

Analytical Marxism – an ex-paradigm?

The odyssey of G.A. Cohen

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In 1978 G.A. Cohen published *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence*. That this landmark work set out to defend (something like) the orthodox historical materialism of the Second International was surprising enough; that its author situated himself within the 'analytical' tradition – and therefore engaged, and sought to defeat, Acton, Plamenatz, Popper *et al.* on their own methodological terrain – was surprising indeed. It is testimony to Cohen's analytical acuity that, from such unpropitious materials, he fashioned not a mere curio, but arguably the most accomplished defence of 'technological determinism' ever produced, and one of the most important works of Marxist *philosophy* to have emerged from the Anglo-American academy. In fact, its publication heralded the emergence of a *sui generis* Marxism designated by its progenitors – prominent amongst whom, alongside Cohen, were Jon Elster, John Roemer, Adam Przeworski and Erik Olin Wright – as 'Analytical' or 'Rational Choice' Marxism. The architects of this new 'paradigm' insisted that a necessary condition of Marxism's salvation was its importation into the tradition of analytical philosophical method, 'positivist' social science, and – or, at least, so argued Elster, Roemer and Przeworski – that version of rational choice theory originating in the Marginalist revolution of the 1870s and providing neo-classical economics with its definitive axioms. As one commentator observed, 'Cohen and his co-thinkers ... casually crossed the supposedly impassable border between Marxism and the academic mainstream in philosophy and social theory.'¹

After nearly two decades, few Marxist 'insights' have survived the attempt to 'reconstruct' it. Most of the Marxist heritage – Marxism-Leninism, Trotskyism, Western Marxism and Structuralist Marxism – had been consigned to the Humean flames from

the outset. So, too, had Marx's 'multiply confused' anatomy of the capitalist mode of production.² As for 'Marx's theory of history' in its technological determinist incarnation, Cohen has long since confessed to doubts as to its defensibility; few Marxists – even amongst his co-workers – now share the slightest doubts about its indefensibility;³ and, anyway, Cohen himself no longer considers it to have any purchase upon the crucial problems confronting socialists at the close of the twentieth century. He argues that the pre-history of the historical materialist programme has nothing very interesting to tell us regarding either the constituency, agency and strategy of any prospective transition to socialism, or the motivational and institutional structures of a feasible socialism. Thus, in the introduction to *Self-Ownership, Freedom and Equality* (1995), Cohen concedes that

to the extent that Marxism [i.e. Analytical Marxism – MR] is still alive, as ... one may say that it (sort of) is in the work of scholars like John Roemer and Philippe Van Parijs [note the conspicuous absence of Elster – MR], it presents itself as a set of values and a set of designs for realising those values ... Its shell is cracked and crumbling, its soft underbelly is exposed.⁴

However, while conceding the demise of Analytical Marxism, Cohen, in an article originally published in 1990, announces the advent of another new paradigm: 'Analytical Semi-Marxism'.⁵

If it is true that the moment anyone started to talk to Marx about morality he would laugh, then Analytical Semi-Marxism would have had him in stitches. At the end of a century providing socialists with few occasions for merriment, Cohen declares it high time for a straight-faced engagement with, and development of, the 'ethical' or 'utopian' socialism decried by Marx-

ism's founders.⁶ Marxists could excuse themselves from serious application to normative political philosophy only so long as they had anticipated both the emergence of a working-class movement impelled into class struggle by its material interests, and the advent of an era of material abundance placing humankind, at long last, beyond the 'circumstances of justice' and, therefore, the need for theories of justice. The latest news from the Anglophone academy is that the working class has a good deal more to lose than its chains (and, it appears, a good deal less to win than a world), and that '[w]e can no longer sustain Marx's extravagant, pre-Green, materialist optimism'.⁷ The 'planet earth rebels' against the final elimination of material scarcity.⁸ The Marxist explanatory programme in ruins, and – relatedly – socialism relegated from the destiny of humankind to one social blueprint amongst others, 'Marxists, or what were Marxists, are impelled into normative political philosophy'.⁹

In view of Marx's notoriously inconsistent and fragmentary remarks concerning our morals and theirs, it might be anticipated that, if Marxism's 'hard factual carapace' has disintegrated, then its 'soft underbelly' will prove very soft indeed. So concluded Elster and Roemer, who, bereft of carapaces, set about appropriating and developing left-liberal normative philosophy in defence of versions of market socialism. Against this current, Cohen, resisting the stampede to market socialism, has launched a last-ditch defence of a more resolutely Marxian normative position. *Contra* Roemer, he argues that, unlike egalitarian liberals, Marxists have traditionally been, and should continue to be, interested in, and unreconciled to, capitalist exploitation.¹⁰ Unfortunately, in so far as this Cohenite brand of Semi-Marxism distinguishes itself from left-liberalism, it finds itself in bad company. Specifically, or so Cohen argues, it is forced to take the rabid neo-liberalism of Robert Nozick's *Anarchy, State and Utopia* extremely seriously.

Taking Nozick seriously

Cohen argues that a Semi-Marxism insistent upon the injustice of capitalist exploitation confronts a serious challenge from a neo-liberal 'entitlement' theory of justice which abandons the unemployed, sick, disabled, and old – or at least those so 'irresponsible' as to have failed to make adequate private provision – to the tender mercies of private charity; refusing to tax the Trumps, Rockefellers, Gettys, Bransons, and of course the less spectacularly endowed, in order to finance welfare provisions, on the grounds that this is morally equivalent to condemning them to forced

labour. Remarkably, Cohen is forced finally to conclude not only that Marxists should be exercised by Nozick but also that 'the Marxist doctrine of exploitation is flagrantly incongruent with even the minimal principle of the welfare state'.¹¹

Those Marxists who argue that capitalist exploitation is unjust claim that, despite formal freedom of contract, workers are forced to sell their labour power to *some* capitalist; and that, on entering the sphere of production, they spend a portion of the working day producing surplus value appropriated by the capitalist without return. Exploitation is unjust because capitalists 'steal' a portion of the worker's product. What general principle underlies this critique? The very principle, or so Cohen claims, to be found at the heart of Nozickian libertarianism: *the self-ownership principle*. Exploitation is morally objectionable because workers are coerced into exercising their powers for the benefit of non-workers (i.e. capitalists). This is objectionable because it violates self-ownership: 'I do not (fully) own myself if I am required to give others (part of) what I earn [or produce – *MR*] by applying my powers.'¹² The problem is that taxing workers in order to finance welfare programmes for non-workers violates self-ownership for precisely the same reasons as capitalist exploitation does: it takes from workers and gives to non-workers (i.e. welfare claimants).¹³ Marxists appear to be compelled, on pain of inconsistency, either to drop their egalitarian commitments or to abandon the moralized critique of capitalist exploitation; that is, unless there is some subtle way of reconciling self-ownership with egalitarianism (and, therefore, Marxian anti-capitalism with socialism).

Some obvious moves are either unsatisfactory or unavailable. For example, it is unsatisfactory to argue from the unjust origins of capitalism to its moral indefensibility. Of course, capitalism's origins leave something to be desired; the problem is that a consistent, and historically literate, libertarian (admittedly a rare enough beast) must concede the injustice of *historical* capitalism, in view of its origins *in*, and development *via*, multiple violations of those inviolable rights eulogized by the libertarian Right. However, it does not follow from capitalism's bloody history that the form of exploitation characteristic of the capitalist mode of production is, in and of itself, unjust. A 'clean' capitalism – that is, one with unimpeachable origins – is, at least, conceivable. For example, we might imagine everyone beginning at the beginning with an equal share of worldly resources. If some people are hard-working and frugal then they may work themselves into a position to exploit the 'lazy rascals' who,

abandoning themselves to whatever ‘riotous living’ is afforded in a state of nature, have allowed their plots to go to seed. Moreover, the ‘exploited’ in such circumstances might be better provisioned than they would have been had nobody been in a position to exploit them – that is, if everyone had squandered their initial endowments. The Semi-Marxist is committed to arguing that even such an immaculately conceived and beneficent capitalism as this, because it is exploitative, is unjust.¹⁴

A familiar left-liberal response to this kind of defence of inequality – and one to which Cohen is sympathetic¹⁵ – is to argue that if it is luck in the natural and social lotteries that has endowed some individuals with virtuous dispositions and scarce talents, then these fortunate individuals do nothing to *deserve* them, and therefore have no indefeasible moral entitlement to the material – and other – benefits rewarding their exercise. However, this move is unavailable to Semi-Marxists so long as their critique of exploitation is reliant upon a self-ownership principle, according to which we are the rightful owners of our powers, not because we have done anything to deserve them, but simply because we belong to ourselves. For example, Jon and John can agree that it is sheer good fortune that has endowed Jon with, say, musical talents, but agree also that it would be unjust for John to coerce Jon into exercising them. There is a further reason why appeals to desert will not help to salvage the Semi-Marxist critique of exploitation: such arguments challenge the inegalitarian distribution of assets *enabling* capitalists to exploit workers, while providing no (independent) reasons for condemning exploitation as such.¹⁶

The self-ownership principle, then, asserts that what we do with ourselves is our business, so long as we mind our business. It does not ask whether we deserve our dispositions, powers and talents, nor does it require us to exercise them, at however small a cost to ourselves, to meliorate human suffering and deprivation. An obvious conclusion is that, to the extent that a moralized Marxism is unexpectedly premissed in a moral principle with such mean and unappealing implications as this – Cohen concludes that it is ‘*the principle of the bourgeois revolution*’¹⁷ – it should be abandoned without further ado. Eventually, Cohen does abandon it, but there is further ado: he lavishes considerable intellectual ingenuity on Nozick in an effort to reconcile the Marxist critique of capitalist exploitation with socialist egalitarianism.

Libertarianism is attacked at its weakest point (at least, its weakest point once self-ownership is con-

ceded). Self-ownership alone will not generate an unequal distribution of worldly resources. If we go back far enough, we eventually arrive at a point in (pre-)history at which there is no private ownership of the external world. The problem for the inheritors of the classical liberal tradition is to explain how it is that pre-social individuals ever get from owning only themselves to owning also bits of the world. In the *Second Treatise of Government*, John Locke answered that full liberal property rights are legitimately acquired when some agent mixes her labour with a previously unowned thing, is not wasteful, and leaves ‘enough and as good’ for others. Nozick argues that this position – and, in particular, the labour-mixture thesis – is, in various ways, unsatisfactory. In its stead, he proposes the following ‘proviso’: ‘[a] process normally giving rise to a permanent bequeathable property in a previously unowned thing will not do so if the position of others no longer at liberty to use that thing is thereby worsened’.¹⁸

Cohen identifies three problems with this proviso. First, Nozick has *nothing whatsoever* to say about that process ‘normally’ giving rise to full liberal property rights; pouring scorn upon the labour mixture thesis he gives no indication of what he thinks might replace it. Second, the decision-procedure for determining whether the position of others is worsened by an act of appropriation only, and arbitrarily, compares the post-appropriation position with the pre-appropriation position. It does not consider whether anybody is worse off than they would have been under some alternative set of property relations:

a defensibly strong Lockean proviso will forbid the formation of full liberal private property ... [f]or there will always be some who would have been better off under an alternative dispensation that it would be arbitrary to exclude from consideration.¹⁹

Finally, Nozick assumes that worldly resources are originally unowned, that nobody owns anything. But we might equally well assume that, in the pre-social position, everybody owns everything (joint ownership); and, therefore, that pre-social individuals are not entitled to use worldly resources without (unanimous) consent. If we do this, then – or so Cohen argues, with considerable ingenuity and at some length – we have an original position in which self-ownership is respected and equality is maintained.

Unfortunately for the Semi-Marxist, under conditions of joint ownership no one can actually ‘use their rights of self-ownership to achieve substantial control over their own lives, since anything that they

might want to do would be subject to the veto of others'.²⁰ There is little point in owning one's powers if one is denied access to those worldly resources required if they are to be exercised. In view of their commitment to 'genuine freedom and autonomy', Marxists must reject a joint ownership proposal that leaves pre-social individuals without 'substantial control over their own lives', and with little opportunity to exercise and develop their powers, capacities and talents. However, there are crumbs of comfort to be had here. Nozick and his supporters, argues Cohen, would be ill-advised to press this objection: in capitalist societies, the self-ownership of a propertyless proletariat is formal in the same sense and for the same reasons.

[A] victory emerged from what had looked like the jaws of defeat. For I realised that my libertarian antagonists could not press [this] objection... They could not complain that joint ownership of the external world degrades self-ownership, since the pale self-ownership enjoyed by persons in a jointly owned world is at least as robust as that of self-owning propertyless proletarians, who, unlike joint owners, have no rights at all in external resources, and who also, therefore, lack real control over their own lives. Yet libertarians defend, as a realization of self-ownership, the capitalist world in which proletarians proliferate.²¹

Nozick is defeated, then, but the victory is a pyrrhic one. Semi-Marxists, given their commitments to egalitarianism and to 'genuine freedom and autonomy', are obliged to attack the self-ownership thesis; but they do so at the cost of undermining the basis of their moralized critique of capitalist exploitation.

But is it Marxism?

Perhaps it is already apparent why many Marxists – and not only Marxists – have been hostile to Analytical Marxism, and are unlikely to find Analytical Semi-Marxism any more congenial. In particular, Cohen and his cohorts have been attacked – by Marxists and Anti-Marxists alike²² – for their ahistoricism and 'donnish remoteness' from socialist politics. Regarding the former charge, Cohen unapologetically, and unfashionably, declares his allegiance to moral principles understood to possess transhistorical validity: 'while historical circumstances undoubtedly affect what justice (for example) demands, they do so only because timelessly valid principles of justice have different implications at different times'.²³ Regarding the charge of 'donnish remoteness', Cohen would presumably argue that there is not much in the way

of socialist politics to be remote *from* at present, and further, that this is, in part, due to the intellectual failings of socialist normative philosophy. He concedes that Semi-Marxism demands a very considerable diminution of Marxism's 'scientific' pretensions, and substantial revisions to socialist normative philosophy, but insists that there is no longer any intellectually respectable alternative.

The question arises, however, as to whether or not the 'Semi-Marxism' advocated by Cohen has anything to do with Marxism. The very notion of a Semi-Marxism is not a theoretically innocent one: it presupposes that the normative principles inscribed within Classical Marxism can be separated from its explanatory theses without disfiguration.²⁴ On this view, Marxism has traditionally embraced *both* a theory of history *and* a set of 'ultimate normative truths'. Semi-Marxism claims to be a species of *Marxism* (or, at least, to be descended from it), because it seeks to identify, elaborate and develop a distinctively Marxian normative position. It is only a *Semi-Marxism* because it seeks to detach these moral commitments from Marxist theories of history and of capitalism. Marxism, then, is not conceived as a theoretical totality, exiled from which its 'components' cease to be that which they are. The analytical philosopher views it as an amalgam of (partially) distinct methodological, explanatory and normative theses to be prised apart and interrogated independently.²⁵ Cohen argues, in support of such a disseverance, that it is perfectly possible to embrace historical materialism 'but regret that the career of humanity is as it describes, and, more specifically that, as it predicts, class society will be superseded by a classless one'.²⁶ Commitment to Marxism, then, is consistent with rabid anti-socialism.

However, despite attracting some prominent supporters, this understanding of Classical Marxism as a mere entanglement of explanatory and normative claims, to be disentangled by its self-appointed reconstructors, is a troubling one. Historical materialism is a theory of historical *development* or *progress*, and not simply of historical *change*. Whatever theory of history might remain were it to be excavated of all evaluative presuppositions, it is doubtful that it could be informatively described as an anti-socialist historical materialism, as opposed to some non-Marxist alternative to it. Of course, there is nothing unusual in combining commitment to socialist values with rejection of historical materialism. But such species of socialism are not ordinarily assumed to possess any *Marxist* content. As Cohen recognizes, commitment to egalitarianism and to 'genuine freedom and autonomy' are by no means

distinctive to Marxism. In order to trace the contours of a Marxian normative position, it is necessary to move from the proclamation of allegedly ‘timeless’ moral principles to consider the criteria governing their application in varied historical circumstances. In doing so we find that a distinctively Marxian normative position cannot be specified other than by invoking historical materialism. For example, Marxists would not advocate egalitarianism in pre-capitalist or early capitalist times: the transition to socialism is historically possible only once its material preconditions have been delivered by a succession of inegalitarian and exploitative class societies.

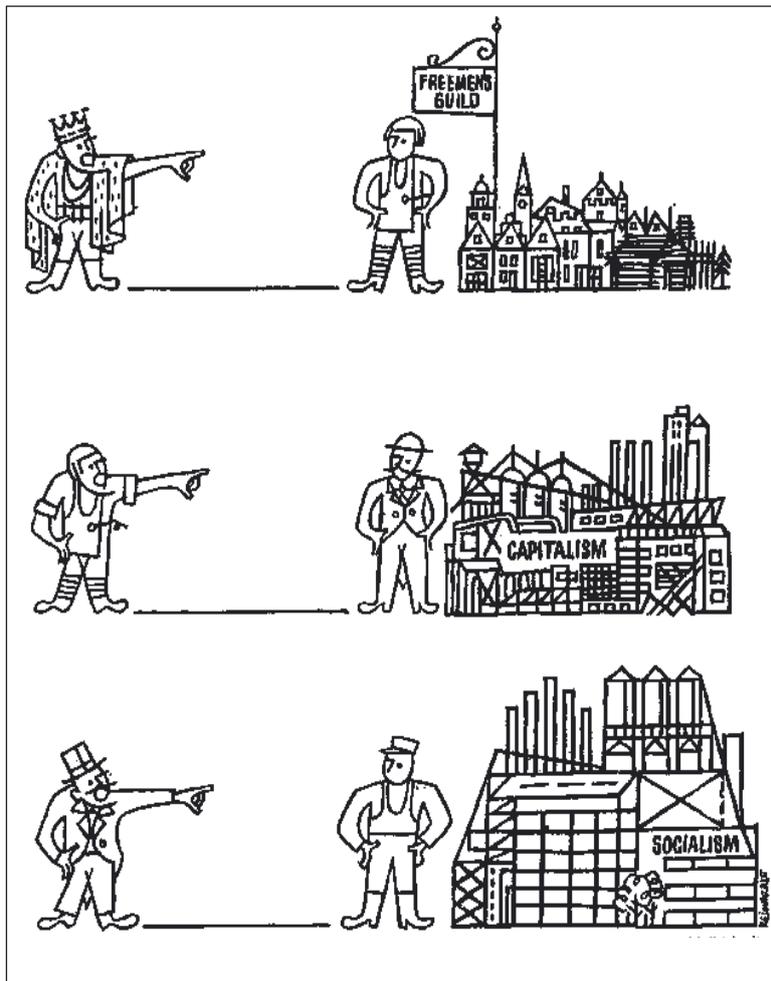
Consideration of Cohen’s dissatisfaction with his own joint-ownership proposal underscores this point. This proposal, or so he argues, reconciles egalitarianism with self-ownership, but only at an unacceptable price. Marxists will reject it because they value ‘real freedom and autonomy’. What is odd here is Cohen’s insistence that Marxists will object to joint ownership in a *pre-social* original position because it frustrates the autonomous development of *pre-social* individuals. From the perspective of historical materialism, and certainly that version of it defended by Cohen in the 1970s, to permit pre-social or ‘primitive’ individuals

to exercise their powers and capacities by transforming worldly things into use-values is to initiate a process of (pre)historical development tending towards the creation of a surplus product and, consequently, the emergence of exploitative class societies. According to historical materialism, ‘genuine freedom and autonomy’ is possible only at the close, and not prior to the outset, of a long process of economic, social and political development.

Moreover, regardless of the problem of reconciling Cohen’s discussion of joint ownership with an allegiance to historical materialism, there are further problems with its proposal. What are we to make of the idea of joint *world* ownership? To see how strange this proposal is, consider an individual in the pre-social position wishing to grow turnips on an acre of land in (what we now know as) the Norfolk Broads. Is she required – as far as possible – to seek the consent of everyone in the world? Perhaps it is a little less fanciful to imagine joint owners agreeing to a set of *general rules* governing the appropriation of worldly resources – for example, they might agree to rules permitting the emergence of capitalism. But, if these joint owners are permitted to choose between, say, continued joint ownership and capitalism, then what is to be said in

favour of an original position within which opting for capitalism requires unanimity, while the continuance of joint ownership is secured by a single dissenting vote? Is it not ‘arbitrary to exclude from consideration’ the *continuance of joint ownership itself*? After all, this might be the worst possible option for the majority (or even *all*) of these pre-social individuals. Or, to put the same point another way, even if there is no good reason for *not* starting with joint ownership (Cohen) as opposed to ‘non-ownership’ (Nozick), is there any good reason *for* starting with it, and not with any other aboriginal property system?

More importantly, leaving aside the organizational and communications problems that would confront anybody attempting to assemble the world’s population to discuss such pressing matters within a state of nature, none of this makes sense: there can be no *pre-social* ‘vetos’, ‘rules’ or ‘property rights’. None of these concepts has any application outside of some pre-existing



set of economic, social and juridical relations. Short of resorting to the profoundly anti-Marxist notion of a *natural* right to property, there is no way that there can be joint *ownership*, or any other form of ownership, prior to the emergence of all social and juridical institutions. Now, of course, Cohen may have in mind not joint ownership of the entire world (and everything in it – except, of course, each other), but communal ownership of particular worldly resources (for example, tribal ownership of



a particular tract of land). This, of course, is a more historically realistic, and formally unobjectionable, starting point for enquiry into the development of property regimes. But it places us at the beginning of an altogether different sort of story to that narrated by Cohen. To see this, notice that, given the project on which he has embarked, Cohen is prohibited from *beginning* here: questions will arise with respect to *communal* ownership of *particular* worldly resources similar to those he is preoccupied with in his discussion of *individual* acts of appropriation.

The absence of capitalism

Cohen's discussion of joint ownership evinces the sort of ahistoricism that has been attacked by many of Analytical Marxism's most incisive critics.²⁷ As Cohen recognizes, Marxists are generally hostile to these sorts of 'thought experiments' – or 'out-of-the-way examples' as he calls them. While he is right to respond that such argumentative devices can serve the useful purpose of clarifying and dramatizing problems within normative philosophy, there are limitations to how far the imagination can be stretched. In particular, the designer of such thought experiments should not specify counterfactual conditions that are not simply 'out-of-the-way', but actually inconceivable. For example, we cannot be asked to imagine joint ownership in a pre-social state of nature, because this is unimaginable. Similar problems arise with the 'out-of-the-way examples' which figure prominently in Cohen's discussion of self-ownership and exploitation. In particular, we are invited to imagine, or so it appears, consenting adults indulging in capitalist acts in the absence of capitalism.

Consider the parable of Infirm and Able, which – in various guises – figures prominently throughout *Self-Ownership, Freedom and Equality*:

Think of a worker who very much enjoys both his work and the wages it brings him and who works for a wholly infirm neighbour who leads a miserable life but who, unlike the worker, has managed to possess himself of a stock of capital. This infirm capitalist lops off just enough of the worker's product so that he, the capitalist, can stay alive. We can suppose that, if something like the stated capital imbalance did not obtain, then the worker would produce for himself alone and callously let his infirm neighbour die. And we can also suppose that it was because he knew that he would die without the power over the worker that capital would give him that the infirm man decided to acquire and exercise that power.²⁸

Cohen wishes to make three points about this 'out-of-the-way example': (i) Infirm exploits Able; (ii) only the self-ownership principle can provide credible grounds for objecting to Infirm's 'theft' of a portion of Able's product; and (iii) while their moralized critique of exploitation appears to commit Marxists to condemning Infirm's treatment of Able, they will feel uncomfortable about this in view of their egalitarian – and other – moral commitments.

So what is to be said about this 'out-of-the-way example'? Various questions arise. Why make Infirm and Able neighbours? What is the relevance of Infirm's 'miserable life' to the justice or otherwise of his exploitation of Able? Or are we to suppose that Able's wages are generous? And, if so, are we to imagine that it is Infirm's generous disposition that determines the wage rate, and not conditions in the labour market? It is this last question that directs us to what might be

designated the ‘absence of capitalism’ problem. Cohen writes that ‘[t]his infirm capitalist lops off just enough of the worker’s product so that he, the capitalist, can stay alive’. It seems that we are supposed to imagine Infirm ‘lop[ping] off just enough of the worker’s product’ to secure his (physical) survival as a human being. But this is unimaginable; or, at least, it needs to be added that Infirm must reproduce himself *qua* capitalist in order to survive *qua* human being.

Reliant upon successful competition with other capitals for his survival, Infirm may be forced to expand production, to take on other workers, to bear down upon their wage rates, to increase the length of the working day, to support high unemployment as a means to secure low wages and long hours, to empty Able’s work of any meaningful content, to sack her during a crisis, and so on. All this not because acquisition of the predication ‘capitalist’ transmogrifies Infirm from good neighbour to demon incarnate, but because, in order to survive, he must now compete successfully in the market place. Notice also that, if Infirm is to exploit Able, it will not be enough that he should possess himself of a stock of capital; he will also have to deprive Able – who, it seems, starts out as an independent producer – of access to the means of *her* reproduction – that is, to ensure that she will now die without Infirm’s ‘assistance’. Moreover, infirm will not be capable of unilaterally separating Able from her means of (re)production, and it is unlikely that anyone else would oblige him by throwing Able off her land. In order to render this extraordinary transition in the affairs of Able and Infirm at all historically credible, we must reconceive it as one manifestation of a transition between modes of production (from, say, independent peasant production to early capitalism). It scarcely needs to be added here that no individual proto-capitalist (such as Infirm) could, prior to such a transition, pick out some particularly callous and mighty unneighbourly proto-worker (Able) for exploitation following it.

So where does all this lead us? Away from the beliefs, dispositions, motives, actions and predicaments of particular individuals condemned to live within the constraints imposed upon them by the capitalist mode of production, and towards analysis and critique of capitalism itself: to consider the actions required of individuals *qua* ‘personifications of economic categories, the bearers of particular class relations and interests’.²⁹

Thus understood, this parable should not unduly trouble those still committed to Marx’s critique of capitalist exploitation. The relationship between Infirm

(*qua* capitalist) and Able (*qua* worker) is simply one more manifestation of the exploitation of labour by capital – structurally (and normatively) indistinguishable from any other such manifestation. Its power to disconcert, such as it is, rests upon a feature of the situation which is beside the central Marxist point: that Infirm is forced to acquire capital for the very same reason that Marxists have traditionally argued that proletarians are forced to sell their labour power – that is, to survive. But this should not disconcert us unduly: the moral justifiability of Infirm’s actions, *given the constraint he faces*, is an altogether different matter to that of the justice or otherwise of the relationship he is *compelled* to enter into *vis-à-vis* Able (and *vis-à-vis* labour in general). Nor does the fact that Infirm appears to be an awfully nice person, and Able a rather callous one, make the slightest difference: the injustice inscribed in the relation between capital and labour is not of Infirm’s doing – on becoming a capitalist he has to do what he has to do. As for Able, callous people can suffer injustice too.

Cohen’s tendency to conceive capitalist exploitation exclusively in terms of bilateral relationships between *individual* capitalists and workers neglects the extent to which, for Marx, exploitation was a relationship between social classes – that is, between *capital* and *labour*. Cohen’s claim that the traditional Marxist critique of capitalism invokes a strong version of the self-ownership principle appeals exclusively to those passages in which Marx writes of the ‘robbery’ of particular workers by those capitalists employing them at some particular time. On this reading, those outside the sphere of production – the unemployed, the incapacitated, the families and dependents of workers, and so on – are not (currently) members of the *exploited* class at all. They appear in *Self-Ownership, Freedom and Equality* in the guise of the ‘poor’ and ‘needy’ (who are ever with us), and, of course, as non-exploited non-workers pumping welfare benefits out of the direct producers.

Marx’s position is a rather different one. In *Capital*, and elsewhere, he is concerned to analyse an exploitative relationship between *capital* and *labour* irreducible to a sum of *bilateral* relationships between *capitalists* and *labourers*.³⁰ If Marx does offer a moralized critique of capitalism, then many of its central claims pose a serious challenge to Cohen’s reading of Marx; in particular, to Cohen’s claim that it covertly relies upon invocation of the self-ownership principle. For example, Marx argues at length that labour, in producing surplus value, is condemned to (re)produce and augment ‘the alien power’ that dominates and

exploits it: that is, capital. Labour's own activity also turns against it by producing an Industrial Reserve Army: 'The working population ... produces both the accumulation of capital and the means by which it is itself made relatively superfluous; and it does this to an extent which is always increasing.'³¹

It seems reasonable to conclude from this that the revelation that capital is nothing more or other than past labour – that is, that workers are subjected to the dominion of their *own* product – reveals a particularly viscous, and unjust, aspect of capitalist exploitation. However, this analysis of the innermost secrets of capitalist exploitation would have no moral significance if the commitment undergirding the critique of exploitation was, as Cohen claims, to self-ownership. It is not *this* worker's product that confronts *her* as an alien power, but labour's *total* product that so confronts her. On Cohen's reading of Marx, however, there could be nothing unjust about a situation in which *each* individual worker confronts the product of *all* other workers in the form of capital. *Their* product is *their* product; it can stand in no morally significant relationship to her. For similar reasons, on Cohen's reading, no special kind of injustice could arise because labour's work activity tends to produce labour's future inactivity in the form of unemployment. This might be unjust only if it could be demonstrated that some particular individual's *own* labour activity was instrumental in producing *her* unemployment.

Consider, in this context, Cohen's illustration of his own general thesis regarding the incompatibility of self-ownership and egalitarianism, with specific reference to Clause IV of the British Labour Party's 1918 constitution (RIP).³² This, it may be recalled, had promised 'to secure for workers by hand or by brain the full fruits of their labour'. To it Cohen responds that, 'if that promise were fulfilled, then full-time single parents, infirm people and other unemployables [*sic*] would get nothing'. What he fails to note is that self-ownership is not only incompatible with welfarism, but also with common ownership. If Marxism does invoke a strong version of the self-ownership thesis, it is obliged to render Clause IV as follows: 'to secure for *each* worker by hand or by brain the full fruits of *his* or *her* labour'. No generation of workers could claim that 'labour' (i.e. those currently involved in the production process) possessed any entitlement to the 'full fruits of labour' (i.e. the means of production accumulated over generations). Justice will require common ownership only if the injustice to be rectified is the 'robbery' by capital of labour, and not the violation by capitalists of the self-ownership of *each* labourer.

Reasons to be cheerful?

If Cohen has resisted unconditional surrender to left-liberalism *à la* Roemer, Van Parijs and Elster, then he remains also less than enthusiastic about market socialism: 'market socialism is at best second best, even if it is the best (or more than the best) at which it is now reasonable to aim'.³³ To what, then, does Cohen consider it to be 'second best'? Presumably to something a little closer to the 'higher phase' of communism envisaged by Marx. However, for Marx, such a society was possible only on the basis of that material abundance against which the planet earth rebels. Indeed, Cohen argues that it has been the anticipation of abundance (the Marxist 'technological fix') which has provided a convenient – if entirely unsatisfactory – resolution to the problem of reconciling self-ownership and egalitarianism. The defeat of material scarcity leads to the emergence of a wholly non-coercive egalitarian society:

An overflowing abundance renders it unnecessary to *press* the talent of the naturally better endowed into the service of the poorly endowed for the sake of establishing equality of condition, and it is therefore unnecessary to trench against or modify self-ownership, in order to achieve equality.³⁴

If we can no longer share Marx's 'extravagant, pre-Green, materialist optimism', must we abandon all hope of such 'voluntary equality'? Not according to Cohen:

it is not Utopian to speak of a level of material plenty which, while too low to abolish conflicts of interest as such, is high enough to allow their resolution without coercion and in favour of equality ... [people] ... are or might become *sufficiently* just to support an egalitarian distribution ... in conditions of modest abundance.³⁵

Here we find one of the few remaining remnants of historical materialism to have survived the wreckage of the Analytical Marxist programme – and, in particular, of Cohen's defence of a reconstructed 'technological determinism': socialism is materially possible as human industry develops to, and beyond, some 'high' level (that is, as it delivers 'conditions of modest abundance'). This claim survives in Cohen's version of Analytical Semi-Marxism exiled from its theoretical context: it has survived the virtual abandonment of Marx's theory of history, of capitalism, and of class struggle. Can the connection between the development of human industry and the possibility of a successful transition to socialism be maintained when so much else is lost?

To begin with, it is not clear precisely what Cohen has in mind here. Is he claiming that *individuals* will be more amenable to ‘voluntary equality’ as they become more prosperous? Surely not. Prosperous individuals are not renowned for their egalitarian sentiments. Is the idea, then, that such sentiments will become more pronounced as GNP – or total global product? – increases to some ‘high’ level? If so, it is difficult to imagine what causal mechanism might take us there. Perhaps Cohen’s claim is not a predictive but a prescriptive one? Under conditions of ‘modest abundance’ people *ought* to be moved by egalitarian considerations. But, if egalitarian principles of justice possess timeless and universal validity, then the advent of ‘modest abundance’ does not obviously strengthen the arguments in support of – and therefore the *reasons* for acting in accordance with – egalitarian principles.

In fact Cohen does not envisage any world-historical transformation of human motivations. Human beings have always possessed both self-interested and ‘generous’ dispositions. As the common wealth increases it is no longer necessary to be ‘zealously just and altruistic’ – to make any ‘heroic’ sacrifice of self-regarding interests’ – in order to be moved by egalitarian considerations.³⁶ However, the question arises again of whether this point is predictive or prescriptive. If predictive, then ‘modest abundance’ has had no detectable impact of this kind in the advanced capitalist countries – the per-capita incomes of which are, Cohen assures us, ‘already beyond the required level’.³⁷ If evaluative, then it is unclear why we should be any more forgiving towards a feudal lord unmoved by ‘egalitarian’ considerations, than towards a corporate manager or an affluent worker.

The weaknesses in Cohen’s arguments – here and elsewhere – are often signalled by an uncharacteristic absence of conceptual clarification: where he is least sure of his ground, his self-confessed ‘pedantry’ is wont to desert him. So it is with the troubling notion of a ‘modest abundance’. Consider how one might go about answering the question, ‘Is there more or less material scarcity now than there was in 1896?’ It is a mistake to identify the progressive *conquest of scarcity* with ever increasing *levels of productivity*. Scarcity is a function not only of productivity but also of human need: that is, as Marx insisted, as productivity increases human beings acquire historically determined needs. The modern worker has needs that would not even have occurred to the medieval peasant.

Two points follow from this. First, to decide whether material scarcity is yielding to (modest) abundance we require not only a knowledge of productivity levels but also a philosophical anthropology. It will be necessary to distinguish mere desires and preferences (‘false needs’) from genuine human needs (‘true needs’) – and to do so while recognizing that historical agents acquire (genuine) historically determined needs which are not shared by all human beings regardless of historical and cultural location. Second, and following on from this, we cannot straightforwardly conclude that, because the planet Earth rebels against the indefinite expansion of *material productivity*, it is therefore in rebellion against the conquest of *material scarcity*. The concepts of ‘scarcity’ and ‘abundance’ are not purely descriptive ones; they possess an irreducibly evaluative and contestable aspect – that is, unless we regard naked consumer preference as sacrosanct, the way we apply these concepts will depend upon a theory of human need.

Cohen’s own position clearly does invoke such a philosophical anthropology. In claiming that per-capita incomes within the advanced capitalist countries are indicative of a condition of ‘modest abundance’ he is, presumably, claiming that their productive powers are sufficient, if redeployed within a socialist society, to satisfy not mere – and often manipulatively created – consumer preferences, but genuine human needs. This recalls Cohen’s efforts, in *Karl Marx’s Theory of History: A Defence*, to identify a distinctive contradiction in advanced capitalism. He had argued that – because of capitalism’s ‘output expanding bias’ – any increase in its productive powers would be (mis)used to produce (ever more frivolous) consumer goods, rather than to alleviate toil: ‘electric carving knives are fine but nothing beats freedom’.³⁸ Socialism’s mission, then, is to bring about a ‘benign realignment of labour, leisure and education’.³⁹ Some conception of human nature and the conditions of its flourishing obviously premiss these arguments. The problem is that he has tried to argue that the development of human industry to a level at which the transition to a feasible socialism is, at long last, on the historical agenda will be fortuitously coincident with a more or less spontaneous disillusionment with consumerism or an outbreak of ‘voluntary’ egalitarianism amongst capitalism’s ‘talented’. Neither of these claims is particularly plausible, so why is Cohen so concerned to defend them?

The answer, perhaps, is that he is nostalgic for a Marxism in which he no longer believes, according to which the evolution of capitalism tends to



produce and radicalize the agents of its own dissolution. Unfortunately, the development of Analytical Marxism has rendered capitalism inert: the stimulus for social transformation, such as it is, is no longer to be sought within history, but outside of it – in the realm of ‘timeless’ principles. Having concluded that the prospects for working-class radicalization in the advanced capitalist countries are between dim and nil, and having abandoned the special theory of capitalism wholesale, Cohen is, it seems, here making a last-ditch attempt to forge some kind of tenuous connection between the development of human industry within capitalism, and the emergence of the agents of – or, at least, a constituency more amenable to – the transition to some form of socialism. In place of class struggle, socialist must hope that (post-) industrial capitalism will so overprovision its ‘talented’ that they become increasingly disposed to indulge their ‘generous’ dispositions and to embrace a ‘voluntary egalitarianism’. It scarcely needs to be added that even if, under conditions of ‘modest abundance’, ‘generous’ dispositions (or the tendency to act upon them) do become ever more pronounced, there is no reason to assume, and very good reasons for doubting, that generous people will be any more likely to embrace socialist (or any other species of) *egalitarianism*. The question would remain: why socialism rather than, say, some form of liberalism?

A staple diet

Cohen does not claim to possess a well-worked-out model of a feasible socialism. However, in view of his rejection of large-scale economic planning – ‘Von Mises and Hayek were right’⁴⁰ – it is unclear what alternative he might offer to some type of market socialism other than something along the lines of Nordic social democracy. Of course, a further possibility, to which Cohen confesses his vulnerability, is despair:

Vanity of Vanities, or rather, the form of it that has tempted me, says: genuine socialism is impossible, or virtually impossible to achieve. It is overwhelmingly likely that the best we shall ever get is some kind of capitalism, and it is for others to find the strength to fight for a better capitalism.⁴¹

If Analytical Semi-Marxism represents Marxism’s best effort to come to terms with the inhospitable economic, social, political and ideological conditions of the late twentieth century, then despair is indeed indicated. For what is Marxism without either historical materialism (aside, that is, from a few isolated and disfigured remnants) or the special theory of capitalism

(the labour theory of value, the law of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall, and the corresponding theories of crisis, class formation and class struggle)?

Alan Ryan, writing in 1987, expressed a bewilderment, shared by many others, regarding Analytical Marxists' claim to be 'reconstructing' Marxism. Of Elster, given his hostility to the Marxist tradition, he asked, why 'bother with Marx at all'? As for Roemer's ethical egalitarianism, it is 'not Marx or Marxist'; while in Cohen's work he detected a fight to the death between 'an essentially sentimental and old-fashioned communism' and (emerging victorious) a powerful, analytical, intelligence. In conclusion, Ryan anticipated the impending recruitment of the Analytical Marxist to 'the endless and repetitive debates over Rawls, Nozick and Dworkin which constitute the staple diet of academic political theory':

the project of showing that Marx can be made to talk in ways that Oxford philosophers of thirty years ago would have thought sufficiently sanitary seems a mistake. It satisfies neither the desire to get inside the mind of the historical Marx nor the need for an intellectual apparatus adequate to the complexities and absurdities of the late 20th century.⁴²

The recent works of Cohen's erstwhile co-workers strikingly confirm Ryan's prognosis. Roemer's defence of market socialism appeals directly to left-liberal moral principles; Elster – who, along with Przeworski, has departed the ranks of the 'Non-Bullshit Marxism Group' – openly declares his allegiance to the basic principles informing 'the writings of John Rawls and Ronald Dworkin',⁴³ and Van Parijs is 'committed ... to some broadly "Rawlsian" conception of justice'.⁴⁴ As for Cohen, all the indications are that he can no longer postpone the embrace of a socialism of avowedly left-liberal, rather than Marxist, provenance.

This conclusion is unlikely to perturb the (ex) Analytical Marxists who have been impatient with 'sterile' debates fixated upon the question of whether they are 'really' (Semi-)Marxists. Perhaps such debates are sterile. However, the complaint against them is not only that their work is 'not Marx or Marxist', but, more strongly, that it is *entirely* alien to the spirit – as well as the letter – of 'historical' Marxism, and wholly inadequate to 'the complexities and absurdities of the late 20th century'. Both these failures are apparent in its total neglect of the Marxist critique of liberalism, and of Marx's reasons for disdaining 'utopian' socialism.

In particular, if Marx laughed at the mention of morality, this, perhaps, was not symptomatic of mon-

strous self-delusion and wanton inconsistency, but rather an expression of his conviction that normative principles were all but impotent in the struggle to change the world – the comedy that pitches hopeless inadequacy against terrifying immensity (with tragic, as well as hilarious, consequences). About this, there are still good reasons to share Marx's scepticism and despair. A socialism appealing not to the material interests of any social class, divorced from any identifiable mass movement, but rather to the reason, and reasonableness, of disembodied and rational individuals – and which, in place of a systemic analysis of the developmental tendencies of capitalism, offers a selection of blueprints for an ideal society (or, in Cohen's case, omits to provide such blueprints) – is unlikely to prevail in the face of a global neo-liberal capitalism possessing formidable economic as well as coercive and ideological resources.

In a piece originally published in *Radical Philosophy* in the summer of 1986, Joseph McCarney – responding to Gregor McLennan's favourable review of Elster's *Making Sense of Marx* – enquired as to whether Analytical Marxism constituted 'A New Marxist Paradigm?'⁴⁵ At the outset, he conceded to McLennan that Elster's work might well be 'the flagship for a new armada of Marxist analytical scholarship and reassessment', adding that the other 'captains in [this] armada' included Cohen and Roemer. However, as McCarney proceeded to argue, if Elster's ship was the standard-bearer for a new 'Marxism', then it was a ship that sought to ease its passage into the pacific waters of the philosophical and social scientific mainstream by throwing a 'duffer' like Marx – 'a minor post-Ricardian whose heart [was] in the right place' – overboard at the outset of its all too brief voyage from residual allegiance to a few 'isolated insights' to be trawled from the work of Marx, to unapologetic embrace of left(ish) liberalism.

Such taunts cannot be levelled at Cohen with equal justification. He has persisted, despite the general trajectory of the analytical reconstruction of Marxism, in holding Marx in some esteem, and there is no question of the profundity of the ties that continue to bind him to the socialist project.⁴⁶ However, Cohen's best efforts to keep his own ship afloat have led him progressively to jettison its original Marxist cargo. If anything remains of the Marxism he had sought to defend some twenty-five years ago, then it is little more than a slightly nuanced left-liberal moral position, alongside a commitment to the idea that the development of capitalism has some tendency to produce more favourable conditions for the transition

to socialism. Regardless of whether or not Analytical Marxism constituted ‘a new Marxist paradigm’ some ten years ago, it is now, without doubt, an ex-Marxist one. Cohen’s recent work has made its contribution to those ‘endless ... debates over Rawls, Nozick and Dworkin’; *Karl Marx’s Theory of History: A Defence* will remain a classic Marxist text, despite the failure of its central argument. However, there is warrant for concluding that, when the intellectual history of this period comes finally to be written, Cohen’s efforts over the last quarter of a century to reconstruct a version of Classical Marxism will be viewed as something of an anachronism: the tenacious pursuit of his own peculiar brand of ‘old-fashioned’ Marxism all the way to its dead end.

Notes

1. A. Callinicos, ‘Introduction’ to *Marxist Theory*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1989, p. 3.
2. J. Elster, *Making Sense of Marx*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1985, p. 554.
3. See, in particular, R. Brenner, ‘The Social Basis of Economic Development’, in J. Roemer, ed., *Analytical Marxism*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1986; and E.O. Wright, A. Levine and E. Sober, *Reconstructing Marxism*, Verso, London, 1992.
4. G.A. Cohen, *Self-Ownership, Freedom and Equality*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1995, p. 6.
5. See G.A. Cohen, ‘Marxism and Contemporary Political Philosophy, or: Why Nozick Exercises Some Marxists More than He Does Any Egalitarian Liberals’, in Cohen, *Self-Ownership, Freedom and Equality* (originally published in the *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, supp. vol. 16, 1990).
6. See the introduction to *Self-Ownership, Freedom and Equality*, esp. pp 1–7.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 204–8.
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 159–60.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 216.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 151.
14. See *ibid.*, pp. 121ff.
15. Although he doubts that such arguments will be conclusive against a ‘moderately sophisticated’ defence of self-ownership (*ibid.*, pp. 229ff).
16. To see this, notice that someone reliant exclusively upon this sort of argument will have no grounds for objection to a possible world within which exploitative relations did emerge as a consequence of, initially equal, historical agents exercising dispositions and talents which they did deserve.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 229.
18. Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 75. See pp. 74–91 for Cohen’s devastating assault upon the Nozickian proviso.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 87.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
21. *Ibid.*
22. See, in particular, John Gray, ‘The Academic Romance of Marxism’, and ‘Against Cohen on Proletarian Unfreedom’, in his *Post-Liberalism*, Routledge, New York and London, 1993; and for a partial and characteristically uncompromising response, Cohen, *Self-Ownership, Freedom and Equality*, pp. 62–5.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 2.
24. It would be misleading to trace Cohen’s intellectual biography from historical materialism to ethical socialism. He has long been concerned with normative philosophy. However, his belief that there are ‘timeless’ ethical principles did not, in and of itself, raise any doubts in his mind regarding his historical materialist affiliations.
25. For a general argument concerned with the tendency of analytical philosophy to ‘analyse’ complex totalities into their (allegedly) separate components, and the problems this poses for Cohen’s anti-dialectical interpretation of Marx’s theory of history, see S. Sayers, ‘Marxism and Dialectic Method: A Critique of G.A. Cohen’, in S. Sayers and P. Osborne, eds, *Socialism, Feminism and Philosophy*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1990.
26. *Self-Ownership, Freedom and Equality*, p. 1.
27. See, in particular, E. Meiksins Wood, ‘Rational Choice Marxism: Is the Game Worth the Candle?’, *New Left Review* 177, 1989; M. Lebowitz, ‘Is “Analytical Marxism” Marxism?’, *Science and Society* 52, 1988; and A. Callinicos, ‘Introduction’ in A. Callinicos, ed., *Marxist Theory*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1989. See also M. Roberts, *Analytical Marxism – A Critique*, Verso, London and New York, 1996.
28. *Self-Ownership, Freedom and Equality*, pp. 149–50.
29. K. Marx, ‘Preface to the First Edition’, *Capital 1*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1976, p. 92.
30. See, for example, *Capital 1*, chs 24–25.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 783.
32. *Self-Ownership, Freedom and Equality*, p. 155 n. 18.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 256.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 122.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 128.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 135.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 128 n.13.
38. G.A. Cohen, *Karl Marx’s Theory of History: A Defence*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1978, p. 318.
39. G.A. Cohen, *History, Labour, Freedom: Themes from Marx*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1989, p. 121.
40. *Ibid.*, p. 260.
41. *Ibid.*, p. 254.
42. A. Ryan, ‘Can Marxism be Rescued?’, *London Review of Books*, 17 September 1987, pp. 9–10.
43. J. Elster, *Solomonic Judgements*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1989, p. 205.
44. P. Van Parijs, ‘Rawlsians, Christians and Patriots’, *European Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 1, no. 3, 1993, p. 309.
45. J. McCarney, ‘A New Marxist Paradigm?’, *Radical Philosophy* 43, Summer 1986.
46. See, in particular ‘The Future of a Disillusion’, in *Self-Ownership, Freedom and Equality*.