

**KARL MARX'S THEORY  
OF HISTORY: A DEFENCE**

**G A Cohen**

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In the two decades since Marx's works became academically respectable, his own arguments, the traditional formulations of historical materialism, have become progressively overlaid by a dense undergrowth of interpretation.

Many would-be students have no doubt drawn back as a result — unable to cope with the varied specialisms, Neo-Ricardian economics, Structuralism and Freudian psychology, which claim to validate particular versions. It is therefore welcome to find a treatment of Marx, recently reissued as a paperback, which, by and large, does the opposite, and brings us into direct encounter with Marx's own words.

GA Cohen's book presents itself as a defence. To quote the author: 'it is an old-fashioned historical materialism which I defend, in which history is, fundamentally, the growth of human productive power, and the forms of society rise and fall according as they enable or impede growth.'

Matched with this, and no less welcome, is the book's quest for clarity. The portentous imprecision of the French school of Althusser is repeatedly called to task. 'The Althusserian vogue', writes Cohen, '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.'

Cohen's own theoretical commitment is to restore the concept of 'productive forces' to its central place in explaining human development.

Basing himself on a close examination of Marx's own usage, particularly in his 'most pregnant' text, the *Preface to the Critique of Political Economy*, Cohen defines productive forces as including instruments of production, scientific knowledge, raw materials and labour power. These in their cumulative expansion, from generation to generation, ultimately and periodically lead human beings to the necessity of transforming the economic structure or relations of production.

It is, in turn, these relations — constituting, as Cohen cogently argues, alone and by themselves the economic 'base' — which explain the 'superstructure' of society, its ideology and legal institutions.

From this, therefore, it will be clear that Cohen champions what he himself describes as a 'technological' interpretation, that he relates superstructure, directly and causally, to the base, and that he defends a progressive view of the unfolding of qualitatively higher social systems.

At the same time, the point should be made that 'technological' does not, in Cohen's use, imply either literally or metaphorically that such an approach is mechanical. On the contrary, it places at the centre of any

explanation the continual and transforming relationship between human labour and nature (including human nature).

Moreover, Cohen approaches the task of *how* this explanation should be made with a subtlety and precision which, whatever its limitations, compares favourably with the 'in the last resort' evasions of the structuralist school. He advocates a theory of explanation that is functional (not functional<sup>^</sup>) and within which, to use Cohen's initially somewhat bemusing terms, 'the character of what is explained is determined by its effect on what it explains'.

This may be simply illustrated by looking at the institutions of the early capitalist state.

A new class, the bourgeoisie, is brought into being. It is created by transformations in productive forces which made possible, through conscious action, the forging of new production relations in which wage labour is hired by capital. But to sustain these relations, for them not to be quickly destroyed, it will be necessary to create new legal institutions and ideology. Hence, the character of these institutions cannot be explained without reference to the specific development of productive forces and yet at the same time these same institutions are indispensable for the growth of the new relations and the further revolutionising of productive forces.

In arguing this case, and within it the primacy of the economic base, Cohen goes on to provide a valuable distinction between the basic (and pre-legal) 'powers' over property and labour power implicit in particular class relations and the legal rights that are created to endorse them.

This enables him to refute the accusations of critics like HB Acton that by making property 'rights' intrinsic components of production relations Marx himself abandoned the distinction between base and superstructure. At the same time Cohen also chides Perry Anderson for actually making this mistake by attempting to explain the rise of capitalism, at least in part, by the prior existence in Europe of absolute property rights stemming from Roman Law.

Again, in his definition of class, Cohen insists on a firm adherence, to its structural base in production relations. On this score the historian EP Thompson is criticised for tackling the 'making' of the English working

class in cultural and ideological terms which are strictly relevant to a quite different subject: the emergence of class consciousness.

Can we therefore conclude that the book does indeed live up to its subtitle as a defence of historical materialism?

Unfortunately, our answer has, up to a point, to be qualified. For as befits a book of rugged and uncompromising originality, it also leaves a number of question marks, and some of these are by no means small.

First, his defence is framed in terms which Cohen describes as 'those standards of clarity and rigour which distinguish twentieth century analytical philosophy'. It is accordingly a very English book by pedigree, and one which pays initial tribute to the heritage of logical positivism.

This may give Cohen added weight in his polemics with Acton and Plamenatz. But we are left guessing (because he does not tell us) about his standpoint on dialectical materialism. Much of what he writes is inherently dialectical (as in his functional mode of explanation), yet from some brief remarks on the concept of 'contradiction', it could be inferred that Cohen is unwilling to extend his defence to dialectical materialism itself.

And, if that is the case, it must reopen our assessment of his interpretation of historical materialism. For while, in some ways, the procedures of analytical philosophy are infinitely flexible, it is not easy to exempt logical positivism from the strictures which Politzer applied to the extension of formal logic beyond the domain of mathematics.

Cohen's position may or may not demand the assertion of principles of identity (that is, of unchanging categories) or of non-contradiction. But, until this has been made explicit, we are left with the suspicion that however brisk Cohen's rejection of idealism at the front door, it enters unchallenged through the back.

For it is the practice of *making* historical relations, of understanding the process of change, that is the real test. Cohen has elaborated a structure that is by formal declaration materialist and technological. It remains to ask ourselves whether or not this can be done in the absence of the procedures of materialist dialectics outlined, for example, by Lenin in his *Philosophical Notebooks*.

Second, and no less central, Cohen expounds but does not *defend* the labour theory of value. From his final chapter on contemporary capitalism one might infer that

he is unwilling to do so.

Here his position is not unlike that of Baran and Sweezy. These economists, in rejecting the labour theory of value, argued that in its monopoly stage capitalism's contradictions stem principally from a rising rate of surplus and the irrationality embodied in its consumption. Cohen appears to endorse a similar thesis although he focuses on the contradiction between production for exchange (ie, profit) and that for social use. He argues that advanced capitalism is only able to function by stimulating unreal needs and grotesquely wasting material and human resources.

Hence his immediate political prescription: that workers should use their bargaining power to seek more leisure time as *against* higher wages.

It is unfortunate *that so serious a book* should not confront a theory which Marx believed to be central. Its emphasis on unreal needs and leisure time serves to mask the politically most pregnant aspect of capitalism's crisis: its inability to make full use of its productive resources. Scientifically, this inability can only be understood as a consequence of its own necessary (labour) measure of value.

This omission, and the one-sided elevation

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of leisure time, is not unconnected with our final point of criticism.

In his section on the future communist society Cohen reinterprets, if he does not actually dispute, Marx's formulation that 'labour is no longer a means of life, but life's prime want'. Cohen takes this to mean that labour, being a means to live, *cannot* be wanted.

Elsewhere, discussing human nature, he argues that men do not naturally wish to labour but as rational beings will, in conditions of scarcity, do so, and use their uniquely developed mental powers to control their environment.

This separation of labour and rationality into (undialectically) distinct categories continues throughout the book. Can it be easily reconciled with Marx's concept of humanity's 'species-being'?

This gives human labour, as a specifically collective and social activity, a unique role in the *development* of rationality, of instrumental communication and language.

The coercive loss of its control, its alienation, the hallmark of any class society, inevitably transforms the individual's relationships to his labour and his own development. Conversely, as Marx wrote in the *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, the test

of advance towards communist society would be how far labour did become 'life's prime want'.

The difference is a fundamental one, and relevant not just to the future but also to any understanding of class society.

However, our final note should not be one of criticism. Cohen has ventured on a most difficult task. His clarification of basic terms is of lasting importance. He has cleared away many academic absurdities. Most important, he has helped take a new generation of students back to the bright steel of Marx's own thought.


John Foster

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