

Lavoie, Marc

Book Review

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Book review

Cuyvers, Ludo (2022): *Neo-Marxism and Post-Keynesian Economics: From Kalecki to Sraffa and Joan Robinson*, Milton Park (247 pages, Routledge, hardcover, ISBN 978-1-032-25480-7)

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More than 40 years ago I had read an article by Ludo Cuyvers on Joan Robinson's theory of economic growth (Cuyvers 1979). I had not read anything else from him since. A possible explanation is found in the preface of Cuyvers' book, where he says that in the past 50 years, he has studied the works of Kalecki, Sraffa and Robinson, but 'never came to writing up the results' of this research (Cuyvers 2022: xv). This is not quite true, as the 1979 paper attests, and as Cuyvers has also published papers discussing and developing Sraffa's (1960) model. In any case, the title of this intriguing book has a long history, since Cuyvers (1979: 328) was already making use of it, defining the term 'post-Keynesian neo-Marxism', and claiming that Robinson's theory of growth was essentially neo-Marxist, a qualifier that Robinson herself disliked.

Cuyvers' book is divided into three parts. In the first part he defines what he means by post-Keynesian neo-Marxism, linking it in particular to the works of Michał Kalecki and Joseph Steindl and to those of Paul Baran and Paul Sweezy, supplementing this part with an introduction to the works of Sraffa and Robinson. The second part, much more technical, is entirely devoted to Sraffa. Cuyvers emphasizes the Marxist concerns that can be found in Sraffa's approach as well as the major differences between Sraffa and Marx, concluding, with the support of Geoff Harcourt, that Sraffa is best understood as being part of a line of descent arising from Marx. The third part is entirely devoted to Joan Robinson, in particular her assessments of Marxian economics, her enamor with Rosa Luxemburg's work and the numerous similarities that one can find between her *Accumulation of Capital* and Marx's views. Cuyvers further argues that her implicit model in that book is very similar to that of Sraffa. Spread out through the book are also details about the lives and careers of all the authors named above, as well as a discussion of some of the epistolary exchanges between these authors. There is a bit of repetitions from one chapter to the next, but at least the outline of the book is very clear.

In a nutshell, Cuyvers' main thesis is that there are a lot of commonalities between: on the one hand, the neo-Marxists associated with Baran and Sweezy as well as authors such as Harry Magdoff and John Bellamy Foster and the whole school of thought that could be found in the journal *Monthly Review*; and on the other hand, the 'left Keynesians' such as Joan Robinson. All of them got inspired by Kalecki and Steindl and were sympathetic to the work of Marx, notably on the drivers of capitalism, the likelihood of class antagonism and the problem of profit realization, without necessarily being attached to his labour theory of value. They also all took on board Keynes's concern about the lack of aggregate demand in modern capitalism. In fact, Halevi (1985: 111), in a paper highly recommended by Cuyvers, claims that 'in a very concrete sense the Marxian

foundations of the *MR* [*Monthly Review*] approach help understand the issues raised by Keynes'. The other common feature of these post-Keynesian neo-Marxists is that they were all concerned with a capitalist economy dominated by large firms and conglomerates, thus leaving aside the standard notion of competition. Sraffa is said to fit in as well, thanks to his 1925 and 1926 articles where he was criticizing the Marshallian competitive firm and industry. I would add, although this is not really in Cuyvers' book, that the analysis of the 2008 Global Financial Crisis that was found among the authors of the *Monthly Review* was very similar to that offered by post-Keynesian authors, based as it was on a proper understanding of the principle of endogenous money and of the inherent instability of the financial system.

Cuyvers seems to lament that this post-Keynesian neo-Marxism did not turn out to have much of an impact on Marxism in general. In particular, he cites Paul Sweezy, who said in 1987 that 'the Monthly Review tendency is a minority' within URPE (Cuyvers 2022: 54). I am unable to judge whether this is still the case today, but there are certainly Marxist-trained authors who do contribute to the post-Keynesian literature, especially around Kalecki and Goodwin. More surprising is Cuyvers' statement regarding Kalecki's impact on post-Keynesian economics. Cuyvers (2022: 52) writes that: 'Despite the relentless efforts of authorities such as Joan Robinson, it must be admitted that Kalecki's impact on the post-Keynesian theory, not to mention present-day economic theory, has been disappointingly small'. The survey on post-Keynesian theory over the last two decades recently offered by Eckhard Hein (2017) seems to show the opposite.

The second part of the book, which is by far the biggest of the three parts, is devoted to the work of Sraffa and especially his famous 1960 book. As said earlier, it is much more technical. Cuyvers goes over Sraffa's price equations, the distinction between basic and non-basic commodities and the equations defining embodied labour. He recalls concepts such as the standard system and joint production, and he goes over the Cambridge capital controversies, as well as the controversies on the labour theory of value between Marxists and neo-Ricardians as the Sraffians were then called. In particular, he deals with the debates and the solutions around the transformation problem and the acrimonious responses to Ian Steedman's claim that Marx's value magnitudes were irrelevant. Cuyvers emphasizes that it took a long time for Sraffa to finish his book and that he was very reluctant to discuss his own work with his Cambridge colleagues, only offering criticisms on the work of others. He concludes that Sraffa 'paved the way for a thorough rethinking of Marx's economics' (Cuyvers 2022: 152).

Joan Robinson's work in relation to Marx is the subject of the third part. It was the topic of Cuyvers' doctoral dissertation in 1977. Cuyvers (2022: 158) considers that today Marglin (1984) and Shaikh (2016) are among the few who have attempted 'an integration of Robinson's theory of accumulation and growth with modern Marxist economic theory'. Cuyvers underlines that Robinson (1956), like Sraffa, had in mind a linear production model – an input–output model with two sectors and with normal prices, not forgetting her independent discovery of the possibility of reverse capital deepening. He also sees similarities with Baran and Sweezy, and of course with Kalecki, as she conceived a monopolized capitalism with weakened competitive pressures and a tendency towards underconsumption. An entire chapter is devoted to the similarities of her growth theories with Marx's views.

Cuyvers (2022: 239) concludes this part and the book by expressing his frustration about the apparent 'slow but unstoppable selective amnesia of many post-Keynesians' regarding the Marxist roots of their school of thought, as they could be found according to him in Robinson's work. This may be so, although Cuyvers mentions that there are exceptions, such as Geoff Harcourt, Edward Nell, Joseph Halevi and Bob Rowthorn.

He could have added the book of Amit Bhaduri (1986: xii), whose preface points out that Joan Robinson convinced him ‘of the radical content of Keynesian economics which we could decipher more easily with the help of Marx and Kalecki’, confirming Robinson’s (1978: 18) assertion towards the end of her career that post-Keynesian theory had a general framework that enabled ‘to bring the insights of Marx, Keynes, and Kalecki into coherent form’. Besides this, Cuyvers has certainly done a good job in arguing for the existence of a post-Keynesian neo-Marxist line of thought, based as it is on published works and archives.

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