

LITTLE, Daniel. *The Scientific Marx*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986.

The purpose of this book is to assess Marx as an eminent social scientist and to show how his work and his scientific practice are in substantial continuity with the larger tradition of empirical scientific investigation.

In his introduction, Little notes that, despite many books and articles on the scientific value of Marx's *Capital*, there has been not much progress. But claims Little, the situation is beginning to change, since recent developments in Anglo-American scholarship have finally cleared the ground for a serious evaluation of Marx's economic theory, by exposing it to the 'rigour' of analytical philosophy of science. In this respect, Little acknowledges his intellectual debt to two main currents in this new brand of Marxism: on the one hand, Little has high respect for the functionalist approach to historical materialism, presented most forcefully in the work of G.A. Cohen and Allen Wood. On the other hand, there is the microfoundationalist approach towards Marxian explanations, most clearly reflected in the work of Elster and Roemer.(see below)

According to our author, valuable as these efforts may be, they have not yet lead to a systematic account of the particulars of Marx's theory of science, as it is embedded in the best of his scientific practice. Nor have their detailed accounts of various topics in Marx's economic theory resulted in a systematic account of *Capital* as an organized body of scientific knowledge. Little has set himself the task of providing such an account.

In chapter 1 the author gives a general account of the topics to be discussed in later chapters. Two general themes are given attention: Little considers the question whether *Capital* must be evaluated against the standards of natural science. He interprets this question as the problem of naturalism, "the doctrine that there can be a natural scientific study of society."(p.13) Little attacks this doctrine and consequently its relevance for an assessment of the scientificity of *Capital*. His strategy is as follows: he starts with an exposition of a model called predictive-theory naturalism that incorporates several features common to various forms of naturalism. In such a model he argues, "scientific knowledge typically takes the form of deductive theoretical systems and associated bodies of empirical consequences."(p.14)

Then, he tries to show that this deductivist picture is inadequate as an account of the scientific nature of *Capital*. Despite his opposite claim "that most postpositivist philosophy of science has tacitly accepted much of this deductivist account"(p.15) I do think that some of the most influential philosophers of science have precisely rejected "the basic idea that scientific knowledge takes the form of unified deductive systems".(16) and have proposed alternative models. (see for instance R. Harre -Principles of Scientific Thinking 1973) Accordingly, Little's discussion of naturalism is one-sided. Be as it may however, Little defends the peculiarity of Marx's account against deductivist interpretations because his "account is irreducibly pluralistic in that it depends essentially on a variety of different forms of analysis and descriptive matter."(p.20) Whether proponents of a naturalistic interpretation will be embarrassed much by this remark is a different story.

Secondly, Little introduces the microfoundationalist approach to Marx's explanations. Following Roemer and Elster, Little repeats the need for microfoundations for Marx's general conclusions. This microfoundation consists in a detailed analysis of the institutional arrangements of a (capitalist) society, and in showing "how individuals, acting rationally within the contexts of those institutions will give rise to distinctive collective patterns."(p.35) Without such a microfoundation, they claim Marx's 'description' of the economic structure and its functional properties would lack any foundation at all!

These two themes now form the background of the following chapters: the microfoundational approach is further discussed in chapter 5, but since it forms the core of Little's approach to Marx's explanatory and scientific practice,(the elaboration of the first theme) the various discussions of "the particulars of Marx's theory of science" (chapters 2,4,6 and 7) are centered around this explanatory paradigm defended by Little.

His method of investigation here is the following: referring to Kuhn's discussion of normal science and its scientists, Little maintains that the explicit theory that a scientist has of his own practice is largely independent of the actual assumptions that underlie his actual scientific work; and worse that this explicit theory can be misleading as a guide for an understanding of this scientific practice. Accepting this as some kind of established law of analytical philosophy of science, and since Marx, a scientist after all, is no exception to this law, Little feels himself released from the difficult and much needed task to take Marx's own remarks about his conception of law, determination, dialectics and essentialism seriously, and to put them into the perspective

of nineteenth century thought and the thought of his intellectual ancestors. (Not a single word is written on this!) Thus in chapter 4, when discussing Marx's view on dialectics, essentialism, and the abstractive method he takes the following elimination-strategy towards Marx's own comments: do not discuss them at all; if one cannot but mention these comments, then either maintain that these comments are not essential to an understanding of his work, and are mere *coquetterie* with Hegelian categories, (Little's handling of dialectics) or maintain that they are regrettable reminiscences of a theory of science abandoned in Marx's best work (some examples of "methodological collectivism", as Elster would say). Otherwise, choose those comments that nicely fit into some kind of moderate version of empiricism that every academic intellectual could accept- that is an empiricism that both rejects extreme forms of inductivism and speculative thought. (see his discussion of Marx's essentialism as Galilean empiricism and chapters 6&7).

Chapter 2 contains a brief discussion of the essential theses and concepts of historical materialism, relying as many authors do, almost exclusively on the summarized statements of historical materialism contained in *The Communist Manifesto* and the *Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. Then follows a review of some of the problems that have been raised in the interpretation of these texts, such as 'technological determinism', 'the primacy of the forces of production', the relation between 'basis' and 'superstructure', followed by a short discussion of the functionalist interpretation of these texts, put forward by Cohen and the subsequent attacks of microfoundationalists such as Elster. Whoever is a bit familiar with this sort of discussions will hardly be impressed by Little's review, since he adds nothing of importance to the debate. In the second part of this chapter, Little criticizes 'the Subsumption Theory': this view holds that historical materialism is a general theory of history and *Capital* is the specific application of that theory as the study of capitalist society. According to the author, despite wide agreement on this view, it misses the mark. Little claims that the analysis offered in *Capital* is doubly restricted when compared with the scope of historical materialism, - that is as an analysis of a 'specific' mode of production; and as an analysis of a mode of production and not of society as a whole. I find it difficult to see how this restrictedness implies a refutation of the subsumption theory. Secondly, his arguments fail as a defense for his own view that historical materialism and *Capital* are logically independent theoretical enterprises- since they presuppose a view on historical materialism that he just wants to defend. So he states that " the chief texts in which historical materialism is

developed do not contain extensive empirical detail".(p.64) Here Little presupposes just his own view that Marx's extensive discussions in *Capital* and the *Grundrisse* that contain extensive empirical detail are outside the project of historical materialism.

In chapter 3 the discussion of the nature of Marx's economic reasoning is equally unsatisfactory. After a (very) short discussion of Marx's Labor Theory of Value (LTV) , Little gets no further than repeating the Steedmanian critique on LTV. For Little then, the debate on the status of LTV in Marx's economic theory is closed and apparently, he expects the same is true for the reader, since not a word is said of the many and different criticisms which have been made against this interpretation and subsequent criticism of LTV, and the sraffian reformulation of the marxian program. On one minor point does Little depart from Steedman's interpretation: when he replaces Steedman's claim of the redundancy of LTV with the claim that LTV is a possible model, a framework of description "that allows us to analyze the process of production adequately and demonstrate the conditions the process imposes on economic variables (price ,profit, interest. etc.,)." (p.88) But this framework is substitutable. It can be replaced by other tools of analysis without significantly altering the theoretical conclusions of the analysis. The conclusion is then that the LTV is not a theory at all, and has no explanatory value. Little is not the first to dream aloud about that project,(cfr. Roemer's treatment of the concept of exploitation) but he would certainly be the first if he could show this substitution to be possible for *Capital* as a whole.

Chapter 5 repeats and restates the essential tenet of his approach, in the form of a systematic exposition of what is according to Little, Marx's central explanatory paradigm: institutional-logic explanations. These take the form of reasoning from the hypothetical situation of a *representative class actor* to a conclusion concerning the most rational strategy in the context of those institutional arrangements; according to Little, LTV is only a tool Marx inherited from political economy to 'describe' these institutional arrangements. Of far more importance, is the micro-analysis of the macrostructures and processes, without whom the description of macro processes would hang in the air.

In this respect, Little offers some 'paradigm examples' of this view extracted from Marx's explanatory practice. However, the examples he mentions are totally unconvincing as anyone acquainted with Marx's explanation of the law of the falling rate of profit, his criticism of methodological individualistic approaches to the phenomenon of competition (e.g. *Grundrisse* 649-50) and his account of the accumulation of capital can see. Moreover, there is more

needed than just a few examples to show the substitutionality of LTV, and the related call for microfoundations as the fundamental explanatory level of Marx's economic theory.

Chapter 6 and 7 are related to the picture of Marx as an enlightened empiricist (see Chapter 4). In Chapter 6, Little analyzes Marx's uses of empirical evidence. There he argues that Marx made substantial and rigorous use of the empirical data. Special attention is directed to Marx's justificational practice. It is noted that the deductivist model, mentioned in the first chapter, is not very useful for evaluating Marx's system, since empirical evidence is not relevant to his analysis as it is in the hypothetico-deductive model of justification. On the interpretation of Little, testing predictions is only of weak use in evaluating Marx's analysis. "Rather than evaluating a theory on the basis of its predictions, we evaluate the cogency of the predictions on the basis of (1) the justification available for the initial hypotheses, and (2) the rigor of the argument establishing these tendencies". (p. 171)

Little further notes how Marx used empirical data for different purposes other than justificatory ones, for instance his documentary use of material in his treatment of empirical data in 'The Working Day' ('Capital I' pp.340-416)

In chapter 7, he defends Marx's scientific practice against the charges of Popper and Thompson. Against Popper, Little rightly argues that the notion of countervailing tendencies that interfere with the basic tendency (e.g. of the falling rate of profit) does not by itself reduce the empirical content of the theory. Secondly, he tells us that Marx's work satisfies the standards of a progressive research program, both empirically and theoretically. Finally, he shows us how Thompson's criticisms of reductionism to economic explanations, and economism— an isolated account of the economic as distinct from politics and ideology, are misplaced with respect to Marx's *Capital*.

By way of conclusion then, I found the book unconvincing in its defense of the microfoundationalist approach—since it adds no further grounds for accepting it as a valuable approach to the study of society let alone as an interpretation of Marx's economic theory. Secondly, although I appreciate the idea to use analytical philosophy as a tool in the interpretation of Marx's *Capital*, I think it must be done very carefully, without omitting the intellectual and cultural background of Marx's scientific practice. An adequate unification of both approaches is still lacking up to this day. Unfortunately, Little's book is of no help at all. Thirdly and finally, his reconstruction of Marx's implicit theory of science on the basis of the microfoundationalist approach does

not increase the credibility of this approach. On the contrary it is further reduced since it is connected with a methodology and a metaphysics that cannot account for the essentialist features of Marx's explicit views and the bulk of his scientific practice.(see especially Scott Meikle- *Essentialism in the Thought of Karl Marx* 1985).

Toon Tessier