Elster acknowledges and stresses the force of Marx's critique of capitalist society: the domination and exploitation of the many by the few, the mystifications over the economic rationality of capitalism, the inadequacies of capitalist democracy and the liberalism that goes with it, and the unnecessary and unjust inequalities which undermine autonomy and self-realization in capitalist society. On Elster's account, Marxians rightly see that these unjust inequalities just go with capitalism. There is no escape from them within capitalist society; they can be ameliorated but not eliminated by a capitalism with a human face (e.g., welfare state capitalism, Swedish-style). In fine, Elster continues the tradition of a Left and a socialist criticism of capitalism. He is not, some Marxist Fundamentalists to the contrary notwithstanding, a sophisticated or even an unsophisticated, witting or unwitting, apologist for the capitalist order.

If there really are forms of historical materialism and functional explanation which are viable that would indeed be good news from the point of view of the political orientation that Elster articulates and defends. It would afford with this distinctive Marxianism a strong social science grounding for socialist revolutionary activity.²⁷ Most centrally it would give us good empirical grounds for believing, against the dominant atheoretical historiography, that epochal social change will take a certain direction.²⁸ Elster calls an intellectual shot here that such conceptions are not sustainable and are in reality myth-eroded parts of Marxian social science and political practice that are better jettisoned not only in the interests of truth and scientific adequacy but (given their cognitive inadequacy) for the sake of the Marxist political agenda as well.

I think — and Levine and Cohen (among others) have so argued — that Elster's case here is by no means unproblematical, let alone established.²⁹ This is something which stands in danger of being forgotten, given the political debacle of communism (the "official communism" of the once actually existing socialisms). But, even if Elster's jettisoning of these central parts of Marx is justified, the Marxian agenda would not be subverted.³⁰ As Levine, Cohen and Wood all clearly see, in a way Ernest Mandel and Robert Paul Wolff do not, such a "streamlined" Marxianism would still support a resolutely Left anticapitalist political agenda and indeed a democratic socia-

27. Andrew LEVINE, "Review of G.A. Cohen's *History, Labour and Freedom*," *Journal of Philosophy* (1991), 267-75; Andrew LEVINE and Elliott SOBER, "What's Historical about Historical Materialism?" *Journal of Philosophy* LXXXII n° 6 (June 1985), 304-26; Andrew LEVINE and Erik Olin WRIGHT, "Rationality and Class Struggle," *New Left Review* 123 (1986).

28. Andrew LEVINE, "What is a Marxist Today?" in WARE and NIELSEN, eds., *Analyzing Marxism*, 29-58.

29. See references in notes 26 and 27. For other important criticisms of Elster see Joseph MCCARNEY, "Elster, Marx and Methodology" in WARE and NIELSEN, eds., *Analyzing Marxism*, 135-61 and his "A New Marxist Paradigm," *Radical Philosophy* 43 (Summer 1986), 29-31 and *Radical Philosophy* 44 (Autumn 1986); David SCHWEICKART, "Reflections on Anti-Marxism: Elster on Marx's Functionalism and Labor Theory of Value," *Praxis International* 8, n° 1 (1988), 109-22.

30. This is well argued in LEVINE's "What is a Marxist Today?" and in his review of Cohen's *History, Labour and Freedom*.

lism that is not merely a utopian or ethical socialism.³¹ Elster's genius consists in his showing how such a Left agenda could still be preserved and remain rooted in social science and not just in moral commitment and moral theory, even if we need to reject a very considerable amount of traditional Marxist belief. *Pace* Michael Walzer, Levine rightly sees that Elster "remains radical and sympathetic to the Marxian project, and he defends many of its fundamental components."³² There *may* be more alive in Marx than Elster allows but what he does allow still affords us a reasonable basis for the critique of capitalism and for arguing for socialism even in an age which is celebrating the death of socialism.

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31. Ernest MANDEL, "How to Make No Sense of Marx" in WARE and NIELSEN, eds., *Analyzing Marxism*, 105-32 and Robert Paul WOLFF, "Methodological Individualism and Marx: Some Remarks on Jon Elster, Game Theory, and Other Things," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 20, n° 4 (1990), 469-86.
 32. Andrew LEVINE, "Review of Making Sense of Marx," 728. See Michael WALZER, "What's Left of Marx?" *New York Review of Books* 21 (Nov 1985). See also Alan RYAN, "Can Marxism be Rescued?" *London Review of Books* 17 (Sep 1987) and Erik Olin WRIGHT, "What is Analytical Marxism?" *Socialist Review* 19, n° 4 (Oct-Dec 1989), 35-56.