

FROM MARXISM TO POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY: THE DEMAND FOR SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION IN COHEN'S WORK

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1. Economic and social transformations that occurred worldwide during the twenty five past years allow us to consider a double hegemony of capitalism. On the one hand, capitalism is ruling as a mode of production, since almost all the countries claiming themselves as socialist have disappeared. On the other hand, and as a result, capitalism is ruling as a theoretical mode of production, since research from radical and critical currents decreased hard during that period. Such a trend has been stronger in English-speaking countries, starting from the Thatcher government in the UK and the Reagan government in the US. As soon as the early seventies, with the publication of *Theory of Justice* by John Rawls in 1971, a large debate occurred in political philosophy on social justice issues. Probably the most incisive opponent of Rawls was Robert Nozick, with *Anarchy, State and Utopia*, published in 1974. So we can bring out two main trends that oppose each other on the issue of social justice. On the one hand egalitarians who follow roughly Rawls are claiming a defense of social justice; on the other hand libertarians, besides Nozick, are supporting private property, on the basis of self-ownership, no matter social justice. As a matter of fact, Marxism always treated social justice as a secondary question, in the sense that distributional issues result from structural issues. Yet from the second half of the seventies Marxist-inspired authors had many publications on that issue. The point of that communication will be to wonder about the emergence of those issues in a Marxian framework and to deal with the relationship and compatibility between theory of justice and scientific socialism. In that context it seems that Gerald A. Cohen has a particular position, in that he has written both on historical materialism and on political philosophy. Therefore we will deal with the way he defended historical materialism in the late seventies, how he modified his own claims during the eighties, in the light of the transformations of contemporary capitalism, and how his attention decisively shifted to political philosophy in the early nineties.

I A RECONSTRUCTION OF HISTORICAL MATERIALISM

2. It might be possible to separate Cohen's work on two kinds of concerns about Marxism, namely historical materialism and normative theory. *Karl Marx's Theory of History*, first published in 1978, seems to be not much concerned with normative theory. In that book, he intended to defend what he called "*an old-fashioned historical materialism*" [Cohen 2000, p.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. [Cohen 2000, p.ix]

3. He realised an exegetic work on the Preface of *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, extracting from it a few sentences which were supposed to represent the core of historical materialism:

We take the 1859 Preface as our guide. [Cohen 2000, p.28]

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A) HISTORICAL MATERIALISM IN THESESES

4. From the Preface, Cohen has rigorously presented the terms that he judges as essential – productive forces, relations of production, economic structure, superstructure – and he articulates a defence around two theses. On the one hand, the Development Thesis claims that productive forces tend to grow autonomously in the history. It rests on three principles : Human beings are rather rational, they live in a situation of scarcity and they are intelligent enough to improve their condition. On the other hand, the Primacy Thesis claims that the productive forces have an explanatory primacy on the relations of production. It means that a set of relations of production is explained by the level of development of productive forces and, as a result, productive forces dominate the relations of production. Therefore, if a contradiction occurs between productive forces and relations of production it must be resolved by a change in the relations of production, in order to keep the development going.

B) TECHNOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT AND CLASS STRUGGLE

5. The Development Thesis has been charged for determinism, as a “*Transhistorical Choice Marxism*” [Roberts 1996, p.81]. Following Plekhanov, Cohen considers history as a progress. It seem be a technological one, since *the development of knowledge is, as we saw, the centre of the development of the productive forces. In its higher stages, the development of the productive forces merges with the development of productively useful science.* [Cohen 2000, p.45]

6. History would then be determined by scientific development. Such a claim leads us to wonder what is the place for human action and especially for the class struggle. For Cohen, class struggle is determined by structural conditions, and class capacities seem to exist automatically anytime relations of production fetter the development of productive forces. In a period of expansion of productive forces the interest is for development; in a period of decline of productive forces the interest is for revolution. But Cohen tells nothing about the tranformation from rationality to action. We think that class struggle is the way of becoming conscious of the contradiction between productive forces and relations of production. When relations of production do not fit with the development of productive forces anymore, the historical task of the dominated class is to replace those relations by higher relations. Relations of production define classes, and therefore determine class struggle, which function is to transform in return the relations of production towards higher stages. In a period of transition between two social forms, class struggle decides when a ruling class is being overthrown, that is when a higher social order is objectively possible. Relations of production and productive forces fit together through class struggle.

II THROUGH A REVISION OF HIS CENTRAL CLAIMS

7. 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*”².

A) A THEORETICAL REVISION

8. One of the most 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,

² See below, p.2

replacing his former distinction by the idealistic one between “material” and “spiritual”. He claimed that historical materialism, as the Marxian theory of history, is independent from philosophical anthropology, as Marxian theory of human nature:

the apparent dependance of the Marxist theory of history of the Marxist theory of human nature is an illusion. [Cohen 2000, p.366]

9. 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.

Unprecedentedly, 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. [Cohen 2000, p.25]

10. Now Cohen started to deviate from one of his former constraints, namely “*what Marx wrote*”³. He allows to Marx and Engels an inclusive historical materialism and he considers himself as a defender of a restricted historical materialism. 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, p.21]

11. 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. [Cohen 2000, p.376]

B) A HISTORICAL REVISION

12. Cohen considers that the central claims of historical materialism were falsified by the Russian Revolution:

« No social formation perishes before all the productive forces for which there is room in it have developed ». *He claims that productive forces in Russia were not developed enough for allowing capitalism to disappear.*

« and new, higher relations of production never appear before the material conditions of their existence have matured in the womb of the old society itself ». *At the same time, he claims that the conditions for socialism were not united in russia.*

13. For Cohen, the Russian Revolution was not a socialist revolution, and USSR has never been a socialist country. Besides, the restoration of capitalism in Russia confirms the second point of Cohen. For the same reasons he thinks that a success of socialism in USSR would have been a defeat for historical materialism. Against Cohen we can say that capitalism was quite developed on an international scale, as well as trade between countries.

C) A SOCIAL REVISION

14. Cohen claims that changes in the class structure of capitalist societies since the eighties – more heterogeneity and less polarization – led Cohen to deal with ethical issues. He started to acknowledge the issue of a workers’ revolution as a set of conditions, not as a material necessity.

³ see below p.3

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. [Cohen 2001]

15. Such a point of view was theorized before by Erik Olin Wright, in *Classes* in 1985, as the existence of contradictory class locations. It means that there would be several forms of exploitation (on qualification, on organization, on statute...). That means that domination could be explained otherwise than by relations of production, and Wright explicitly rests upon Roemer's *A General Theory of Exploitation and Class*, which considers exploitation only as a transfer of value. For Roemer the relationship between technological determinism and class struggle must be clarified with a sociology of injustice. Without having the structural conditions, only the development of a social ethos can launch social transformation.

III THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL BREAK UPSIDE DOWN

16. *[T]he questions about base and superstructure and forces and relations of production ... occupied me for some twenty years, before my interests shifted decisively in the direction of moral and political philosophy. I think, instead, that our shift of attention is explained by profound changes in the class structure of Western capitalist societies, changes which raise normative problems which did not exist before, or, rather, which previously had a little political significance. Those normative problems have great political significance now. [Cohen 1990, p.364]*

A) MARX : A RELATIVISTIC VIEW ON JUSTICE

17. Moral views were criticized by Marx as a kind of ideology, separating the resolution of a social conflict from its material conditions. Moral judgments are a reflection on the needs of the ruling mode of production, and communism is beyond justice. He criticizes the socialists that only have considerations about justice, because stressing distributive justice keeps attention from revolutionary goals to abstract ideals. Any moral rule will disappear with the disappearance of the conditions that create the need for it.

18. Marx does not claim that capitalism is unjust, since labor force is acquired by the capitalist at its just value. It becomes a theft by a dialectical way. In the capitalist mode of production, the bourgeois distribution is the only just distribution, since law results from economic relations. As a matter of fact, no principle of justice allows transhistorical judgments, since ideas on justice and morality are superstructural to any social formation. For Marx, unbiased consideration is an ideological illusion; he takes position besides the proletariat as the bringing the future, and not because it is exploited by the bourgeoisie. Yet it would be wrong to claim that Marxist critique of capitalism has nothing moral: he condemns capitalism for his appropriation methods (theft, violence). But such a moral request is not a foundation for a revolutionary critique of capitalism, since the latter rests upon a scientific analysis. A moral critique is just an outcome of it.

B) COHEN : A REVOLUTION IN MORALS

19. As we have seen, Cohen has repudiated historical materialism and now he privileges moral theory, like a way back to Utopian socialism and to Kantian thought. 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.

20. 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 the ambitions of Marxism and his own ambitions as a Marxist. Departing from a real attempt to renew Marxism, Cohen finally removes all its specificity as a social science, implicitly acknowledging Roemer's conclusion:

It is not at all clear how analytical Marxists will differ from non-Marxist philosophers like Ronald Dworkin and Amartya Sen. [Roemer 1986, p.191]

Subjectivity and self-conscience have replaced the objectivity of science and Marxism has been integrated into 'bourgeois social science'.

21. 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. 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 of class struggle. Cohen's Marxism is now a theory of social justice, arguing against Nozick about self-property. His latest book - Cohen 1999 - is no more concerned with scientificity, but only with normative justification. Cohen's critique has become unscientific and normative.

CONCLUSION

22. In criticizing capitalism upon normative points, Cohen creates a tension between historical materialism and an ethical defense of disadvantaged people. If capitalism must be condemned for social injustice, Marx should have condemned in its upward stage, since it was bringing inequalities. From now on, Cohen rests his hopes for social transformation and he seems to replace social revolution by revolution in morals. In giving priority to normative political philosophy on explanatory social theory, Cohen has made the distance between Marxism and egalitarian liberalism. He gave up Marxism as a science of society.

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