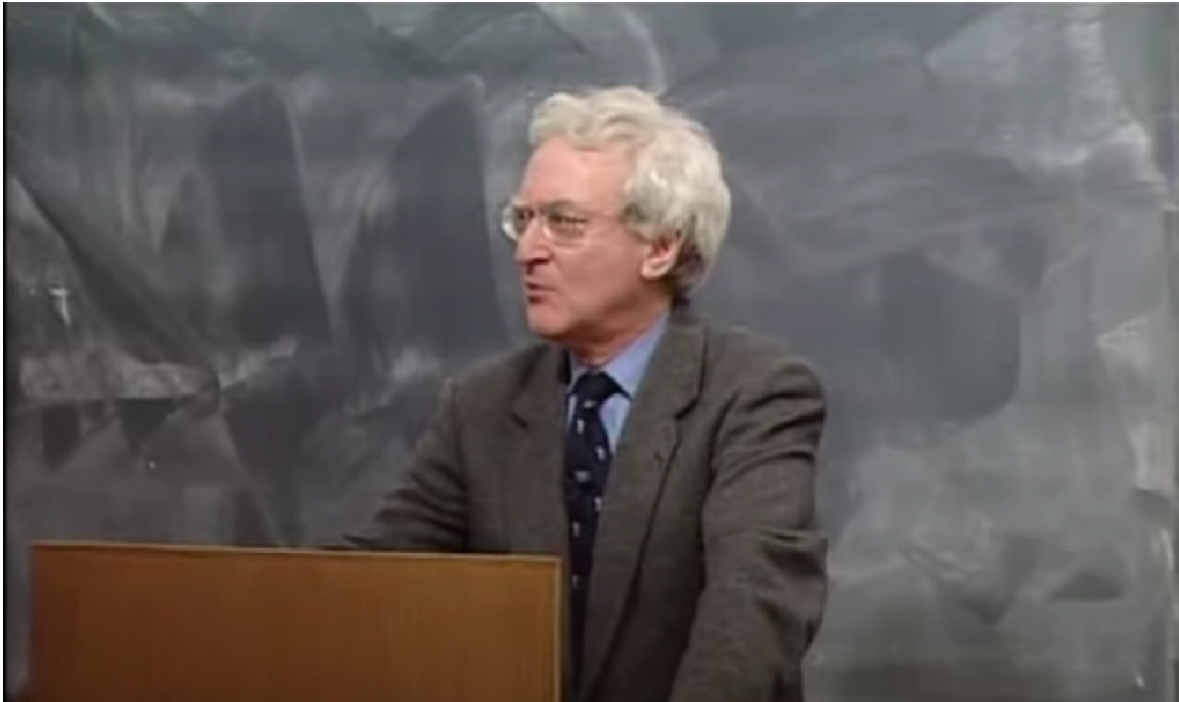


If You Want to Understand Marxism, Read G. A. Cohen

Socialist philosopher G. A. Cohen was a brilliant thinker who subjected Marxism to the same scrutiny he would any other ideology. If you want to see Marxism at its most nondogmatic and precise, you should read G. A. Cohen.



The late philosopher G. A. Cohen became one of the most important pioneers of a tendency called “Analytic Marxism.” (Philosophy Overdose / YouTube)

The late G. A. Cohen was many things, not all of which usually go together. He was the son of a working-class Canadian Communist family who outgrew his early attachment to the Soviet Union but never let go of his [socialist convictions](#). He was an Oxford-educated philosophy professor who became one of the most important pioneers of a tendency called “Analytic Marxism.”

He was also very, very funny. [Here’s](#) Cohen doing an impression of his mentor, philosopher Gilbert Ryle, that I showed to the late [Michael Brooks](#) a couple years ago; Michael told me he was angry that Cohen wasn’t still with us because he wanted Cohen to come on his show:

In the introduction to the 2000 edition of his brilliant book [Karl Marx’s Theory of History: A Defence](#) (first released in 1979), Cohen tells a self-deprecating story to explain what distinguishes “analytical” Marxism from other forms. When he wrote a paper on the early Karl Marx in the late 1960s — commenting on a passage about the power of money in Marx’s [Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844](#) — Cohen claimed that Marx’s view would be that “a rich capitalist’s mistress does not love *him* because of his money” because what she loves is the money itself. Cohen was taken to task by the American philosopher Isaac Levi, who wanted to know “*exactly* what that meant and/or how one was supposed to go about telling whether or not it was true” and “what, precisely, was the *difference* between loving someone *just* because of their money and loving that money itself?”

At the time, Cohen considered the interrogation to be “hostile and unhelpful.” On his way out of the room, though, Levi told Cohen something that stuck with him — that he didn’t mind thinking about things in a different way as long as he understood which “ground rules” were being assumed:

That remark hit me hard and sunk in deep. In the aftermath of Levi's admonition, I stopped writing (at least partly) in the fashion of a poet who puts down what sounds good to him and who needn't defend his lines (either they resonate with the reader or they don't). Instead, I tried to ask myself, when writing: precisely what does *this* sentence contribute to the developing exposition or argument, and is it true? You become analytical when you practice that sort of (frequently painful) self-criticism.

The results of this lesson are all over *Karl Marx's Theory of History*. Instead of treating Marx as a prophet, Cohen treats him like he would any other philosopher, accepting the ideas that are persuasive and rejecting the rest. If Cohen writes as a Marxist, it's because he believes that Marx's core ideas about history are true — and to establish that, he holds those ideas up to the light, scrutinizing them from different angles, making distinctions that Marx didn't, clearing up misinterpretations, and fielding (and sometimes conceding) a variety of objections.

The Basic Materialist Picture

Marx's theory is "materialist" in a very specific sense. Marx didn't just reject the notion that the ideas in people's heads are the primary driver of history. He didn't even simply emphasize that humans are driven by material needs. He thought the *capacity* of any given society to meet those needs (its "forces of production") and the *way it organized itself* to do so (its "relations of production") were the primary factors that explained why and how different forms of society rose, fell, and replaced each other in different historical epochs.

In early human societies, the productive forces were so undeveloped that the population couldn't be divided between a ruling class and a class of subordinate laborers. There just wasn't enough to go around. This changed somewhat under feudalism and early slave societies: a sufficient social surplus could be created to support a nonproductive ruling class if the peasants or slaves or other "immediate producers" were coerced into handing over some of what they produced.



The late philosopher G. A. Cohen. (Nicholas Vrousalis / YouTube)

At a certain point, though, feudalism and slave systems became an impediment to further growth. As

modern industrial capitalism emerged within the shell of feudalism, it needed a labor force that was, in Marx's phrase, "doubly free" — free in the sense that instead of being bound to some aristocrat's estate, workers could labor for any boss who offered them a job, and free also in the sense that they were "free" from any way of making a living *except* selling their working hours to a boss.

Capitalism worked exceptionally well at generating wealth and pushing forward the productive forces. So exceptional, in fact, that Marx argued the productive forces were advanced enough that the working-class majority could meet its material needs far better by taking over the economy and running it in its own interests. In a word, socialism.

Marx didn't underestimate the importance of ideas or human activity in this process. As Cohen points out, Marx's historical materialism isn't a "deterministic" theory incompatible with human free will or a theory that, by assigning primacy to purely material factors, understates the importance of "man's mind" in driving forward historical progress. When Marx talks about the "forces of production," he means two things — first, the nonhuman "means of production" and second, the "labor power" of human beings. The fish in the lake and the pole the fisherman uses to extract them from the lake are both part of the fisherman's "means of production."

How about labor power? This just means the capacity of humans to use the "means of production" to produce goods or services. When Marx talks about "the forces of production" expanding over time, he's primarily talking about *mental* labor power — the increase in scientific knowledge of how to use what we're given by nature to meet human wants and needs. "Man's mind" is the whole thing.

"Marx argued the productive forces were advanced enough that the working class could meet its material needs better by taking over the economy and running it in its own interests."

The charge of free-will-denying "determinism" is also confused on several levels. First, the question of whether any sort of "determinism" about [causes and effects](#) is incompatible with human free will is a deeply [philosophically controversial](#) question. It isn't just a "Marxism problem." Second, claims like "the relations of production cause the legal and political institutions of some society to be the way that they are" don't have to be interpreted in a deterministic way. Often, claims like "X causes Y" are about probability rather than necessity.

Finally, as Cohen notes in a footnote later in the book, even "in so far as the course of future history and, more particularly, the future socialist revolution, are inevitable, they are inevitable not in spite of what men may do, but because of what men, being rational, are bound to do."

Of course, not everyone is equally rational. But that is as much an objection to the claim that the supply and demand curves in Econ 101 textbooks are predictive as is to the suggestion that Marxist claims about people acting on their class interests are predictive.

How Do Societies Change?

By the time the second edition of *Karl Marx's Theory of History* came out in 2000, the Soviet Union's collapse had become the ready example for Marxism's critics. As Cohen points out, though, this turn of events was actually a dramatic confirmation of a key tenet of historical materialism. After all, historical materialism holds that the form of society possible at any stage of history is a function of the level of development of its productive forces.

While Marxists would certainly have been happier to see an economically viable and politically attractive form of socialism arise in the USSR rather than to see our theory confirmed, the fact is that the theory *would* have been falsified if Joseph Stalin had been right and it really was possible to bring into being a flourishing postcapitalist order in a society that was still half-feudal in 1917. Vladimir Lenin was enough of an orthodox Marxist to [know this](#) — he said many times that the experiment could only flourish if revolution spread to the developed West.

Where does that leave us today?

Marx and Friedrich Engels famously say in the opening lines of *The Communist Manifesto* that “the history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of class struggle,” but that by itself doesn’t tell us when and why there are breakthroughs in struggle or why an old system is overturned and a new one is born.

Marx’s answer is that when an old system “fetters” the further development of the productive forces the old system is defeated and the new one is born. But this is confusing. If the idea is that later technological progress explains earlier shifts in social systems, that sounds suspiciously like effects are being used to explain causes instead of the other way around.

In *Karl Marx’s Theory of History*, Cohen tells what he calls a “somewhat naive story” to illustrate one way this can work. It’s worth quoting at length:

Imagine a productively weak society whose members live in equality at subsistence level, and who wish they were better off. One of them suspects that the introduction of treadmills on the bank of the river on which they rely for irrigation would increase the flow of water onto the land, raise its yield, and thus enhance their welfare. He puts his idea to the community, who are impressed, and a group is forthwith commissioned to design and construct the devices. These are then installed at suitable points on the river bank, and tested, all members of the community participating in the test. They correctly perceive the benefits regular use of the treadmills would bring, and there is a request for volunteers to man them. But none come forward: it is a task relished by no one in the society. Nor is it feasible, for reasons we allow the reader to conjecture, for everyone to contribute just some of his time to treading. Many full-time treaders are needed. It is agreed to select them by lot, and this is done. So rebarbative is the job, however, that it becomes apparent it will not be efficiently performed without severe supervision. For that role there is no dearth of applicants, and a number are, by some means, selected for it. Gradually a class structure (supervisors, farmers, treaders) rises in what was an egalitarian community. One may now say that the relations have changed because otherwise the forces would not have progressed, and that the forces do progress because the relations have changed. But it is clear, despite the second part of the last sentence, that the change in the forces is more basic than the change in relations: the relations change *because* the new relations facilitate productive progress.

Cohen also draws on real-world examples like the consolidation of small workshops into modern factories that precapitalist guild rules prohibited. The fact that these larger factories were more productively efficient can explain the consolidation — and thus the overthrow of guild rules that stood in their way.

Is this some “shell-game” explanation of causes by reference to effects? Not really. There are, Cohen writes, multiple ways that the productive advantages of larger factories can explain the consolidation. One is that employers often recognize the productive advantages themselves and consolidate because of that recognition. A second “Darwinian” explanation is that, whatever initially motivates consolidations, larger factories are better able to survive in the long term than their smaller competitors. Either way, the feature that brings about the functional advantage is “selected” because it has that functional advantage; the order of cause and effect is the “right way” around.

Cohen’s Critics

So far, so good. But many of Cohen’s critics have pointed out in the decades since the book’s release that the idea of “fettering” seems more than a little imprecise. Does a new social system have to be more conducive to further development of the productive forces than *any* alternative possible at that stage of history or just more conducive to further development than the system it replaces? If the former, what does “further development” even mean here? Technological innovation? The more

widespread implementation of new technology? And is the case for socialism over capitalism really that it's going to be better for rapid development than capitalism — the most absurdly development-happy system that's ever existed — or just that a socialist system could guide that development in ways more amenable to human flourishing?

Whatever the answer to these questions, there's surely some sense in which it's unrealistic to think one system can replace another as the globally dominant economic order unless a sufficiently large number of people know that they'll have better lives under the new system than they had under the new ones. And the “exchanges with nature” by which people meet their material needs have to have improved in *some* way for that to be true — whether we're talking about improvements in productive technology *per se* or “just” their redeployment to serve more people's needs. But Cohen's treatment of Marxist concepts is so intricately precise that the publication of his book inspired a new generation of critics to criticize him with equal precision, and the new chapters in his 2000 edition grappling with problems like the imprecision of the “fettering” analogy show there's plenty of work left to be done.

“Cohen's treatment of Marxist concepts is so intricately precise that his book inspired a new generation of critics to criticize him with equal precision.”
To his credit, Cohen subjected at least one aspect of the classical Marxist understanding of history to a searching critique in his book [*If You're An Egalitarian, How Come You're So Rich?*](#)

Cohen noted that one reason the problem of how to make sense of “fettering” — and in particular whether a new society would have to be not only more “unfettered” than the one it replaced but more “unfettered” than any of the other possible alternatives — didn't preoccupy Marx and Engels is that they tended not to think of a number of different possible new societies potentially replacing the old one but of a single new society “gestating in the womb” of the old. This metaphor, while it has its roots in G.W.F. Hegel's philosophy, led many Marxists to neglect the hard business of thinking about what a socialist society should look like — a theoretical defect that arguably had terrible consequences during the state socialist experiments of the twentieth century. Taking that task seriously will involve both solving complicated problems about economic engineering and institution building *and* grappling with contentious normative questions — as radicals explore which values should guide the construction of the new institutions.

The second of those tasks is the one that took up most of Cohen's energy in the final decades of his life. He spent his time arguing on the one hand with libertarians, who opposed any redistribution of wealth on principle, and on the other hand with Rawlsian liberals, whose conception of distributive justice Cohen believed to be insufficiently egalitarian. This is the only part of his body of work that many philosophers are familiar with — and to be clear I find much of that work brilliant.

But I sometimes find myself wishing that *Karl Marx's Theory of History* would get more love from contemporary socialist writers and thinkers, given its refreshing combination of analytical rigor and engagement with questions of historical change that lie at the heart of the socialist project.

Why Socialists Should Read G. A. Cohen

At one point in *Karl Marx's Theory of History*, Cohen differentiates three historical classes of “subordinate producers” according to their relationship to their labor power and the means of production. Slaves own neither. Serfs who hold some ownership rights over their plots of land but are legally obliged to labor for their lord own some but not all their labor power and their means of production. Proletarians own all their labor power but none of their means of production. Cohen says we should say, roughly, that proletarians are subordinated to capitalists because to make a living they must combine the labor power they own with the means of production owned by the capitalists.

But wait. Cohen considers two examples, both involving garment factories, that are recognizably capitalist employment relations but depart from this description. The first involves a worker at a dress

factory named Schwartz who cuts cloth into patterns. He does some of this using a machine owned by his boss, a machine that Schwartz couldn't afford to supply for himself. The rest of it he does by using a pair of scissors he brings to the factory from home.

The second and more serious counterexample involves Schwartz's brother-in-law, Weiss, whose work at a coat factory could be completed entirely on a machine that belongs to him. His employer demands, as a condition of employment, that Weiss buy his own machine and bring it into the factory. Perhaps the only reason Weiss labors for the boss at all rather than striking out on his own as a small businessman is that he lacks his boss's business connections.

"He could easily have been writing about an Uber driver's responsibility to buy a car that would've been provided to her if she'd been a unionized cab driver instead."

Considering these examples leads Cohen to clarify that what makes the proletariat a proletariat is not the lack of ownership of means of production but the lack of ownership of means of production *that he's able to make a living from* without working for a capitalist.

What always strikes me most about this passage is the way Cohen describes Weiss's situation. If it's true, Cohen writes, that workers have nothing to lose but their chains, then the sewing machine Weiss is forced to buy and maintain for himself "is one of those chains."

Cohen wrote that line in a time and place where strong unions and a strong welfare state felt like permanent features of advanced capitalist societies. Cohen himself made [several comments](#) in [different places](#) that indicate he badly underestimated capitalists' ability to roll back this progress. Nevertheless, his description perfectly encapsulates a familiar feature of the hellscape of neoliberal precarity that's emerged in the decades since. He could easily have been writing about an Uber driver's financial responsibility to buy and maintain a car that would have been provided to her if she'd been a unionized cab driver instead.

This kind of insight, both moral and descriptive, is exactly what makes *Karl Marx's Theory of History* a useful book for anyone who wants to think carefully about how history progresses — a subject of enduring relevance to anyone who wants to lose their chains.