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REVIEW

Christoph Schuringa. *A Social History of Analytic Philosophy: How Politics Has Shaped an Apolitical Philosophy*

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This is an extremely readable attempt to explain and critique the social and political character of analytic philosophy (an amenability to liberalism and maintenance of the status quo) by detailing the circumstances of the tradition's formation. It is, rather uniquely, a telling from the outside; Christoph Schuringa situates himself as an observer of but not participant in the analytic tradition, adopting an avowedly Marxist method of "ideology critique" (3).[1] This critique is motivated by the perceived dominance of analytic philosophy and how it "perpetuate[s] a picture that is central to bourgeois liberal ideology" (4), made all the more necessary because of analytic philosophy's alleged inability to recognise and scrutinise itself.

Schuringa's picture of contemporary analytic philosophy is not a flattering one. Analytic philosophy is "highly ahistorical and acultural", seeing little need to consult other disciplines (such as psychology, history, or sociology) and more than happy to philosophize in a vacuum with an assumption that "any idea can be quite readily explained without prior immersion in a wider theoretical context" (11). Analytic philosophy is also unable to recognise itself as merely one approach among many, frequently equating itself with philosophy simpliciter, and is consequently too ready to recast the work of more heterodox thinkers in its own dry style (distorting and homogenising in the process). Its practitioners are

[1] Compare, for example, Soames (2005) and Potter (2019), who are both very much participants in the tradition.

acculturated into an adversarial pedantry, with philosophy seminars cultivating an attitude of competitive individualistic point-scoring rather than collaborative participation in a shared endeavour. Even those who balk at the broader thesis of the book will find aspects of this picture uncomfortably familiar.

When covering a hundred years of philosophy, there are bound to be occasional details and nuances of interpretation or emphasis that specialists will quibble over. But Schuringa's overall historical narrative is accurate (and until chapter 7, largely in keeping with typical histories of analytic philosophy). His interpretation of "Analytic philosophy" is less conventional, but still plausible: analytic philosophy as a unified tradition only cohered in America in the 1940s and 50s. Prior to this, there "was never any classical programme of analysis" (9), only a loosely shared stylistic commitment to clarity. Schuringa's chronology begins with the forebears of the analytic tradition in the first half of the twentieth century. Chapters 2, 3, and 4 each focus on one proto-analytic current; G. E. Moore, Bertrand Russell, and Ludwig Wittgenstein in Cambridge, logical empiricism in Vienna, and Ordinary Language philosophy in Oxford respectively. Chapter 5 describes the coalescence of the analytic tradition in the shadow of McCarthyism, whilst chapter 6 covers the creation by analytic philosophers of an oppositional "other" in the so-called continental tradition. Whilst the continental tradition is in one sense "an analytic philosopher's fiction" (lumping together a heterogenous plurality of schools and approaches), analytic philosophers made it real (155). Analytic philosophy as a tradition spanning the twentieth century is rejected by Schuringa as a retrospective creation of mid-century analytic philosophers in search of a lineage, and chapter 7 finds the origin in Dummett's mythic recasting of Frege as the initiator of the linguistic turn. But this turn from metaphysics to language was abandoned almost as soon as it was conceptualised; chapter 8 charts the rehabilitation of full-blooded metaphysics, emphasising the development of modal logic and the influence of Saul Kripke and David Lewis. Chapter 9 surveys the methodological fallout of this rebirth; primarily the legitimation of appeals to intuition. Only belatedly did analytic philosophy turn to explicitly social and political questions, and chapter 10 discusses attempts to recast feminism, Marxism, and philosophy of race in an analytic light.

As for the overall historical thesis, Schuringa argues that the tepid and disconnected style of analytic philosophy represents "a continuation of a basically eighteenth-century mindset marked by bourgeois ideology's twin faces—liberalism and empiricism" (15).[2] Central to this mindset is an illusory commitment to neutrality and objectivity, and a philosophical predicament that mirrors the social predicament. Just as one is mere subject to the forces of capital, one is epistemically subject to the world; passively receiving the deliverances of the senses. But this essentially bourgeois orientation is also a consequence of the circumstances of analytic philosophy's inception. Schuringa dates analytic philosophy proper to the USA in the aftermath of World War II, its character and style being formed in a Red Scare atmosphere overtly hostile to anything that seemed politically radical. Schuringa gives a number of historical examples, some well-known (Angela Davis's persecution for Communist Party membership) and others far less so (the participation of Reichenbach, Quine, Davidson and others in the US military-adjacent Project RAND, which was instrumental in developing rational choice theory). The studied neutrality characteristic of the analytic tradition thrived in and was incentivised by this environment, cultivating a philosophy posing no danger to the status quo.

The placidity of analytic political philosophy is most forcefully emphasised in chapter 10, where Schuringa argues that attempts to treat social and political concerns according to analytic methods have not produced a radicalisation of analytic philosophy, but a defanging of more subversive philosophies; a "colonization" of these radical doctrines by the style and methods of the analytic tradition. Rae Langton's transformation of radical feminism, Miranda Fricker's repurposing of standpoint theory, and G. A. Cohen's analytical Marxism all recast non-analytic theories, but in doing so, Schuringa argues, they are stripped of their uniqueness and vitality, and what began as radical and subversive is rendered palatable, and amenable to co-option by the bourgeois hegemony. Even if one accepts that these analytic reformulations defang the original theories, the language of "colonization" suggests an illegitimacy or intrusion of analytic philosophy beyond its remit, which is not fully established.

[2] That empiricism is bourgeois, either by necessity or disposition, is a claim often made by Marxist critics, but the specifics of the connection are under-developed and unsubstantiated.

As a purely historical narrative, what's most contentious is the emphasis on the American postwar political climate as an explanation for the character of analytic philosophy, which requires conceiving analytic philosophy as a specifically (or at least predominantly) American phenomenon. Even allowing for the (somewhat contentious, but not implausible) classification of the pre-World War II thinkers as merely proto-analytic forebears, most historians of analytic philosophy would consider analytic philosophy, at the very least, an anglophone phenomenon.[3] It is unclear how US-specific factors constrained developments on the other side of the Atlantic.[4] The story here is unduly reductive, explaining a global intellectual phenomenon via American political circumstances. As Schuringa notes, his claims about the impact of Cold War politics echo the work of John McCumber (2001), Don Howard (2003), and George Reisch (2005). But Schuringa's thesis is significantly broader than his predecessors'. Howard, Reisch, and McCumber did not claim to explain analytic philosophy as a whole; each had more modest goals. McCumber's focus was specifically the history of *American* philosophy. Howard and Reisch's focus was the transformation of *logical empiricism*, which after the emigration of the majority of the Vienna and Berlin circles (including Carnap, Reichenbach, Hempel, Frank, and Feigl), was a tradition almost entirely located in the USA.[5] In both cases, the explanatory emphasis on specifically American circumstances is more clearly warranted.

A more daunting question is whether the book lives up to the methodological promise of its title; does the narrative here amount to a *social* history? A social history must, at minimum, aim to be more than an internal intellectual history; that is, a story of how ideas arose in response to other ideas, and surpassed them as a matter of theoretical progression. And yet this book (especially chapters 2–4) reads as a typical intellectual history (albeit slightly more acerbic). Few (if any)

[3]It has sometimes been suggested that analytic philosophy is an Anglo-German phenomenon, but any strict geo-linguistic characterisation runs into trouble. See Glock (2008, chap. 3).

[4]An obvious reply would be the hegemonic influence of American ideas, but such an explanation would seem to abandon the goal of *social* history of the analytic tradition in place of story about the transmission and reception of ideas, more on which below.

[5]Of the key logical empiricist figures still alive after 1945, only Friedrich Waismann lived outside the USA. Hans Hahn (1934), Moritz Schlick (1936), and Otto Neurath (1945) all died before the period in question.

intellectual histories are now written that assume a history of ideas can be told whilst completely ignoring social, historical, or political context. The role of McCarthyism is undoubtedly an external factor in the present narrative, but one that has already been emphasised by histories typically classed as intellectual, not social. The task of a social history must be more than merely bringing in extra-philosophical factors to the story; it typically seeks to expose how deep and long running social and economic trends, forces, and processes moulded historical developments, often in ways inaccessible to the participants themselves. But such broad forces are absent from the narrative.

Social history also tends to eschew "great man" narratives, prioritising forces and processes over individuals. And yet, as Schuringa admits, he "focuses on the field's charismatic figures", which he rightly notes "might seem surprising in a social history" (4). He does so whilst also endeavouring to avoid a crude Marxism that renders philosophers mere mouthpieces for their class interests (4).[6] This great-man approach is then justified by the claim that, unbeknownst to its practitioners, analytic philosophy "promotes a cult of personality" (4). But this line of argument is not explicitly followed up in the rest of the book. No case is made for either the methods or content of analytic philosophy uniquely manifesting in hero-worship. And prima facie, there is nothing obvious about the analytic tradition as presented, in either its intellectual or class character, that makes it especially prone to canonisation and reverence. Nor are examples given of specific attempts to propagate such a cult. Continental philosophy has its canon of greats too, whilst Marxism is named for the greatest of its greats. And insofar as the analytic tradition is split into competing schools or factions, rarely are these distinguished by their reverence for some specific authoritative figure. When philosophers are described as "Quineans" or "Fregeans",

[6]Even so, the short biographies of each philosopher make sure to pointedly emphasise their privileged upbringings, private schooling, and elite education. These features are no doubt common to analytic philosophers, but are also far from unique to them. The same sort of biographical details could just as well be given in a history of the continental or Marxist traditions, or even a history of twentieth century physics. This seems a socio-historical pattern related to access to higher education, rather than the specific character of analytic philosophy.

these labels are loose, and typically used in relation to specific shared ideas rather than a firm affiliation to their hero's project.[7]

The major omission from the book is a conclusion. There is no final chapter to draw together the thematic threads of the argument woven through the preceding chapters. Such a chapter could well have gone some way to explicitly addressing the points discussed above and concretely restated the arguments with the additional background of the narrative to support them. The broader, underlying social trends could have been brought to light, and the examples of the analytic cult of personality highlighted. As it is, the reader is asked to do too much work in trying to put the pieces together for themself.

Schuringa's book is then intended as much as a polemic as it is history; an attempt to use the telling of the history of analytic philosophy to diagnose the sources of its neuroses and failures. Deliberately provocative, the book will likely raise the hackles of anyone who identifies or sympathises with the tradition under attack. This is made all the more likely by occasional scornful barbs, and some unflattering depictions and withering assessments of some of the tradition's canonical figures. The thesis itself is not new, but the style and substance of the argument are likely to ruffle the feathers of analytic true-believers and entertain the tradition's critics. But a genuinely *social* history of analytic philosophy remains a promising project as yet unfulfilled.

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[7] The arguable exception here might be Wittgensteinians. But this seems to be a unique and specific consequence of Wittgenstein's enigmatic work and character, and his well-known capacity for developing fawning adoration amongst his enthusiasts.

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