

Marxism, Equality and Exploitation

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This paper presents a Marxist argument against Marxism. More precisely, it deploys the resources of Classical Marxism to criticise Analytical Marxism. One of the most striking features of the history of Analytical Marxism has been the tendency for many of its leading practitioners to move away from theoretical questions of history and economics towards normative questions of equality and fairness. G. A. Cohen and John Roemer stand as paradigmatic examples of this tendency. Yet Marx, Engels and other Classical Marxists were deeply opposed to 'equality'. They criticised the egalitarianism of contemporaries like 'Gracchus' Babeuf and Pierre-Joseph Proudhon as politically and theoretically damaging. To deploy the concept of 'equality', so the Classical Marxists argued, was to deploy an abstract and bourgeois concept whose use in political and theoretical debate served to ignore (or even to jeopardise) values like individuality and self-realisation – values which Marx and Engels took to be objective, ultimate and central to their political and theoretical projects. This paper employs the anti-egalitarian arguments of the Classical Marxists (particularly those of Marx and Engels) against the egalitarianism of the Analytical Marxists (particularly that of Cohen and Roemer). One of the central arguments of the paper will be to decouple the concepts of equality and exploitation. The latter has often been taken by Analytical Marxists to consist in, or be reliant upon, some notion of fairness; and the latter has similarly been taken to involve some form of egalitarianism. This paper will show that the Classical Marxists' use of the concept of exploitation was more closely linked to notions of power than notions of fairness or equality. To adapt a phrase of Cohen's, this paper will attempt to show that the relationship between exploitation and equality is one of mutual irrelevance. Whatever else may be said about the Analytical Marxists' move to egalitarianism, and of their treatment of exploitation, they are inconsistent with (Classical) Marxism.