Marxist Social Theory

Bruce Laurie
University of Massachusetts at Amherst

On April 26, 1985, the Association for Economic and Social Analysis (AESA) sponsored a conference on Marxist social theory. Dedicated to fostering and refining Marxist theory *and* practice, the AESA holds monthly meetings in Cambridge or Amherst, Massachusetts and a yearly conference, this being the third. It was a busy day filled with four two-hour sessions from 9:30 a.m. to 9:30 p.m. that brought together more than one hundred Marxists and radicals, primarily from schools in New England. Amherst is a logical place for such a conclave. For the past decade or so the Economics Department at the University of Massachusetts has been a center of Marxian political economy in all its varieties and permutations. Those who expected lively exchanges between neo-Althusserians and eclectics, the major wings in what Sam Bowles referred to as the "Amherst School," were not disappointed.

The opening session on "Power, Property, and Class" heard papers by Bowles and Herbert Gintis and by Stephen Resnick and Richard Wolff, as well as a comment by Bob Ackerman. Bowles opened by observing that he and his neo-Althusserian colleagues shared the common project of countering the essentialist economism that has weighed down Marxist theory and hobbled the foot soldiers of the left. There were nods of approval, but agreement ended there. He and Gintis put forth an alternative notion of class, one that envisions coexisting social hierarchies grounded in property, patriarchical, and race relations that operate according to "rules" set by elites. Relations between the occupants of each hierarchy are undemocratic, oppressive, and therefore in tension and conflict over power and authority. Bowles and Gintis acknowledged their debt to liberal theory, but asserted they went beyond it by rejecting defenses of property, the *sine qua non* of liberalism, and by insisting that struggle be collective and in the name of democracy. Wolff and Resnick countered with a critique of class theories derived from power, property, or consciousness. Drawing upon Althusser, they took a structuralist position that anchors class in the extraction and distribution of surplus labor, the first being a "fundamental class process" that gives rise to "fundamental [read productive] classes" and the second being a "subsumed class process" that underpins

International Labor and Working Class History
No. 28, Fall 1985, pp. 96–99

"subsumed [read unproductive] classes." These processes occur across the face of society in a variety of sites from home to factory, such that the same individual may perform different roles depending upon the context. In their view, the overlap of roles helps account for the complexity of social relations. They added that theories which overlook the basic contradiction born of the extraction of surplus labor are deeply flawed, for the democratization of power or property relations can be and often is consistent with exploitation.

Commentator Ackerman deftly kept things loose with well-timed quips and amusing metaphors but also injected a needed note of sobriety with a heady critique of both schools. He argued that Gintis's and Bowles's categories of "game" and "democracy" cannot bear their own analytical weight without considering the larger setting that influences or determines the "rules" in the first place and without taking account of democracy's pitfalls, tyranny of the majority being the most salient. He applied this to Wolff and Resnick as well, asserting that class should be a point of departure for an inquiry into power and property relations. Each theory, he went on, poses different understandings of the same category, say "worker," but fails to relate it to the social whole. And despite their seemingly different emphases, once the theories cycle past their entry points, they wind up with strikingly similar descriptions. Finally, neither one imparts an agenda for transformation, for by claiming that one person may play a multiplicity of "games" or fulfill different "roles," both fail to resolve how actors might choose to struggle—which some of us took to be a subtle plea for factoring in consciousness.

The second session on "Critiques of Neoclassical Economics" lacked the spice of the first. Jack Amariglio, who looked at his subject from the outside, observed that neoclassicists falsely assume they are scientific and value free. He reviewed the work of Donald McCloskey, an exception to this rule, who has taken the heretical stand that metaphor, persuasion, and language, instead of science, are what make discourses acceptable. Phil Morawski opted for an immanent critique in addressing the "primitive mathematics" of the neoclassical school. He argued that mainstream economists use "science" not only to justify not only "what is studied" but also "what is." Arjo Klamm, the commentator, found both presentations excessively abstract and added that Amariglio didn't like the "game," while Morawski attacked its "rules." A discussion of the place of mathematics in radical economics ensued, and it produced consensus on two points: math is opaque, rather than transparent, in that it should raise new questions, and as a logical extension, Marxists should develop their own math. That was useful, but the steadily narrowing focus disappointed those who wished for a more wide-ranging critique of neoclassical categories and recent twists and turns in the tradition.

Fred Curtis opened the third session on "Race and Class" with a neo-Althusserian analysis of social relations in South Africa. He concluded that race ascription may determine the value of labor power by associating racial

groups with devalued work (i.e. "coolie labor"), by securing the racial division of labor, and by legally constraining protest. Race also determines access to class and thereby creates caste systems. Cornell West followed with a paper on race relations closer to home in the United States through a neo-Gramscian perspective far too rich to treat properly here. Suffice it to say he delivered a breathtaking critique of orthodox Marxism for privileging class relations and ignoring exploitation beyond the economic sphere. He preferred a "concrete" rendering of the black experience that combines Gramscian ideas of class and race hegemony at the macro level with psychological and literary theories (Derida's being one) that penetrate to the quotidian, exposing hegemonic and counterhegemonic practice in everyday life. Satya Gabriel, who stood in for scheduled commentator Carl Friedman, took issue with Curtis for overlooking the positive aspects of race consciousness. Racial differences that oppress and abuse, he stressed, must be eliminated, while those that enrich and liberate must be nurtured. He also felt that Curtis confused racism and discrimination, for it is possible to have the second without the first. He applauded West's ambitious project but urged him to consider the enduring contributions of African ethnicity to the historic fight against racism in the United States. In a spirited and useful question and answer period, West expressed strong reservations over the current Marxist tendency to overtheorize, and regretted the inclination to stress complexities and thus confound sensible practice.

The last panel featured presentations by Paul Sweezy and Harry Magdoff. Richard Wolff paid tribute to these deans of American Marxism in a touching introduction that recalled their heroic stand for radical principles and left scholarship in the face of McCarthyist repression. As a token of appreciation, he presented them with a soon-to-be published book of essays on Marxism coedited by Stephen Resnick and himself. Sweezey then summarized a paper entitled "After Marxism What?" which dealt with the thorny problem of defining socialism. He told his listeners that socialist government in the modern era has fallen short of Marx's dream of "proletarian hegemony" because parties, not workers, have assumed the reins of power. Such parties have effectively eliminated competition but merely substituted a "single capital for many capitals." And to the extent that they have left labor/capital relations intact, they have not delivered socialism. If these societies cannot be considered socialist, neither can they accurately be described as "state capitalist," as some critics of the Soviet Union would have it, because the competition that is the lifeblood of capitalism has been drained. Putatively socialist societies, moreover, are not driven along by the same forces as capitalist states even though they produce surpluses. Instead, what propels them is the need of revolutionary elites to maintain their positions in a hostile world. Peace activists in the United States and other capitalist powers might relieve some of the pressure which could provide more scope for workers in the Eastern Bloc and elsewhere, but one should not hope for much more. Socialist rulers will not relinquish power easily, nor bow to the good wishes of their labor's allies abroad.

Magdoff turned to the domestic scene in a presentation of "Ruling Class Economic Ideologies." He began by observing that the industrial working class, the class of destiny for Western Marxists, has shrunk markedly over the last thrity years and may well be on the verge of extinction under advanced capitalism. The general failure on the part of the left to recognize this elemental fact and adjust its thinking is regrettable enough. Even worse, the right has been keenly aware of it, which helps explain the currency of ruling-class ideologies. Such views have reached so deeply, in his estimation, that the left press and journals of opinion accept the terms, if not the solutions, of political discourse framed in the paneled offices of corporate board room and right-wing think tanks. At this juncture, he averred, the right may have a better purchase on capitalism than the left. It is time to return to the drawing board in a concerted effort to develop a fresh perspective on the sources of capitalist growth and decline. A good place to start is with finance capital, for according to Magdoff it figures as increasingly important.

One of the more noteworthy aspects of the day was the contrasting styles and messages between the Old Left, one the one hand, and New and Post New Left, on the other. Perhaps it owes to their distance from the academy, or possibly their long experience with the left. For whatever reason, Magdoff and Sweezy spoke a plainer tongue with a minimum of Marxist or academic jargon. Theirs was an accessible radicalism free of the theoretical hair-splitting and obfuscatory terminology that characterizes modern Marxism. They also conveyed a refreshingly pragmatic view of activism. A telling moment occurred when an undergraduate rose to ask Magdoff's advice on the choice between pursuing a career and running the risk of "being bought" as against working for radicalism. Magdoff saw no necessary contradiction between the two, noting that he had studied and written about Marxism while a small businessman. Sweezy followed with a confirming anecdote that grew out of a recent trip to France where he met several young radicals who happened to be in the employ of the government. When he asked how they reconciled this, he was told "We work for the state by day and against it by night."

This is not to suggest that the differences over theoretical orientation and tactics, and the generational differences—Old Left, New Left, and Post New Left—ran in parallel lines. In fact the sharpest line of division proved that which separated structuralists from nonstructuralists, and it cut across the New and Post New Left, dividing partisans of class struggle from those who value cross-class alliances. It may be asking too much to expect a consensus on the left in this day and age, all the more so in light of the academic setting of this conference. But if Bob Ackerman was correct, and one suspects he was, in finding similarities between the schools, one wonders why there has been and continues to be such a fuss. Can we really afford to allow controversy over theoretical precision to stand in the way of what needs to be done—especially in a period of rightist dominance?