Since the 1980s, the analytical Marxists have tried, sympathetically but critically, to make sense of Marxist theory without succumbing to the obscurantism and dogmatism which they perceived in hitherto prevailing versions of Marxism - both Western versions and the official Marxisms of the former Communist societies. One of the aims of this interdisciplinary group was to ascertain what would remain viable in Marxism once the ‘rigorous’ standards of analytic philosophy and the most up-to-date methods of the social sciences were applied to it - rather than denounced as forms of ‘bourgeois ideology’. However, laudable as this orientation may seem, matters may not be that simple. This becomes evident when one considers an issue in the philosophy of social science that was hotly debated within (and outside) analytical Marxism during the 80s and 90s: the issue of methodological individualism versus methodological holism. In distancing themselves from earlier versions of Marxism, some of the analytical Marxists may have uncritically adopted certain mainstream views in the social sciences and the philosophy of social science, with the result that they have drawn the wrong lessons from those past debates.

One of these wrong lessons, I think, is the notion that Marxism needs to be grounded in methodological individualism - a doctrine about what counts as an acceptable, properly ‘scientific’ form of explanation in the social sciences. The lingering attachment to methodological individualism among some of the analytical Marxists has come with an attachment to rational choice theory as well. But it is debatable whether ‘rational choice Marxism’ has produced anything useful or relevant to the issues that socialists and other egalitarians are concerned with that has not already been said, or could not be said more effectively and plainly, without the formalistic model-building characteristic of rational choice theory – and without its rather obsessive attachment to explanation in terms of ‘mechanisms’.

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1 This view is expressed by, among others, Steven Lukes (2007, 219-21).
My focus, however, will not be on rational choice theory *per se* but on methodological individualism – which is logically independent of rational choice or game theoretic explanations. I will argue that the attachment to methodological individualism that is evident in the work of some of the analytical Marxists is unfortunate, both because it is misguided in itself and because it can lead to an unnecessary quest for methodological purity that does more harm than good, particularly if it diverts analytical energies from the real social and political problems of our time – surely not what the analytical Marxists intended. If this amounts to an accusation of ideology, so be it.

1.

The text I will begin with is G.A. Cohen’s ‘Introduction’ to the second edition of his *Karl Marx’s Theory of History* (Cohen, 2000, xvii-xxviii). Here we find some strong claims about the methodological and philosophical commitments of analytical Marxism. The analytical Marxists, Cohen declares, are more unswervingly committed to certain methods of reasoning and techniques of inquiry than they are to any of the substantive claims of Marxist social theory. In particular, they are committed to what he calls ‘analysis in a broad sense’ and ‘analysis in a narrow sense.’ In the broad sense, analytical thinking ‘is opposed to so-called “dialectical” thinking’, in the narrow sense, it is ‘opposed to what might be called “holistic” thinking’ (xvii). Analytical Marxists, Cohen avers, strive to be analytical in both these senses and their ‘belief in the power of analysis, both in its broad and its narrow sense, is unrevisable’ (xxiv). He continues along these lines:

And our commitment to Marxist theses (as opposed to our commitment to socialist values) is not absolute in the way that commitment to analytical technique is. The commitment to the techniques, so we should claim, reflects nothing less than a commitment to reason itself. It is a refusal to relax the demand for clear statement and rigorous argument. We believe that it is irrational obscurantism to resist analytical reasoning, to resist analysis in the broad

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2 Of course, ‘more effectively and plainly’ is always to be construed as relative to an audience. Rational choice Marxism is geared toward an audience for whom rational choice theory is almost a kind of natural language. But it is far from clear why non-initiates should be any less put off by ‘rational choice Marxism’, with its pretense of methodological purity, than by the forms of dialectical Marxism (with their own claims to methodological purity) which the analytical Marxists reject. See Callinicos (2006, 254-60) on methodological individualism and rational-choice Marxism; for more general recent criticism of rational choice theory, see Lehtinen and Kuorkoski (2007) and Reiss (2007). Reiss interestingly, and without appealing to pre-modern conceptions of science, criticises the rational choice theorists’ attachment to ‘mechanisms’, arguing, against the grain, that “investigating mechanisms…is…a methodological strategy with fairly limited applicability” in the social sciences (163).

3 The first edition appeared in 1978. It is a core original work of analytical Marxism.
sense in the name of dialectic, and to resist analysis in the narrow sense in the name of anti-individualist holism (xxiv).

To so resist these so-called analytical techniques represents, for Cohen, ‘an unwillingness to accept the rule of reason itself’ (xxiv).

In what follows I will not resist analysis in Cohen’s ‘broad sense’ in the name of dialectical method (though I am more sceptical than Cohen of the idea of a so-called ‘analytic method’ and about the ‘power of analysis’ in both his senses). I will, however, resist analysis in his ‘narrow sense’ in the name of pragmatism, an anti-atomist, anti-reductionist, holistic, anti-metaphysical pragmatism. In this vein, I will argue that the debates on methodological individualism (MI), seen in a pragmatist light, should not have been resolved as Cohen seems to suggest they have, in favour of MI over methodological holism (MH). If anything the problems should have been dissolved, at least at the level of abstraction at which they typically were framed. But Cohen seems to suggest that to resist MI is to resist analysis in the ‘narrow sense’ – which is, for Cohen, to resist ‘reason itself’. I think, on the contrary, that analytical Marxism should not be saddled with a commitment to analysis in this sense – something that the Cohen of the first edition (1978) did not do. There is a certain hollowness to Cohen’s claims on behalf of analysis and ‘the rule of reason’. It is as if none of the critique of traditional analytic philosophy coming from various quarters over the past three decades has moved him. My aim here, however, focusing on Cohen’s ‘narrow’ sense of analysis, is merely to clear away some brush, so that we can have a better view of what the analytical Marxists (and their fellow travelers) have done best: help us to understand and assess the key claims of Marxism, both explanatory and normative, and to think clearly on issues having to do with class oppression, the workings of capitalism and the desirability, possibility and sustainability of a democratic socialism.

I will proceed as follows. First, I will say in more detail what Cohen means by ‘analysis’ in the narrow sense of the term. Then, I will critically discuss Cohen’s claims in the light of a kind of pragmatist scepticism towards both reductionist versions of MI and metaphysical versions of individualism and holism. Pragmatism links inquiry, whether scientific or any other form of inquiry, to human purposes; and as the name suggests, it judges a method not in terms of its ability to track the ‘intrinsic nature of reality’ but in terms of its uses and consequences (including its theoretical uses and consequences), its potential contribution to desirable practices. Relevant here is pragmatism’s aversion to metaphysical theorising, its lack of ‘ontological seriousness’, and its rejection of the notion that the task of inquiry is to accurately represent things just as they are in
themselves - how they essentially are apart from any kind of description or conceptualisation, apart from any human interests, needs or purposes. I maintain that if we take a pragmatist turn, which centrally includes an anti-representationalist, holist view of language and meaning (a form of semantic or meaning holism), then we would discard *metaphysical* versions of individualism and holism, and that in so doing we would do much to remove the basis for thinking that there are two distinct, competing methods properly denoted by these terms. I draw two lessons from this: first, that interminable methodological/philosophical debates revolving around MI should always take a back seat to more substantive socio-historical analysis which can and does proceed without reference to these issues; second, that MI should cease being trumpeted as an *alternative* to so-called ‘holistic’ structural and functional explanations in Marxism and in social science generally.

2.

In his account of analysis in the narrow sense, Cohen virtually equates it with a form of MI:

In that narrower sense the analyticalness of analytical Marxism is its disposition to explain molar phenomena by reference to the micro-constituents and micro-mechanisms that respectively compose the entities and underlie the processes which occur at a grosser level of resolution….Insofar as analytical Marxists are analytical in this narrower sense, they reject the point of view in which social formations and classes are depicted as obeying laws of behaviour that are not a function of the behaviours of their constituent individuals (xxiii). Cohen maintains that ‘a micro-analysis is always desirable and always *in principle* possible, even if it is not always possible to achieve one in practice at a given stage of the development of a particular discipline’ (xxiii). He interprets his previous debates with Jon Elster on functional explanation and the need for ‘microfoundations’ in this light. In these debates Elster was insistent on the need for an account of microfoundations grounding the functional theses of historical materialism - such as the thesis that the ‘legal and political superstructure’ of a society can be explained, at least in its large lines, in terms of its being functional for the prevailing system of economic production. In the 2000 ‘Introduction’, Cohen maintains that his argument against Elster was not that functional explanations can be adequate without an explicit account of micro-mechanisms, but that, incomplete as such macro-explanations are in Marxism, it would be premature to condemn them as being unscientific before further investigation into possible mechanisms. The proper conclusion, according to Cohen, is that ‘pre-analytical Marxism was scientifically undeveloped, rather in the way that

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thermodynamics was before it was supplemented by statistical mechanics, and, in each case, because of failure to represent molar entities (such as quantities of gas, or economic structures) as arrangements of their more fundamental constituents’ (xxiii–iv).6 Analysis in the narrow sense therefore obliges the theorist to ‘represent’ macro-level social realities like ‘economic structure’, ‘class conflict’, ‘global capitalism’, ‘the state system’ and so on, in terms of their ‘more fundamental constituents’, assumed to be individuals. In the context of Marx’s theory of history, Cohen says, ‘to claim that capitalism must break down and give way to socialism is not yet to show how behaviours of individuals lead to that result. And nothing else leads to that result, since behaviours of individuals are always where the action is, in the final analysis’ (xxiv).

These remarks need to be unpacked before they can properly be assessed. As we will see, they could be unpacked in a way that makes them fairly trivial, but that would undermine the notion that analysis in a narrow sense distinguishes so-called ‘analytical’ social theory from any other kind of social theory, as well as the notion that MI is an approach that is clearly distinguishable from MH. But insofar as Cohen’s depiction of analysis in a narrow sense is not trivial, it involves a commitment to a highly questionable, reductionist and/or metaphysically inflected version of MI that analytical Marxism, or any critical social theory, can live well without; or so I will claim.

3.

Cohen’s dismissal of ‘anti-individualist holism’ is not stated in such a way that it is very clear which version of MI he thinks is correct. The idea that laws or generalisations about social formations and classes are ‘a function of the behaviours of their constituent individuals’ is ambiguous between ‘such laws and generalisations are reducible to laws or generalisations about individuals’ and ‘the behaviours of individuals are an integral, ineliminable part of the causal processes underlying such laws and generalisations.’ The latter claim, I think, is trivial; the former is not.

Moreover, the very contrast between individualism and holism is problematic. Suppose we say that individuals are the ‘fundamental constituents’ of society: society only exists insofar as individuals do. But conversely, individuals are social beings, members of societies. Should we then

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6 I agree with Callinicos (2006) that Cohen has shifted his position to some extent and conceded more to Elster than he did in the earlier debates. In fact I am virtually in complete agreement with Callinicos’s critical comments on Cohen’s ‘Introduction’ to the 2000 edition. In this paper I am, to some extent, fleshing out Callinicos’s criticisms in a more self-consciously pragmatist way than he does.
say that society is the ‘fundamental reality’ from which individuals emerge? If this is regarded as an absurd way of speaking, why is it any more absurd than the claim about individuals being more ‘fundamental’? Do we have any useful or plausible idea of what a human ‘individual’ is that is not an idea of a social being, always related to, associated with, interacting with or having interacted with, other individuals? From a pragmatist perspective, the whole idea of getting clear on what is ontologically more fundamental, the individual or the social (or collectivity), is a bad one. In some contexts, for some purposes, it is better to focus on individuals; in other contexts, for other purposes, it may be more useful to talk about institutions, social structures or groups. Why think that one of these ways of talking better represents social reality ‘as it really is’ than the other? If, as pragmatists stress, language is not a medium for representing the intrinsically real, but simply one more important capacity humans have evolved that helps us to cope with our environments and our lives, then to ask which vocabulary is more fundamental in the sense that it represents reality apart from any interests, needs or purposes that we may have, is to ask a bad, fruitless question. For a pragmatist, the question whether the individual or the social is more fundamental should itself be questioned: It should always be asked, ‘more fundamental in what sense, in which context and for which purposes?’

These general remarks should be kept in mind in the following, more detailed discussion of MI. I will now proceed to look at some of the arguments that have been made in this area and to draw certain conclusions from them, both about the debate between the individualists and holists, and about what this should mean for analytical Marxism.

4.

Methodological individualism is a doctrine about legitimate explanation in the social sciences that has been vigorously debated at least twice in the 20th century: in the 50s and 60s with defenders of MI such as F.A. Hayek (1952) and critics such as Maurice Mandelbaum (1957), then from the late 70s to the 90s with defenders such as Jon Elster (1982), Daniel Little (1991, 183-201) and John Roemer (1982), and critics such as Alan Garfinkel (1981), Richard Miller (1978), Andrew Levine (Levine et al., 1987) and Torbjörn Tännsjö (1990). Although Marxism was at the centre of both

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7 One example of such explicit ontologising within analytical Marxism is Daniel Little’s defence of ‘ontological individualism’ (Little, 1991, 183-90). Another example, outside analytical Marxism, is from a former student of Cohen, Rajeev Bharghava, who defends a kind of metaphysical holism: Bharghava (1992).
debates, the latter debate is distinctive in that it was mainly a debate within analytical Marxism. Some of the analytical Marxists, such as Roemer and Elster, began to develop a brand of ‘rational choice Marxism’ which they linked to MI, not as a matter of entailment but of affinity. MI, the thought went, encourages us to look for microfoundations at ‘the level of the individual’; and rational choice theory, it was suggested, is an excellent vehicle for this.

This whole line of reasoning assumes that there is an interesting, principled contrast between individualist and holist explanations. The assumption is questionable. Mind/Body dualism is no longer a mainstream philosophical view; the dualism of the Individual and the Social seems to have lingered, and I want to suggest that this partly explains why the debate between methodological individualists and holists has not been adequately resolved (or, rather, dissolved) within analytical Marxism – or outside analytical Marxism, for that matter.

The strongest version of MI is the notion that any legitimate social explanation can, in principle, be reduced to explanations in terms of the characteristics of individuals; if it is not so reducible, it is not a legitimate explanation. Stated in this way, the doctrine raises more questions than it answers. How could explanations in terms of the characteristics of individuals actually explain in a way that is socially relevant if there were no explanatory work being done, if only implicitly, by assumptions about the 
relations between and among individuals, in other words, by social relations? Is that not unavoidable and if so, does it not become unclear what the relevant contrast to MI would be? How would a methodological holist approach differ? Holists typically stress the explanatory role of social relations, social structures, and social institutions. If the contrast to individualistic explanation is explanation in terms of social relations and social structures, what is the nature of this contrast? Does it commit one to an atomistic conception of fundamentally asocial individuals? How can we identify individuals apart from their social relations? Is it a relevant or important distinction for our understanding of, or our ability to assess, the explanations of social scientists, historians, journalists or cultural critics?

In addressing these questions, we can observe that MI is commonly associated with the use of intentional or psychological explanations (at ‘the level of the individual’) in the social sciences and ‘holism’ with structural or other forms of broad, non-intentional explanation. If MI is construed as a reductionist doctrine, it can be taken as the thesis that the latter type of explanation, where legitimate, is reducible, in principle, to the former. A nonreductive MI would give us the weaker claim that the latter explanations need to be supplemented by, not reduced to the former; in the terms...
of rational choice theorists, supplemented by an account of ‘microfoundations’ or ‘micro-mechanisms’. In their efforts to make use of mainstream social-science techniques for radical purposes many of the analytical Marxists have adopted this language of ‘micro’ and ‘macro’. They have made use of rational choice theory and game theory to analyse Marxist theses about society and history, as well as to address questions about the justice of capitalism and socialism. Though this is not a feature of Cohen’s work, he sees these techniques and forms of inquiry as forming an integral part of what he calls analysis in the ‘narrow sense’ and, going by the 2000 ‘Introduction’, he now seems to think that they are indispensable to good social science.

However, the attempt to identify two clearly distinct types of explanation under the headings ‘individualist’ and ‘holist’, one of which (the holist or macro) needs either to be reduced to, or supplemented by, the other (the individualist or micro), seems problematic from the start if we carefully consider what is actually involved in social explanations. Any non-trivial social theory, explanation or analysis will refer at least implicitly both to the sorts of ‘entities’ emphasised by explanatory holists and those emphasised by explanatory individualists, to social structures, institutions and social relations, on the one hand, and to the beliefs and desires of individuals, on the other.  

Perhaps contrary to appearances, there is no way to unscramble these in a way that isolates the purely ‘individualist’ explanations from the purely social-structural or ‘holistic’ explanations. Insofar as we distinguish (as in economics) macro from micro levels of analysis, these distinctions are context-relative and relative to our explanatory and other purposes; our focus is on different features of social reality, not on an individual-level reality and a derivative social reality. There is no reason to think that we are dealing here with context-transcendent metaphysical distinctions corresponding to higher and lower levels of Reality. Neither is ‘more fundamental’ than the other in that metaphysical sense of ‘more fundamental’. Pragmatising these distinctions, I will argue, deflates Cohen’s claims about the role of analysis (in the narrow sense) in analytical Marxism.

5.
One of the founding members of analytical Marxism, Jon Elster, has been an ardent defender of MI over the years, but it is not easy to grasp just what MI actually comes to in Elster’s many writings. He has made many claims about it but it is not clear how all these claims mesh with each other.

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8 Callinicos provided compelling arguments for this, against the claims for MI made by Philip Pettit. See Petit (1986) and Callinicos (1987, 12-38). See also, for criticism of Pettit’s version of MI, Tännsjö (1990).
After debates with Cohen (in Cohen’s non-individualist days) and others, Elster came to believe that MI is, though correct, an ‘essentially trivial doctrine’ (Elster, 1993, 7), albeit one that has continually been violated by Marxism - according to the Elster of Making Sense of Marx (1985). As he put it in Political Psychology:

[M] implies neither an atomistic perspective (it grants that relations between individuals are not always reducible to their monadic predicates), nor egoism (it is compatible with any specific set of motivations), nor rational choice (here again it is perfectly neutral), nor the innate or ‘given’ character of desires (it is consistent with the view that desires are shaped by society, that is, by other individuals), nor finally...political individualism (being a methodological doctrine, it is compatible with any political or normative orientation) (1993, 7).

If MI is none of the above things, what precisely is it and what does it imply? Elster’s answer in Political Psychology was that it is a form of reductionism that tries to ‘explain the complex by the simple - the principle that has brought about scientific progress in the face of all kinds of holistic obscurantism’ (1993, 7). There are two different ideas here. One is that MI tries to reduce the complex to the simple, the other is that it avoids ‘holistic obscurantism’. They are different ideas because one can consistently reject certain, metaphysical forms of holism while being sceptical of individualist forms of reduction. The sort of holism Elster had in mind is, putatively, rooted in the Hegelian-Marxian tradition (Elster, 1985, 1-49). Putative forms of ‘holistic obscurantism’ in this tradition include the idea that ‘History’ is an entity unto itself, a quasi-intentional agent with an ultimate goal, that groups or classes, somehow more real than the individuals comprising them, literally think and act, and that individuals are, ontologically, epiphenomenal manifestations of magically self-subsisting social structures or social wholes.

If MI is just the position that rejects these forms of holism, this may explain why Elster has come to regard it as an ‘essentially trivial doctrine’. These are rather metaphysical forms of holism with no clear explanatory or interpretive value in the social sciences. There is no reason to think these notions are not readily excisable from the significant core of Marxist theory including the theory of history. They are superfluous to any useful Marxist explanatory framework that we may have. These forms of holism posit supra-individual social entities (with characteristics we normally ascribe to individuals) that are supposed to be more fundamental or real, in some sense, than the individuals themselves. This is what Levine, Sober and Wright, in their important essay on MI and Marxism, called ‘radical holism’ (1987). They considered this form of holism to be just as implausible as atomism - the idea that the ‘monadic predicates of individuals’ can explain much of
significance in our social lives. Atomism, as they characterised it, seeks explanations in terms of characteristics of individuals that can be identified and understood without even implicit reference to social relations. Like the extreme forms of holism mentioned above, this is an extreme view of dubious intelligibility (and few conscious adherents), but there is a point to discussing it in this context. For once we abandon both atomism and its apparent alter-ego, ‘radical holism’, what we are left with is explanation in terms of relations between and among individuals, that is to say, social relations. There is no metaphysical chasm between, say, intentional and non-intentional or structuralist explanations, both (implicitly or explicitly) refer to relations between and among individuals and neither refers to a level of reality ‘higher’ or ‘deeper’ than the other. The difference between MI and an anti-reductionist form of MH should not be viewed as a metaphysical difference – a difference between the ontological status of individuals with their beliefs and desires, on the one hand, and social institutions and processes with the relationships between individuals they embody, on the other. But then what is the difference?

Absent the metaphysics of atomistic individuals and of supra-individual social entities that exist ‘above and beyond’ individuals, it is not obvious how we should answer this question – though in the literature it is often just assumed that there is an obvious answer, one that does not bring the old metaphysical distinctions in through the back door. One common answer, as I have suggested, is that distinctively individualist explanations typically are explanations in terms of the intentional or psychological states (beliefs, preferences, desires) of individuals, whereas non-individualist explanations typically explain in terms of social structure or groups. What I want to suggest is that once we have rejected atomism and radical holism, the so-called ‘individualist’ explanations are also in a plain sense social, while the so-called ‘holist’ explanations make reference to no ‘more fundamental’ reality than the relations and interactions of individuals; and that, in light of this, we should stick with the distinction between intentional and non-intentional explanation without assigning greater methodological or metaphysical virtue to either type. Whether one type is better, more plausible, more useful, more relevant, more scientific, more enlightening than the other, and whether it is even attempting to answer the same questions as the other, depends entirely on the theoretical context, the substantive claims involved, and the purposes our explanations are seen to
answer to. Let me begin to explain what I mean with reference to a rather abstract argument, rooted in Donald Davidson’s writings on interpretation and ‘meaning holism’.  

To explain a social phenomenon in terms of individuals’ mental (or intentional) states we must be able to specify some of the beliefs and wants of individuals. We do this linguistically: the attribution of belief requires that we are able to verbalise these beliefs in sentences. Suppose I attribute to someone a belief that she is underpaid by her employer. In attributing such a belief, automatically I have attributed a host of further beliefs to her: that there are employers and employees, that there is an employer-employee relationship, that employees are paid by their employers, that there are standards of payment such that one can be underpaid, and so on, indefinitely. If I attribute a belief to her which contradicts another belief I have attributed to her, typically, if I am genuinely concerned with making sense of this person, I will either reinterpret the meanings of the words with which I am phrasing her beliefs (in order to make the beliefs non-contradictory) or I must explain the contradiction (explain why a person in that situation would have such contradictory beliefs). In the process of attributing beliefs to someone I am also making sense of them; these two processes are, at least generally, inseparable. In doing this, I must assume that I share some minimal standards of reasoning with the person to whom I am attributing beliefs, otherwise it would be hard (perhaps impossible) even to recognise her as being a language-user and, to that extent, a person. I also assume that we share many beliefs and that we would have at least some similar wants and needs in similar circumstances. On Davidson’s view, differences only become intelligible or salient against a broad background of shared belief and interpretation: what we believe in common provides the basis for the detection of disagreement.

A key point here is that just by attributing a particular belief to someone, we (holistically and automatically) attribute many more, related beliefs to them – related, for example, by our own standards of inference. We do not and cannot, typically, attribute beliefs or wants to people without attributing, if not mastery of an entire language, at least a significant portion of it. But language is a social, public phenomenon and the meanings of our words, utterances and thoughts are tied to language - tied to the common uses of words. *Meanings in that way are as social as can be.* When it comes to meanings, there is no clear ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ and individuals are through and through

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9 See Davidson (1989, 2001). The argument against atomism presented here, based on Davidson’s ideas on meaning and interpretation, resembles in some ways Ludwig Wittgenstein’s arguments against the possibility of a ‘private language’ (in his *Philosophical Investigations*) and against the atomistic picture theory of meaning that Wittgenstein himself had previously defended in his *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus*. 
social individuals participating in particular forms of social life. To believe or want something is, *ipso facto*, to be dependent in one’s very believings and desirings on others through language. Individuals are *physically* separate from each other but our thoughts and desires have an ineliminably social character. Intentional explanations may be different from structural explanations but not in virtue of referring to any sort of pre-social or asocial atomised individual subject. An atomistic interpretation of *individualism* is therefore no less problematic than the forms of ‘holistic obscurantism’ that Elster so derides.

But as we have seen, Elster rejected atomism and distinguished atomism from MI, which in his view is reductionist but not atomist. MI, Elster suggested, reduces the complex to the simple. But if the ‘simple’ items are not like atoms or essentially inscrutable individuals with their private languages, what are they? Elster discussed this in an earlier book, *Explaining Technical Change*, in which ‘reductionism...was characterised as a search for *mechanisms*’ (Elster, 1993, 7-8). Here is Elster’s description of what reductionism -and hence, for Elster, MI- meant in that book, and what it means in *Political Psychology*:

According to this earlier argument, the difference between theory and mechanism is one of fineness of grain. A theory is a lawlike ‘If, then’ statement relating an antecedent state to a subsequent one. A mechanism provides the causal chain that mediates between the two states. In the absence of mechanism, the law is a mere black box....In the present exposition, theories and mechanisms differ in level of generality rather than fineness of grain. In my earlier terminology, going from theory to mechanism is to go from ‘If A, then always B’ to ‘If A, then always C, D, E, F, and B.’ On the view set out here, going from theory to mechanism is to go from ‘If A, then always B’ to ‘If A, then sometimes B’. However, I also urge the further move to ‘If A, then sometimes C, D, E, F and B’ (1993, 7-8).

In this passage, it is not clear what Elster means by the ‘complex’ and the ‘simple’ in social science. Nor is it clear what makes individualist explanations different from non-individualist or holistic explanations. Is it just that individualist explanations appeal to mechanisms while holistic ones do not? That would be question-begging, for the holists could say that they do not deny the need for mechanisms but simply assert the need for explanations in terms of social factors that are not merely characteristics of individuals – not merely their beliefs and desires, for example. If we are trying to discern what Elster means by MI, or at least what it amounts to for him whether or not he has provided a good definition, the above passage combined with the previous quotes from Elster, tell us this much: In speaking of MI, Elster does not mean atomism, egoism, rational choice, innateness or ‘givenness’ of desire, or political or normative individualism. We know Elster thinks of MI as an
‘essentially trivial doctrine’ that tries, in the spirit of science and against ‘holistic obscurantism’, to reduce the complex to the simple. And we also know that he thinks of MI as a ‘search for mechanisms’ that link, through a causal process, the *explanans* to the *explanandum*.

6.

It may help to discuss these claims in the context of a hypothesis about ideology in a particular historical period. Consider the claim that the ideology of ‘divine right’ prevailed in pre-modern Europe because it served to legitimise the rule of kings and aristocrats in a deeply Christian culture – it answered in that way to their class interests. Elster’s view seems to be that for this explanation to be legitimate, the ‘black box’ between (A) the class interests of kings and aristocrats and (B) the prevalence of the ideology of divine right, needs to be filled in with an account of mechanisms (C,D, E...). That is, for the hypothesis to be a credible answer to the question ‘*Why* did the ideology of divine right prevail in pre-modern Europe?’, there has to be an answer to the question ‘*How* did its answering to the class interests of kings and aristocrats lead to the prevalence of the ideology of divine right in pre-modern Europe?’ Answering the latter question would give us a proper reduction.

Elster associates MI with the latter type of question (the ‘how’ question) even if he doesn’t define MI in these terms. The first thing to note in this context is that even if we answered Elster’s ‘how’ question about mechanisms, we would not necessarily have performed a reduction. That is, we would not have shown that the original hypothesis, which was an answer to a ‘why’ question, could in principle be eliminated in favour of the answer to the ‘how’ question. Suppose it were possible to specify the relevant mechanisms. Since Elster is mostly concerned with psychological mechanisms, let us assume we could tell a plausible story about what, psychologically speaking, led both the rulers and ruled to internalise the ideology of divine right - perhaps in different ways, in varying degrees, and for different reasons. We discover, let us suppose, mechanisms C, D, E, F, and G. It is crucial here, as Alan Garfinkel would stress, to pay attention to the form of our explanation. What our class-interest hypothesis is really saying is that *even if* the mechanisms were different from the actual ones, *even if* the causal processes linking A to B were not exactly what they were, the ideology of divine right - or some empirically possible functional equivalent - would have prevailed anyway, given the type of economic system then obtaining, given the class structures that arose from it and given the religious and cultural traditions that characterised this period. This does not entail or imply that the ideology was simply imposed from above or that it did not answer to some needs of
the ruled. It says that the crucial factor that explains why the ideology was culturally dominant is that it answered to the interests of the kings and aristocrats; had it been antithetical to their interests, given their class position and their effective, disproportionate control of the ideological institutions – what Marx called the ‘means of mental production’ - it would not have become culturally dominant, regardless of the role it played for the labouring classes.

Elster would say, in response, ‘The fact that in the absence of the actually operating cause [the actual mechanisms] some other cause [some other mechanisms] would have brought about the same or a similar effect does not in any way detract from the explanatory force of the actual cause’ (Elster, 1983, 166). It is worth dwelling on this point. Elster sees the matter of ideology in this light:

It is a massive fact of history that the values and the beliefs of the subjects tend to support the rule of the dominant group, but I believe that in general this occurs through the spontaneous invention of an ideology by the subjects themselves, by way of dissonance reduction, or through their illusionary perception of social causality. [These are some of Elster’s ‘mechanisms’, along with others such as self-deception, wishful thinking and various fallacies such as the fallacy of composition.] (1983, 164).

In order to focus on the issue of MI, I will leave aside the dubious empirical claim that ideologies (such as neoliberal free market ideologies, or racist imperialist ideologies) are in general ‘spontaneously invented’ by the victims of these ideologies. Elster states that Cohen’s objection to his line of reasoning was that even if we accept that legitimating ideologies tend spontaneously to be invented by the ruled, we may reasonably believe ‘that in the absence of such an ideology (e.g. in the presence of a rebellious ideology) the rulers would have cracked down on the subjects by violent repression.’ After all, this has happened repeatedly throughout history. Thus it does not seem far-fetched to suggest that in class societies the rule of the economically dominant class will be stabilised by some mechanism, ‘be it an endogenous and spontaneous belief in the natural superiority of the oppressors or a harshly repressive system [or perhaps some appropriate mixture of the two along with other ‘mechanisms’]’. And so Elster renders Cohen’s position as follows: ‘at a high level of generality there is a functional explanation [in terms of economic structures and class interests] for the presence of such mechanisms.’ In response Elster says: ‘In other words, when asked “Why is it there?”’, one could answer “Because if it had not been there, something else with the same consequences would have been there”’ (1983, 165-6).

More accurately and charitably understood, I think Cohen’s position can be construed as follows. Given the prevalence of an economic structure in which the economically dominant class
forms a numerical minority, there will be an ideology effectively supporting the rule of the few over
the many whatever the actual mechanisms may be which bring this about; such ideologies prevail
because of their functional role in stabilising forms of class rule and the economic structures from
which these forms of rule arise. Elster, like many others, has never found this convincing as an
explanation. For him, the ‘explanatory force’ of the actual cause - the actual mechanisms - is not
affected by the idea, even if this idea is justified, that some other causal mechanisms would have
produced the same or similar effect in its absence. So it would seem that on Elster’s view, the best
explanation for the prevalence of ideologies supporting the rule of the few over the many is not that
the class structure will ensure that a ruler-supporting ideology will prevail or that such ideologies
prevail because of their role in consolidating such structures. Rather, Elster’s position seems to be
that the best explanation will vary with whatever mechanisms are present which lead to that result.
If in one society the dominant mechanism is ‘dissonance reduction’, if in another it is indoctrination
through sermons and other religious practices, if in another it is wishful thinking and if in another it
is violent repression (repression that decisively affects the sorts of views disseminated by the
ideological institutions), we have four different explanations even though we may have good
reasons, rooted in an awareness of structural realities, for believing that in each society some other
mechanism or combination of mechanisms would have produced a similar result in the absence of
the actual mechanism. How could we, or could we, reasonably judge whether Cohen or Elster was
more nearly correct in this debate?

Once again, I think it is best to take a pragmatist turn. The dispute between Cohen and Elster
should not be construed as being about the nature of explanation as such or the question of legitimate
versus illegitimate forms of explanation in social science generally. Though Elster (and to a lesser
extent, Cohen) tended to pose the issue in these broad, old-fashioned philosophy of science terms,
we can be more pragmatist about these matters. This would involve viewing the issue as primarily
revolving around the question of what we want or should want from an explanation in this context.
We need to pay attention to the level of generality of the explanations we seek as well as the
purposes we have (or ideally would or should have) in asking the questions to which our
explanations are answers. There is no reason to think that either Elster or Cohen have
misunderstood the real essence or meaning of ‘causality’ or ‘explanation’ (even if essentialism made
sense here) or that there is any virtue in philosophically legislating on these matters. If we want an
explanation in terms of mechanisms, if we are interested in the psychological or even non-
psychological ‘nuts and bolts’ of how a ruler-supporting ideology comes to prevail in a particular society or period, then Elster’s account (or some other ‘mechanistic’ account) would seem appropriate. If we want to know why ideologies effectively supporting the rule of the few over the many have been, are and will be culturally dominant (in non-democratic-socialist societies at least), whatever the mechanisms that actually lead to that result, Cohen’s account seems at least to be an appropriate kind of answer. And just as Cohen-type accounts in terms of class structure presuppose that there are some causal ‘mechanisms’ or regular processes through which the structure is maintained or reproduced, Elster-type accounts in terms of mechanisms presuppose a background of social-structural conditions – which is to say the ‘mechanisms’ do not operate in a social and institutional vacuum.

Crucial here is that with Elster’s approach no reduction seems to have occurred: his ‘mechanistic’ analysis arguably does not answer the same question as Cohen’s ‘functional’ analysis. That is, Elster’s ‘mechanistic’ analysis may not even address the question of what would have to be different for it not to be the case that an ideology supporting the rule of the few over the many prevails. An implication of Cohen’s account is that the prevailing relations of production must be changed, indeed democratised, if we are to come to live in a world relatively free of ideologies that effectively support the rule of the few over the many. Absent such a fundamental social transformation, there will continue to be ‘mechanisms’, varying with context, to ensure that such ideologies do prevail. At any rate, that hypothesis cannot be ruled out on purely methodological grounds.

If Elster’s view is that MI merely enjoins us to ask ‘how’ questions about mechanisms, there does not seem to be anything about the very nature of such ‘how’ questions that requires us to assume that ‘the characteristics of society can be explained as arising from the characteristics of individuals’, which is, presumably, what a distinctively individualist analysis would show (Garfinkel, 1981, 17). For Elster, ‘methodological individualism tells us to study the individual human action as the basic building block of aggregate social phenomena’ and, ‘in a general way, any action can be explained by the motivations and beliefs of the actors.’ This, he says, is a ‘truism that follows from the definition of action, as distinct from mere behaviour’ (Elster, 1993, 8). Presumably then, for Elster, the reduction of the complex to the simple which is supposed to be the hallmark of MI is the reduction of ‘aggregate social phenomena’ to ‘the individual action’.
If, as Elster says, it follows from the very meaning of ‘action’ that actions ‘can be explained by the motivations and beliefs of the actors’, does this mean explanations in terms of beliefs and motivations will enable us to explain ‘aggregate social phenomena’? From our discussion brief discussion of ideology, it should be clear that in some cases, no, it will not so enable us. Motivations and beliefs may vary from society to society, and within a society, and yet an ideology effectively supporting the rule of the few over the many can prevail despite the variations. Moreover, motivations and beliefs may sometimes be explained, surely, in terms of factors other than motivations and beliefs. In this context, one may note that there are many coherent, seemingly plausible Marxist or quasi-Marxist analyses and explanations on offer that do not seem to adhere to Elster’s strictures. One might consider, for example, Jared Diamond’s explanations of world poverty in his Pulitzer Prize winning *Guns, Germs and Steel*; explanations that appeal, irreducibly, to geographical, ecological, technological and social factors in history; similar things could be said of David Harvey’s analysis of the emergence of a ‘new imperialism’ in terms of his notion of ‘accumulation by dispossession’ and the tendency of capitalism to be afflicted with crises of overaccumulation (Harvey, 2003). Both Diamond and Harvey in their socio-historical analyses write and argue fairly clearly without engaging in obscure metaphysical theorising (they practice ‘analysis’ in Cohen’s broad sense) but they do not provide us with explanations that are reducible to psychological mechanisms ‘at the level of the individual’. Nor do they fetishise the distinction between intentional and structural explanations; rather, they move freely between the two, as Marx himself did, without giving the impression of crossing a metaphysical divide in doing so. It can be a good exercise, when faced with abstract theorising about social science methodology, to look at cases of substantive social analysis to see whether the abstract methodological doctrines actually make sense in these contexts.

Of course, there is one sense in which ‘the individual human action’ is the ‘building block’ of social phenomena: the truism, happily granted by macro-theorists such as Marx and perhaps even the arch-holist Émile Durkheim, that social outcomes are generally the product of the purposive activity of interacting individuals.¹⁰ Social outcomes are typically the result of the interaction of individuals pursuing whatever ends they have. But this ‘individualist’ claim does not entail or imply that a macro-level theory, to be a legitimate candidate for ‘good science’, must be supplemented by

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fine-grained micro-analyses, let alone reduced to the latter. It implies only that we must be able  
plausibly to maintain that the causal processes leading to macro-level phenomena work through the  
agency of individuals - which, again, is something that Marx and even Durkheim would have  
accepted.

But Elster could agree since for him MI is ‘essentially trivial’. But then why make such a  
 fuss about it? He and others such as Roemer, as well as many non-Marxist writers, have endorsed  
MI as a distinctive methodological doctrine, a way of explaining ‘aggregate social phenomena’, and  
they have said that it is a doctrine that has blatantly been violated by, among other things, Marxist  
social theory. But then it is not so trivial. It only becomes trivial when it is characterised in a way  
that not even a holist such as Durkheim would deny. It is a truism that has relevance only for  
blocking certain forms of ‘holistic obscurantism’ that hardly any social scientist endorses or  
presupposes. It seems to me that Alex Callinicos has pinpointed the root of the problem, and  
proposed the appropriate solution, in these remarks:

Behind methodological individualism is a kind of ontological anxiety – a fear of the  
intellectual monsters that we may unleash unless we rigorously reduce everything to the  
supposedly unproblematic coherence of the individual subject. But why can’t we be more  
laid back about ontology? Why can’t we adopt the kind of pragmatism espoused by Quine  
(in some moods at least), and say that what we are committed to affirming the existence of  
are simply those entities to which our best-corroborated theories refer? So long as we’re  
sufficiently tough on our theories, why not let them settle what our ontology is? (Callinicos,  
2006, 258-9).

But why not, in addition, go beyond Quine and cease speaking of ‘ontology’ altogether? We need to  
ask which empirical theories give us more useful, coherent, comprehensive or plausible  
explanations, interpretations and analyses. But these are not metaphysical questions. Once we take  
a Quinean and more broadly pragmatist turn, does not talk of ‘ontology’ become, as Richard Rorty  
stressed, a form of gesticulation before an outmoded philosophical tradition?

At any rate, be that as it may, since individuals are social beings, and intentional action is  
social (given the Davidsonian arguments just canvassed about the social character of intentional  
states) there is a sense in which an individual human action is ineliminably social and always  
presupposes a background of ‘aggregate social phenomena’. In this context, a better metaphor than  
the idea of individuals being the ‘building blocks’ of society might be the idea of waves that are  
inseparable from the surrounding ocean. For when we try to specify the content of the ‘building  
block’ metaphor, we will be hard-pressed to get anything more substantial than the truistic, non-
methodological, ‘individualist’ claim that social outcomes are primarily caused by the interaction of individuals, the truism that no holist would deny – what Richard Miller called an ‘individualist constraint on causation’ rather than a less trivial individualist constraint on explanation (Miller, 1978). Elster says we cannot talk of social institutions as if they were monolithic “since essentially they are collections of human beings” (1993, 8). This is surely true, given a certain reading, but it does not provide a basis for a distinctive methodology that might distinguish ‘individualist’ from ‘holist’ explanations. Broad macro-theory does not require the assumption that social institutions are monolithic, or that they are not comprised of individual human beings who stand in certain relations to each other.

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Taking stock, I think we may draw the following conclusions. Insofar as commitment to MI has motivated commitment to the ‘analytical techniques’ that Cohen associates with analytical Marxism, particularly rational choice theory and the methods of neoclassical economics, the considerations presented here should, at least, temper the enthusiasm for these techniques. When MI is construed in a way that makes it clear and distinctive, it is a reductionist doctrine but it is implausible as a general methodological principle, even if reduction is sometimes possible and desirable; when it is construed in a way that is clear but trivial, it is not distinctive; and when it is construed as being reductionist, concerned with mechanisms, trivially true (and hence not reductionist) but transgressed by Marxist and other non-trivial forms of macro-level, ‘holistic’ theorising, and as enjoining explanations in terms of the relations and interactions of individuals, it is no longer even clear what MI actually is or how it differs from non-metaphysical forms of MH: it becomes a hodge-podge of claims that do not clearly hang together. Given these considerations, one should be sceptical of this doctrine and analytical Marxists should not, as Cohen seems to suggest, be ‘absolutely’ committed to it. It would be better if they became a little more pragmatist in their thinking, worried less about methodological purity and more about the sorts of real-world issues that matter to socialists and others concerned with human emancipation. MI, despite the intentions of its analytical Marxist defenders, seems to be a theoretical refinement that does not advance these concerns. But then it is no refinement at all.