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**Review of *Karl Marx's Theory of History Expanded Edition*, by Gerald A. Cohen.**

**Princeton University Press, 2000, 442 pages.**

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It seemed that Marxism reappeared in English-speaking academics at the end of the seventies, and G.A. Cohen is not the less responsible for this. His *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence* (2000) is one of the books in Marxist theory that have been the most subject to debate during the last twenty-five years in English-speaking academics. It was published in 1978, at a time when Western Marxism was declining. The book is devoted to an analysis of the Preface of *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (Marx 1971, 21)<sup>1</sup>, which is probably the piece in Marx that has been the most discussed and the most interpreted worldwide, and the clearest piece of exposition for historical materialism. More than twenty-five years after, Cohen is still best known as the author of *Karl Marx's Theory of History*, and it is not an overestimation to say that this book became a standard for a generation of Marxist scholars.

In 2000, a renewed and expanded edition was published, with four additional articles a new introduction. *Karl Marx's Theory of History* aroused wide interest because of its original and innovative defence of historical materialism. It was innovative in using the instruments of academic mainstream analytical philosophy. That innovation seems to be paradoxical, since both have systematically opposed each other. Cohen was rather impervious to Western Marxism, and closer to orthodox analytical philosophy: "If you are young and left-wing, and you come to university with a thirst for relevant ideas, and academic philosophy of the Oxford

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<sup>1</sup> Henceforth referred to as Preface

kind is the first system of thought you encounter, then it will be hard for you not to feel disappointed or even cheated by it, and it will be natural for you to think of Marxism as a powerful alternative and antidote to it. But if, as I did, you start with Marxism, then it is not difficult to take analytical philosophy on board” (xxi). In doing so, Cohen could study historical materialism as a set of theses, in such a way that the content of the Preface is separated from its mode of explanation.

The object of this review is to assess the book in considering first his defence of historical materialism. We will see then that it originated analytical Marxism. Finally we will deal with the substantive contribution of this new edition, with his revision of his former theory.

## **1. A defence of historical materialism**

In *Karl Marx's Theory of History*, Cohen intended to defend “an old-fashioned historical materialism” (x) and he laid down conditions to his defence: “on the one hand, what Marx wrote, and, on the other, those standards of clarity and rigour which distinguish twentieth century analytical philosophy” (ix). He realised an exegetic work on the Preface, extracting from it a few sentences which were supposed to represent the core of historical materialism: “We take the 1859 Preface as our guide” (28). Then he made a strict clarification of the concepts. In his defence of historical materialism, we can deal with two aspects, his technological interpretation of historical materialism on the one hand - “our version of historical materialism may be called technological” (147, fn. 1) - and his use of functional explanation on the other hand - “central Marxian explanations are functional” (278).

### **1.1. A technological historical materialism**

Cohen made a strict conceptual separation between three sets of things: “These sentences mention three ensembles, the productive forces, the relations of production and the superstructure, among which certain explanatory connections are asserted” (1982, 28). He establishes a distinction between material productive forces and social production relations.

On the one hand “only what contributes materially within and to productive activity as Marx demarcates it counts as a productive force” (34), on the other hand “production relations are relations of effective power over persons and productive forces” (63). A material process is always in progress whereas social forms change. Cohen is materialist in the sense that “it cannot be if the antonym of ‘material’ is ‘mental’... then the antonym of ‘material’ as used here is ‘social’” (47). Mental forces, as science, are a subset of material forces. The content is material, a timeless relation between man and nature, whereas the form is social, a specific social mode, corresponding to an established period. In that way, it is now possible to display the connections within a social formation and the distinction “also serves to sustain the revolutionary critique of capitalism” (105), replacing by the way the critical and revolutionary aspect of the dialectical method.

If this is Marx’s idea, he was not so fastidious, since he wrote in turn material and social productive forces. Actually, productive forces are material and they become social. Now a science is necessary to disclose the social form that is hidden behind and confused with the material content of a society. That science is the critique of the political economy, namely Marxism.

Cohen represents historical materialism as a set of theses, namely the Development Thesis, according to which productive forces develop throughout history, and the Primacy Thesis, according to which productive forces get an explanatory primacy over production relations. The Development Thesis has been charged for determinism. Following Plekhanov, Cohen considers history as a progress and this progress is based on three elements concerning human nature and the situation of Man facing history: rationality, scarcity, and intelligence. In a situation of scarcity, human beings would be rational enough to use their intelligence in order to improve productive forces. The Primacy Thesis can be explained as follows: The current level of development of the productive forces determines which production relations

would allow a further development of the productive forces and relations of production that allow the development of the productive power exist because they currently allow the development of the productive forces then the level of development of the productive forces explains the nature of the relations of production. Cohen seems to imply that the interest of the ruling class corresponds to the interest of the humanity and to the development of productive forces. In that sense, he is a Smithian Marxist, according to which rational self-interest behaviour would lead to economic development.

One of the main charges against Cohen has been that he is a technological determinist. Cohen seems to consider progress as teleological, like the deterministic orthodoxy of the Second and Third Internationals did. He is dealing with history as a relay race in which social structures replace each other for gradually improving the productive forces. Nevertheless, it is still possible that a social structure destroys productive forces and goes backwards. Therefore, Cohen's view can be seen as a conception of history by stages. It may result to the claim that socialism could not be avoided and then political commitment becomes unnecessary.

History is the activity of human beings producing for their own interest, and the history to come is not necessarily the aim of past history. For that reason, Cohen can be charged for historicism, as he confuses laws and tendencies of history. He closes to historical materialism the possibility of contradictions in historical development. His comprehension is ossified because historical development cannot be reduced as a succession of correspondences and contradictions between forces and relations. Here he conceives history as a fate instead of a necessity. His strict separation between forces and relations allows him to expose history in a rather attractive way but it lacks their dialectical interpenetration that forms history, so that he is confusing universal and real history. Men are making history, under conditions that they do not choose and the issue is the transformation from rationality to action. "The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it **vérifier sur MIA**"

(Engels 1946). Fettering productive forces is something necessary for a revolution to occur and to succeed but it is not sufficient. If there is no potential agent of social transformation, revolution will not occur only because of the contradiction between forces and relations. The ruling class has many opportunities to prevent the development of that ability of the working class to exist as a class for itself. The point would be that Cohen was more focused upon non-transitional periods.

### **1.2. The use of functional explanation: in search for scientificity**

Therefore, Cohen seems to defend a theory of historical inevitability, and he could be accused of teleology. Having cleared Marxism from dialectical materialism, he claims that Marx “fails to say, here and everywhere else, what kind of explanation he is hypothesizing” (278). He assumes that central explanations in historical materialism are functional, that is between production relations and productive forces on the one hand, and between base and superstructure on the other hand. “I did not come to associate historical materialism with functional explanation because I thought functional explanation a good thing and I therefore wanted Marxism to have it. I began with a commitment to Marxism, and my attachment to functional explanation arose out of a conceptual analysis of historical materialism” (1982, 33).

Until then, functional explanation was used in natural sciences, especially in biology, and Cohen uses it in order to avoid inconsistency in the explanation of relations of production by productive forces. He is defending a Lamarckian evolutionary analogy, namely that natural evolution is explained by the adaptation of species to their natural environment. “My contention that the condition of Marxism may be such that its adherents are justified in putting forward large unelaborated functional-explanatory claims will be more credible if scientists in other domains have, at a certain stage, been in a similar intellectual position. In addition, I

think natural historians were in that position before Darwin advanced the subject” (1980, 133).

Whereas for Marx it was rather an evolutionary metaphor, it is for Cohen a specific analogy, with specific distinctions between Lamarckism and Darwinism. The charge of determinism stands still, since functional explanation is not able to supply any mechanism. The point is that class struggle is far richer than struggle for life in nature, and Cohen is lessening the revolutionary project of Marx and Engels. The scientificity of historical materialism is due to the fact that it lightens the laws of birth, life, growth and death of a social organism. Functional explanation is a part of his theory that has been strongly criticised, during the first part of the eighties. This mode of explanation for social sciences has not a good reputation in academics, especially in English-speaking ones. It is blamed for being ahistoric, teleological, holism, approximative, lazy-thinking... Nevertheless, Cohen’s interpretation was quite close to Marxism’s substantial content.

## **2. The first analytical Marxist book**

Yet the major contribution of the book is less in its content than in its epistemology, since it is based on a split between the content and the method of Marx’s works. Here we display Cohen’s methodological background, with both a positivist and an Althusserian influence. Then we show that the book originated analytical Marxism.

### **2.1. A positivist and Althusserian background**

Cohen is one of these English-speaking radical intellectuals who were influenced by the Althusserian vogue in continental Europe. Out of Althusser, he kept the epistemological break between young and mature Marx, but he cleared his anti-humanistic structuralism. “Althusser’s *Pour Marx* persuaded me that the abidingly important Marx is to be found in *Capital* and the writings preparatory to it... It is perhaps a matter for regret that logical positivism, with its insistence on intellectual commitment, never caught on in Paris... The

Althusserian vogue could have unfortunate consequences for Marxism in Britain, where lucidity is a precious heritage, and where it is not generally supposed that a theoretical statement, to be one, must be hard to comprehend” (x).

It might be the case that Cohen crossed the border between Marxism and the academic mainstream in philosophy and social theory. With that book, he did not aim to make a defence of Marxism as such, but only of historical materialism. Not only the clarity and rigour are a principle that any author must regard, but here they are the core of the intellectual construction of Cohen. As a research program, historical materialism was submitted to tests. “My intellectual life has been more than forty years of deciding what must be dropped and what must be kept from the Marxist and socialist doctrine” (2001).

Cohen isolated the theory of history from the rest of Marx’s, and he paved the way for a positivist Marxism. Using traditional tools of the bourgeois social science is not completely new in Marxism. Otto Neurath, a founding member of Vienna Circle, could be considered as the first analytical Marxist, being a Marxist and using empiricism and realism against Hegelianism, considered as a scientific and philosophical non-sense since being neither verifiable nor analytic. However, it would be excessive and schematic to claim that analytic philosophy is entirely at odds with Hegelian notions such as contradiction. Quine and Sellars for instance were supporting Hegelian projects, such as deconstruction. But traditional analytical philosophy tends to reject holism: “When such ‘holism’ is affirmed as a matter of principle, all analytical Marxists would oppose it: a micro-analysis is always desirable and always in principle possible” (xxiii).

Cohen’s aim was to defend Marxist theory of history, as a part of the core of the Marxist Research Program, from which insane areas must be cleared. Like any theory applying for the status of science, any part of Marxism must be subjected to test, to criticism. It was sufficient for Popper to claim that Marxism cannot be disproved for declaring it unscientific, but



Lakatos's methodology allows to test a theory in separating essential parts from secondary parts. Therefore, "while you do not need to read Galileo or Newton to be a good physicist (reading them is the vocation not of physicists but of historian of physics), we have not progressed so far that it is time to stop reading Marx" (xxvii-xxviii). Still Marx was denying positivism as far inferior scientifically from classical political economy and politically from utopian socialism.

## **2.2. The birth of a school**

On several points, Cohen was a precursor, influenced in that way by Althusser: Historical Materialism and Hegelian dialectics are at variance, basic concepts in any theoretical structure must be systematically questioned and clarified and nothing exists like a specifically Marxist methodology. Althusser was denying dialectical materialism as a 'philosophical monstrosity intended to vindicate power' (1994, 31-32). When he wrote that book, Cohen's objective was probably not to found a school. Now, *Karl Marx's Theory of History* cannot be studied without being conscious that he gave the first tone to a long series of debates. It attracted many authors who were sympathetic to Marxism but who were disgusted by its methodological background. Studying one part of the Marxian corpus separately from the rest, clearing in that way Marxism from dialectical materialism, Cohen allowed a Marxism without a specifically Marxist method, contrary to so-called orthodox Marxism.

Cohen was a member of the 'September Group', which has met each September once a year since 1979, initiated by Elster and Cohen. They were scholars who were not unfriendly with Marxism, but not necessarily Marxist, initially Brenner, Cohen, Elster, van Parijs, Przeworski, Roemer, Steiner, Van der Veen and Wright<sup>2</sup>. The systematic work initiated by Cohen paved the way to many works which have become standards in Marxism, among

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<sup>2</sup> Samuel Bowles entered the group in 1987, Joshua Cohen in 1996. Jon Elster and Adam Przeworski left in 1993.

which Roemer's *A General Theory of Exploitation and Class*, Elster's *Making Sense of Marx*, Wright's *Classes*, in the collection 'Studies in Marxism and Social Theory', introduced as: "The books in the series are intended to exemplify a new paradigm in the study of Marxist social theory. They will not be dogmatic or purely exegetical in approach. Rather, they will examine and develop the theory pioneered by Marx, in the light of the intervening history, and with the tools of non-Marxist social science and philosophy. It is hoped that Marxist thought will thereby be freed from the increasingly discredited methods and presuppositions which are still widely regarded as essential to it, and that what is true and important in Marxism will be more firmly established"<sup>3</sup>.

Besides historical materialism, these works include research on the labour theory of value, social classes, political science, historical transitions... It can be subsumed with a theory of history by Cohen and a theory of exploitation by Roemer, with a methodology by Elster. The aim of that school was to study Marxism while using the traditional tools of mainstream academic thought (mainly analytical philosophy and logical positivism, partly neoclassical economics). He used to regard himself as a 'non-bullshit Marxist'. "Before others taught me to call what we were doing 'analytical Marxism', it was my own practice to call it 'non-bullshit Marxism'" (xxv).

For Cohen, a choice must be made between bullshit and Marxism. He means bullshit in general as an unfair intellectual posture, but he rarely deals with bullshit in Marxism. We may imagine that it could be something like dialectics, as an answer to critics like Sayers, Sayer or Smith, charging him for being undialectical and unhistorical. "There is no such thing as a dialectical form of reasoning that can challenge analytical reasoning. Belief in dialectic as a rival to analysis thrives only in an atmosphere of unclear thought" (xxiii). As a Research Program, Marxism has, according to Cohen, experienced a scientific revolution from pre-

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<sup>3</sup> Epigraph in any book published in the series.

analytical to analytical Marxism. The aim would be to reconstruct Marx's theory of history in a non-Hegelian way, and to replace the labour theory of value with contemporary mainstream economics, namely Cohen and Roemer.

In Cohen's idea, it is a matter of "regret that Marxism came to be called 'Marxism', instead of what Engels wisely called it. If the 'scientific socialism' label had stuck, people would be less disposed to put the unproductive question, 'Is Analytical Marxism Marxist?'" (xxvi). Analytical Marxism has often been confused with Rational Choice Marxism, namely the use of game theory, methodological individualism and neoclassical economics for Marxism. This claim must be proved wrong since just some in the Group have been involved in Rational Choice Theory. They were mainly Elster, Roemer and Przeworski. However the debate in analytical Marxism has rapidly become a discussion around Rational Choice Marxism, and especially around Elster's *Making Sense of Marx*. On the one hand, the defenders of mainstream academics who were not too much at odds with Marxism applauded the book (Carling, McLennan). On the other hand, Marxist scholars who were more involved into inclusive Marxism accused it of deformation, diffamation, incoherence, contempt, of being an anti-dialectic positivism, a superficial, Popperian, dogmatic, unmarxist work (McCarney, Ryan, Sayer). This book came after a large debate between Elster's methodological individualism and Cohen's functional explanation. Being far closer to the mainstream academics, Elster seems to have imposed his view in the discussion and he strongly influenced Cohen (1982, 34): "Game theory aims to explain the vicissitudes of the struggle and the strategies pursued in it, but it cannot give a Marxist answer to the question why class wars (as opposed to battles) are settled one way rather than another".

On the name of the exactness, Marxism was swallowed into anti-Marxist social science. It might be the case that Rational Choice Theory allows easier issues, in a seemingly scientific way, but it has two main defects that are deadly for any social theory which task is to explain

and to change the world: on the one hand, it strongly weakens the explanatory power of Marxism, and on the other hand, he annihilates its revolutionary project.

### **3. Through a revision of his central claims**

With Cohen and analytical Marxism, Marxism has now entered the university, but at a certain price, which is a revision of Marxian central claims, particularly on historical materialism. Three of the four additional articles in Cohen's deal with historical materialism. "I said above that inherited theory must be refashioned, and I offer at the end of this edition some effort in that direction, across chapters XII-XV" (28). They were first published in the first half of the eighties. Separating historical materialism from the rest of Marxism, Cohen denies some parts of the corpus that are joined together in Marx. *'The theses of the labour theory of value are not presupposed or entailed by any contentions advanced in this book'* (2000, 423, stress in the original). In rejecting the labour theory of value, Marxism in general and historical materialism in particular have lost much of their substance. Furthermore, the shower of criticism that was received by Cohen's use of functional explanation greatly lessened the theory. Charged for determinism, Cohen got obliged to weaken his initial defence of historical materialism and to privilege normative postures. He dismissed his former constraint, namely "what Marx wrote and the standards that distinguish twentieth century analytical philosophy", by imposing a choice between the two, privileging the latter upon the former. Then, historical materialism was subverted on the name of analytical rigor.

One of the main original contributions of Cohen was his powerful distinction between 'social' relations of production and 'material' productive forces. However, in a following article, he came to separate Marxian philosophical anthropology and historical materialism, replacing his former distinction by the idealistic one between 'material' and 'spiritual'. He claimed that historical materialism, as a Marxian theory of history, is independent from philosophical anthropology, as a Marxian theory of human nature: "the apparent dependance

of the Marxist theory of history of the Marxist theory of human nature is an illusion” (366). It is quite a turning point, since in 1978 he was basing historical materialism especially upon human nature, as inherently rational and intelligent. In reality, productive forces develop neither thanks to nor despite of human nature but at the expense of it. Men have a history because they must produce their life, not by nature but because of the circumstances. In an unprecedented way, Cohen separates two kinds of historical materialism, as a core and a periphery: an inclusive historical materialism for which history is centrally the development of productive forces, and a restricted historical materialism for which history is among others the development of productive forces. The latter allows an explanation of spiritual phenomena independently from material area. Undoubtedly, Cohen prefers it since “what has been dropped could not in an intellectual conscience have been kept, except at the cost of relaxing the rule of reason, which is not an acceptable cost” (25). Now Cohen started to deviate from one of his former constraints, namely “what Marx wrote”. He allows to Marx and Engels an inclusive historical materialism and he considers himself as a defender of a restricted one. The distinction between the two deals with the Preface on the following sentence: “It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness” (Marx 1971, 21). For any classical Marxist, this is the core of Marxian materialism, but not for Cohen: “If that sentence is removed, what remains is, I would claim, open to restricted construal” (376). Cohen explicitly charges Marx with an inclusive elaboration of historical materialism, which he regards as a Hegelian influence. “Hence, when he replaced Hegelian idealism by his own materialism, he retained the inclusivism of the rejected doctrine. 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 the

liberation of humanity, did not require him to turn the arrow between consciousness and being the other way around” (381).

At that point Cohen fails to assess the dialectical relation between Marxism and Hegelianism. Marx was rejecting the idealistic content in Hegel but he made use of his dialectical method as a necessary instrument. In that sense, Cohen is close to the mechanist conception of the former materialists. His initial defence is put into question. It seems that Cohen has been much weakened by his critics, and above all, that analytical philosophy is definitely at odds with Marxism. All that he can keep from historical materialism is a restricted version, far from Marx’s as a subversive theory. The former conception of Cohen by stages forbids him to consider the movement of real history.

Then we can evoke his non-Marxist separation between normative and scientific issues. Actually, Cohen has always been concerned both with historical materialism and with normative theory. That comes from his entire break with Hegelian method. Probably under the influence of John Roemer, for whom exploitation has not to do with the extraction of surplus labour, but with social injustice, his priority came seriously upon the normative part as soon as the early nineties.

Now, Cohen has repudiated historical materialism and he privileges moral theory, like a way back to Utopian socialism and to Kantian thought. “So scepticism about historical materialism should leave the socialist project more or less where it would otherwise be” (342). Cohen’s fellows, those who he is addressing to, are not Marxist scholars, but bourgeois political philosophers like John Rawls or Robert Nozick. He is conciliant with them, conceding that the individual is more important than social classes in political action. “You have to strike a difficult balance between personal right and social duty” (Cohen 2001). He must depart from the paradigm to justify moral claims, and to get in harmony. Then, most of the time, he is studying historical materialism independently from his moral theory.

That clear distinction between scientific and normative issues has to deal with the widespread confusion between the collapse of Soviet Union and the death of Marxism. Actually, it was certainly a weakening in its theoretical impact, but for Cohen it was a reason to reduce Marxism's ambitions and his own ambitions as a Marxist. "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" (394).

Departing from a real attempt to renew Marxism, Cohen finally removes all its specificity as a social science. Subjectivity and self-conscience have replaced the objectivity of science and Marxism has been integrated into "bourgeois social science". Moral issues are not Marxist, which aim is to study real history and life conditions, rather than imaginary individuals. Cohen's fight for socialism rests upon normative issues instead of historical requirements. Actually, normative issues are methodologically vague. Cohen feels obliged to deal with them in order to counter the Lockean/Nozickean idea of self-property. For Marx, socialism is necessary, not because it is good for humanity but because it is necessary to develop productive forces that are fettered by an old-fashioned mode of production, namely capitalism. There is not much left between Cohen's Marxism and egalitarian liberalism. "What distinguishes Marxism, in the view of those of us who have been called Analytical Marxists, is a commitment to a society of social ownership and equality, a commitment to social ownership and the interest in equality" (2001).

Distinguishing ethics, logics and epistemology, Cohen and analytical Marxism have replaced a universal social theory with an eclectic one. It appears more and more clearly that Cohen has gone away from scientific Marxism. Starting from the Althusserian epistemological break, he ended up with the opposite, namely a non-scientific humanism. Revolution became an issue of individual consciousness rather than class struggle. Then,

since the early nineties, Cohen has dealt with the issue of a workers' revolution as a set of conditions, not as a material necessity. "That class, traditionally conceived, had four characteristics which, taken together, ensured that it would produce a socialist revolution. First, it was the section of society on whose productive activity everyone depended. Second, it constituted the great majority of society. Third, it was composed of the exploited people in society. And, finally, its members were in serious need; they experienced a substantial lack of the essentials of a fulfilling life" (2001).

Considering that they are not brought together, he claims, that "there would certainly never be that society of community and equality for which we continue to struggle" (2001). Cohen's Marxism is now a theory of social justice, arguing against Nozick about self-property. Cohen's critique has become unscientific and normative.

He first intended to put forward a serious defence of Marx's theory, but its methodological premises allowed it to be charged by his fellow analytical philosophers. The main outcome of this was the foundation of Neoclassical Marxism, put differently an anti-Marxist Marxism, destroying its own subject. Both constraints of Cohen's work proved irreconcilable, considering the definitive inclusiveness of Marxism. At the end, between 'what Marx wrote' and 'analytical philosophy', Cohen chose the latter. From a technological interpretation of historical materialism, he ended with a non-Marxist theory, and his failure seems to be attributed to non-Marxist method rather than to Marxism.

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