



HAL
open science

G.A. Cohen and Marxism

Fabien Tarrit

► **To cite this version:**

| Fabien Tarrit. G.A. Cohen and Marxism. *Analyse und Kritik*, 2015, 37 (1), pp.71-95. <hal-02019812>

HAL Id: hal-02019812

<https://hal.science/hal-02019812v1>

Submitted on 19 Feb 2019

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



HAL Authorization

Fabien Tarrit

G. A. Cohen and Marxism*

Abstract: The philosopher Gerald A. Cohen died on the 5th of August 2009. His contributions were at first based on Marx's thought. He really appeared on the intellectual stage in 1978 with his *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence*. Later on, he gradually departed from Marx's theory. He discussed the libertarian concept of self-ownership and the possibility of associating it with a Marxist approach, before entering into the normative debate around Rawls's *Theory of Justice*, while his Marxism was withering away. Based on Kantian philosophy, his critique of Rawls was that he allowed too little autonomy to individual choices. This paper discusses the consistency of Jerry Cohen's intellectual journey with regards to his relation with Marx's work.

1. Introduction

Gerald A. Cohen died at 68 on August 5th 2009. He was a Canadian-born English philosopher. His intellectual work was structured around Marxism, left-libertarianism and Rawlsian liberalism, and he became a major writer in contemporary thought. He was born in Montreal in 1941 in a working-class area. His mother grew up in a Ukrainian petit-bourgeois family, who fled from the Stalinist regime in 1930 to Canada—she was 18. She then joined the working class and became an active member of the Canadian Communist Party. His father was born in Canada, with an “impeccably proletarian pedigree [. . .] and no secondary education” (Cohen 1999a, 21). He was a member of the *United Jewish People's Order*, which proved to be pro-Soviet, anti-Zionist and anti-religious, and which managed the Morris Winchiewsky School in Montreal, where the young Cohen received his primary education. In 1952, at the age of eleven, he had to leave that school after it suffered from the repression by the *Anti-Subversive Squad of the Province of Quebec Provincial Police*, and then went to a Protestant public school. In 1958 he was admitted to McGill University in Montreal,¹ and from 1961 to 1963 he studied philosophy at Oxford University in Britain. From 1963 to 1984 he taught at University College London, and in 1985 he was appointed to the Chichele chair in Social and Political Theory at Oxford University² (suc-

* Grateful thanks to the editors, especially Anton Leist, for their precious advice, and to Pierre Van Zyl for his linguistic help.

¹ Cohen remembers that, when he was a high school student, “to go to McGill was a widespread hope and expectation” (1999a, 35).

² He acquired the English nationality at this occasion.

ceeding Charles Taylor). This had never happened before to a scholar known as a Marxist. He left Oxford University in 2008 and replaced Ronald Dworkin at London University as a Professor of Jurisprudence. His intellectual development was also related to political activities: he had various and unequal involvements with the Quebec Communist Party, with a great deal of disillusion—especially after Khrushchev’s speech in 1956—that certainly had a serious impact on his own evolution. In the 1960s and the 1970 he became closer to the Communist Party of Great Britain and then to the Labour Party. His intellectual work contains many biographical elements, which he explains through the influence of his upbringing, while he notes that “the fact that [he] was brought up to believe it is no reason for believing it” (ibid, 12). He was very young when he got interested in Marx’s work, and in January 1966, back from a teaching period at McGill University, he started to study specifically Marx’s view of history. For that reason his academic work was first articulated around Marx’s thought and related values. He concentrated on historical materialism (1978; 1988), before getting closer to political philosophy (1995; 1999a; 2008).³ These books reflect an evolving research program that started with *Karl Marx’s Theory of History: A Defence*. The peculiarity of this program gives Cohen’s work a specificity within the Marxist field. With this book, known as “the most important work of Marxist philosophy to have been written in English” (Callinicos 2002, 8), Cohen became a leading Marxist philosopher in the English-speaking world (see Lock 1988). Yet such a position of authority did not really cross borders, and his work is little-known in continental Europe.⁴ Cohen can be considered as a radical writer⁵ in the sense that his intellectual development was based on the search for intellectual justifications of socialism, and also because he conceived philosophy as a means of transforming the world.⁶ He started with Marx for reasons that include his own upbringing, and he ended up with Rawls while still keeping as a guideline his initial objective, namely the elaboration of intellectual tools for social emancipation. This paper aims to include Cohen’s work in such dynamics, and it focuses on his specific relation to Marx. Cohen first proposed a new mode of defense of historical materialism, based on analytical philosophy (2). He later weakened its defense, using the same basis (3), before orienting his intellectual priorities to normative political philosophy (4).

³ “I resolved, in 1975, that, when I completed a book that I was then writing on historical materialism, I would devote myself in the main to political philosophy proper.” (Cohen 1995, 4–5)

⁴ Two of his books were translated into French (*Why not Socialism?* and *If you’re an Egalitarian, How Come You’re so Rich?*, both in 2010), as well as two papers (“Are Freedom and Equality compatible?” in *Actuel Marx*, 1990, and “Rescuing Justice from Constructivism and Equality from the Basic Structure Restriction” in *Raisons publiques*, 2010). *If You’re an Egalitarian How Come You’re So Rich?* was also translated into Spanish and German (2001). Furthermore, Karl Marx’s *Theory of History* was translated into Spanish (1984), Italian (1986), Norwegian (1986) and Turkish (1998). A PhD on Cohen was defended in France (Tarrit 2006b).

⁵ “To be radical is to grasp the root of the matter. But, for man, the root is man himself.” (Marx 1844, 25)

⁶ “The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it.” (Marx 1845, 15)

2. A New Mode of Defending Historical Materialism

As suggested in the title of the book, *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence* is aimed to defend historical materialism as an independent component of Marx's work.⁷ The book was published in 1978, at the time of much debate on Marxism in general and historical materialism in particular (2.1). It relies on analytical foundations (2.2) and is articulated around functional explanation (2.3). It is the beginning of Analytical Marxism (2.4).

2.1 The Debate before Cohen

The book was published at a peculiar point in the development of Marxism. The context was a crisis of Marxism (2.1.1) and the book was related to two major debates: the issue of determinism in historical materialism (2.1.2) and the complex relation between Marxism and analytical philosophy (2.1.3). It is also a reply to Althusser's view (2.1.4).

2.1.1 The Background: Marxism in Crisis

When the book was published, Marxism experienced a double crisis. First, it was going through a political crisis, related to hesitations of radical intellectuals with regards to the Soviet Union. This amounted to a widespread desertion of the basic Marxian categories (including the dictatorship of the proletariat) and to a loss of influence of the organizations which explicitly claimed a Marxist foundation. Second, it was going through a theoretical crisis. Especially in the English-speaking world (mainly in the United States and Britain), Marxism was not under discussion. This can be related to the weakness of the working class movement in these countries.⁸ Yet Cohen's book did not show any sign of these ongoing crises. It seems to leave aside the political and intellectual background at that time. Still, together with or because of a very favorable reception, it appeared that Cohen turned Marx into a respectable opponent in the non-Marxist English-speaking philosophers' fields, and he supplied a more accessible philosophical basis for English-speaking Marxists. His book refers to two major debates: the determinism in historical materialism and the relation between Marxism and analytical philosophy.

2.1.2 Determinism in Historical Materialism

For Marx, legal relations and state forms can be understood not mainly from the development of the human spirit, but because of the material living conditions and relations between social classes. This leads to a critique of political economy. Basically, the nature of the mode of production of material life dictates the main features of spiritual life. A rather common interpretation sees Marx's theory of

⁷ He specifies in the book that "*the theses of the labour value are not presupposed or entailed by any contentions advanced in this book*" (1978, 423, italics by Cohen) and he confirms later that "historical materialism was, at the time in question, the only part of Marxism that [he] believed" (1995, 1).

⁸ Jon Elster noticed "a curious fact [...] the absence of an English Marxism" (1981, 745, personal translation).

history as deterministic, a history without an actor. Within the question of the relation between productive forces and relations of production, a major issue is related to primacy. Here we consider whether the explanatory primacy should be given to the relations of production or to the productive forces. For Georgi Plekhanov (1897) the anatomy of society is to be found in the economy, and the nature of social forms is determined by the state of the productive forces. For Karl Kautsky (1907) the inner movement is based on an external impulsion, which might be fettered by the structure, and history enters into an evolutionary process, where conscience is reduced to a by-product. A major condition for the emergence and development of capitalism is less the objective and subjective development of the proletariat than a sufficiently developed science. In that sense, Kautsky and Plekhanov can be seen as sources of Cohen's thought. The 1960s and 1970s have also seen the development of important debates on the nature of historical development, especially on feudalism and its analysis on an historical materialist basis (see Sweezy 1946; Dobb 1963; Braudel 1969; Brenner 1976).⁹ The main issue of the debate is whether the feudal mode of production had its own historical movement and an internal impulse for development.¹⁰

2.1.3 The Complex Relation between Marxism and Analytical Philosophy

Marxism and analytical philosophy are intellectual fields that have basically ignored each other for a long time. Broadly seen in their refusal of global theories, analytical philosophers rejected Marxism as a whole, whereas Marxists globally rejected analytical philosophy, in judging it as ahistorical, among others critiques. The first debates appeared after World War II, including contributions by Vernon Venable (1945), Harry B. Acton (1955) and John Plamenatz (1963). For Acton, "Marxism [...] is a mixture of two philosophies which cannot consistently go along together, positivism on the one hand and Hegelianism on the other" (1955, 251). Marxism is then charged for not applying consistently enough the standards of clarity and rigor required by analytical philosophy. On the contrary, Cohen "believe[s] that very often they reject the theory because they apply the standards not too severely, but not severely enough" (1970, 121).

Still, Venable, Acton and Plamenatz did actually make a rigorous analysis of the 1859 Preface and they attempted to define what the relations of production and the productive forces include, to display explanatory relations between concepts, to find out how the causation works between law (superstructure) and economy (infrastructure). Yet major disagreements appeared with Cohen, who attempted to defend Marx's theory, while the above authors tried to ruin it. This nevertheless proved that a dialogue between Marxism and analytical philosophy is not impossible, precisely on the issue of historical materialism. Cohen starts the exchange through Althusser's contribution.

2.1.4 A Reply to Althusser

In continental Europe, the intellectual background was to some extent influenced by Marxism, among whom Louis Althusser was not the least important

⁹ For the debate on the transition from feudalism to capitalism see Tarrit 2013.

¹⁰ For the debates on the theory of history before Cohen, see Cowling/Manners 1992.

figure. Cohen recognizes that “Louis Althusser has had a strong effect on current interest in historical materialism” (1978, x) and it appears from some discrete allusions that his book was also a reply to Althusser, especially to *Reading Capital*, published in 1965. Indeed, during the 1970s a big controversy arose from Althusser’s contribution, including English-speaking radical scholars such as Edward P. Thompson, Perry Anderson, Andrew Levine. The debate included discussions on the relation between structure and subject, on the articulation of the relation between productive forces and relations of production on the one hand, and class struggle on the other hand. Althusser openly questioned the Hegelian content of Marx’s theory, including the dialectical issue, which he considers as metaphysical. He conceives dialectical materialism as a “a philosophical monstrosity designed to legitimize the regime” (Althusser 2006, 254). For Cohen, as for Althusser, historical materialism is not consistent with Hegelian dialectics. There is no specific Marxist methodology and the basic concepts of a theory must be questioned and clarified systematically.¹¹ Cohen also implicitly endorses the Althusserian epistemological break. His basic breach with Marx’s work relies on a rejection of the dialectic method, which keeps him close to Louis Althusser, who put into motion some elements that allowed Cohen to be a precursor.

Cohen nevertheless distanced himself from Althusser and he referred to important differences, by claiming that “[i]t is perhaps a matter of regret that logical positivism, with its insistence on precision of intellectual commitment, never caught on in Paris” (1978, x). Later his conclusion became clearer:

“Yet, although I was for a time attracted to Althusserianism, I did not end by succumbing to its intoxication, because I came to see that its reiterated affirmation of the value of conceptual rigor was not matched by conceptual rigor in its intellectual practice.” (Cohen 2002, 323)

Such a critique includes the issue of structuralism, and Cohen perceives Althusser’s view of history as a process without a subject, in which human beings are only supports for objective structures and subjectivity is a construction of ideology, and this makes the objective of conceptualizing struggle and social change harder.

Still Cohen did not appear *ex nihilo* and he got involved in a set of debates discussing major issues. He unambiguously proposes a defense of historical materialism.

2.2 An Analytical Defense of Historical Materialism

His defense is conditioned by “two constraints: on the one hand, what Marx wrote, and, on the other hand, those standards of clarity and rigour which distinguish twentieth-century analytical philosophy” (1978, 9). The originality

¹¹ Althusser wonders what kind of philosophy best suits with what Marx wrote in *Capital*, “but whatever it turns out to be [...] it will not be a Marxist philosophy. It will be one that belongs to the history of philosophy, a philosophy for Marxism, but not a Marxist philosophy” (Althusser 1994, 37–38, personal translation).

of his approach is neither his close relation to Marx's work, nor his resort to analytical philosophy, but their conjunction. His main innovation does therefore not rely on the content given by him to Marx's theory, but rather on his mode of exposition: an analytical presentation of Marxian concepts (2.2.1) and their articulation through explanatory theses (2.2.2).

2.2.1 Fragmented Concepts

He first gives precise definitions of the concepts and then he articulates them with causal relations, in a way that fits in with analytical methods in philosophy and science, namely analytical philosophy and, to a lesser extent, logical positivism.¹² According to Rudolph Carnap (1966), who was a prominent member of the Vienna Circle, logical positivism gives science the objective of reconstructing all the concepts that may be used for describing the world with simple logical relations. For Erik Olin Wright, himself also an Analytical Marxist, the aim of Analytical Marxism is to “define a series of abstract concepts [...] and then specify the ways in which these concepts can be combined to generate more concrete categories of social forms” (1994, 112). This corresponds respectively to the roles of analytical philosophy and logical positivism: the analytical philosopher breaks down complex sets into their basic components, while the logical positivist tries to bring them together.¹³ It seems that Cohen's distinction refers to the Vienna Circle's logical positivism rather than to neopositivism—including Popper, Lakatos, Kuhn, Feyerabend. For instance, he rejects Popperian falsificationism in claiming that a repetition of events on a large scale gives a certain amount of credibility to scientific laws.

Cohen uses such methodology with historical materialism, as formulated in the Preface of the *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (Marx 1859, 21), which he judges as the most representative and the most synthetic text of Marx's theory of history.¹⁴ He brings them together in three sets of concepts that he strives to articulate through logical connections (productive forces, relations of production and superstructure). He structures historical materialism through two explanatory theses: the Development Thesis and the Primacy Thesis.

2.2.2 Historical Materialism in Theses

The Development Thesis says that “[t]he productive forces tend to develop throughout history” (Cohen 1978, 134). This development of the productive forces is considered to be the independent variable in the explanation of history and historical change. There is an endogenous trend towards improvement, in

¹² By the way, Cohen's contribution was characterized as a “positivistic expression of the Marxian theory of history” (Bidet 1990, 54, personal translation). See also Noble 1984. John Roemer also refers to “analytical philosophy” and to “positivistic social science” (1986, 1–2). Analytical Marxism has been attacked for being both positivistic and empirist (Weldes 1989) and its focus on formalism “weakens Marxism” in the name of rigour (Anderson/Thompson 1988, 228).

¹³ Marx was rather hostile to positivism: “I am studying Comte on the side just now [...] that is pitiful when compared with Hegel.” (1866, 289)

¹⁴ This sequence is certainly the most synthetic introduction indeed, but the theory also appears in *The German Ideology* (Marx/Engels, 1845), in *Poverty of Philosophy* (Marx 1847).

a given direction. Cohen considers that such a tendency to development is autonomous and a feature of humanity. He bases this Thesis on three universal components: the *scarcity* of resources reflects the situation of human beings in history, and the *rationality* and the *knowledge* of human beings are specific features of human nature. Being *rational* and *intelligent*,¹⁵ human beings are then willing and able to use and improve the means of production that allow the development of the productive forces, and it would be irrational not to use them.¹⁶

The Primacy Thesis relies on the Development Thesis. It claims that “[t]he nature of the production relations of a society is explained by the level of development of its productive forces” (Cohen 1978, 134), which is the driving force of history. In analytical language it means that the *correspondence* between productive forces and relations of production allows the *development* of the productive forces which, when it is fettered by some *contradiction* between forces and relations, requires a *transformation* of the relations towards a *superior* form in order to allow a higher development of the forces. This means that the forces have an explanatory *primacy* over the relations. In being *material*, the forces enter into a historical continuity and they require a specific *social* form as the framework of their development. This is thus an explanatory asymmetry, with a Primacy of the *material* over the *social*. The Development is a necessary premise to the explanatory primacy of the productive forces over the relations of production.

2.3 An Original Recourse to Functional Explanation

In the articulation between productive forces and relations of production, Cohen displays a major innovation: the recourse to functional explanation in historical materialism (2.3.1). It relies on an analogy with pre-Darwinian evolutionary biology (2.3.2).

2.3.1 The Request for a Mode of Explanation

Since Cohen does not associate historical materialism with the dialectical method, his claim for scientificity requests of a mode of explanation for articulating his theses. Functional explanation is thus considered as necessary for the logical consistency of historical materialism: “the economic structure has the function of developing the productive forces, and the superstructure the function of stabilizing the economic structure.” (1980, 129) Here the functional explanation is used as a methodological device for bringing the concepts of historical materialism together. Cohen denies any general functional interconnection between them, since it would lead to functionalism. It seems that he and Althusser are opposed to the Marxist tradition that rejects functional explanation as conservative, equating it to functionalism. Conversely he thinks that it might be possible to extract the explanatory mode out from its normative consequences,

¹⁵ Cohen indifferently uses knowledge and intelligence.

¹⁶ See Joshua Cohen 1982 and Robert Brenner 1985, who are also Analytical Marxists, on the possibility of a lasting absence of development.

in the sense that “functional explanation is compatible with the rejection of the doctrine of functionalism, and functional explanation is not necessarily conservative” (1978, 284).

More precisely, functional explanation is taken as consequential explanation in which the consequences are explanatory through their influence on the element to be explained, as Robert Merton puts it: “When the net balance of the aggregate of consequences of an existing social structure is clearly dysfunctional, there develops a strong and insistent pressure for change.” (1957, 114)

2.3.2 Biological Analogy

Such a theoretical framework also relies on the possibility of an analogy between functional explanation and evolutionary biology.¹⁷ Cohen claims “that historical materialism may be in its Lamarckian state” (1980, 134), that is its pre-Darwinian stage, which means that species have had useful features “because they were useful” (ibid, 133) and that any organism always tries to adapt to its environment. It is therefore not necessary to specify the mechanism of such an adaptation. This means that the relations of production adapt to the development of productive forces. Jon Elster in particular describes Cohen’s view as primitive in terms of the philosophy of science, an inductivism in the mode of the Vienna Circle: “[i]f Marx was Buffon in Marxism, Cohen is Lamarck; let us wait for Darwin.” (1981, 754) Elster judges that functional explanation lacks an explanatory mechanism. This question is the object of a special issue of *Theory and Society* published in 1982, which includes contributions by Jon Elster, John Roemer, Philippe Van Parijs and Anthony Giddens, and an answer by Cohen himself.

2.4 The Founding Document of Analytical Marxism

As a matter of fact, Cohen received a huge amount of support, at least of greetings, in the English-speaking academia. In proposing an approach to Marxism which corresponds to the standards of analytical philosophy and logical positivism, he attracted some intellectuals that were quite close to Marxism but who, until then, were reluctant to accept the philosophical assumptions that were traditionally attributed to it, especially its Hegelian legacy. It is commonly accepted that the birth of Analytical Marxism is attributed to Cohen’s book (see Roberts 1996; Tarrit 2014).

Cohen renews the way of thinking about Marxism. In attributing traditional methods to Marxism, and therefore in reducing the reluctance of many radical scholars who had moved away from Marxism because of the lack of rigour traditionally attributed to Marxist dialectics, he opened the doors of the English-speaking academic world to Marxism. In September 1979, one year after the publication of *Karl Marx’s Theory of History: A Defence*, Cohen and Elster

¹⁷ The reference to evolutionary biology refers to a quest for inter-science comparisons. We can find such an analogy in Marx. In his tribute at Marx’s funeral Engels said: “Just as Darwin discovered the law of development or organic nature, so Marx discovered the law of development of human history.” (Engels 1883, 467)

organized a meeting in London on the issue of exploitation, with a dozen of scholars that were Marxist or close to Marxism. Most of them were coming from English-speaking countries and specialized in various fields in the humanities (economics, sociology, history, philosophy. . .).¹⁸ The experience was renewed a year later in the same place on the same topic. Meetings were then organized every year in September¹⁹ among scholars sharing a common interest: an attempt to separate the substance of Marxist theory from its mode of exposition. Analytical Marxism as such started in September 1981 and the group got called the September Group—sometimes the Non-Bullshit Marxism Group.²⁰

The term Analytical Marxism was first published in 1986, in a book edited by John Roemer (1986), but Jon Elster had already used it in seminars as early as 1980.²¹ It led to many debates on the validity of Marx's theory, and to some major contributions, including Roemer's *A General Theory of Exploitation and Class* (1982), Elster's *Making Sense of Marx* (1985) and Wright's *Classes* (1985). According to Erik O. Wright (1994, 40–41), four elements define what is analytical in Analytical Marxism: conventional scientific norms; a systematic conceptualization; a precise specification of theoretical arguments within and between concepts; and the importance given to the intentional actions of individuals.

The last element is more normative than methodological, and is moreover less consensual, in the sense that it is wrong to strictly associate Analytical Marxism with Rational Choice Theory. Rational Choice Marxism can be considered as a branch of Analytical Marxism, but not all Analytical Marxists endorse Rational Choice Theory, for instance Brenner and Wright (see Veneziani 2012).

Marx's work was systematically put under scrutiny and “there is probably not a single tenet of classical Marxism which has not been the object of insistent criticism at these meetings” (Elster 1985, xiv). These discussions include specific developments in Marxist theory (Cohen 1978; Roemer 1982), empirical applications of Marxian concepts (Wright 1985) and reconstructions of Marx's

¹⁸ The contributors also included the American economist John Roemer, the American sociologist Erik O. Wright, the American political scientist Adam Przeworski, the American historian Robert Brenner and the Belgian philosopher Philippe Van Parijs. On Analytical Marxism, see Tarrit 2006a; 2014.

¹⁹ The meetings occurred every year until 2000. The 2001 meeting was cancelled because of the 9/11 events. Then the decision was taken to move to an every-other-year frequency. See Wright 2005. The meetings were organized most often in London, but also in Paris (1982), in Chicago (1991), in New York (1996), in Cambridge, Massachusetts (1998), in Oxford (1999).

²⁰ “And when a set of Marxists or semi-Marxists, who, like me, had come to abhor what we considered to be the obscurity that had come to infest Marxism—when we formed, at the end of the 1970s, a Marxist discussion group that meets annually, and to which I am pleased to belong, I was glad that my colleagues were willing to call it the Non-Bullshit Marxism Group.” (Cohen 2002, 323) Cohen refers to Frankfurt (1988), for whom bullshit corresponds to a lack of concern of reality.

²¹ It is not the first time in the history of thought that this term has been used. A school of thought called ‘Analytical-Linguistic Marxism’ developed in Poland from 1956 (see Skolimowski 1965). Analytical Marxism has no direct relation to it, but the two have in common the separation between positive and normative issues, between science and ethics. In the late 1970s, a school of thought called ‘Analytical Marxism’ developed in Japan (see Takamasu 1994). Its aim was an algebraic study of issues raised by Marxism, with a strong deal of formalization, continuing the work of Okishio 1961 and Morishima 1973.

theoretical corpus (Elster 1985). Theoretically speaking, Analytical Marxism can be summarized as an “attempt [...] to preserve the classical research programme by (a) reconstructing the theory of history along non-Hegelian lines and (b) replacing the classical labour theory of value with contemporary general equilibrium theory” (Carling 1997, 770). This basically corresponds to Cohen’s and Roemer’s contributions.

3. A Reconsideration of Historical Materialism Using the Same Mode of Analysis

In the course of the debates within Analytical Marxism, Cohen explicitly distanced himself from the Marxian theory of history:

“I believed the theory to be true before I began to write the book [*Karl Marx’s Theory of history: A Defence*], and that initial conviction more or less survived the strain of writing it [...]. I do not now believe that historical materialism is false, but I am not sure how to tell whether or not it is true.” (1988, 132)

In his attempt to specify the elements that constitute respectively the core assumptions and the protective belt of the theory, he reconstructs his own interpretation of historical materialism in a sense that corresponds to a diminution of its explanatory scope. He presented the foundations of his “reconsideration” (ibid) during the 1980s, by questioning the logical structure of this theory, and by judging it as inconsistent (3.1). During the 1990s, he based his reconsideration, which actually was a refutation, on empirical elements (3.2).

3.1 A Theoretical Reconstruction of Historical Materialism

Cohen explicitly presents the foundations of this reinterpretation by firstly interrogating the logical structure of the theory defended in *Karl Marx’s Theory of History: A Defence*. He develops three points: a conceptual fragmentation of Marx’s work in various fields (3.1.1), the split of historical materialism into two different versions (3.1.2) and a rejection of the dialectical method (3.1.3).

3.1.1 A Conceptual Fragmentation of Marx’s Work

He presents Marxism as several theories rather than a single theory developed with several aspects. This corresponds to a break with the assumption of the homogeneity of Marxism. “Marx produced at least four sets of ideas: a philosophical anthropology, a theory of history, an economics, and a vision of a society of the future.” (Cohen 1988, 136)

In Cohen's view, firstly, the Marxian philosophical anthropology, as the theory of human nature, claims that men are creative beings. Secondly, the Marxian theory of history proposes an implicit growth of productive power, as a support for social change. Thirdly the Marxian economic theory corresponds to the labour theory of value and its extensions (the tendency of the rate of profit to fall, the theory of exploitation). Fourthly the Marxian project for a future society is communism, as it allows for the flourishing of men and of humanity.

Therefore, "Marxism is not one theory, but a set of more or less related theories" (Cohen 1988, 155),²² and this allows one to state that historical materialism and Marxist philosophical anthropology are independent and that "the apparent dependence of the Marxist theory of history on the Marxist theory of human nature is an illusion" (157). This is a significant development in Cohen's own thought, since his initial defense of historical materialism was based on human nature, i.e. on the assumption that human beings are rational and intelligent.

3.1.2 The Split of Historical Materialism

Cohen questions "the scope of historical materialism" (1983a, 195) and judges the theory as "too materialist" (1988, 143). That is the reason why he proposes two distinct interpretations of historical materialism, which are specified by a common core and two different protective belts: an inclusive historical materialism and a restricted historical materialism.²³ Inclusive historical materialism states that "history is centrally, *inter alia*" (158), the development of the productive forces, in the sense of the Development Thesis previously described, which "explain[s] the principal features of spiritual phenomena" (160), whereas restricted historical materialism claims that history is "among others" (159) the history of the development of the productive forces. It then becomes possible to explain spiritual phenomena independently from material phenomena. Cohen charges Marx for "never contemplat[ing] the distinction [and for] commit[ting] himself [...] regrettably, to the inclusive variant" (165). Thus, consistently with the epistemological break taken from Althusser, he claims that "*The German Ideology* certainly cannot be recovered for restricted historical materialism, but the more precise and circumspect statement of the theory in the Preface of 1859 [...] *nearly* can be" (167, stress by Cohen).²⁴

The condition for saving historical materialism concentrates Cohen's detachment.

"[T]he document [The Preface] does, I concede, contain one unambiguously inclusivist sentence about consciousness, which says that 'it is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but,

²² While not necessarily refuting Cohen, we can compare this with what Marx wrote (1865, 172, italics by the author): "Whatever shortcomings they may have, the advantage of my writings is that they are an artistic whole, and this can only be achieved through my practice of never having things printed until I have them in front of me *in their entirety*."

²³ A similar distinction is proposed by Wright, Levine and Sober (1992), also members of the September Group, between weak historical materialism and strong historical materialism.

²⁴ This quote does not appear in the original version of the paper (in the *Irish Philosophical Journal* 1, 1984).

on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness'. If that sentence is removed, what remains is, I would claim, open to restricted construal. I regard the quoted sentence as a flourish, Marx's own inclusivist comment on the doctrine he is setting out, and not a comment which that doctrine, as otherwise set out, requires. I do not contend that he did not mean what he said when he wrote the quoted sentence, and I accept that this presence colours the rest of the Preface. My claim is that the rest of the Preface may be seen as having a different colour when the quoted sentence is removed." (Cohen 1988, 167–8)

Restricted historical materialism proposes to include a non-materialist feature, namely that spiritual phenomena, like religion and nationalism, can be explained independently from any material structure. Yet, Cohen pretends to still be materialist since "spiritual phenomena [...] must neither profoundly disturb nor be ultimately responsible for material progress" (159). Basically he considers this historical materialism as a reply to "[t]he challenge [of] Max Weber's account of the Protestant Reformation and its aftermath" (160). Actually, Weber's claim (1905) that a specific feature of the Protestant religion, namely the development of a morality that promotes an individualistic behavior, explains the emergence of capitalism in Europe,²⁵ is at odds with inclusive historical materialism, but is still consistent with restricted historical materialism. Cohen admits his "move [from an inclusive historical materialism] to restricted historical materialism" (173),²⁶ even if he considers that "when [he] wrote [*Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence*] [he] was already, implicitly or incipiently, a restricted historical materialist" (174) and he judges it necessary "not [...] to qualify restricted historical materialism as a *materialist* theory of history" (stress by Cohen).

3.1.3 A Rejection of the Dialectical Method

Cohen's reformulation of historical materialism is also based on his initial rejection of the dialectical method. He denounces as an obstetric conception the statement that the solutions to a given problem can emerge with the full development of this problem, and that the potential social transformation amounts to the movement with which the old order gives birth to the new order. This is a critique against Hegel's method,²⁷ and more precisely against the Hegelian

²⁵ This view needs to be qualified, notably with H. M. Robertson's approach (1933): on the one hand, the Protestant religion encouraged the business culture in adapting to capitalism. On the other hand, all sections of Protestantism do not have the same relation to capitalism. More generally, the relative propensity of various branches of Christianity to support capitalism relies on material circumstances.

²⁶ Cohen attributes an inclusive elaboration to Marx, which would be related to an Hegelian influence: "when he replaced Hegelian idealism by his own materialism, [Marx] retained the inclusivism of the rejected doctrine." (1988, 172)

²⁷ "[T]he Dialectical principle constitutes the life and soul of scientific progress, the dynamic which alone gives immanent connection and necessity to the body of science; and, in a word, is seen to constitute the real and true, as opposed to the external, exaltation above the finite." (Hegel 1830, 213)

content in Marx's work, which claims that a solution only exists when a problem is fully developed and is endogenous to that problem:²⁸

“Perhaps, instead of turning him upside down, or right side up, Marx would have done better, after toppling Hegel, to leave him lying there, on a horizontal plane. The really important things that Marx had to say, about the history and liberation of humanity, did not require him to turn the arrow between consciousness and being the other way round.” (Cohen 1988, 172)

Cohen attributes the claim to Marx that a solution arises from the deep study of social phenomena, and that the role of the socialist theoretician is to express the task of the working class, that is to achieve a social revolution. Here the working class plays the role of a midwife, and Cohen claims that “[t]he obstetric conception of political practice is patently false” (1999a, 75)²⁹ because it “justif[ies] a criminal inattention to what one is trying to achieve, to the problem of socialist design” (159). That is the reason why, against Marx's refusal of “recipes for cook-shops of the future” (Marx, 1867, 21), Cohen judges “that socialists do need to write recipes” (1999a, 77). Later on he therefore centered his intellectual priorities on normative political philosophy.

3.2 An Empirical Refutation of Historical Materialism

Cohen develops and justifies his reconstruction, which amounts to be a refutation, by referring to empirical issues: the evolution of the class structure (3.2.1), the failure of the Soviet Union (3.2.2) and the emergence of environmental issues (3.2.3).

3.2.1 A Transformation of the Class Structure

For Cohen the modification of the class structure of capitalist societies, at least since the 1980s, towards more heterogeneity and less polarization,³⁰ prevents the emergence of a social group with both the capacity for social change—i.e. being the majority in society and producing what is valuable—and an interest for social change—i.e. being exploited and needy.³¹ Such a view echoes that of the

²⁸ “The formulation of a question is its solution.” (Marx 1843, 218)

²⁹ We notice that Cohen's interpretation of the dialectical method, based on the metaphor of the midwife, corresponds to Dühring's approach in the latter's critique of Marx's *Capital*—“The Hegelian negation of the negation, in default of anything better and clearer, has in fact to serve here as the midwife to deliver the future from the womb of the past” (in Engels, 1878, 80)—, to which Engels answered that: “On the contrary: only after he has proved from history that in fact the process has partially already occurred, and partially must occur in the future, he in addition characterizes it as a process which develops in accordance with a definite dialectical law. That is all. It is therefore once again a pure distortion of the facts by Herr Dühring when he declares that the negation of the negation has to serve here as the midwife to deliver the future from the womb of the past.” (Engels 1878, 82–83)

³⁰ Less workers (strictly speaking), a new form of petite-bourgeoisie, new structures of qualification, a weaker workers' movement.

³¹ Such an interpretation reminds us of the structural definition of classes proposed by Cohen in *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence* (“A person's class is established by nothing but

Analytical Marxist Erik O. Wright (1985), who proposes a theorization of contradictory class positions, and weakens, if not refutes, the dual character of class relations.³² For Cohen such an evolution means that socialism is not unavoidable and this leads to the necessity of discussing ethical issues and proposing normative answers: “[P]rofound changes in the class structure of Western capitalist societies [...] raise normative problems which did not exist before.” (1999a, 105)

Besides, Cohen supposes that the *Communist Manifesto*'s slogan “Workers of the World, Unite”, created as an expectation that the national proletariats would transcend their specificities and move towards international solidarity, has been impossible to carry out due to history, and this would be illustrated by “workers [...] march[ing] to the trenches of World War I” (Cohen 1988, 145). More generally he claims that the dispersion of the Western working class into various groups, the agrarian majority in poor countries, the power of transnational capital, the existence of cultural barriers prevent the world-wide cooperation of workers. This means that there can be major diverging interests between workers from different countries. For instance, the Indian proletariat, as an industrial reserve army, can exert a pressure on the English proletariat. The double challenge of both cultural diversity and differential purchasing powers is then a further difficulty for the mutual identification of working classes. That is another reason why, for Cohen, a moral theory becomes necessary for creating a relation of international solidarity.

3.2.2 The Collapse of the USSR

For Cohen, and many others, the dissolution of the Soviet Union amounts to a lack of perspective for a socialist future.³³

“The loss affects both those who (like me) had once believed, and had not abandoned all hope, that the Soviet Union would realize the socialist ideal, and, *a fortiori*, those who still believed, only yesterday, that it was in fact realizing it.” (1995, 252, stress by Cohen)

The occurrence of the Russian Revolution in 1917 could be seen as contradictory with the central tenets of historical materialism on two points. On the one hand, “[n]o social formation ever perishes before all the productive forces for which there is room in it have developed” (Marx 1859, 21). For Cohen the productive forces were not sufficiently developed in Russia for leading capitalism to disappear. On the other hand, “new, higher relations of production never appear before the material conditions of their existence have matured in the womb of the old society itself” (ibid). For Cohen, claiming that the conditions for socialism existed in Russia at that time would be a mistake.

his objective place in the network of ownership relations”, 1978, 73). This is at odds with the distinction between class in itself and class for itself, as proposed by Edward P. Thompson (1963) for instance.

³² For a presentation of the Analytical Marxist interpretation of social classes, see Tarrit 2012.

³³ It nevertheless seems that for Cohen the transformation of the class structure has a stronger causal influence than the collapse of the Soviet Union (and of its satellites) for explaining the retreat of critical thought, and especially of Marxism.

He further distinguishes socialism from Marxism and thinks that Marxism has been strengthened, since the dissolution of the Soviet Union could be seen as confirming his interpretation of historical materialism. He claims that Russia has never been a socialist country. Socialism succeeding in the USSR would have been a defeat for historical materialism, so that its failure is a success for historical materialism: “If the Soviet Union had succeeded in building an attractive socialism, then that would have been wonderful for socialism and for humanity, but bad for the credibility of historical materialism.” (Cohen 1999b, 104) We also could imagine that the Russian Revolution in 1917 was the beginning of revolution on a world scale, but the debate on the permanent revolution is to a large extent beyond the present paper.³⁴ Nonetheless, the development by Cohen of such a distinction between socialism and Marxism relates to his gradual detachment from Marxism.

3.2.3 The Emergence of Environmental Issues

On the one hand, Cohen points to a contradiction between the development of productive forces, in the sense proposed by historical materialism according to Cohen’s interpretation, and the preservation of the environment. On the other hand he claims that the limited amount of natural resources leads to the impossibility of growth of productive forces up to abundance. The current environmental crisis would be a fetter to the development of the productive forces.

“A (supposedly) inevitable future plenty was a reason for predicting equality. Persisting scarcity is now a reason for *demanding* it. We can no longer sustain Marx’s extravagant, pre-Green, materialist optimism.” (1999a, 114, stress by Cohen)

Cohen thinks that Marx was too pessimistic on the social consequences of a less than abundant situation and, for that reason, too optimistic on the possibility of such abundance.

As a matter of fact, this interpretation by Cohen stems both from the Development Thesis—where the development of the productive forces is a condition for historical progress—and from his definition of the productive forces as being reducible to science.

4. Shifting Priorities towards Normative Political Philosophy

Cohen was as early as the 1970s interested in political philosophy, seen together with historical materialism. In the 1980s he concluded that the explanatory theses about history lost their moral authority and that it became necessary to concentrate on the search for normative answers and to elaborate a normative

³⁴ Cohen hardly commented on this: “I do not thereby commit myself to Trotskyism, but perhaps I do commit myself to the view that one must choose between denial of key historical materialist theses and affirmation of some Trotskyist ones.” (1999b, 104)

defense of socialism, since “socialism was to be preferred to capitalism for reasons of normative principles” (1995, 3), and no more for scientific reasons, if we admit the epistemological break between scientific issues and normative issues. This corresponds to Cohen’s gradual detachment from Marxism, first in associating it with the concept of self-ownership (4.1), and then in giving it up in order to enter the post-utilitarian debate³⁵ in normative political philosophy (4.2).

4.1 A Defense of the Concept of Self-ownership

Cohen first tried to demonstrate the relation between Marxism and political philosophy through the concept of self-ownership. It was intellectually very ambitious to endorse an essential concept of a theory to which he was radically opposed—libertarianism—in order to use it for his own theoretical field. He then attempted to endorse the concept of self-ownership as a support for the theory of exploitation (4.1.1), with some conditions, before giving it up (4.1.2).

4.1.1 In Support of the Marxian Theory of Exploitation

We do not suggest an immediate causal link between Cohen’s gradual detachment from historical materialism and his growing interest in self-ownership, since he claims that his “Marxism did not control or affect [his] moral and political philosophy in a manner that many Marxists and anti-Marxists would have thought that it should” (1995, 2). In any case, it seems that Cohen’s priorities seriously focused on self-ownership, and were mainly based on a critique of Robert Nozick’s libertarian theory (1974). Cohen endorsed the claim that, even if some proletarians may be individually free to exit from their class, the proletariat is collectively unfree to exit because of the private property of the means of production, and it is forced to sell its labour power. The liberals and the libertarians are criticized for their misuse of liberty, since they do not see the unfreedom of the workers that goes along with capitalism’s freedom. Cohen claims that the only way to defend freedom is to put an end with capitalism and exploitation.³⁶ At this point it is a complement to historical materialism rather than a radical shift from Marxism. His views were presented in *Self-Ownership, Freedom and Equality* (1995). He noted that Nozick appropriated the concept of self-ownership in

³⁵ This refers to debates initiated by John Rawls’s *A Theory of Justice*, which is explicitly presented as a critique that goes beyond utilitarian political philosophy.

³⁶ See Cohen 1977; 1979a; 1981; 1983a; 1985. Among the many comments on that issue, George Brenkert (1985) noted that not having to sell one’s labour power is not sufficient for talking of freedom, since unfreedom amounts to the lack of the ability to transform its life from an exchange value to a use-value for its own. Cohen’s answer to this critique was given beforehand, that both the proletariat and the (petite-)bourgeoisie are inserted within relations of domination (see Cohen 1968). For Jeffrey Reiman (1987), the opportunity costs for reaching the petite-bourgeoisie may be higher than the benefit from not being a proletarian anymore, so that it may not be a reasonable alternative, even for individual proletarians.

favour of a libertarian defense of capitalism,³⁷ and that this Lockean legacy³⁸ can be used to support a critique of capitalism.

For Nozick, the thesis of self-ownership leads to the conclusion that the equality of condition requires a violation of the rights of self-ownership, i.e. slavery. Therefore, if one wants to fight against such a justification of inequality, it becomes necessary to refute either self-ownership or the inference proposed by Nozick that self-ownership leads to inequalities. Cohen chose, with some intellectual bravery, the second option,³⁹ which amounts to a direct confrontation with Nozick's arguments.

“One way of doing good philosophy well is to assemble premises which even opponents will not want to deny, and by dint of skill at inference, to derive results which opponents will indeed want to deny but which, having granted the premises, they will be hard pressed to deny. The trick is to go from widely accepted premises to controversial conclusions. It is, of course, no trick at all to go from premises which are themselves controversial to controversial conclusions.” (1995, 112)

It might therefore be possible to defend the Marxist notion of exploitation, or at least the notion of appropriation, without rejecting the thesis of self-ownership. On the contrary, Cohen judges that the Marxist critique of capitalism, and especially of the associated exploitation, is based on the thesis of self-ownership:⁴⁰ since the proletarians do not own the means of production, they are forced to the jobs that generate exploitation and surplus value, which means that they have the right, but not the power to leave the proletariat:

“When I am forced to do something I have no reasonable *or* acceptable alternative course [...] and the claim that the worker is forced to sell his labour power is intended in that familiar sense.” (1988, 255–6, stress by Cohen)

³⁷ All libertarians do not endorse this concept, but Robert Nozick is representative of those who do.

³⁸ “[E]very Man has a ‘property’ in his own ‘person’. This nobody had any right to but himself. The ‘labour’ of his body, and the ‘work’ of his hands, we may say, are properly his. Whatsoever then he removes out of the state that Nature hath provided, and left it in, he hath mixed his labour with it, and joined to it something that is his own, and thereby makes it his Property. It being by him removed from the common state Nature placed it in, it hath by this labour something annexed to it that excludes the common right of other men. For this ‘labour’ being the unquestionable property of the labourer, no man but he can have a right to what that is once joined to, at least where there is enough, and as good left in common for others.” (Locke 1690, 17)

³⁹ “The inference from self-ownership to the unavoidability of inequality was my target.” (1995, 13)

⁴⁰ “Those of us who have a Marxist formation [...] inherit a critique of capitalism which relies, unthinkingly, on a libertarian premise” (1995, 17) and the Marxian principle of proportionality—“to each according to his needs” (Marx 1875, 26)—is a “truncated form of self-ownership” (Cohen 1995, 131).

4.1.2 A Conditional Self-ownership

If the condemnation of exploitation relies on the fact that workers are forced to sell their skills to capitalists, which is parallel to the Nozickean logic that taxpayers are forced to pay for welfare programs, we can infer then that the original privatization is a theft of what could be commonly held, which is at odds with what Nozick writes, for whom things come to the world attached to people entitled to rights on them.

For Cohen private appropriation contradicts what non-owners wish, which means that they are not free, so that Nozick cannot pretend to be an advocate of freedom, since private property reduces the freedom of those who do not have it. Therefore, self-ownership does not prevent the achievement of the equality of condition, and Nozick's inegalitarianism can be refuted without rejecting the self-ownership thesis. Nozick's view is based on the coexistence of self-ownership and an inegalitarian principle for the distribution of external resources—first arrived, first served. The conjunction between self-ownership and a common ownership of resources would erase the tendency of self-ownership to generate inequalities.

The control by proletarians, who only own their labour force, of their life is not sufficient for talking of autonomy, let alone freedom. For everyone to have a reasonable degree of autonomy, limitations to self-ownership are necessary. This corresponds to the private ownership of internal resources and the collective ownership of external resources. These are the conditions under which self-ownership would not prevent the achievement of the equality of condition.

Cohen later on lost interest in the concept of self-ownership, basically because of its inconsistency with Kant's philosophy, more precisely the concept of the categorical imperative. Cohen came closer to Kant's philosophy, and at the same time he became devoted to Rawlsian and post-Rawlsian⁴¹ political philosophies, which are explicitly based on the Kantian philosophy.

4.2 A Confrontation with John Rawls's Theory of Justice

“Having spent (what I hope will turn to be only) the first third of my academic career devoting myself to exploring the ground and character of the two predictions described above [the destiny of the working class and the development of the productive forces], I find myself at the end of the (putative) second third of my career, engaged by philosophical questions about equality that I would earlier have thought do not require investigation, from a socialist point of view.”
(Cohen 1995, 7)

It could be assumed that Cohen's shift to the theory of justice is related to the fact that Marxism is underequipped on that issue. Our claim here is rather that the underequipped character here is not Marxism as such but Cohen's impoverished version of Marxism, from which many items have disappeared, including

⁴¹ This term refers to the debates, about Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* (1971) and structured around equality.

the labour theory of value (see Cohen 1979b) and historical materialism in his original form, which are the two basic tenets of Marxism.⁴² This is because Cohen gave them up that he could no longer defend freedom against libertarianism on non-Marxian bases and, above all, in rejecting the claim that social being determines consciousness he gave more credit to the idea of a full autonomy of consciousness, and then more credit to the autonomy of political philosophy related to the economic basis. Therefore, John Rawls and the discussion on normative issues were naturally Cohen's next step. Now, for Cohen socialists must have normative concerns and propose models for future societies or at least discuss issues relating to what a just society is. From the mid-1990s until he died, his publications, including his book *If You're an Egalitarian, How Come You're So Rich?* in 1999, are part of the contemporary debate of political philosophy that started with Rawls's publication of *A Theory of Justice* in 1971. He proposes a 'critique' on two issues: the basic structure (4.2.1) and the principles of justice (4.2.2).

4.2.1 For a Wider Basic Structure

An essential part of Cohen's criticism to Rawls refers to the subject to which the principles of justice must apply, namely the basic structure of society. "[T]he feature of Rawls's view to which I strongly object is its restriction of justice to the 'basic structure' of society" (1999a, 183) and "restrict[ing] his concern to the coercive structure only [is] a purely arbitrary delineation of his subject matter" (139).

Cohen proposes the widening of the basic structure in decomposing it into four features: "the coercive structure, other structures,⁴³ the social ethos,⁴⁴ and the choices of individuals" (143). As a matter of fact, the distinction between rights and virtue, in Kant's sense, does not appear in Rawls's view. Cohen accuses Rawls's concept of the categorical imperative to be restricted to law, whereas Cohen also includes an imperative in terms of virtue in the sense that individual actions, together with the informal structure, are not related, by definition, to any legal framework. He proposes that the principles of justice should be applied not only to coercive rules but also to non-legally constrained choices of individuals. By separating personal choices and the legal structure, Cohen pretends to be more Kantian than Rawls. Indeed, Kant (1797) draws a distinction between what is legal and what is moral: legality is based on conformity while morality is based on intentions.

For Cohen the choices for which law is indifferent are crucial for social justice. Distributive injustice in a just coercive structure may reflect individual choices, which raises the issue of individual responsibility. His concern is limited neither to the basic structure in which the choices are determined, whether it is coercive or informal, nor to a set of individual choices, but to the pattern of interactions

⁴² We are inclined to follow Engels that we owe to Marx "two great discoveries [...] the materialist conception of history and the revelation of the secret of capitalist production through surplus value" (Engels 1880, 53), the latter being based on the labour theory of value.

⁴³ They are extra-legal structures, like social norms.

⁴⁴ Cohen defines this as "the set of sentiments and attitudes in virtue of which its normal practices, and informal pressures, are what they are" (1999a, 145).

between structure and choice, which he calls “distributive justice” (1999a, 134). Individuals must be guided by a culture of justice, without which inequalities that prevent any improvement for the least off—such inequalities are inconsistent with Rawls’s difference principle—would persist. Cohen claims that such a culture is necessary for two interrelated reasons. On the one hand, it is impossible to implement egalitarian rules that can be verified. On the other hand, it would be an important risk in terms of freedom if rules should be followed at any rate. Cohen transforms Rawls’s analysis from a political theory of the institutional approach based on the legal structure to an interactional approach based on behaviours, actions and interactions of individuals and groups of individuals.

4.2.2 Difference Principle and Individuals

The second feature of Cohen’s critique is focused on the implementation of justice or more precisely Rawls’s difference principle, which says that inequalities are justified if they contribute to improve the situation of the least off. Cohen “ha[s] no quarrel here with the difference principle itself but [...] there is hardly any serious inequality that satisfies the requirement set by the difference principle” (1999a, 124). He then develops a critique of the view “commonly thought [...] that the difference principle licenses an argument for inequality which centers on the device of material incentives” (ibid). Cohen wants to demonstrate that the incentives-based difference principle is contradictory, and that ambiguities appear between the difference principle and the notion of solidarity that it is supposed to incorporate. Cohen develops the argument as follows.

When a tax is low, the richest—considered, by assumption, as the most talented—are more productive, and the poorest benefit from it by getting a better material situation. A public policy which aims to improve the situation of the poorest should therefore decrease the tax for the richest, and the situation would be better for all than in a more equal society. The difference principle can also be used to justify a lower tax for the richest categories, in the sense that they would hence be encouraged to improve their productivity. A greater amount of wealth would be available for redistribution, and job opportunities would appear for the poorest. This is a justification for inequality-based incentives, in the sense that they improve the material condition of the least off. Actually Cohen shows that what seems to be a normative defense of inequality is a factual defense. Rawls does not demonstrate that an inequality that creates incentives is just, he only claims that inequality is unavoidable.

The first point in Cohen’s critique is a question of definition: Rawls assumes that the richest are the most talented. Yet skill does not correspond to the ability of getting a comparatively high income. The only correct claim is that the skilled people are entitled to such a material condition that they can require a higher income, and that they can move their productivity around such income. It can be stated however that their situation is the result of random circumstances, which is opposed to the Rawlsian principle that opportunities are the same for all. Cohen concludes “that the incentives argument for inequality represents a distorted application of the difference principle” (1999a, 126).

The argument then relies on the assumption that preferences are selfish and that rich persons—with features allowing the possibility of getting a comparatively high income—have a strategic behavior. In Rawls's sense, inequality is necessary only if these people decide to produce less in case of the reduction of inequalities. In a society entirely⁴⁵ based on the difference principle, i.e. characterized by fraternity and dignity, talented persons will however not need incentives and the expected effect will not occur. The incentives argument is not necessary for the difference principle if talented persons accept that principle, since the difference principle relies on a tacit solidarity between various categories of the population, and since its implementation requires a certain degree of homogeneity and social cohesion. Thus the assumption that talented persons will have no advantage except if it benefits the least off is not consistent with the Rawlsian assumption that the individuals are maximizers.

For Cohen “justice itself is a compromise or a balance between individual interest and demands for equality” (1992, 314). This means that the difference principle requires a culture of justice, an ethos, without which a just society cannot exist and without which the conjunction between the defense of individual interests and a proper social justice would be only incidental. An egalitarian ethos corresponds to an internalization of a concern for the least off. This ethos can be seen as a substitute for the mutual indifference which is assumed in the original position. On the one hand, nothing tells us which behavior individuals would choose in their interactions. On the other hand, mutual indifference is inconsistent with the values of fraternity defended by Rawls. The large interpretation proposed by Cohen is therefore more cautious than Rawls's, but it is not basically based on social justice, and it requires individual behaviours based on justice. Rawls must give up one of the two arguments, either the incentives for the talented, or the ideals of fraternity. For Cohen it is worthwhile to keep the ideals of fraternity. For that reason, and especially because of their absence in the Rawlsian theoretical framework, Cohen was led to give it up in favor of an individual interpretation, instead of a social interpretation. He then concentrated on convictions, individual behaviours and the philosophy on which they should be based. Without becoming a Christian philosopher, he refers to the fact that he became “[l]ess contemptuous of another old nostrum [which] says that, for inequality to be overcome, there needs to be a revolution in feeling or motivation, as opposed to (just) in economic structure” (Cohen 1999a, 120, stress by Cohen).

5. Conclusion

Gerald A. Cohen's research subjects were historical materialism from the early 1970s to the first mid-1980s, self-ownership and left-libertarianism until the mid-1990s, and normative political philosophy until he died. Such an evolution in his research, together with the debates in the September Group, can be illustrated by comparing the epigraph of his first book, *Karl Marx's Theory of History:*

⁴⁵ Namely on the four elements of the basic structure that were previously discussed.

A Defence, taken from the Preface of Marx's *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, with the last sentence of *If You're an Egalitarian, How Come You're So Rich?*, taken from the Gospel according to Saint-Marc—"For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?" (Mark 8, 36). This is how he closed his intellectual journey, in reaching a result that seems contradictory and irreconcilable with his initial approach.

"I would indeed have been shocked to foresee, when I was, say, in my twenties, that I was to come to the point where I now am. For the three forms of egalitarian doctrine that I have distinguished can in one dimension be so ordered that my present view falls at the opposite end to the Marxist view with which I began." (1999a, 3)

Still, Cohen did not become a Christian intellectual. He tried to get, by looking at great authors the adequate intellectual tools for radical thought (Marx, Locke, Kant). His whole work has always been marked by a great sense of rigour in the argumentation. It is still true that, by claiming that he had "in no measure abandoned the values of socialism and equality that are central to Marxist belief" (1999a, x), he relies on a quote from *The Great Gatsby* (Francis Scott Fitzgerald)—"So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past" (reproduced in *ibid*, 1)—to illustrate that since he "was raised as a Marxist [his] intellectual work has been an attempt to reckon with that inheritance, to throw out what should not be kept and to keep what must not be lost" (*ibid*, 9–10) and that he has "remained attached to the normative teachings of [his] childhood, and, in particular, to a belief in equality. . . . A powerful current bears [him] back to it ceaselessly, no matter where [he] might otherwise try to row" (*ibid*, 1). Cohen proposes quite convincing answers to the thesis that it would be an illusion to overcome the tensions between personal beliefs that are not based on scientific rigour, and a highly rigorous argumentation. Nevertheless, if we judge his whole intellectual development in regarding his relation to Marxism, we must claim that Cohen's shift from Marxism to theories of justice, which can be roughly understood as a shift from the basis to the superstructure, is not related to the theoretical weakness of Marxism, but to the failed interpretation of Marxism by Cohen. Cohen's Marxism was seriously infected by the a priori rejection of dialectics by some of the analytical tradition. This prevented Cohen to get Marx as a whole and allowed him to think that Marx could keep powerful in being separated in parts, rather than an homogeneous theory. As a result, Marxism was deeply weakened in Cohen, as in Analytical Marxism. We claim then that grasping issues like exploitation and injustice is absolutely not anti-Marxist, and that it does not need to depart from Marxism but on the contrary to defend a robust Marxism.

Bibliography

- Acton, H. B. (1955), *The Illusion of the Epoch: Marxism-Leninism as a Philosophical Creed*, London
- Althusser, L. (1994), *Sur la philosophie*, Paris

- (2006), *Philosophy of the Encounter*, London
- Bidet, J. (1990), Sur le marxisme analytique anglo-saxon, in: *M Mensuel, Marxiste, Mouvement* 38–39, 54–57
- Braudel, F. (1969), *Écrits sur l'histoire*, Paris
- Brenkert, G. C. (1985), Cohen on Proletariat Unfreedom, in: *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 14, 91–98
- Brenner, R. (1985), Marx's First Model of the Transition to Capitalism, in: Chavance, B. (ed.), *Marx en perspective*, Paris, 203–230
- Callinicos, A. (2002), Theory, History and Commitment: An Interview, in: *Imprints: A Journal of Analytical Socialism* 6, 3–27
- Carling, A. (1997), Analytical and Essential Marxism, in: *Political Studies* 45, 768–783
- Carnap, R. (1966), *Philosophical Foundations of Physics*, London
- Cohen, G. A. (1968), Bourgeois and Proletarians, in: *Journal of the History of Ideas* 29, 211–230
- (1970), On Some Criticisms of Historical Materialism, in: *Supplement to the Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 44, 121–156
- (1977), Robert Nozick and Wilt Chamberlain: How Patterns Preserve Liberty, in: *Erkenntnis* 11, 5–23
- ([2000]1978), *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence*, expanded edition, London
- (1979a), Capitalism, Freedom and the Proletariat, in: Ryan, A. (ed.), *The Idea of Freedom: Essays in the Honour of Isaiah Berlin*, Oxford, 9–26
- (1979b), The Labour Theory of Value and the Concept of Exploitation, in: *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 8, 338–360
- (1980), Functional Explanation: Reply to Elster, in: *Political Studies* 28, 129–135
- (1981), Illusions about Private Property and Freedom, in: Mepham, J./D.-H. Ruben (eds.), *Issues in Marxist Philosophy* 4, Brighton, 223–242
- (1983a), Reply to Four Critics, in: *Analyse & Kritik* 5, 195–222
- (1983b), The Structure of Proletariat Unfreedom, in: *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 12, 3–33
- (1985), Are Workers Forced to Sell their Labour-Power?, in: *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 14, 99–105
- (1988), *History, Labour and Freedom: Themes from Marx*, New York
- (1995), *Self-Ownership, Freedom and Equality*, Cambridge
- (1999a), *If You're an Egalitarian, How Come You're So Rich?*, London
- (1999b), Marxism after the Collapse of the Soviet Union, in: *The Journal of Ethics* 3, 99–104
- (2002), Deeper into Bullshit, in: Buss, S./L. Overton (eds.), *Contours of Agency: Essays on Themes from Harry Frankfurt*, Cambridge, 322–339
- (2008), *Rescuing Justice and Equality*, Cambridge/MA
- (2009), *Why Not Socialism?*, Princeton
- Cohen, J. (1982), Book Review: *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence*, in: *The Journal of Philosophy* 79, 253–273
- Cowling, M./J. Manners (1992), Pre-History: The debate before Cohen, in: Wetherly, P. (ed.), *Marx's Theory of History*, Newcastle, 9–29
- Dobb, M. (1963[1946]), *Studies in the Development of Capitalism*, London
- Elster, J. (1981), Un marxisme anglais. A propos d'une nouvelle interprétation du matérialisme historique, in: *Annales Economie Sociétés Civilisations* 36, 745–757
- (1985), *Making Sense of Marx*, Cambridge

- Engels, F. (1947[1878]), *Anti-Dühring. Herr Eugen Dühring's Revolution in Science*, London
- (1970[1880]), *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, Moscow
- (1989[1883]), Karl Marx's Funeral, in *Marx-Engels Collected Works* 24, Moscow, 467
- Frankfurt, H. (2005[1988]), On Bullshit, in: Frankfurt, H., *The Importance of What We Care About*, Cambridge
- Hegel, G. W. F. (2009[1830]), *Hegel's Logic. Being Part One of the Encyclopaedia of The Philosophical Sciences*, New York-Oxford
- Kant, I. (1996[1797]), *Metaphysics of Morals*, Cambridge
- Kautsky K. ([1977]1907), *Les trois sources du marxisme. L'oeuvre historique de Marx*, Paris
- Lock, G. (1988), Louis Althusser and G. A. Cohen: A Confrontation, in: *Economy and Society* 17, 499–517
- Locke, J. (2004[1690]), *Second Treatise of Government*, New York
- Marx, K. (1976[1843]), The Jewish Question, in *Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society*, New York, 216–248
- (1972[1844]), A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right, in: Marx, K./F. Engels, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, New York, 53–65
- (1969[1845]), Theses on Feuerbach, in: *Marx-Engels Collected Works* 1, Moscow, 13–15
- (1976[1847]), The Poverty of Philosophy: Answer to the Philosophy of Poverty by M.Proudhon, in: *Marx-Engels Collected Works* 6, New York, 105–212
- (1971[1859]), *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, London
- (1964[1865]), Marx to Engels in Manchester, 31st July, in: *Marx-Engels Collected Works* 42, Moscow, 172
- (1987[1866]), Letter to Engels, 7th July, in: *Marx-Engels Collected Works* 42, Moscow, 289–291
- (2007[1867]), *Capital. A Critique of Political Economy. Volume 1. Part 1*, New York
- (1970[1875]), Critique of the Gotha Programme, in: *Marx-Engels Selected Works* 3, Moscow, 13–30
- /F. Engels (1975[1845]), The German Ideology. Critique of Modern German Philosophy According to Its Representatives Feuerbach, B. Bauer and Stirner, and of German Socialism According to Its Various Prophets, in: *Marx-Engels Collected Works* 5, Moscow, 19–584
- Merton, R. K. (1957), *Social Theory and Social Structure*, New York
- Morishima, M. (1973), *Marx's Economics: A Dual Theory of Value and Growth*, Cambridge
- Noble, J. (1984), Marxian Functionalism, in: Ball, T./J. Farr (eds.), *After Marx*, Cambridge, 105–119
- Nozick, R. (1988[1974]), *Anarchie, État et utopie*, Paris
- Okishio, N. (1961), Technical Changes and the Rate of Profit, in: *Kobe University Economic Review* 7, 85–99
- Plamenatz, J. (1963), *Man and Society: A Critical Examination of Some Important Social and Political Theories from Machiavelli to Marx*, London
- Plekhanov, G. V. (1897), *The Materialist Conception of History*, Moscow
- Rawls, J. (1971), *A Theory of Justice*, Cambridge/MA
- Reiman, J. (1987), Exploitation, Force and the Moral Assessment of Capitalism: Thoughts on Roemer and Cohen, in: *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 16, 3–41

- Roberts, M. (1996), *Analytical Marxism: A Critique*, London
- Robertson, H. M. (1933), *Aspects of the Rise of Economic Individualism: A Criticism of Max Weber and His School*, Cambridge
- Roemer, J. (1982), *A General Theory of Exploitation and Class*, Cambridge
- (1986) (ed.), *Analytical Marxism*, Cambridge
- Skolimowski, H. (1965), Analytical-Linguistic Marxism in Poland, in: *Journal of the History of Ideas* 26, 235–258
- Sweezy, P. M. (1946), *The Theory of Capitalist Development*, London
- Takamasu, A. (1994), Analytical Marxism and Mathematical Marxian Economics, in: *Chulalongkorn Journal of Economics* 6, 330–349
- Tarrit, F. (2006a), A Brief History, Scope and Peculiarities of 'Analytical Marxism', in: *Review of Radical Political Economics* 38, 595–618
- (2006b), *Cohen et le marxisme analytique : Genèse, portée et limites d'un essai de refondation du marxisme*, PhD thesis, University of Reims Champagne-Ardenne, France
- (2012), Marxisme analytique et classes sociales, in: Harribey, J.-M./M. Montalban (eds.), *Pouvoir et crise du capital. Marx, penseur du XXI^e siècle*, Bordeaux
- (2013), La transition du féodalisme au capitalisme interprétée par le marxisme analytique, in: *Economies et sociétés* 47, 961–994
- (2014), *Le marxisme analytique. Une introduction critique*, Paris
- Thompson, E. P. (1963), *The Making of the English Working Class*, New York
- Venable, V. (1945), *Human Nature: The Marxian View*, New York
- Veneziani R. (2012), Analytical Marxism, in: *Journal of Economic Surveys* 26, 649–673
- Weber, M. (2002[1905]), *The Protestant Ethic and The Spirit of Capitalism*, London
- Weldes, J. (1989), Marxism and Methodological Individualism: A Critique, in: *Theory and Society* 18, 353–386
- Wright, E. O. (1985), *Classes*, London
- (1994), *Interrogating Inequality: Essays on Class Analysis, Socialism and Marxism*, London
- (2005), Falling into Marxism, Choosing to Stay, in: Sica, A./S. P. Turner (eds.), *A Disobedient Generation: Social Theorists in the Sixties*, London, 325–349
- /A. Levine/E. Sober (1992) (eds.), *Reconstructing Marxism: Essays on Explanation and the Theory of History*, London