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Marx’s Method

Introduction

Marx’s method represents a distinctive approach to the study of political economy and is often considered to be an alternative to methodologies employed in economic analysis that are based on the natural sciences. It is important to note that Marx arrived at economics via philosophy and his analysis has its roots in social theory. As a result, Marxian political economy can be considered to be much more comprehensive in its analysis than other schools of economic thought. However, the distinctive nature of the approach leaves it open to criticism from more ‘orthodox’ methodologies. In particular, Popper (1972) argues that Marx employs ‘historicism’ in his view that there is a law of historical development, and this leads Marx to adopt ‘economic determinism’, which for Popper is not acceptable because human behaviour is individual in character and can therefore change the course of history. However, this charge made by Popper does not stand close scrutiny, as Marx would undoubtedly agree that this could be the case but that, while human beings do make their own history, it is not under conditions of their own choosing. Rather, they are constrained by the institutional and social structures that are associated with the phase of development in which they exist.

Because Marx is concerned with the dynamic process of history, and the fact that he was writing in the nineteenth century, perhaps the best manner in which to view his work is as a framework for analysis that can be transferred to suit the time and the place and therefore must be adapted to the prevailing circumstances. One may suggest that this is precisely the process that was undertaken by Lenin, using the framework for a country that had not reached capitalist maturity, and for
Gramsci in Italy and Lukacs in Hungary. We could also include Mao in China and Castro in Cuba. What all of these have in common is not an inflexible ideology, but indeed exactly the reverse: the commonality lies in the use of a Marxian framework of analysis as the starting point for the understanding of the system within which they found themselves. Indeed, it would be illogical to employ a methodology that has at its heart the importance of history, and then to claim that the theory is predictive of events that themselves will depend upon the course of history, in anything other than the most general manner.

As with all schools of thought, Marxian political economy is not a unique and totally original schema. Marx’s thought evolved through a process of acceptance and also of criticism of a variety of existing ideas. The result is unique to Marx, but has its roots in other, earlier strands of philosophy, social theory and economics.

The Hegelian tradition

Marx’s earliest writings were devoted to the criticism of the political philosophy of Hegel, and it was this which led Marx to recognize the importance of economics. Although Marx accepted the Hegelian separation of the categories ‘man’ and ‘citizen’ and also the division of ‘state’ and ‘civil society’, he saw civil society, the area of economic relations, as deviating from the course of political society, caused by the collapse of economic coercion that was central to the functioning of feudalism. Thus, the emergence of ‘free’ labour became the crucial event in the emergence and development of capitalism. Therefore, the starting point of Marx’s thought could be viewed as this separation of the economic and the political, and of the state from civil society. From his beginnings as a political philosopher he developed his argument as a critique of Hegel’s political philosophy and concentrated his thought increasingly on the understanding of the economic mechanism of civil society, which he came to acknowledge as the driving force in the development of societies.

Writing in the early nineteenth century Hegel was concerned with the difference between ‘appearance’ and ‘essence’, where appearances, or phenomena, are not necessarily false but may mislead, and essences relate to basic organic relationships that underlie the phenomena that are under investigation (Pheby, 1988, p. 115). Hegel argued that history is not a random sequence of events but rather it is a process that is governed in a comprehensive manner by objective laws. Such objective laws can only be properly understood by viewing history as a whole. This process is not uni-directional but is a dialectical process. Most of