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G.A. Cohen and the crisis of Marxism

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hoopvol.

Onder verwijzing naar de slotclaus van Stokmans reactie in *Acta Politica* 1981/, blz. 289, is overigens de verleiding groot zich af te vragen of hij zich er reeds van heeft vergewist of voor het Engelse taalgebied niet D. M. White als recensent zal worden aangezocht. Deze heeft het inmiddels namelijk al héél 'bont gemaakt met het door mij in *Acta Politica* 1978/2, blz. 193/194 van hem aangehaalde inzicht waarom het bij het onderzoek van Helmers c.s. uiteindelijk gaat: 'If one is proposing to do research on something – who gets what, when, how, why or whatever – one might use the word power to label one's subject matter. The research would then be research on power in het sense defined, although it would be an open question whether it was in any sense research on power'.

De 'kern van de Nederlandse economie' trekt zich (helaas) absoluut niets aan van een zgn. 'paradigma shift' (Kuhn) waarmee Stokman in zijn oratie een 'recenserend artikel' (zie daarover A. Gerschenkron in *Mercator Gloriosus*, Ned. vert. 1973) afdoet. Dat behoort niet bepaald tot de 'protective belt' (Lakatos) waarmee zich de deelnemer in een '(progressive) scientific research programme' bij voorkeur tooit. Als Stokman daarbij zichzelf niet ontzegt hetgeen hij Letterie in *Acta Politica* 1980/4, blz. 555 overlopend naar blz. 556, voorhoudt dan kan het machtonderzoek alsnog wetenschappelijk boeiend én maatschappelijk relevant worden.

**John Stuart Mill
De onderwerping
van de vrouw**

Geïnspireerd door zijn vrouw Harriet Taylor pleit Mill (in 1869) voor radicale gelijkstelling van de vrouw op politiek en maatschappelijk terrein. Een verrassend boek over emancipatie. Boom klassiek 36. f 29,50

boom
in de boekhandel

**M. van Schendelen
(redactie)
Kernthema's van de
politicologie**

Levendig beeld van de wereld der politiek in een geheel herziene editie van deze inleiding tot de wetenschap der politiek. f 39,75

boom
in de boekhandel

Literatuur

G. A. Cohen and the crisis of Marxism

by Grahame Lock

The place of Marxism in the Anglo-Saxon academic world – by which the Dutch universities are of course heavily influenced – has traditionally been marginal, though greater in history and economics, for example, than in political science or philosophy. Consequently, Marxists in the Netherlands have often turned for inspiration to West Germany or France. This has meant that, to the extent that their own university departments are American or British oriented, their own work has been doubly marginalized.

The picture has however been potentially and perhaps enduringly altered by the publication of G. A. Cohen's *Karl Marx's Theory of History: a Defence*.¹ This book has provoked an intense discussion among mainstream Anglophone political philosophers and social scientists. It is thus all the more surprising that little attention has been paid to it in the scientific press of the Netherlands. The present article, while it does not aim to present a survey of the book's contents, may nevertheless serve to draw the attention of a wider group of readers to what is in fact a most remarkable work.

Cohen characterizes his purpose in the following manner: to defend historical materialism by offering arguments in its favour (some of which have been overlooked), thus defusing a number of its adversaries' instruments of attack. This defusion is to be achieved especially by 'presenting the theory . . . in an attractive form' (p. IX). Unlike most latter-day Marxists, he defends a traditional or 'old-fashioned' orthodoxy: that is, the writing of Marx himself, and particularly, as far as exegesis is concerned, the well-known 1859 Vorwort to the *Zur Kritik der politischen Oekonomie*. His goal is then, further, to 'straighten Marx out', to tidy up his thoughts, and thus to provide a 'less ambiguous' version of his ideas.

The Marxism which he offers is a *technological explanation of history*: it is a conception according to which 'history is, fundamentally, the growth of human productive power', where 'forms of society rise and fall according as they enable or impede that growth' (p. 2). For Cohen, explanatory primacy is attributed to the productive forces. Their tendency to develop through history

is explained in terms of the historical situation of scarcity in which men live, together with their possession of a rational and intelligent nature. It is the development of the productive forces in history which explains the emergence and disappearance of economic structures (another term for 'production relations'); it is in turn the latter which explain social superstructures. In their turn, social superstructures (non-economic institutions) 'consolidate' economic structures, while these structures stimulate – where they do not hinder – the reproduction/development of the productive forces.

I shall say more, later, about these theses. But first I want to make some comments on the political and theoretical situation into which the book falls. It is a situation which has been characterized by others as a *crisis of Marxism*², one provoked essentially by political events but also expressed in theoretical uncertainty, for example in the 'emergency' abandonment by Communist parties of central categories of traditional Marxist doctrine, like that of the dictatorship of the proletariat. This state of crisis is of course not so (openly) marked in the Anglophone world, for obvious reasons concerned with the weakness of the Marxist labour movement there. Cohen's book is however written as, and has largely been received as, an almost purely philosophical treatment, in a quite traditional sense of that term; as a work to be read and assessed in abstraction from the consideration of its possible roots in or impact on such a theoretico-political situation. Its reception has moreover been overwhelmingly favourable.

On the one hand, Cohen has rendered Marxism if not respectable, then at least a to-be-respected opponent in philosophical and social scientific circles. On the other hand he seems to have provided less theoretically-minded (or less theoretically handy) Marxists with an unimpeachably serious philosophical backstop. On the way he has disposed of many of the philosophical objections to Marxism made by Anglo-Saxon 'experts' such as H. B. Acton and J. P. Plamenatz (though not Karl Popper, whose rebuttals are, for whatever reason, left aside), as well as providing trenchant criticism of various positions defended in the philosophy of science, sociology and political science, by Carl Hempel, Larry Wright, Robert Merton and others.

Some criticisms of Cohen

The generally enthusiastic reception referred to above has however been disrupted by one particularly hostile review, whose main argument draws our attention to one of the more intriguing aspects of the book. The review appeared in an issue of the Parisian journal *Critique* devoted to Anglo-Saxon philosophy. Entitled 'Le Marxisme et la philosophie analytique', its author is Jonathan Rée, a philosophy lecturer in Britain.³ In his notice Rée correctly

points to the fact that, until recently, Marxism and philosophy occupied two entirely separate cultures in the Anglophone world. He accepts Cohen's claim to have finally 'brought them together'; that is, he agrees that the book does respect 'those standards of clarity and rigour which distinguish twentieth-century analytical philosophy' (Cohen, p. IX). But he believes that precisely the desire to meet these standards led Cohen into a form of self-deception, into the dissimulation of an underlying empiricist and atomistic conception of the (social) world, a conception deriving from Bacon, Locke, Hume and Mill. Whereas Cohen claims to defend an old-fashioned Marxism with the aid of the tools of analytical philosophy, Rée reminds him on the one hand that much of the creative Marxism of this century is the product of a rejection of just such old-fashioned assumptions, and on the other hand that his adopted version of analytical methods is somewhat out of date too. Now it is true that, in Cohen's case, one must understand the phrase 'analytical philosophy' in a very general sense, and that one misses in the book any sign that this philosophy is for him more than a source of instruments for the dissection of ideas deriving from quite a different textual corpus. The question remains as to whether, as Rée thinks, the book also reveals an indifference to literary form, a blindness to the need to do more than collect and categorize specimen ideas and to display its collection of conceptual distinctions and implications. Rée illustrates his argument with a nice quotation from John Ruskin's autobiographical *Praeterita* (referring to the latter's own youthful scientific studies):

I . . . thenceforward began . . . writing my own more eloquent and exhaustive accounts in a shorthand of many ingeniously symbolic characters, which it took me much longer to write my descriptions in, than in common text and which neither I nor anybody else could read a word of, afterwards.⁵

At first sight, this passage might seem to fit Cohen's work. But I believe that Rée's critique is misplaced. Leaving aside some instances of logical flamboyance, of presentational bravura that are probably unnecessary (pp. 172-4 for example), which are nevertheless in any case perfectly comprehensible, Cohen places clarity before mere rigour, and writes in a manner which is pleasing just on account of its meticulous attention to detail. He is not indifferent to literary form: he has, it seems to me, deliberately adopted the way of careful lucidity, perhaps believing that what *cannot* be said clearly ought not to be said at all, and that an idea which *has not* been clearly expressed cannot claim serious attention until its sense is sufficiently determinate. Thus he is certainly allergic to particular continental brands of philosophy and political theory, of an anti-academic variety, which openly proclaim the problematic character of any species of supposedly scientific propositions, which consider the notion of truth itself to be hopelessly metaphysical, which hold that the desire for

clarity is the expression of a psychotically-based myth of the possible cognitive mastery of the world, or which define knowledge only in terms of the power which it confers. These themes may or may not evoke the image of certain authors for the readers of *Acta Politica*. To many British philosophers and political scientists they connote the worst kinds of speculative excess. And such or similar themes are indeed to be found in some varieties of 'continental Marxism'.

Now Cohen actually makes hardly any reference to non-Anglophone Marxist writing – except to that of Marx and Engels. But in his Foreword he confesses himself 'bound to say a word' about his attitude to the work of Louis Althusser. It was, he writes, 'Althusser's *Pour Marx* [which] persuaded me that the abidingly important Marx is to be found in *Capital* and the writings preparatory to it'; but he was disappointed by Althusser's essays in *Lire le Capital*, which he qualifies as vague and evasive. The question may therefore be posed as to whether – by Cohenian criteria – Althusser's work is vague and evasive because it *is not* yet sufficiently 'worked out' or because – like the 'continental Marxisms' referred to above – it *cannot* be thus 'worked out' (clarified) and would not even wish to be. Cohen does not imply the latter, and may not believe it. I believe that his book is, in many of its aspects, some kind of answer to Althusser. For he knows his rival's work, being to my personal knowledge one of the few English-speaking intellectuals to have read *Pour Marx* and *Lire le Capital* in the original, before translation (together – for purposes of textual control – with the complete French edition of Marx's *Capital*). I shall therefore return later to the question of this confrontation between the most celebrated of recent Anglophone and Francophone Marxist philosophers.

Cohen's manner of writing (*pace* Jonathan Rée) is marked by a profound honesty, a quality all too often absent from Marxist work. This I admire. But further, my admiration for the book derives in part from an interpretation of its character and effects which differs from that given by Cohen himself of his own purpose. He states, as we have seen, that he aims (among other things) at the formulation of a less untidy presentation of 'the' theory originally elaborated by Marx. But his intention is also to identify what Marx said, as opposed to what many interpreters have claimed that he said. And the – very successful – result of this second enterprise as a matter of fact tends to hinder the satisfaction of the first aim. For what he reveals in his many careful exegeses and treatments (whether or not that was his intention, though it often was – but with another aim, to get rid of these difficulties as quickly and efficiently as possible, in order to produce a 'least ambiguous' defence of Marxism), are the enormous ambivalences, gaps and contradictions in Marx's work, enormous enough to make it unlikely that a reasonably comprehensive

defence of Marxism can be provided in the near future.

An example is Marx's contention, as interpreted by Cohen⁵, that class struggle is a 'theoretically derivative battle'. The sense in which he uses the term 'derivative' is admittedly only to be understood in the context of his principal theses (it is, for example, not that he believes class struggle to be a secondary *political* process). Yet I believe that a different reading of Marx is possible here. One must in this connexion distinguish between (I) an explanatory theory which aims to account for the general development of history, and therefore for its 'line': e.g. the progression from tribal society to ancient society to feudalism to capitalism to socialism and finally to communism, and (II) what one might call a 'special' theory, which would allow one to attempt to account for particular transitions as tokens of *one given type* of transition: say, the transition from feudalism to capitalism, or from capitalism to communism. Now Marx, it seems to me, offered both general and special theories, which in this case are mutually incompatible. A further complication is that he also sometimes suggested that the set of special theories at the same time constituted *another* general theory, of class struggle, as stated in the opening words of the *Communist Manifesto*, ch. I: 'The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle'.

With regard to (I), Cohen is right to assert that Marx did try to elaborate a general account of history which relied on the attribution of explanatory primacy to the development of the productive forces. With regard to (II), however, I think that Marx was inclined to attribute explanatory primacy to class struggle, especially in regard to capitalist society and its tendencies. This fact, if it is a fact, would still not embarrass Cohen, who accepts that 'for Marx the *immediate* explanation of major social transformations is often found in the battle between classes' (p. 48). What would embarrass him is the combination of this claim with a demonstration of an *incompatibility* between the two kinds of theories, general and special. On Althusser's reading, for example, any general theory of history is speculative, therefore a philosophy of history; he believes that Marx showed the need to avoid such an account, and in particular to avoid every kind of evolutionism. An evolutionist theory is a teleological account, and a teleology requires that the *principle* of historical development be present at the point of origin. Cohen's theory possesses such a principle in the three factors mentioned above: economic scarcity, and human rationality and intelligence.

We have already cited Rée's comment on the role of creative Marxism in challenging the kind of orthodoxy defended by Cohen. One review of his book, while fairly sympathetic to his effort, may be said to challenge him from such an 'anti-orthodox' position: Andrew Levine and Erik Olin Wright's 'Rationality and Class Struggle'.⁶ They place doubt on the three factors con-

stituting Cohen's defence and use of the thesis of the development of the productive forces. They suggest that Cohen does what Marx condemned in the classical political economists (but himself also attempted): 'building an economic theory out of a logically prior notion of individual (instrumental) rationality in a milieu of (relative) scarcity'.⁷ They believe that his position is thus faithful to (an aspect of) Marx, but wrong. For it ignores the fact that 'the realization of human interests (in the development of productive forces) can be blocked by social constraints'; in other words, it ignores what they call the problem of *class capacities*. These they define as the organizational, ideological and material resources available to classes in class struggle. Unlike Marx himself, many latter-day Marxists have, they argue, questioned the assumption that the development of class capacities automatically follows on from the emergence of 'revolutionary interests', and tried to investigate the 'systematic processes' at work in capitalist society tending to disorganize the working class. They conclude that a rational interest in the transformation of an economic system is not a sufficient condition of its transformation. Since the development of the productive forces does not (necessarily) lead to any corresponding development of class capacities, it is 'arbitrary' of Cohen to attribute explanatory primacy to the productive forces.

Levine and Wright consequently propose to 'supplement' the account of historical materialism found in Marx's 1859 *Vorwort* (and used by Cohen) by such an inquiry into class capacities. That they talk about *supplementing* this text – though they indicate that this is a minimum requirement –⁸ may be an index of their unwillingness to abandon certain categories of 'orthodox Marxism' which other Marxists have rejected: for example those of rational (or objective) interest and of rational action (predicated of a class, therefore of a 'subject of history').⁹

They suggest that it is the *generality* of Marx's *Vorwort* which underlies his and Cohen's failure to pose the question of the obstacles to the realization of the rational interest of a class. They argue for the use of 'class-specific' notions of scarcity and rationality. It may, however, be doubted whether their critique brings the full weight of recent Marxist work (to whose anti-orthodox cutting edge they refer) to bear on Cohen's theses.

They appear to accept Cohen's *aim* as proper: to derive 'an adequate, substantive picture of the general contours of human history', only disagreeing on the question as to whether this aim is realized. I doubt, for reasons sketched below, whether the aim is in order. Their retention of the above-mentioned categories of the rational interest and rational action of a class is paralleled by their instrumental conception of class capacities, which – as we have seen – refers to the *resources* available to a class. More subversively, for instance, Althusser and Balibar have suggested that the proletariat only exists as a class

to the extent that it is organizationally and ideologically *united*, which unity is assured only to the extent of the division of the bourgeoisie; and vice versa.¹⁰ Consequently, one can on this view hardly speak of or measure the extent of the 'resources available to a class in struggle', as if the class already unambiguously existed but was deprived of the organizational, material and ideological instruments necessary to realize its rational interest.

Cohen argues for a purely structural definition of class (thus, implicitly, against the view of Althusser and Balibar) on pp. 73-77 of his book. His argument is framed in terms of a critique of the historian E. P. Thompson¹¹, whose argument against the structural definition is shown to be badly grounded. This latter definition asserts that class may be defined purely in terms of production relations, and must be so defined since the exclusion of factors of 'consciousness, culture and politics' is required to 'protect the substantive character' of the Marxian thesis that class position *strongly conditions* consciousness, culture and politics. In my view one must distinguish between two relations of 'conditioning': that of an *individual's consciousness* (etc.) and that of the *ideology of a class*. What Cohen is talking about is the conditioning of the individual's consciousness (one might add: and his unconsciousness) by 'external' factors. I believe that the core of the Marxist claim concerns the determination and transformation of ideologies and of the contradictions inside and between them, in their relation to the class struggle. I see that it is unilluminating to talk about the class conditioning of the ideology of a class if the relevant class is not identified independently of the ideology in question. If such a phrase is to make sense at all, it is therefore necessary to differentiate two senses of 'class'. Cohen himself notes that Marx was forced to distinguish between a 'class-in-itself' (corresponding to his own use) and a 'class-for-itself', even quoting Marx to the effect that 'the proletariat can act as a class only by constituting itself a distinct political party' (p. 7). And I am prepared to accept that there is a sense in which a divided working class, in Cohen's sense, may and indeed must be called a class – in which case it might be better to avoid confusion by for example calling it, in that event, 'the working class', and then calling what I am talking about 'the proletariat' (and correspondingly 'the capitalist class' and 'the bourgeoisie'). This does not mean that I think that a 'pure' structural definition of class is possible. It means that I believe that such a distinction would allow us better to formulate accounts of the dynamic of class struggle under capitalism, of the splintering and unification of classes. It would allow us better to formulate accounts of the uneven development of the economic, political and ideological class struggles in their relation one to another. Besides, one might invoke here the argument of Balibar to the effect that the term 'class' does not have the same meaning when applied to the working class on the one hand and the capitalist class on

the other.¹² The sense of this argument is however not yet sufficiently elaborated.

Cohen and Althusser on Economic Determination

The explanatory primacy of the productive forces for which Cohen argues is of a quite novel kind (to my knowledge at least) within Marxist theory. The latter's protagonists have long been dissatisfied with Marx's own account of the causal primacy of the economy (however this last term is interpreted), or of the relation between 'base' and 'superstructure'. Engels' famous letter to Bloch of 21-22 September 1890 is one early expression of this unease.

In 1965 Althusser and Balibar, in *Pour Marx and Lire le Capital*, produced an ingenious extension and development of Engels' unexplained notion of 'determination (by the economy) in the last instance'. *Determination* was distinguished from *domination*, and so 'the economy' appeared twice in the characterizing formula of the capitalist mode of production: it was the structure of the capitalist mode of production (= production relation + productive forces, within which the primacy of the former over the latter was asserted) which *determined*, in the last instance, the *domination* of the economic instance in any capitalist social formation. The same determination by the economy resulted in the domination of the political instance in classical Greece, and of the ideological (religious) instance in the Middle Ages.¹³

Cohen has now produced a second – only the second for many years – properly new and interesting schema intended to deal with the problem of economic determination. For him the 'real basis of society' is indeed the set of production relations, and these production relations constitute what is also called the 'economic structure': which means that *the productive forces are not part of the economic structure of society*; nevertheless they enjoy *explanatory primacy* over the production relations (pp. 28-9). This assertion thus involves the rejection of the widely-held notion that if productive forces are explanatorily primary, they must form part of the economic basis or foundation, since the consequent of the proposition is denied. The productive forces may be said to be the 'basis' of society only in the sense in which a basis may be something external to that of which it is the basis. Or, in other words, the productive forces 'are indeed the foundation of the economy but they do not belong to the economic foundation' – they occur 'below' the latter (p. 30). They 'strongly determine the character of the economic structure, while forming no part of it' (p. 31).

Their determining and explanatory role in this respect is then elucidated by reference to functional-explanatory forms, which are discussed below. The advantage of Cohen's formula (filled in with his further, elegant and extensive

account of what the determination and explanation in question come to) is that it at one and the same time respects Marx's own words in the *Vorwort* and is methodologically exceptionally rigorous.

Now there is, in spite of the differences between them, a similarity between the two above-cited schemas, for both attempt to explain historical development (transitions; revolutions) in terms of a general theory of non-correspondence between productive forces and production relations; only in Althusser/Balibar the latter were accorded explanatory primacy, and in Cohen the former. All recognized that such a general theory, if it were to be recognizably Marxist, required such a notion of (non-)correspondence. But here is where, in my view, the weakness of their respective positions lies. My doubts lie, I have indicated, at the level of the project itself. Why was it supposed that such a general theory is possible at all?

Interestingly, the Althusserian version – rich in contradictions – already contained within itself the seeds of its own dissolution, and of an alternative. The reason is that correspondence and non-correspondence were treated in terms of the 'subjection' of labour to capital.¹⁴ Productive forces, for Althusser/Balibar, were constituted by the relation of real appropriation of nature; production relations were defined as the relations of expropriation of the product (e.g. the form of capitalist exploitation). If the *correspondence* between the production relations and the level (or character) of the productive forces is, as Balibar argues, to be understood as a correspondence between the real and formal subjection of labour to capital¹⁵, then a *non-correspondence* may be understood as concerning a failure in the reproduction of one of these relations of subjection. Since it is unlikely (in the case of the transition from capitalism to socialism) that the workers + allies could overnight modify the 'form of the productive forces' – the level and type of technology in use, etc. – and thus the relation of 'real subjection', it would seem to follow that transition (revolution) results from a refusal of 'formal subjection', that is (on a free reading) from a rebellion of workers – not yet necessarily motivated by *any* clear idea of the benefits or costs of socialism – against their 'absolute non-ownership' of the means of production, where 'ownership' is to be understood in the sense of appropriation rather than in the superstructural, merely juridical sense.

Thus, to put it bluntly, the motor of transition would lie in class struggle. Yet questions of the superiority of socialism to capitalism in the satisfaction of rational interests are hardly at issue here. Nor is this account obviously applicable to social forms other than capitalism. But these conclusions were not drawn by the authors of *Lire le Capital* until later.¹⁶

Now the above points touch on comments made by Cohen, but which he would not consider central to the main theses of his book. But my opinion is

that similar critical considerations apply to any attempt to back up a general theory of historical development with a general account of relations of correspondence and non-correspondence between productive forces and production relations. Cohen's position depends for example on an implicit rejection of Balibar's argument to the effect that general theories of the kind which Cohen's book seems to offer rest on the notion of some sort of 'essential definition' of economic – or political or ideological – phenomena which pre-exists the process of their 'historical definition'; therefore that the sense of the term 'economy' and related terms *changes* with the transition from feudalism to capitalism, and must change again with the transformation from capitalism to socialism/communism.¹⁷ Similarly, the transformation from feudalism to capitalism would be of *another kind* (in more than the obvious sense) than the transformation from capitalism to socialism, and the two would consequently not be explained as two instances of a single kind of contradiction: the non-correspondence between productive forces and production relations. This would mean that a doubt hangs over Cohen's principal question: *how to explain the 'development of history'* (to which he provides the answer: in terms of the 'growth of human productive power').

Functional explanation and functionalism

Let us first, however, look at the instrument employed by the author to give content to his answer. This instrument is functional explanation. Functional explanation is, in his view, a special type of causal explanation, one which explains an event (etc.) in terms of its function – roughly, its (beneficial, i.e. functional) effects. We should immediately mention his insistence that functional explanations are not (necessarily) *functionalist*, for functionalist theories propound the 'functional interconnection thesis', to the effect that 'all elements of social life support or reinforce one another, and the whole society' etc. Marxists have, according to the author, often mistakenly rejected functional explanation on account of their aversion to functionalism. As he correctly points out, however, anti-functionalists like Althusser have made use of functional explanations (for example in the latter's article 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses').¹⁸

Leaving aside for a moment the specific application to Marxism, we should note that the argument is not that the identification of something's function ipso facto provides us with a functional *explanation*. Just as, in non-functional causal explanation, the simple fact that β preceded α does not provide us with a causal explanation of α , though of course α may have been caused by β , so the fact that a is functional for b does not guarantee that a can be functionally explained by reference to that function. But where or how does

reference to function become functional explanation?

According to Jon Elster¹⁹, only (if at all, because in this case it is dubious whether one would still want to refer to a 'functional' explanation) when the *particular mechanism* that may justify it in a given case is provided; and 'Cohen does not even attempt to provide such a mechanism' in the case of historical materialism.²⁰

I agree with Cohen's reply to Elster (already referred to) to the effect that this argument is wanting, and that an 'alternative route' from a consequence-statement to a functional explanation may be available in the form of the provision of supporting evidence which would establish a confirming general pattern, even when little or no hint of the relevant mechanism(s) or elaboration is to be had: in Cohen's words, 'we may be confident that a caused b in a given context because of appropriately parallel cases in other contexts, even if we do not know *how* a caused b '.²¹ He has not yet however given convincing and detailed examples of how Marxist explanations of this kind work.

Now Cohen suggests that historical materialism may in this respect be 'in its Lamarckian (pre-Darwinian) stage'. By this he means that Lamarck, who provided a functional-explanatory account of biological evolution, was (scientifically) *justified* in his belief in that account, even though his elaboration of the relevant mechanism was – that is, turned out to be – false. (Darwin provided the true elaboration in the form of the theory of random variation and natural selection.) For Elster denies that Lamarck's 'true' belief could have been justified, given that the latter was quite wrong in his theory of the environmental adaptation of species, whereby acquired characteristics were supposed to be transmitted to offspring. Cohen answers that Lamarck, though wrong in regard to the identification of the relevant mechanism, was not only justified in putting forward his general functional-explanatory account of evolution, but may also be said to have *known* that the presence of features was explained by their function. To claim that Marxism may be in its Lamarckian stage is thus to suggest that Marxists *know* certain truths about society, even if they cannot yet provide accounts of the relevant explanatory mechanisms.

Thus, for Cohen, Marxists are often unjustly accused of proffering a demonstrably false conspiracy theory of history when they argue for example that 'it is no accident that' left-wing commentators receive little space in major . . . newspapers', etc. – unjustly because such an account may form part of a general functional-explanatory story in which no such conspiratorial mechanism is supposed. There *may* of course actually be such a conspiracy; Cohen thinks there often is. Further, it may be true that 'ruling classes are well placed to propagate ideologies congenial to themselves'. Yet an ideology, before it can be propagated, must be formed. 'And on that point there are traces

in Marx of a Darwinian mechanism, a notion that thought-systems are produced in comparative independence from social constraint, but persist and gain social life following a filtration process which selects those well adapted for ideological service . . . There is a kind of "ideological pool" which yields elements in different configurations as social requirements change'.²²

Now if Marxism really is in a 'Lamarckian' stage, what kinds of elaborations of mechanisms might it seek in order to round out its functional explanations? Cohen notes four, among the possibilities: (1) purposive mechanisms (e.g. a conscious decision by the government to cow workers into submission in regard to the acceptance of real wage-cuts by the deliberate creation of unemployment); (2) Darwinian mechanisms (e.g. the proliferation of large and small companies in an industrial field where only the large can and do survive); (3) Lamarckian mechanisms: evolution in virtue of new characteristics acquired – but not purposively – within the life history of an organism (for example: the subjection of workers to the discipline of the factory lays the foundations for the creation of labour organization, which becomes a tradition transmitted from one generation to another); (4) mechanisms of self-deception, which operate 'through the minds' of agents but without their 'full acknowledgement' (pp. 287-9; the examples are mine). This last elaboration seems to me to be of particular interest, but its statement by Cohen is controversial, in that what is supposed or suggested by him in his formulation of the 'psychic mechanism' involved is something like a set of unconscious ideas which the agents in question, so to speak, deliberately (but also unconsciously?) refuse: that, I assume, is why he uses the term 'self-deception'. Better would in my opinion be to insist on the principled impossibility of any such presumed selfknowledge, which is (in Cohen's account) hidden by the agents from themselves. This question also has political undertones, for his brief sketch *could* be utilized, in reference to the class struggle of the working class and its organizations, in support of a Kautskyan principle of scientific vanguardism, the leaders of that working class being those who, not being deceived either by 'bourgeois propaganda' or by themselves (and would not these two phenomena be linked in most accounts of this sort?), may therefore be considered fit to 'lead' the class – and to declare when revolution is possible (when the productive forces are sufficiently developed to allow it to occur, and to succeed, without regression to an earlier form of society).²³

With such reservations, Cohen's list provides enough interesting research possibilities. My own view is however that these concern research into the relation between mode of production and social superstructure, and that – for reasons already alluded to – such explanatory forms should not be invoked at all in order to provide a general theory of 'epochal' change. Cohen, however, is not the first Marxist to have attempted this latter enterprise, even if he is

the first to formulate the attempt very clearly, in the terms outlined above. There is a whole tradition in the Marxist labour movement which in fact made specific reference not just to functional explanation as a useful form, but explicitly to Lamarck and Darwin.²⁴ This tradition Cohen does not treat. Yet a study of it might have thrown some light, not only on the line of demarcation between legitimate and illegitimate elaborations, but also on the possible consequences of extending the functional account to the general relation between productive forces and production relations, that is, on the possible consequences of the 'primacy thesis'.

A survey of early socialist and Marxist references to Lamarck and Darwin suggests that Cohen's references to them in his discussion of functional explanation may be, so to speak, more than 'a mere accident'. For behind these references may be found a more or less vague – but often politically decisive – notion of *progress*, an idea which, if I am not wrong, also plays a significant role in Cohen's book. In his exegesis of Marx he notes for instance, and apparently without dissent, the latter's opinion that capitalism was needed 'for progress', since it enabled 'man' to extend his dominion over nature (p. 25). The 1859 *Vorwort*, on which he heavily relies, speaks of the appearance, 'within the womb' of the old society, of 'new, higher relations of production'. We may wonder whether this use of the term 'higher' does not have more to do with the influence of the Enlightenment tradition of progress than with Marxism itself.

Progress and technological development

On p. 202 Cohen remarks on the existence of some divergence between the tendency of capitalism and material progress. 'Expansion of freedom', he says, 'is *dictated* by the productive forces when their further development is impossible without it'; thus is progress in spite of everything ensured. Moreover 'it is a banal but important truth that human beings on the whole prefer freedom to its opposite' (p. 204). Already under capitalism technological development begins to break through the limits on freedom, or at least creates the conditions for their severance. Progress, in short, has its technological and human sides; or (Cohen p. 215): 'the quantitative and qualitative conditions were both important in Marx's thinking'. Collectivization of labour, a feature of socialism, was prepared for by the development of capitalism itself, 'but the development of the productive forces as such is posited first, as a *separate* requirement' (my emphasis: G. L.).

In my view, the notion that one might be able to write an autonomous history of the development of the productive forces is problematic. In other words, I deny the applicability at least of the 'development thesis' ('the pro-

ductive forces tend to develop throughout history') and therefore the adequacy of the 'primacy thesis proper' (p. 134). My denial implies the need for a different use of the term 'productive forces' from that adopted by Cohen, who says (p. 28) that they are 'not relations', whereas I believe that on this point Althusser/Balibar's alternative definition in *Lire le Capital* allows new and important problems to be posed. Productive forces here become 'technical' relations between means of production, producer and non-producer, that is, relations of 'real appropriation' of nature which are historically defined. This historical definition is provided by the theoretical insertion of the productive forces into a particular mode of production, thus – in class societies – of exploitation. For if the productive forces are defined in such terms, then their definition will change with a change in the social relations of production, as will the definition of 'productive power'. That the *means of production* (especially the instruments of production: cf. Cohen, pp. 32, 37-50) can still be identified as separate objects, i.e. separate from the relation constituting the productive force into which they are integrated, which is obvious, does not entail that one can establish a separate history of their autonomous development, of 'the growth in knowledge of how to control and transform nature'. To believe in the possibility of such a history is, in my stated view²⁵, to repeat an error contained in Marx and developed by Engels, according to which human history (as the eighteenth century *philosophes* already believed) displays the *progressive extension* of the rule of man (in his generality) over nature. This conception tends – in the consideration of the future and fate of capitalism – to reduce the role of class struggle, in all its complexities, in the determination of events, and to interpret the 'necessary transition' to socialism as just one more expression of an underlying historical dialectic.

Let me move to a much more concrete level in order to illustrate my point. Cohen is faithful to Marx in counting instruments of production as productive forces. His development thesis requires us to be able to provide an autonomous history of their development. Thus for example, it may be (he says) that in a society whose culture strongly supports one-man navigation, a canoe is for whatever reason invented which, being long, is best operated by two men. Such an innovation does not *necessitate* a change in work relationships, for the new canoes could be operated inefficiently. But 'we should expect . . . a transition to double manning' because 'it is the rational thing (to do) . . . and men are somewhat rational' (pp. 168-9). This story is logically sound. To invent a technologically superior canoe is, as he says, not necessarily to invent that use which renders it superior. Everyone may be aware of its technological superiority, and yet refuse or otherwise fail to exploit it. Yet it seems to me empirically true of the overwhelming majority of technological innovations under capitalism that they were introduced *with their application in mind*, and

that this fact not 'accidental' but has something to do with the nature of the division of labour under capitalism, between tasks of planning and execution. Secondly, it appears to me to be just as empirically true that such innovations-in-use are not to be explained by reference to any abstract 'human rationality', but only in terms of the specific rationality of the capitalist system, which includes the need to retain control over the working class. An innovation may be introduced for this latter reason, rather than (merely) because it is more productively efficient. Such an explanation of course addresses itself to a different problem than that posed centrally in Cohen's book.

Now this sort of argument is not specifically Marxist: in one or another form it has even become a commonplace of industrial sociology. The Tavistock Institute of Human Relations, for instance, has concerned itself with the problems of designing technology to fit systems of work organization and patterns of work behaviour; in this connexion its researchers introduced the notion of the *socio-technical system*. It was found, generally speaking, that not only the extent but also the *form* of technological innovation possible in any enterprise depended in large part on 'behavioural' and 'psychological' (or what we might call political and ideological) factors.²⁶ In Marxist terminology: the state of the class struggle plays a part in determining not just what *degree* of technological rationalization is possible, but the *qualitative* course of technological change. In consequence, it would be impossible simply to measure the extent of improvement of the instruments of production (or of the productive forces) and their efficient employment in quantitative terms, or to establish that capitalism does not deploy the productive forces in a rational manner, in Cohen's sense. Even if – as he claims – capitalism is unnecessarily output-oriented, it does not follow that a post-capitalist régime could solve problems by planning (see below) a better balance with leisure orientation. For this would leave intact the existing set of 'socio-technical systems', or in other words, what may be called 'capitalist technology'. On a historical note, it may be remarked that Cohen's suggestion resembles what Lenin tried, admittedly at a relatively low technological level, in post-revolutionary Russia, and with roughly the same aim. This attempt only led to a reinforcement of the tendencies proper to the capitalist production process: degrading and deskilling of manual labour, and increasing polarization between manual and mental workers.²⁷

What is at stake under capitalism is (i) maximalization of profit, and (ii) reproduction of the conditions necessary to profit-making, i.e. reproduction of the capitalist system. Now (i) may often (but not always) be served by the introduction of more efficient instruments of production, though 'efficiency' here can only be determined by taking possible workers' resistance into account. But (ii) may require that, nevertheless, the more efficient instruments

of production may still not be introduced. The growing interventionist tendencies of the State (which continue even in this epoch of neo-liberalism) may be interpreted as, in part, a means of securing (ii) when the logic of profit of the individual enterprise would tend to undermine it.

Does my account nevertheless fit Cohen's explanatory devices, demonstrating that the rational man – as long as he is not a capitalist – will opt for socialism, which does allow the most efficient alternative to be chosen? No, and for two reasons:

(1) in order for the working class to be able to overcome the capitalist division of labour, it may be necessary for *less efficient* options to be adopted, for a long and indefinite period, such that by no means all workers can hope to benefit from the change in 'purely' material terms (which does not imply that only a few *will* cherish such hopes, or that a widely-shared hope of such a kind may not play an important role in triggering revolutionary change). And

(2) no transition to socialism can in any case be explained in terms of what is 'rationally desirable' (or in accordance with the objective or rational interests of the working class). Such transitions are not matters of choice at all, and a fortiori not matters of rational choice. If, as I believe, advanced capitalism is exacerbating the technical and social division of labour, establishing new and aggravated forms of hierarchy and division within the industrial and technological (etc.) processes themselves, then I cannot see how it is possible to locate the politico-ideological principle of transition to socialism in such things as the (working people's) simple desire to attain a 'sufficiency [of goods] produced with a minimum of unpleasant exertion' (p. 307).

Cohen further believes that the overemployment of resources characteristic of advanced capitalism (sacrificing leisure time to ever-increasing output), resulting in a situation 'irrational' for most people (p. 311), can be avoided under socialism. For under socialism 'the decision-makers are free ... to *choose* between expanding output and reducing labour, when there is progress in productivity' (p. 315). But is it not true that, in any such emergent socialist society, decisions (of the 'decision-makers' – whoever, in this case, they may be) would *still* be subject to the dictates of the 'impersonal logic of the economic system'?

The whole point of Marx's insistence (in his *Critique of the Gotha Programme*) on the distinction between the 'first' and 'higher' stages of communist society is to emphasize the fact that in the first stage 'the enslaving subordination of the individual to the division of labour' and 'the antithesis between mental and physical labour' persist; and should we not expect these inequalities to lead to conflict, including or especially in the economic system, so that 'decisions' concerning that system will not be (mere) matters of *choice*, but the outcome of complex struggles? Of course, we might say that it is char-

acteristic of socialist societies that in them planning should be easier, for some of the anarchy of the capitalist market has been abolished. But the market is not entirely abolished in socialism (for example: the market in labour power still partially functions), and what 'planning' under socialism can mean is legal registration and regulation of value relations which, in (western) capitalism, find their own level. (One might compare, but of course *mutatis mutandis*, the distinction between fixed and free-floating currency rates). Consequently, the economic system of socialism cannot be reduced to a matter of rational choice, nor can it be said that socialism, in contrast to capitalism, allows the most efficient technological alternative to be chosen. I conclude that my account, sketched above, of the double 'logic of capitalism' is incompatible with Cohen's picture of the role of rational choice in the transition to socialism, and that my connected remarks on the socialist economy contradict his picture of the place of rational choice under socialism itself. I do not believe that we are here dealing with a matter of the calculation by the workers of the benefits and costs of socialism, as Cohen suggests.

I suspect that, under capitalism, what is at stake in the last resort is the preservation of the capitalist system. What must therefore be avoided at all costs is the subversion of that system, and in particular of the capitalist production process. This process requires the continued subordination of labour to capital, guaranteed by the above mentioned division of mental and manual labour, and all the accompanying sub-divisions. Now there seems to be a positive correlation between the quantitative development of the productive forces, as we are acquainted with this development under advanced capitalism, and the *undermining* of the conditions for what Cohen calls 'cultural democracy'. He cites Marx (p. 214) to the effect that capitalism collectivizes the working class, thus rescuing it from rural and craft 'idiocy'. But only, as we now know, to impose another kind of industrial 'idiocy', based on the continuous degrading of labour for the majority and on the lowest common denominator of skills, those so simple as to be transferable from one industry to another without too much difficulty as whole industries disappear, in the process of world economic rationalization, to be replaced by others. Polarization between tasks of planning and execution becomes ever greater. It is the subversion of this tendency (which may take directly political or a-political forms: absenteeism, lack of labour discipline, etc. – all being varieties of class struggle) that capitalism must resist, not necessarily – as Cohen suggests on p. 318 – a more 'rational' balance between output and leisure.

Karl Marx's Theory of History, which stands, subjectively, almost wholly outside of the crisis of Marxism referred to above, is actually located four-square within it. It stands 'outside' of theoretical as well as political history. Its

author abstracts from the conditions of production of Marx's positions, their sources in contemporary scientific ideology, as he ignores the conditions of production of his own work, and its relations to its ideological 'surroundings'. Yet just because it makes little or no reference to Kautsky or Bernstein, Lenin, Stalin or Mao; to the British, US, Canadian, French, German, Czech, Polish or any other labour movement; just because it makes no mention of the Chinese Cultural Revolution and its enormous impact on western European Marxism (for example in turning Marxist intellectuals against the thesis of the primacy of the productive forces!); just for these reasons it is an exemplary expression of the crisis, which 'dare not speak its name'. In the face of the crisis, Cohen returns to 'first principles'. Just such a philosophical defence of a fairly orthodox Marxism may be expected to be well received by all those who are themselves inclined to distance the theory from its conditions of emergence and transformation, and to judge it for its clarity, coherence and consistency alone. And, as I said, the book has been phenomenally well received in the Anglophone academic world for a piece of Marxism. But even if this approval is sometimes, in my opinion, oddly founded, still it is as a matter of fact more than deserved. We might even say that, in this case, its reviewers have often not appreciated the full significance of the book.

For I have, in the limited space of a journal article, concentrated on a confrontation of positions, and thus given a generally critical impression which belies my admiration for and, now and again, astonishment at the delicate but luminous intricacies of the textual developments, for the care and thoroughness of the exegesis, which indeed put many a 'continental' Marxist to shame. For these reasons, but also on account, as I have said, of the problems in Marx and in Marxism which the book has revealed rather than solved, I would call it a brilliant work. 'Confined, like all his colleagues, within the narrow circle of orthodox speculation; obliged, as they were, to mark time and to consider only such ideas as had been conceived and consecrated by the Fathers of the Church and developed by the great preachers, he none the less managed to pull a bluff, to rejuvenate and almost modify these same ideas...'²⁸ The book establishes Cohen as the leading Marxist philosopher working in the Anglophone world. It is around his theses, arguments and exegeses that much future debate in the field, and not only that carried on by Marxists, will revolve. As Isaiah Berlin says, clarification may expose the shortcomings of a theory; and that is what Cohen has achieved for Marxism, thus positively contributing to the course of its crisis.

Notes

1. Oxford University Press, 1978, xv + 369 pp. A paperback edition is now

available. American publication is by Princeton University Press.

2. See Louis Althusser, 'The Crisis of Marxism', in *Marxism Today*, London, July 1978.
3. *Critique*, Paris, août-septembre 1980. I have retranslated from the French version.
4. *Praeterita*, Oxford University Press, 1978 (first edition 1885-89).
5. Cohen, p. 25.
6. In *New Left Review*, London, September-October 1980, no. 123.
7. Levine and Wright, p. 57.
8. Levine and Wright, p. 68.
9. See for example L. Althusser, *Essays in Self-Criticism*, London, 1976, pp. 94-99; *Ce qui ne peut plus durer dans le parti communiste*, Paris, 1978, pp. 94-6.
10. Cf. L. Althusser, *Essays in Self-Criticism*, 'Reply to ohn Lewis'.
11. See Cohen, pp. 73-7. In his *The Poverty of Theory*, London, 1978, pp. 298-9, Thompson comments on what he considers the merely apparent similarity between his own and Althusser's conceptions of class.
12. Cf. E. Balibar, *Cinq études du matérialisme historique*, Maspero, Paris, 1974, pp. 188-9.
13. L. Althusser and E. Balibar, *Reading Capital* (English edition of *Lire le Capital*), London, 1970, p. 217.
14. Balibar, op. cit., p. 236-7; cf. K. Marx, *Capital*, vol. I, Part V, ch. XVI. The German 'Subsumtion' may be translated as 'subsumption' or 'subjection'.
15. Balibar, op. cit., pp. 303-4.
16. See Althusser, *Essays in Self-Criticism*; Balibar, 'Sur la dialectique historique (quelques remarques critiques à propos de "Lire le Capital")', in *Cinq études du matérialisme historique*.
17. Balibar, op. cit.
18. In *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, London, 1971, pp. 121-73.
19. In 'Cohen on Marx's Theory of History', *Political Studies*, no. 1, March, 1980, pp. 121-8.
20. In op. cit., p. 127.
21. Cohen, in *Political Studies*, March 1980, p. 132.
22. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History*, pp. 289-91.
23. See Cohen, op. cit., p. 206.
24. See Thierry Pacquot, *Les Faiseurs de nuages*, Paris, 1980, ch. 3.
25. In my *The State and I*, Leiden, 1981, ch. 3.
26. Cf. Michael Rose, *Industrial Behaviour*, Harmondsworth, 1978, part IV.
27. Cf. Robert Linhart, *Lénine, les paysans*, Taylor, Paris, 1976.
28. J. K. Huysmans, *A Rebours* (1884).