The Odyssey of Jon Elster

Jon Elster has made the story of _Ulysses and the Sirens_ a central motif in his philosophical Odyssey. In Elster’s philosophy a paradigm of imperfectly rational behaviour is to bind yourself against the mast, as a precaution against the predictable weaknesses of your will which would otherwise leave you entranced by the siren. The use of literary analogies is frequent in Elster’s work, whether he is Explaining Technical Change or Making Sense of Marx. Consequently it is not inappropriate to describe Elster’s own intellectual wanderings as an odyssey. Unlike Joyce’s _Ulysses_ there is no trace in Elster of a predilection for satirical subjects, or any danger of unreadability. But there is a similar technical and stylistic range, and a comparable breadth in intellectual debts, acquired from journeying through Western culture with several languages. Elster, like Joyce, is also crowned with the ability to make an atomic whole out of apparently disparate materials.

Elster’s odyssey is tinged with some sadness, and disenchantment from loss of Marxist faith. Sadness is shown in several disappointments. The Preface to _Ulysses and the Sirens_ opens with two:

Many philosophers and social scientists at some time in their lives have wanted to write fiction or poetry, only to find that they didn’t have what it takes. Others have chosen philosophy or social science as a second choice when they decided that their first choice of doing mathematics really was not within their abilities. The present work is at the intersection of these two failures.

Devotees of Elster’s essays in the social sciences are glad that he persuaded himself that he could not become a literary giant or a mathematician although we are entitled to be sceptical about his harsh judgment of his literary and mathematical talents. Elster’s disenchantment comes through most clearly in his stretching of accounts with Karl Marx. Making Sense of Marx is the work of someone who wants to be able to believe but whose reason will not permit him to follow his unadorned preferences. Elster’s strength of will prevents him from enjoying the pleasure he might otherwise derive from being a Marxist. As he cannot define


ELSTER’S RANGE


By any standards Elster’s output is prolific. What is more startling is that he draws from a wide range of social sciences, and from natural science and literary criticism, with fluency and ease. The reader is constantly educated, in a way


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ELSTER’S PHILOSOPHY OF SCIENCE

Elster’s methodological writings are a sustained defence of the primacy of methodological individualism in social science. His defence is partly negative. The other viable modes of scientific explanation, viz. causal and functional explanations, whilst central to physics and biology respectively, are not appropriate in the social sciences. Figure 1 is Elster’s summary of his methodological position. For social scientists, the interesting and controversial boxes are number 7–9. Elster believes, as box 7 indicates, that there is room for causal explanation in the analysis of human behaviour. For example, sub-intentional causality occurs in mental operations which are not governed by will or intention. He claims that it is beyond his competence to adjudicate whether intentional explanations are reducible to causal explanations, but believes that intentional explanations in the sense, and thinks that for practical purposes these modes of explanation are wholly separate. As indicated by box 8 Elster questions whether functional explanations are rigorously construed, has any place in social science. Why? Because there is no social-scientific analogue of the genes–mechanisms which underpin functional explanations in biology. While there are examples of rigorous functional explanations in social science, such as the theory that firms survive because they adopt rules of thumb which (unnaturally) make them profit-maximisers, they are not numerous, and their empirical domain is limited. Most "functional" explanations in social science are in fact objective technologies, or processes without subjects, and Elster thinks that this vice has been pervasive in Marxian and neo–Marxist vortices to the detriment of both traditions. His long-running dialogue with Gerd Gigerenzer’s establishes that Gigerenzer’s reconstruction of historical materialism as a functionalist account of the relations between productive forces and production relations, in the absence of explanatory mechanisms, is just a trap of faith devoid of convincing microfoundations. He shows that Gigerenzer’s defence of "consequence laws," i.e. interesting corollaries awaiting explanatory mechanisms, is implausible, and effectively discredits the best defence of Marx’s theory of history yet put forward.

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Causal explanation applicable?

- Functional explanation applicable?

As box 9 indicates, Elster defends intentional explanations as the hallmark of the social scientist. This defence attacks structuralism which he takes to suggest that the constraints on human actors are so strong as to make rational choice within those constraints irrelevant. In more philosophical debate structural constraints are a synonym for necessity, whilst choice is a synonym for freedom. Ulysses and the Sirens is a lengthy objection to this dualism. The idea that people are sometimes free to choose their constraints lies behind the legend of Ulysses and the Sirens. On the other hand Sartre’s shows that the preferences behind choice are sometimes shaped by constraints, as in the task of the fox who after

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ELSTER ON IRRATIONAL BEHAVIOUR

Some of Elster's most stimulating writing is on irrationality. In broadly speaking he is concerned with four classes of irrationality. The first is using rationality on irrational assumptions about the behaviour of others. This irrationality displays rational symptoms, given inexcusably false beliefs on the part of the agent. Elster is coy about what precisely makes a belief inexcusably false but distinguishes three forms of this sort of irrationality, found commonly in politics. First, agents may treat their environment as parametric, or made up of agents less rational than they are, when in fact the environment is made up of equally rational agents. The Chinese Communists' behaviour in dealing with Chiang Kai-Shek is a good political example. They treated their class-enemy as a parametric, or as less rational than they were, with the result that in 1937 many of their cadres went to their deaths.

Secondly, wishful thinking may lead agents to endorse irrational assumptions. For example, nuclear engineers wish to define the probabilities of nuclear accidents in the language of risk which can be planned for (because one can assign probabilities), when in fact uncertainty is a more rational way to characterize the prospects of nuclear accidents, but it cannot be planned for (because here one cannot assign probabilities). Thirdly, self-deception may lie behind irrational assumptions. Here the agent manages both to believe and not to believe the same ideas. He claims, without elaboration, that the problem is the crucial test that any theory of human nature has to pass. Elster believes that self-deception is possible, although as he admits, he does not provide knock-down arguments for his case. Indeed his discussion of Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance shows that the assumption that people will selectively expose themselves to information sources that will produce consonance, and ignore information that produces dissonance, turns upon a crucial ambiguity in the meaning of 'information'. Once people are told of information which does not support their decisions or attitudes they cannot 'avoid the information' because they know of its existence. They may ignore it but that is a different matter from deceiving themselves. Elster thinks that self-deception can be regarded as self-modification but is obscure on this score. Upsides and the Sore is undoubtedly a readable account that consist self-deception is impossible.4

4 It is curious that Elster adopts the view in Sore Sore (p. 142) that self-deception is inevitable, without contrasting the judgement with his position in Upside and the Sore (p. 172) where he promises to defend the common-sense view that people do sometimes deceive themselves.
The second class, pursuing incrementally unavailable incentives, leads to different forms of irrationality: the irrationality of paradoxical intentions. Elster's favourite examples focus on wishing what cannot be wished, such as wishing oneself to be more handsome, sincere, relaxed, passionate or cool. Such injunctions are suggested to politicians by their marketing strategies. 'Be more spontaneous!' is my favourite paradoxical injunction. The philosophical illustration is Hegel's master-slave dialectic: the worthless slave cannot give the master the recognition he craves because the master has set himself the paradoxical goal of official recognition. Recognition is only worthwhile from someone you respect. You cannot compel genuine recognition from someone you despise. Elster gives his most sustained attention to a sub-set of the irrationality of paradoxical intentions: the wishing of states that are essentially by-products. States which cannot be brought about intelligently, or intentionally, because the attempt to do so precludes the state which is the object of the intention, illustrate what he calls the intellectual fallacy of by-products. Elster's extended discussion of one self-defeating prescriptive political theory is especially worth attention. He argues against the theory that the main purpose and defence of democracy is its educational and useful effect on its participants, an argument advanced in different guises by J.S. Mill, Arendt and Parman (and we might add advocates of Human Relations and workers' control). These theories defend democracy and advocate its extension for those of its advantages which are essentially by-products. Elster argues cogently that the case for democracy should not be made in this way, and that the desirable by-products can only be obtained if they are not consciously aimed at. The argument highlights his dislike of statist politics.

Thirdly, the rationalities of ideology as biased belief attract his attention. He advances four negative propositions against the Marxist theory of ideology. There is no reason to suppose that beliefs: (i) shaped by a social position tend to serve the interest of the person in that position; (ii) shaped by social position tend to serve the interests of the ruling or dominate group; (iii) shaped by interest tend to serve those interests, and (iv) which serve certain interests are to be explained by those interests. These propositions are well argued and supported by multiple historical and biographical examples, and amount to a decisive critique of the Neo-Marxist theory of hegemony as well as a range of arguments in political sociology. Elster is especially useful in generalizing the arguments of the French classical Paul Veyne, author of Le pain et le cirque. Veyne contends that the ruled adopt beliefs which benefit rulers because such beliefs make sense of their position to themselves (cognitive dissonance), and not because they are brainwashed or persuaded by an hegemonic ideology; and that the interests of the ruling class are in fact better served by the ruled classes spontaneously generating an ideology which justifies their inferior status to themselves. Subjects only believe in rulers who never need to stoop to prove their superiority. Such psychological micro-

foundations for a theory of ideology are better founded, and more plausible, than the ones propagated by structuralist Marxist.

Finally, the unintended benefits of ideological bias are succinctly dismissed by Elster with examples from the work of Nivett and Ross, Hirschman and Schumpeter. Phenomena like illusions and wildfied thinking may often benefit agents because of their irrationality. For example, as self-confidence has a positive effect on motivation, so excessive self-confidence may have personally beneficial consequences for the individual. Societies may also benefit from collective wildfied thinking because the simplest improvements require such an enormous effort that the full appreciation of this knowledge would inhibit progress. Heroic planning based upon wildfied thinking may achieve more than sober appraisal and cost-benefit analysis might suggest. But Elster counsels against promoting such examples into general laws, and against the obtrusive search for meaning or hidden hands—the professional vices of the sociologist and the economist, and the pathological preoccupation of the Marxist.

ELSTER ON THE PROBLEMS OF RATIONALITY

Elster's excursions into the world of irrationality are prompted by his desire to explore the limits of intentional explanation and its most famous sub-set, rational choice explanation. He is well aware that the main challenges to rational choice theory are that it may not tell us what is demanded by rationality, and that people may not behave as rational choice theory hypothesizes. The first problem can arise in two ways. First, rationality may be indeterminate: more than one action may be equally and maximally beneficial to the agent. Although this problem does not pose normative difficulties, it poses explanatory indeterminacy especially when the alternatives may be very different. Heterarchies and political systems engaged in case studies of decisions frequently face this difficulty. The second way in which the problem arises is that rational action, belief, and/or evidence may not be able to exist. When agents cannot compare, put-wise, all options, their preference rankings are incomplete and the normative theory of rational choice cannot guide the agent's action, and the pro-ince theory cannot explain it. Under uncertainty, and/or conditions which resemble games which have no single co-operative equilibrium, agents cannot form determinate rational beliefs. Finally, agents may not be able to establish rationally the optimal levels of evidence they require for an action to be rational, because they cannot assess the expected marginal benefits and costs of searching for information. While serious, in Elster's view these difficulties are not decisive objections to rational choice theory in either its positive or normative versions. Because rational choice's domain is limited, this does not mean that it should be
Elster is also critical of socialization theory, and supports many of the arguments made by Barry in *Socialists*, *Economists* and *Dowansay*. However, he concludes that socialized norms may explain some behaviour better than rational choice theory, and considers that voting is a good example where this is so. While the general case might be correct, I am not persuaded that voting is a good example. Elster, like Downs before him, is making the mistake of assuming that the voter's choice of whether to vote or not is a deterministic decision of the form: will the benefits from voting for the candidate or party I support outweigh the probability that my vote will make a difference exceed the costs of voting? But the rational voter's decision is a strategic decision in conditions of uncertainty. The rational voter must reason with himself or herself along the following lines: will others vote? If they think strategically, as I do, then I face an infinite regress. In that case I do not know whether it is rational to vote. Given uncertainty about the rationality of others I should risk-minimize by voting or avoid post-election regrets. While not wishing for a moment to suggest that such reasoning lies behind real voter's actions, this argument suggests that rational choice theory can, in principle, explain voting as rational. More importantly, contemporary political science has conceded the assumptions and predeterminism of rational theory — that is that body of ideas can be operationalized — and rational choice explanations of voting behaviour are becoming the conventional wisdom. But Elster's main complaint about socialization theory is that it is ad hoc and ex post facto. It fails to tell us when norms will override rationality.

10 Rational Choice 22.6–7

a superior, rigorous, and elegant structuralism? Whether or not this argument is true or false, Elster does not present his readers with an extended argument rebutting such objections.

ELSTER'S MARXISM

When Elster went to the ENA in Paris in 1968 he was a Marxist who felt no affinity with then fashionable Althusserian ideas. Convinced that methodological and political individualism were distinct he studied Marx under Raymond Aron. He did not publish his thesis because he thought its methodology would bring no Marxist readership, while non-Marxists would find its residual Marxism unacceptable. But in the course of the late 1970s and early 1980s, Elster worked closely with a range of colleagues, notably G. Cohen and J. Roemer, to produce a Marxism compatible with his methodological predications. Making Sense of Marx is the product of this labour.

There was a time when politically experienced or competently educated people could easily identify a Marxist. The necessary and sufficient conditions for legitimacy—using the label Marxism were obvious to all except secret policemen. Joseph McCarthy and respectable journalists. A Marxism necessarily believed in the doctrines of historical materialism, the labour theory of value, the primacy of class struggle in historical conflict, and that the working class would be the architect of a new socialist order more productive and liberating than capitalism. Unless somebody like Stalin enforced orthodoxy, certain misconceptions were not mandatory Marxist beliefs: such as the dogma of dialectical materialism, the belief that all mental activity forms an ideological superstructure causally explained by the economic basis of society, and the theory that in the course of capitalism's development profits must fall as a result of the inexorable rise in the organic composition of capital. But Elster thinks that all these tenants, rightly associated with Karl Marx and Marxism, are wrong-headed and indefensible.

Having asked the question ‘What is living and what is dead in the philosophy of Marx?’ Elster argues that the following ideas are dead if not yet buried: 1) scientific socialism; 2) dialectical materialism; 3) teleology and functionalism; 4) Marxist economics; and 5) the theory of productive forces and relations of production (i.e. the core of historical materialism). But despite being suffused with wishful thinking, functionalism and arithmetization, he believes that some of Marx’s theories still await the official coroner’s verdict. The following ideas are capable of being re-used, renewed and reconstructed from the mists in which Marx and later Marxists have left them: 1) a version of the dialectical method,

2) a restricted theory of alienation; 3) moral insights from the theory of exploitation; 4) a theory of technical change under capitalism; 5) parts of Marx’s theory of class and politics; and 6) a stripped-down version of the theory of ideology.

But this apparently balanced verdict in Introduction to Karl Marx fails to remove the impression created by Making Sense of Marx that Elster has ruthlessly destroyed the plausibility of almost any non-trivial argument that Marx’s and Engels ever made. The tone and content of Elster’s writings on Marx put the skills of Berlin, Nopper and Sokolowski in the shade. The title Making Sense of Marx suggests that there is a lot of sense in Marx. To make sense of him requires that he be subjected to the light of intervening history, and . . . the tools of non-Marxist social science and philosophy. It is hoped that Marxist thought will thereby be freed from the increasingly discrepant methods and presuppositions which are still wielded as essential to it, and that what is true and important in Marxism will be firmly established. For Elster, modern social science and philosophy are methodological individualism. But for Elster, these methodological canons rule out most of Marx’s writings as self-evident.

Making Sense of Marx documents Marx’s methodological blunders in a way which can only leave the sympathetic but unprodded by Marx’s admirers concurring with Elster’s case against judgments. Marx’s theory of the state is couched in a ‘half-conspicuous, half-functional’ language that revives lazy, frictionless thought; Marx’s theory of history, like Hegel’s, is halfway between a fully religious and a fully secular’ vision; and as for Marx’s philosophy ‘little more needs to be said than that Marx had no coherent materialist view, and that had he had one, it would have been a less interesting relation to historical materialism’. His theories of man’s relations with nature are either rambling and incoherent, or inherently moral. To push the digressions through, Elster adds that a ‘few interesting observations’ can nevertheless be extracted from his writings, much as a weary teacher is kind to an enthusiastic but incoherent undergraduate. Needless to say the ‘few interesting observations’ consists of Elster’s own (genius) interesting, and psychologically informed elaborations. The labour theory of value is useless at best, harmful and misleading at its worst (footnote 15). To explain Marx’s avoid theory of the falling rate of profit, ‘this multiply confused argument, we might invoke wishful thinking, an uncertain grasp of mathematics . . .’ and so on, but at least it passes muster as a
reliable theory unlike the various other theories of capital growth examined in his writings. They tend to be trivial, or obscure.25 As for the Marxist
theory of ideology it has had its full share of doctrinaire and pretentious
eccentricities. In addition to the usual夸 awarding of ill-founded functional
explanations . . . the pretensions in this area have engaged in fictions and
speculations that have brought it into disrepute.26 Indeed, any writer with
a modicum of ingenuity can invent analogies between a set of trivial
systems and a socio-economic structure. Later Marxian doctrines have
provided many instances worthy of a prominent place in the chamber of
horrors of science.
Three criticisms are supported by internal evidence, by comparison, and argument
which is usually irrefutably fair to Marx (before his irreparable methodological
execution.27
What is left of Marx after this methodological offensive? And what is left
which is both 'true and important' that the series Marxism and Social
Theory is dedicated to deliver? When we look at Elster's list of Marx's ideas that he
deems not alive and kicking, these questions become relevant for any reader, Marxist
or non-Marxist.
The component of the dialectical method which Elster thinks contains
methodological value is the absence of Adam Smith's invisible hand, the negative
unrestrained consequences of action, the self-defining rationality of the
producer's dilemma, or more crudely, the invisible punch. But, in Legs and Society
Elster borrows Marx's term 'commodity' to describe the negative consequences
for the individual of the unrestrained actions of others, and uses the term
'suboptimality' to describe the production of sub-optimal outcomes by rational
actors, and regards the one-off prisoner's dilemma game as the exemplar of
sub-optimality. The reason this point is significant is that Elster regards Marx as ignorant about
the importance of strategic actors producing sub-optimal outcomes, i.e. the
component of the 'dialectical method' which Elster regards most highly. More
obviously Marx was incapable of appreciating that if his theories had any merits
the bourgeoisie was capable of understanding them and developing strategies
which would make them self-defeating political preludes. So it is misleading
to suggest that Elster, or anyone else, derives from Marx the important view

25Ibid., p. 261
26Ibid., p. 260
27Thus see correspondences. Elster on 'dialectics' with Marx's writings. Put simply, he sees a passage
where Marx discusses the antagonism between English and Irish working class contained critically
that "Workers' ethics can exploit prejudices but they cannot create them" . . . Making Sense of Marx (pp. 32-3).
Elster's comments are generally not, but in a very crucial case of the passage from Marx he has just
read. Marx explicitly makes the contrast between the English and Irish workers as being 'artificially'
kept alive and remodelled by the ruling-class. Marx wrote with Elster that the ruling-class in the case
had not created, but rather hijacked advantage of existing social antagonism.

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point of the so-called 'dialectical method', game theory. It is contestable, and
at odds with Elster's evidence, to suggest that he does so. When Marx's analysis of
the unintended consequences of action was clearer than that of
Mandelstein, Smith or Hegel. Given Elster's critique of Marx's theories of
social development and crises, it is especially strange to contend that the idea of the
unintended consequences of action was turned by Marx from 'a general
explanation into a precious tool for the study of social change'. Rational
choice theories, 'dialectics', are alive and well, and winning Nobel prizes, but
they are not part of Marx's legacy, especially not according to Elster's own
account of Marx's thought.

Elster suggests that Marx's theory of alienation and its corollary, Marx's ideal
of the good life, self-realization, are "untrue. But, as he asserts, the core value
behind the theory of alienation is Aristotle's ideal of human flourishing. True, and
importantly, Marx thought that all humans, not just Greek ancestors and
slaves-workers, should be given the opportunity to develop their creative powers
in a post-exploitation society. But the fact remains that the idea is not distinctly
Marxist. Elster highlty concedes that Marxism's central value, autonomy,
received wisdom, is not 'equality', however construed, but it is freedom:
freedom from constraining modes of production and freedom to achieve one's
loves capacities to the full. While appealing to this, Elster is conscious of the
Aristotelian ideal's absurdity when taken as an absolute ethical goal. Some
people's experiences (Hitler's for example) should not be allowed to disturb, and on
the other hand, people should not be forced to be free given Elster wishes,
pre-communist individuals become regarded as so many sheep for the slaughter.
And the idea that all can be equally satisfied in their project of self-realisation
comes up against the harsh reality that, for most of us, self-realisation comes from
the recognition of others. If we all recognised one another as fully realised variants
of Leonardo da Vinci the pleasure from seeing so many and scientific would be
considerably diminished. The grim truth seems to be that 'self-realisation' is in
part a positional good. In short, on the evidence of Elster's writings, his own
ethics are both more realistic and complex than Marx's, and his ideals are not
distinctly Marxist.

Elster contends that Marx's theories of exploitation and of distributive justice
still breathe, which is an extraordinary claim given his own analysis of the
defects of Marx's positive and normative theories of exploitation. Marx's positive
theory of exploitation, the labour theory of value, is disregarded as an explanatory
theory of price formation to perfect competition. Elster suggests in Introduction to Karl
Marx that Marx's normative theory of exploitation gives a robust guide to some
reasonings that are ethically wrong, 'physical coercion, in slavery and feudalism;
28Ibn, p. 39.
minded judgment on Marx the economizer (a minor post-Ricardian) but qualifies his agreement with Sartrean as extending only to Capital Folioes II and III. He considers that Capital I, for all its faults, was Marx's masterpiece. Capital II he rightly describes as one of the most brilliant books ever written, although he unfairly fails to stress that it was unfinished and prepared by Engels from Marx's notes. But Capital I retains its relevance because of its insights on the capitalist labour process, especially in its seeing the relations between labour, profits, power, property and class at the point of production, the capitalist enterprise. Elster makes his case. These passages in Capital make sense and also still make socialists concerned about modern and intellectuals. Marx's class-ground technique of technical change remains powerful and explanatory today. But in Explaining Technical Change, Elster regards Marx's theory of technical change as wrong on most details. In historical materialism, foundations are unsustainably, and its collectivity, the theory of the falling rate of profit, erroneous on several counts. More strangely still, the reader of Explaining Technical Change will discover that Marx is not an intellectual hero. Elster's admiration is far more evident for Schumpeter's dynamic theory of technical change in capitalism, and for Nelson and Winter's evolutionary models of technical change. By contrast Elster's appreciation of Marx's work on technical change is cooler and more critical.

Elster is on safer ground when he contends that Marx's theories of class-consciousness, class structure and political still live, although his suggestion that they are "clearly alive" in contemporary industrialized liberal democracies is questionable. But Elster is a historical Marxian. He argues that collective action based upon non-linear cleavages, throughout the history of various modes of production, has often been more significant than class-action. He does not dispute the essence of classes, either objectively or subjectively, but he questions their centrality, or primary, in collective action. He also accurately, but he accurately, rejects Marxian attempts to reduce non-class antagonisms to class-based conflicts. The only plausible Marxian defence of the primary of class struggle that Elster recognises is that the referent of "primary" is confined to epochal transformations (i.e. transformations of the mode of production). He suggests that it remains to be shown that cultural conflicts could not shape the strategies that led to a change in the mode of production. Does it really "remain to be shown"? The collapse of the Roman Empire (and slave mode of production) at the hands of barbarians, and the revolution which transformed the Vietnamese mode of production in this century are good, if imperfect, examples, of the centrality of cultural conflicts to what Marxists describe as epochal transformations. Class was present, but not primary, in these transformations. Furthermore, Elster, and his colleague

14 Ibid., p. 196.

16 Making Sense of Marx, pp. 313-4.
Roemer,¹⁷ appear to be concluding that democracy is a more important way of understanding what the worker experiences at the hands of the capitalist than exploitation.¹⁸

Elster holds in low esteem Marx's theory of the state and politics, both in capitalism and post-capitalist societies. But one of the most original merits of Elster's critique of Marx is to bring out clearly Marx's abstractionism or abstractionistic theory of nineteenth-century bourgeois politics in Britain, France, and Germany. Elster reads Marx as arguing that the bourgeoisie bound themselves against working power from the articulate because the separation of economic and political conflicts prevented the working-class movement with a struggle in two fronts. The model of Olympos and the sphere is here applied as class actors. Elster creatively shows how many of Marx's arguments about relationships between organized classes and the state can be re-modelled with the tools of game theory. But classical Marxist theories of the state are not saved by Elster's methodological repairs. The class-compromising model of the liberal democratic state, lucidly presented by another of Elster's colleagues, Przeworski,¹⁹ predicts that the stabilizations of capitalism in the rational structure of the working class, because the costs of the transition to socialism are so high, and the putative benefits of complete socialism are so unimposing. It is a very watered-down Marxism which demonstrates the coherence, rationality, and expediency of labourist or socialist political strategies.

Elster rebuts the theory that the state, as an agency of co-ordination and law-enforcement, will wither away under socialism, in no time, and it shouldn't. The political structure of 'actually existing socialism' also emerges 'short shrift in passing anes, notably in Elster's sympathetic review of Alejandro Zavarrivi,²⁰ but most readers will be frustrated with his failure to discuss state socialism in any length. Nonetheless he writes on occasions about Soviet developments in a style similar to Schapiro or Wallerstein: Marx did not consider the possibility that communism might occur prematurely, and like the Asiatic mode of production become a dead end of history.²¹ This remark is unfair to Marx who thought that 'all the evil 60s (class, state and exploitation) would return if communism were attempted without the full development of the productive forces.'

Elster's teleological belief that at the end of human pre-historic gravity would be abolished contributed to the disenchanted failure of Marxists to develop any practical economic theory, which in turn contributed to the fiasco of command planning. Elster indicates a passing sympathy for market socialism, but falls well short of prescriptive political economy. For the sake of democratic socialism let us hope Elster will turn his talent from the past criticism on Marx's ideas to empirically informed and cautious prescriptive political theory. But he has some catching up to do. As my colleague Alan Beattie puts it, Making Sense of Marx marks an important criticism of Marx's theory of politics where Hobbes began.²²

Elster's criticisms of Marx's theory of ideology have already been cited. Yet Elster claims that although the theory is 'not particularly well and alone ... I believe it can and should be reinterpreted.'²³ But I think the remnant of historical materialism accounts of ideology from Elster's masterly resume is the idea that agents tend to view their locally valid views into invalid global statements. This theory suggests that preference formation is not random with respect to the social location of the individual. This idea, indispensable to the preservation of major research fields in political science such as electoral studies, is true, but what is distinctly Marxian about it? Moreover, if a theory of ideology can be reconstructed with microfoundations in cognitive psychology, it will represent social scientific progress, but in what sense will it be a renewed or restoration of a Marxist theory? After all, we use one of Elster's sharp phrases, 'ideas should be judged by their descendants, not by their ancestors.'

Elster writes in the concluding paragraph of Making Sense of Marx that 'It is not possible today, morally or intellectually, to be a Marxist in the traditional sense.'²⁴ Making Sense of Marx will persuade any rational person who thinks otherwise of the value of that summary verdict. But Elster goes on: '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'. No reader who has accompanied Elster to his conclusion can possibly be fooled by the author's final paragraph. Elster's methodological debates are to analytical philosophy, neo-classical economics, methodological individualism, and cognitive psychology. The substantive theories of Karl Marx which he accepts in an essentially modified form are revisionist in a grand scale. 'Above all values' seem most acceptable. Elster is inspired by Marx's core aesthetic value, the self-development of the human being. But the original idea is mistaken, and Elster is ruthlessly critical of Marx's writings which exposed this rift. Moreover, Elster shares none of Marx's more disputable

¹⁷ John Roemer, 'Should Marxism be esteemed in exploitation?,' in J. Roemer (ed.), pp. 52-70.
¹⁸ 'My contention in this essay Anarchist Marxism are well on the way to becoming non-Rovianism, much like the Althubian socialism published by F. Pethrus, Marxism and Class Theory: A Bourgeois Conquest, Oxford University Press, 1979.
²⁰ 'Negative state or negation state which did social theory incorporated', Archivos Españoles de Sociología, 25, pp. 220-24.
²¹ Making Sense of Marx, p. 589.
²² Personal correspondence.
²³ Introduction to Karl Marx, p. 189.
²⁴ Making Sense of Marx, p. 55.
Victoria's preoccupation, his racism and his sexism. He regards socialist revolutions in the West as impossible and/or undesirable, socialist revolutions in the East and South as doomed to fail, the prospect of a world socialist revolution as a fantasy, and communism as an inhuman utopia.

Sentimentalism triumphs in the last sentences of Elster's odyssey through Marxism. To use some of his own favoured terms, it is only wishful thinking, inconsistency, and exaggeration which make Elster a Marxist. A man who writes that 'Surely the goal of any serious form of socialism is to create a society which on balance is a marked improvement on capitalism, not one which is born in many respects and worse in none'17 is a hard-headed social scientist (with a small 'c' and a small 'f') engaged in the worthwhile task of saving socialism from Marxism. What is psychologically interesting about Elster's Marxism is not its substance. The fact that he is able to throw away the Marxist label. Yet Elster's Marxist studies, like his other works, are worth reading to see the gifted deployment of philosophical themes and arguments. In Hegel's Phenomenology of Mind the argument is made that Spirit in its Odyssey constantly confronts its own past. Perhaps Elster needs to keep his Marxism alive so that his struggle against his past can affirm his own identity. Whether that speculation is true or not, his search to make Marxism defensible, while not vindicating Marx, or Marxism, has produced a fascinating philosopher.2


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