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## Preface

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The following essays address historical materialism, Marx's theory of history and issues in the philosophy of social science relevant to Marxist theory. In the political atmosphere of the early 1990s, a book devoted to these topics may seem anachronistic. Recent events in countries once officially designated "Marxist", and changing intellectual fashions elsewhere, will lead many readers to wonder why Marxist ideas should still be taken seriously. We address these concerns by making some Marxist ideas objects of critical attention, and we try to counter the current disinclination to take Marxism seriously by arguing for the continuing timeliness of the project Marx began.

We have called this book *Reconstructing Marxism* because we find pertinent the metaphor it suggests. However many renovations the Marxist edifice now requires, we think that it is an edifice with reasonably solid foundations, located in the right neighborhood. A title suggested in a quip by Philippe Van Parijs was *Recycling Marxism*. In our view, this goes too far in its recommendation that we demolish the building, salvaging some remnants for future use, but discarding the bulk of what was once there, as though it were so much useless (perhaps even "toxic") waste. We do not believe that Marxism is in such a state of disrepair as to warrant recycling. In our view, the old structure, reconstructed, may still be humanity's best hope for understanding the social world, and for changing it.

We regret, however, that our title may seem to promise more than we deliver. Our brief for *reconstructing* Marxist positions is more programmatic than substantive. We argue that a theory of history with a conceptual structure like the one Marx proposed, but with vastly diminished explanatory pretensions, is surprisingly plausible. We also

suggest that the prospects for Marxist class analysis are eminently favorable, despite the unfortunate fact that Marxists have too often taken up untenable positions in some generally ill-conceived methodological controversies. But in the end, only empirical corroboration can vindicate Marxist claims; this is a task we do not undertake at all. For better or worse, the essays assembled here are almost exclusively philosophical in scope. They therefore only approach the point where the arduous and open-ended task of *reconstructing* Marxism, in the fullest sense of the expression, can finally begin.

The essays that comprise this book were written over a period of ten years within an emerging intellectual current that has come to be known as “analytical Marxism”. We discuss this style of Marxist theorizing in Chapter 1, and reflect on its implications for the Marxist agenda in Chapter 8. In the course of that period our preoccupations have changed, moving from a focus on some core themes of traditional Marxism to a more general engagement with problems in the philosophy of social science. The first essay in the series (Chapter 2), written in 1979, is concerned exclusively with Marx’s theory of history and G.A. Cohen’s attempt to reconstruct and defend it. The second essay to be written (Chapter 4) connects Marxist and neo-Weberian perspectives on the theory of history by discussing Anthony Giddens’s critique of historical materialism. In the next essay chronologically (Chapters 3 and 5), the main task is to clarify some of the senses in which a theory of history can be “historical”. This essay compares Marx’s theory of history with Darwin’s account of evolution. Historical materialism anchors this essay, but Marx’s theory is not these chapters’ exclusive focus. The fourth essay to be written (Chapter 6) discusses methodological individualism and micro-reductionism. The deployment of individualistic analyses in Marxism is more the occasion here than its central concern. Finally, the last essay in this series (Chapter 7) discusses what it means to claim that some causes are more important than others. The role of “causal primacy” arguments in Marxism is only one of a number of illustrations we deploy. Indeed, in our choice of illustrations we sometimes stray far from radical social theory altogether.

This shift of preoccupation from narrowly Marxist themes towards more general issues in the philosophy of social science is to some extent symptomatic of the intellectual trajectory of analytical Marxism during the 1980s. A decade ago, most analytical Marxists were concerned with the traditional core of Marxist theory: exploitation, class, historical materialism, the transition from feudalism to capitalism, the possibilities for socialism. By the end of the 1980s, the topics had widened to include many of the central questions of mainstream social philosophy and social science. While analytical Marxists continue to engage these issues

in distinctively Marxist ways, the principal concerns of most of them have long ceased to be Marxism as such.

It might seem that this shift in focus signals a move away from Marxism altogether. Some critics of analytical Marxism believe that it is headed in precisely this direction. We disagree. Reconstructing Marxism will inevitably erode the boundaries separating Marxism from some of its rivals. But in the present conjuncture, this eventuality is indispensable for strengthening the theoretical capacity of Marxism itself.

Six of the eight chapters in this book are based on essays originally published as articles. When we decided to collect them together, we planned to limit our revisions to deletions of redundancies and corrections of minor errors. Once we had assembled them, however, and determined what needed to be done to make them cohere, we realized that we had learned more than we had thought in the course of the past decade. Much of what we had once considered settled needed to be reworked. As a result, all of the previously published essays have been revised in varying degrees. Chapter 1 is an amalgam of two previous essays. Chapters 2 and 4 have been substantially altered. Chapter 5 is a much expanded spin-off from an earlier essay. In Chapters 3 and 6, revisions mainly involved reorganizations, clarifications and amendments.

Chapter 1 is based, in part, on “What is Analytical Marxism?” (Wright), *Socialist Review* 89/4 (December 1989), pp. 37–56; and “What is a Marxist Today?” (Levine) in *Analyzing Marxism: New Essays on Analytical Marxism*, Robert Ware and Kai Nielsen, eds, *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, supplementary volume 15 (1989), pp. 29–58.

Chapter 2 is a substantially revised version of “Rationality and Class Struggle” (Levine and Wright), *New Left Review* 123 (1980), pp. 47–68. The current version is based, in part, on a descendant of the original paper published as Chapter 5 of *Arguing for Socialism* (Levine) (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984; 2nd edition, London: Verso, 1988).

Chapters 3 and 5 are based on “What’s Historical About Historical Materialism” (Levine and Sober), *The Journal of Philosophy* 82, 6 (June 1985), pp. 304–26; and the revisions of that paper published as Chapter 5 of *The End of the State* (Levine) (London: Verso, 1987).

Chapter 4 is a substantially revised version of “Giddens’s Critique of Marx” (Wright), *New Left Review* 138 (1983), pp. 11–36. A somewhat different version entitled “Models of History’s Trajectory” was published in David Held and John B. Thompson, eds, *Anthony Giddens and His Critics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

Chapter 6 is a slightly revised version of "Marxism and Methodological Individualism" (Levine, Sober and Wright), *New Left Review* 162 (1987), pp. 67–84.

Chapters 7 and 8 appear here for the first time.

We are grateful to the editors of each of the journals in which the ancestors of these chapters first appeared for permission to draw on this material.

G.A. Cohen read and commented on versions of Chapters 1, 2, 7 and 8 with a degree of attention that can only be described as heroic. His comments forced a complete rethinking of the issues involved in Chapter 7 and substantial rewriting of the other three chapters. No doubt, he would still disagree with much of what we have written. However, there would be much more to disagree with in our book but for his criticisms. Sam Bowles, Robert Brenner, Michael Burawoy, Jon Elster, Robert Hauser, Daniel Hausman, Richard Lewontin, Richard Miller, Philippe Van Parijs, Adam Przeworski, John Roemer, Arthur Stinchcombe and Robert Van der Veen have provided invaluable comments, and we have benefited, separately and together, from discussions with Ronald Aminzade, Alan Carling, Margaret Levy and Joel Rogers, among many others.

*Erik Olin Wright*  
*Andrew Levine*  
*Elliott Sober*

## Marxism: Crisis or Renewal?

It has become commonplace nowadays to speak of a crisis—and even of the end—of Marxism. This dire forecast can hardly be explained just by the cultural hegemony exercised by Marxism's ideological opponents. Real conditions—internal theoretical developments, changes in intellectual culture and, above all, transformed political circumstances—contribute to the impression that this once central tradition of radical social theory and practice is in a process of collapse.

Certainly, extraordinary changes have taken place in societies once ruled by Communist parties officially identified with Marxism. A few years ago, the "Marxism" of these parties was the official ideology of a third of the planet. Now, with Communist parties everywhere renouncing much of their previous theory and practice, and with their role in the societies they once ruled becoming increasingly precarious, Marxism appears to have fallen victim to the fate it officially forecast for its rivals—it has been swept, apparently, into the "dustbin of history".

Moreover, the major part of the left in advanced capitalist countries and even in much of the Third World appears to have largely shed its historical affiliation with the Marxist tradition. Not only have Marxist revolutionary aspirations been marginalized, even as distant political objectives within most progressive movements, but programs for social reform inspired by Marxist understandings of the social world and Marxist visions of ideal social arrangements no longer shape left political practice.

These transformations, compounded by developments internal to Marxist theory and to the intellectual culture in which it exists, have led many Marxists to turn away from the Marxist tradition or to move "beyond" it. Thus many of those who have remained on the left have