

## Capitalist Macrodynamics

Rajani Kanth\*

David Laibman, *Capitalist Macrodynamics*, London: Macmillan, 1997 (Pbk).

David Laibman occupies a special place in the left academy of the US: for years, he has kept the promise of Marxian inquiry alive through his painstaking editorship of *Science and Society*, a journal committed to open left inquiry in the best sense of that term. In his new book, David offers readers a crash course in critical political economy updating, revising, and reformulating the central tenets of Marxian (and Post-Keynesian) macro political economy. Refreshingly free of jargon, ritual pronouncements, and gratuitous quotes from Marx, David invites readers to join in an Argument that is developed lucidly and imaginatively (brevity is a stellar virtue in this book). Its clarity and simplicity make this work a pleasure to read, somewhat on the lines of Sweezy's old classic from the forties (indeed, a re-reading only confirms that impression). Short, succinct chapters keep matters rolling along smoothly and non-abrasively. As he says in his preface, the book was the product of intuition plus some numerical exercises. Had other Marxians heeded that excellent formula, perhaps the history of Marxian political economy would have read differently.

Of particular interest is the prudent attempt to steer clear of the Scylla of determinism and the Charybdis of contingency; wisely, despite all the 'laws of motion' of capital references, matters are left, in the end, to contextual determination. The specification of multiple sites of economic praxis is refreshing for its pluralist specification of causal domains in political economy. Ultimately the key 'constraint' on capitalist processes David postulates is the amount of suffering people will accept - that, of course, is the ultimate limit to accumulation - nicely coupling consciousness with agency. This moves away from technicist discussions of crisis where the 'people' somehow, incidentally, get excised in favor of falling rates of this and that. It is this realist open-endedness that places this work firmly in the newly evolving realist paradigm of Marxian thinking (see Lawson, 1997), despite the lack of self-consciousness in this regard.

David has spent years refining his synthesis of Marxian ideas; this is political economy at its best, offering a clear argument for debate and discussion, but non-dogmatically. Of course, he's convinced he is right, perhaps even righter than others, but none of this mars the presentation which shows an intelligent, active, and non-sectarian mind at work. If I were to teach a class in Marxian macro today, this book would be part of any set of 3 critical works I would choose as texts to stimulate inquiry. In fact, I am hard pressed to easily name the other two that would be as relevant, timely and current. The fact that David offers a critical, discursive exposition of issues is not to suggest that standard issues are ignored or underplayed in favor of the critique he is developing. It is a general, comprehensive work, and for all its brevity has something to say on everything from the mechanics of technical change, barriers to accumulation, to crisis theory, financial processes, and falling rates of profit. For all its genial modesty, here is a thesis, a model, and a general theory that will invite serious criticism and discussion wherever

Marxian economics is taken seriously. David does not claim to have resolved all problems in Marxian economics discourse, only to have provided a framework within which debates can be usefully located.

I myself have long moved away from models and theories (Kanth, 1997), finding the possibility of resistance to evil (in and out of capitalism) located in domains other than science and ratiocinations, but I do appreciate the value of academic critiques and their signal place in modernist discourse. I am not, in that sense, a political economist anymore: indeed I, when I do it at all, do a political economy of political economy. I found the book, despite this sceptical mindset, thoughtful, provocative, and hugely readable. All economists could learn from the generosity of spirit that informs this work, putting technical analyses, algebra, and diagrams in their place (in more than one sense). David claims not to know what Marx would have made of this book; I think perhaps old Karl might have learnt something: how to cut verbiage short, raising the task of clear analysis regally above expositional liberties. Few Marxians could do better at postKeynesianism; few postKeynesians know more of Marx; David is a model to be emulated in that rarefied domain of the intersection of those two critical sets. I think this book will rank David at the very top of the US's fast dwindling rank of Marxian (despite the many Sraffian touches) economists. May his tribe increase!!

My only suggestion: another chapter to the book that tells us what is to be done, given the processes he models and describes. I would like to see more talk of racism, and sexism, and environmental devastation, and all such sundry 'side-effects' of the accumulation process. And I invite him to consider all that perhaps as a project for his next book; for then - and only then! - the promise of the classical Marx (theory for the sake of change) would be fully realised. It should be taken as an axiom - Kanth's law! - that reality is always necessarily more complex than any theory or model; however, it is inherent in the nature of engagement (rather than reflection) to reduce this complexity. Reality cannot be comprehended in its entirety; given the nature of epistemic pluralism, ontological depth, and transformational dynamics extant as a norm - but it can, in a human world, be changed. At any rate, this is a masterly book, and I am privileged to have read and reviewed it.

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\* Economics and Finance, University of Technology, . PO Box 123, Broadway, Sydney NSW 2007.

## References

- Kanth, Rajani, *Against Economics*, London, Ashgate, 1997.  
Lawson, Tony, *Economics and Reality*, London: Routledge, 1997.