

Dancing the 'middle ground': between Marxism and post-Marxism

One of the evergreen debates in Marxist theory concerns the tension between the two poles of the base-superstructure metaphor, between a more economic, historical-materialist, and perhaps more Marxian interpretation of Marxism on the one hand, and a more political, humanist, and subjective interpretation of Marxism on the other hand. This dichotomy is of course reductionist and limiting to a certain extent, but it provides an interesting heuristic to appraise some recent developments in the literature. Moreover, it remains very prevalent, particularly among the proponents of a more political Marxism (which occasionally known as post-Marxism) – among whom I count myself.

Few would dispute that its understanding of the economy as the driving force in the constitution and the reproduction of social formations is part of Marxism's core. Its critique of the extant capitalist system and its theory of history ultimately revolve around class, the relations of production in society, and the irresolvable conflict between capital and labor. Yet the abstract principles upon which this powerful critique is based have tended to complicate the articulation of a concrete, situational political strategy (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985/2001). Proponents of a more "political" and less "economic" political project contend that the narrow economism of classic Marxism lacks the flexibility to cope with the open-ended nature of hegemonic struggles. They argue that while Marxism's economic critique continues to resonate powerfully in contemporary Western societies, it is rooted in concepts and reasonings that do not find political purchase today. This more political interpretation itself, however, has in turn been criticized by more mainstream Marxists for vacating Marxism's central categories, including class and political economy – after these notions have been decentralized, what remains that is typically and authentically Marxian?

The academic debate between the more politically and the more economically oriented currents in Marxist theory has at times been less than dignified. Dialogues between both camps have rarely brought out the best of both worlds, resulting more often in spite, apprehension, and misunderstanding than in deeper insight and mutual enrichment. For fear of being deemed essentialist, teleological, or reductionist, political Marxists have for instance tended to develop theories and approaches that intentionally ignore any economic categorization, to the point that saying anything about political economy has become a major challenge (Torfing 2004, 24-25). But classical Marxism, however, occasionally finds itself so caught up in its economic critique that it denies that "politics is a persisting feature of every form of society", seeking to abolish politics rather than to engage in it (Callinicos, 2015, 53).

Safe to say that this mutual ignorance has not been particularly uplifting. This is all the more regretful, given that the limited body of research that combines radical insights of both the 'economic' and the 'political' tradition in a productive and coherent fashion has managed to push forward the limits of Marxist political theory in remarkable fashion. On the 'economic' side, there is the work of Amariglio and Ruccio (Amariglio, 1990; Amariglio & Ruccio, 1994; Ruccio & Amariglio, 2003), and their analysis of the "postmodern moments" in modern economic science. More recently, Tundermann (2020; 2021) has studied Marxist value theory through the prism of the political theory of equivalence, difference, and antagonism put forward by Laclau and Mouffe. Value theory might be one of the most deeply economic and arcane sides of Marxist political economy, yet Tundermann interprets it using a perspective that is inherently highly political in nature, generating new insights by capitalizing on the assets of both theoretical currents. On the 'political' side of the divide, Daly (2004) and Dahlberg

(2014) have emphasized the need to develop a political-economic approach that puts front and centre the political nature of social formations, without overlooking the crucial role that economic processes play within this formation. They argue for a political economy that puts the political nature of economic structures front and center.

The added value of pacifying the conflict between the more economic and the more political interpretations of Marxism is straightforward: it enables one to combine Marxism's powerful critique of capitalism's exploitative mechanisms with a theory of politics attuned to the Marxist worldview yet far more capable of understanding how the "political game" is won (Laclau, 2001, 9-10). Often, this is not a straightforward exercise. The historical-materialist ontology of classical Marxism tends to clash with the poststructuralist ontology upon which many political interpretations of Marxism draw (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985/2001). Their merger requires extensive theoretical reflection and negotiation.

But, as Pedro Rey-Araùjo's 'Capitalism, Institutions, and Social Orders: the Case of Contemporary Spain' illustrates, this exercise can be worth it. It is not an exaggeration to say that 'Capitalism, Institutions, and Social Orders' (henceforth CISO) constitutes an important step in the re-acquaintance between Marxism and post-Marxism. Its self-stated goal is to "dance over the middle ground" (16) (Resnick & Wolff, 1987) – to negotiate a compromise between the tradition in Marxism that valorizes "the primacy of human agency and self-consciousness" (6) and one that believes above all in "structural explanation" (6). CISO casts the tension between social theory and subjective humanism on the one hand and economic determinism and historical fatalism on the other hand as the *leitmotif* of Marxism's historical evolution, and it makes this tension its principal object of analysis.

What makes CISO rather unique, and what makes its contribution so valuable, is that it retells the history of how this tension has manifested itself within the Marxist literature with the ambition of reducing its role. Rey-Araùjo does not give a neutral account of the tension between economy and politics in Marxist theory – he tells its story with the explicit goal of mitigating the friction and the division that this tension causes. The manner in which the first eighty pages of CISO recounts the historic evolution of Marxist thought with broad and fluid brushstrokes, in order to prepare the ground for a crucial intervention, is occasionally reminiscent of the first ninety pages of 'Hegemony and Socialist Strategy', where Laclau and Mouffe (1985/2001, 1-88) paint the picture of a Marxism in crisis, ready for a "post-Marxist moment". But the difference is that the scene set by Laclau and Mouffe is rife with antagonism and conflict. They frame Marxism's *status quaestionis* in the least generous manner possible and look for the most extreme and radical exponents of the orthodox Marxism against which they revolt, in order to generate maximal contrast. Laclau and Mouffe's critics (Mouzelis, 1988; Geras, 1987; 1988) repaid them the favor, launching an all-out assault on a strawman of the ideas put forward by Laclau and Mouffe. Rey-Araùjo goes down a completely different path. He looks for the most moderate representatives of both camps and discusses interventions in the literature that explicitly or implicitly want to temper contradictions and creatively bridge the divide.

The "culmination" of this search for a "middle ground position" (8) is to be found in the work of Louis Althusser (9-16), according to Rey-Araùjo. Althusser faults both currents with an overreliance on the Hegelian dialectic – in the political interpretation, it manifests as the self-realization of the human subject that drives the steady progression of history, in the economic interpretation, it manifests as the development of the forces of production (10). Althusser proposes to replace the idea of a social totality driven by its constituent forces with the notion of 'overdetermination' (10-13). 'Overdetermination' conjures up the image a social unity whose conditions of existence are rife with differences and contradictions, and whose various levels and instances simultaneously determine and are determined by this unity, but where the economy is decisive 'in the last instance' (Althusser 1969,

100-101 cited in 11). According to Rey-Araùjo, this framework constitutes a strong bid for a 'middle ground position' between economic determinism and subjective humanism.

Crucially, CISO does not overextend its ambition and remains well-aware that it is folly to search for the ultimate truce that would finally see humanist and historical-materialist Marxists make definitive peace (91). It finds significant internal problems within Althusser's middle ground position, notably a latent functionalism that makes it difficult to conceive of social change, which collectively make it untenable. CISO is similarly critical for the two traditions it discusses next, Laclau and Mouffe's post-Marxism (1985/2014) (36-63) and Gordon, Edwards, and Reich's Social Structures of Accumulation Theory (1982) (65-84). Rey-Araùjo reads neither of these two theories as bidding for the middle ground position (as mentioned above, Laclau and Mouffe in fact take a rather partisan stance against what they see as economic reductionism). However, he recognizes in both a theoretical sophistication, stemming from their post-Althusserian inspiration, which facilitates the formulation of a middle ground position based on the premises of these theories.

It typifies CISO's generosity and spirit for compromise that it starts its discussion of post-Marxist Discourse Theory (PDT) and Social Structures of Accumulation Theory (SSA) with an overview of the common threads and the potential synergies between these two very different theories (18-35). A far more straightforward, and hence a far less interesting reading, would see PDT's repudiation of the base-superstructure dichotomy as a classic exponent of the political tradition, and SSA's concern with relations of production, class, and neoliberalism as typical of the economic tradition. But Rey-Araùjo instead notes that both traditions, despite all their differences, remarkably also share a number of assumptions, and he argues that this common ground makes it possible for both theories to strengthen and to learn from one-another. It is by combining PDT and SSA, that Rey-Araùjo articulates his own middle-ground position.

In PDT, Rey-Araùjo regrets a lack of attention to the internal mechanisms of capitalism and how they constitute an uneven and irregular terrain for hegemonic struggle (50-59). While PDT's intricate account of politics excels at explaining the dynamics of these hegemonic struggles, it fails to do justice to the "specifically capitalist nature of the societies in which hegemonic logics are operating" (49). This renders PDT unable to explain where or when the 'dislocations' and the 'populist situations' that trigger the proliferation of hegemonic struggles occur nor can it account for how the institutional arrangements of the wavering and failing regime affect the search for a new stable equilibrium (59-62, 62-64, 103-119, see also Rey-Araùjo, 2019). Evidently, analyzing the internal mechanics and the institutional arrangements that drive the capitalist nature of society is precisely what SSA theory excels at.

SSA, reversely, struggles to develop a sufficiently advanced account of politics, suffering from "a veiled historical determinism" (78) and an overly narrow emphasis on the antagonism between capital and labor (82). These flaws render SSA's account of reproduction, stability, and social change in society far more sterile and mechanistic than PDT's. A post-Marxist understanding of hegemonic politics centered on contingency can compensate for these problems, by drawing attention to the role that symbolic representation and discourse play in the articulation of socio-political identities and alignments, and by emphasizing the open-ended nature of political struggles (85).

CISO also provides an explicit statement of how SSA and PDT can be combined (85-101), and operationalizes this combination in an empirical analysis of the social reproduction of Spain's neoliberal political-economic formation from the 1990s until today. It first characterizes Spain as having a 'liberal' and 'Mediterranean' social structure of accumulation with several idiosyncratic traits (125-136), before revisiting the expansion of this regime prior to 2008 (137-170) and its crisis post-

2008 (171-209). Both his theoretical framework and its empirical operationalization draw predominantly on SSA, using PDT as a compliment to flesh out the political dynamics that SSA theory struggles with. One could rightly argue that this makes CISO tilt towards the economic side of the tension between subjective political humanism and economic determinism. However, finding the perfect middle ground position was never CISO's ambition. As Rey-Araùjo puts it eloquently, this middle ground position in the end consists of "the recognition of the ultimate impossibility of granting due space to both political and economic logics in appraising social becoming while, nonetheless, simultaneously committing oneself to the possibility of not downplaying one pole in favor of the other" (91).

Interestingly, Rey-Araùjo provides more than a template methodology that can inform future research into the political dynamics of SSAs. His approach also constitutes a roadmap outlining how political and economic Marxism can productively and creatively be combined. This means that even scholars who intend to make different choices when combining political and economic Marxism, as I myself for instance certainly would, can look to CISO for inspiration. Particularly Rey-Araùjo's generous reading of Althusser and his choice to look for methodological synergies and compromises rather than ontological differences between SSA and PDT are stimulating in this regard. They show that theoretical advances in the literature are about more than demonstrating ontological and epistemological fit, and often happen by virtue of open-mindedness and choosing a productive approach and perspective for interpretation.

The real added value of CISO's inspired and passionate dance on the middle ground, however, resides in its reinvention of Marxist political economy in the purest sense of the term. There is broad consensus among post-Marxist scholars that tackling the 'core issues' of political science, the 'harder' topics such as economy and policy-making is one of the main challenges that post-Marxism faces (Martilla 2014, 4; Jacobs & Orbie 2020). Jacob Torfing (2004, 24-25) already outlined in detail why post-Marxism's ignorance of political economy is problematic back in 2004 – he in fact mentioned it as one of the main obstacles to PDT's viability as a scientific approach. Yet nearly two decades later, only scattered and piecemeal advances have been made in the articulation of a post-Marxist political economy. Valuable interventions such as Daly's (2004), Dahlberg's (2014), and Tundermann's (2020, 2021) remain the exception rather than the rule.

Part of the reason for this struggle, is that attempts to develop such a post-Marxist political economy have frequently started from scratch. Since few post-Marxist scholars have taken an explicit interest in the economy, there is little in terms of state-of-the-art that can serve as a foundation for the construction of an approach to political-economic research inspired by post-Marxism. As such, the sporadic interventions hoping to elaborate such an approach usually cannot do anything but start from a blank slate. These efforts usually result in very valuable and ground-breaking contributions, which nevertheless still leave a lot of ground uncovered, simply because there was so little prior work compared to the vast scale of the topic. To overcome this problem, an incredibly dedicated and systematic effort seems necessary, but this push has so far failed to materialize. Despite their relevance and their value, the few articles, monographs, and book chapters on post-Marxist political economy do not at all form a coherent literature or dialogue.

CISO shows that there is another avenue towards the development of a post-Marxist political economy, an avenue that is quicker, less resource-intensive, and, if anything, more promising than reinventing the wheel, as post-Marxists have occasionally tried when studying economic subjects. This avenue is to reacquaint post-Marxism with its long-forgotten uncle, Marxism, from which it can borrow a readily available set of concepts and reasonings that have proven their value in facilitating a progressive analysis and critique of political economy beyond reproach. As CISO demonstrates, it is

far less convoluted to bridge these two distinct but related traditions than to develop categories for economic analysis within a theoretical framework like PDT that does not strictly speaking understand the economy as a distinct plane on an ontological level.

What we can achieve by dancing on the middle ground is an approach to political economy that is profoundly political, in that it recognizes the ontological primacy of contingency and hegemony, but which at the same time does justice to the uniquely and profoundly capitalist character of the (contingent and open-ended) practices around which contemporary western societies are organized. CISO's dance departs from a neo-Marxist framework, but infuses its economic analysis with a post-Marxist appreciation of the political dynamics that play out within capitalist societies. A more post-Marxist take could reversely infuse its fundamentally political analysis with a Marxist appreciation of the capitalist topography within which hegemonic struggles transpire. But crucially, both approaches are 'political-economic' in the full meaning of the term – they simultaneously take stock of the political and the economic dimension of capitalism, trying to do right by both (91). I read 'Capitalism, Institutions, and Social Orders' as a plea for political-economic research that embraces these two dimensions at the same time, by engaging in a balancing act between Marxism and post-Marxism. This balancing act will not result in the glorious reunification of both traditions, but it promises a Marxism that is more acutely aware of the political strategies and dynamics that catalyze capitalism, and a post-Marxism that is more in tune with the capitalist infrastructure of contemporary politics.

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