# Gerald A. Cohen (1941-2009) An intellectual journey through radical thought

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Abstract: The philosopher Gerald A. Cohen, who once was a Chichele Professor at Oxford University, between 1984 and 2008, died on the 5th of August last year. His thought, known as a radical one and explicitly intended as serving the liberation of humanity, suddenly appeared on the intellectual theatre in 1978 with the publication of Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence. This book can be seen as doubly original. On the one hand it defends historical materialism on the basis of methodological foundations (analytical philosophy, logical positivism, functional explanation) that are usually known as contradictory with Marx's method. On the other hand, it initiated a school of thought, Analytical Marxism, which debate also took on economics, sociology, history... Later, after a long-lasting debate, still in search of intellectual radicalism, he gradually departed from Marx's theory, both for theoretical reasons in terms of logical consistency, and for empirical reasons in terms of correspondence between theory and empirical facts. He then gradually turned on theoretical discussions in political philosophy that flourished around John Rawls' Theory of Justice. This was not an immediate shift, since beforehand he appropriated the libertarian concept of self-ownership in order to associate it to a Marxist approach. In doing so, he intended, on the basis of John Locke's theory, to use a libertarian argument as a tool for critical theory. Cohen then gave up this concept before entering the normative debate around issues on social justice. Based on the Kantian philosophy, his critique to Rawls was that that latter's theory allowed too few autonomy to individual choices. For that reason, Cohen got closer to a theory of individual choice. Such was Jerry Cohen's intellectual journey, which always consisted on drawing the intellectual of radicalism from great authors (Marx, Locke, Kant).

<u>Keywords</u>: Historical materialism, analytical philosophy, self-ownership, political philosophy

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Gerald A. Cohen died at 68 on August 5<sup>th</sup> 2009. He was a born-Canadian English His intellectual work was structured around Marxism, leftlibertarianism and Rawlsian liberalism, and he became a major writer in contemporary thought. He was born in Canada in 1941 in a working-class area. His mother comes from the Ukrainian petite-bourgeoisie and his family fled from the Stalinist regime in 1930 to Canada when she was 18. She entered then the working class and she was an active member of the Canadian Communist Party. His father was born in Canada, "impeccably proletarian pedigree... and no secondary education" (Cohen, 1999a: 21). He was a member of the United Jewish People's Order, which proved to be pro-Soviet, anti-Zionist and anti-religious, and which managed Morris Winchiewsky school in Montreal, in which young Cohen received his primary education. In 1952, he had to leave the school after it suffered from the repression by the Anti-Subversive Squad of the Province of Quebec Provincial Police, and he entered a Protestant public school; he was admitted to McGill University in Montreal in 1958<sup>1</sup>. He then studied philosophy at Oxford University in Britain from 1961 to 1963. He taught at University College London from 1963 to 1984, and he was appointed in 1985 to the Chichele chair in Oxford University<sup>2</sup>, which had never happened to a Marxist (or supposed so) scholar before, in Social and Political Theory (he succeeded Charles Taylor). He left Oxford University in 2008 and entered London University as a Professor of Jurisprudence in place of Ronald Dworkin. His intellectual was also related to political activities: he had various and unequal involvements with the Quebec Communist Party, with a great deal of disillusions – especially Khrushchev's speech in 1956 – that certainly had a serious impact on his evolution. In the 1960s and in 1970s, he became close with the Communist Party of Great Britain and then with the labour Party. His intellectual work wears a lot of biographical elements, which he explains through the influence of the way he was brought up on his thought, while he notes that "the fact that [h]e was brought up to believe it is no reason for believing it" (Idem: 12). While he was very young, he was led to get interested to Marx's work, and in January 1966, when he was back from a teaching period in McGill University, he started studying specifically Marx's view of history. For that reason, his academic work got first articulated around Marx's thought and around the values related to it. For that reason, he got mainly devoted to historical materialism (1978, 1988), before getting closer with political philosophy (1995, 1999a, 2008).

I resolved, in 1975, that, when I completed a book that I was then writing on historical materialism, I would devote myself in the main to political philosophy proper. (Cohen, 1995: 4-5)

These books all constitute an evolving research program that started with *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence*, and the peculiarity of such development gives Cohen's work a specificity within the Marxist framework. Such a book is known as "the most important work of Marxist philosophy to have been written in English" (Callinicos, 2002, p. 8). It led Cohen to be one of the leaders of the Marxist philosophers within the Englich-speaking world (see Lock, 1988). Yet, such an

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Cohen remembers: when he was a high school student, "to go to McGill was a widespread hope and expectation" (1999: 35).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> He has acquired English nationality for this occasion.

authority did not seriously cross the boarders, and it is quite unknown in continental Europe<sup>3</sup>. Cohen can be considered as a radical writer<sup>4</sup>, in the sense that his intellectual evolution is articulated around the research for intellectual justifications to socialism, and that he conceives philosophy as a means for transforming the world<sup>5</sup>. His intellectual evolution started with Marx's work, for reasons that include his own upbringing, and it ended with Rawls, in still keeping as a guideline his initial objective related to the elaboration of intellectual tools for social emancipation. This article aims to include Cohen's work in such a dynamic, and he focuses on his specific relation to Marx's, hence its peculiarity. He first proposed a new mode of defense of historical materialism, based on analytical philosophy (I), he weakened it then, on the same basis (II), before turning his intellectual priorities towards the normative political philosophy (III).

# I. Defending historical materialism on a fresh mode

As the title mentions, the object of Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence is to defend historical materialism, and to do it as an independent component of Marx's work<sup>6</sup>. He confirmed that later, in claiming that "historical materialism was, at the time in question, the only part of Marxism that [he] believed" (1995, p. 1). The book was published in 1978, in a peculiar theoretical and political environment, marked with a double crisis of Marxism. It was going through a political crisis, due to political events, that include – but not only – some hesitations by radical intellectuals against the practices of the leadership of the Soviet Union, which means, concretely, that they were giving up, to a widespread extent, central categories of Marxism (including the dictatorship of the proletariat). It was also indirectly going through a theoretical crisis. Marxism was not under discussion on the English-speaking world (mainly the United States and Britain), which had some relation with had some significant relation with the weakness of the working class movement in these countries. His defense entered a set of several debates that were going on then on Marxism in general and on historical materialism in particular; it is based on analytical foundations (I.1) and it relies on a resort to functional explanation (I.2). It initiated Analytical Marxism (I.3).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Two of his books were translated into French (*Why not socialism?* and *If you're an Egalitarian, How Come You're so Rich?*, both in 2010), as well as two papers ("Are Freedom and Equality compatible?" in *Actuel Marx*, 1990, and "Rescuing Justice from Constructivism and Equality from the Basic Structure Restriction" in *Raisons publiques*, 2010). *If You're an Egalitarian How Come You're So Rich* has also been translated in Spanish and in German (2001). Besides, *Karl Marx's Theory of History* was also translated in Spanish (1984), in Italian (1986), in Norwegian (1986), in Turkish (1998) and a PhD on Cohen was defended in France (Tarrit, 2006b).

<sup>4 &</sup>quot;To be radical is to grasp the root of the matter. But, for man, the root is man himself" (Marx, 1844: 25).

 $<sup>^5</sup>$  "The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it" (Marx, 1845a: 15).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> He specifies in the book that "the theses of the labour value are not presupposed or entailed by any contentions advanced in this book" (1978: 423, stress by Cohen).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Jon Elster noticed "a curious fact [...] the absence of an English Marxism" (1981: 745, personal translation).

# I.1. An analytical defence

His defence is conditioned by "two constraints: on the one hand, what Marx wrote, and, on the other hand, those standards of clarity and rigour which distinguish twentieth-century analytical philosophy" (1978: 9). The originality of such an approach is neither related to study of Marx's work, nor to the resort to analytical philosophy, but on the conjunction of book; therefore, the main innovation does not rely on the substance given by Cohen to the theory, but rather on the mode through which he exposes it: an analytical presentation of Marxian concepts (I.1.1) and their articulation through explanatory theses (I.1.2).

# I.1.1. Fragmented concepts

He gives precise definitions to the concepts and then he articulates them together with causal relations, in a way that fits with English-speaking methods in philosophy and science, namely analytical philosophy and, to a lesser extent, logical positivism<sup>8</sup>. In what appears as a reference to Althusser, Cohen claims that

[i]t is perhaps a matter of regret that logical positivism, with its insistence on precision of intellectual commitment, never caught on in Paris. (1978: x)

According to Rudolph Carnap (1966), who was prominent member of the Vienna Circle, logical positivism gives science the objective of reconstructing all the concepts that may be used for describing the world with simple logical relations. For Erik Olin Wright, himself also an Analytical Marxist, the aim of Analytical Marxism in to

define a series of abstract concepts... and then specify the ways in which these concepts can be combined to generate more concrete categories of social forms. (1994: 112)

This corresponds respectively to the roles of analytical philosophy and of logical positivism: the analytical philosopher cuts complex sets in their basic parts, the logical positivist tries to put them together. In a distinction that could be made between Vienna Circle's logical positivism and neo-positivism around Popper, Lakatos, Kuhn, Feyerabend... Cohen seems closer to logical positivism. For instance, he rejects Popperian falsificationism in claiming that a repetition of events on a large scale allows formulating scientific laws.

Cohen acted in such way with historical materialism, as the appears is formulated in the Preface of the *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (Marx, 1859: 21), which he judges as the most representative and the most synthetic instance of Marx's theory of history<sup>10</sup>. He keeps them together into three sets of concepts that he will strive to articulate through logical connections (productive forces, relations of production and superstructure.), and he articulates historical materialism through

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> By the way, Cohen was characterized as a "positivistic expression of the Marxian theory of history" (Bidet, 1990, p. 54). See also Noble, 1984.

John Roemer also refers to "analytical philosophy" and to "'positivistic social science'" (1986: 1-2) and Analytical Marxism has been attacked for being positivistic and empirist (Weldes, 1989); its focus on formalism "weakens Marxism" in the name of rigour (Anderson, Thompson 1988: 228).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Marx was rather hostile to positivism: "I am studying Comte on the side just now... that is pitiful when compared with Hegel" (1866: 289).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> This sequence is certainly the most synthetic introduction, but the theory also appears in *The German Ideology* (Marx, 1845b), in *Misery of Philosophy* (Marx, 1847)...

explanatory theses: the Development Thesis –the productive forces tend to develop throughout history – and the Primacy Thesis – the level of development of the productive forces explains the nature of the relations of production.

#### I.1.2. Historical Materialism in theses

The Development Thesis says that "[t]he productive forces tend to develop throughout history" (Cohen, 1978: 134). Then the development of the productive forces is considered as the independent variable in the explanation of historical change and there would be an endogenous trend towards improvement, in a determined direction. He considers that such a tendency to development is autonomous, and that it is a feature of humanity. He proposes three universal components for its justification: the *scarcity* of resources as the situation of human beings in history, the *rationality* and *knowledge* of human beings as specific features of human nature. Therefore human beings, because they are *rational* and *intelligent*<sup>11</sup>, they are willing and able to use and to improve the means of production that allow the development of the productive forces, and it would be irrational not to use them<sup>12</sup>.

The Primacy Thesis relies on the Development Thesis. It claims that "[t]he nature of the production relations of a society is explained by the level of development of its productive forces (Idem), which are then the driving force of history. In an analytical language, it means that the correspondence between productive forces and relations of production allows the development of the productive forces which, when it is fettered by some contradiction between forces and relations, requires a transformation of the relations towards a superior form in order to allow the development of the forces, which means that the forces have an explanatory primacy over the relations. Being material, the forces enter a historical continuity, and they require a specific social form for being the framework of their development. Thus, this is an explanatory asymmetry, with a primacy of the material over the social. The Development is the necessary premise for being able to refer to an explanatory primacy of the productive forces over the relations of production.

# I.2. An original resort to functional explanation

## I.2.1. The request for a mode explanation

Since Cohen does not associate historical materialism with dialectical materialism, his claim for scientificity request the formulation of a mode of explanation on order to articulate his theses. Thus, he claims that functional explanation is necessary for ensuring the logical consistency of historical materialism. This means that "the economic structure has the function of developing the productive forces, and the superstructure the function of stabilizing the economic structure" (1980: 129). Here the functional explanation is used as methodological device for articulating together the concepts of historical materialism, and he denies that there could be any functional interconnection between them, which would lead to functionalism. As well as Althusser was, G.A. Cohen seems to go against the Marxist tradition that traditionally rejected functional explanation as conservative, equating it to

<sup>12</sup> See Joshua Cohen (1982) and Robert Brenner (1985), also Analytical Marxists, on the possibility of a lasting absence of development.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> Cohen indifferently uses knowledge and intelligence.

functionalism. Conversely he thinks that it might be possible to extract the explanatory mode out from its normative consequences, in the sense that

functional explanation is compatible with the rejection of the doctrine of functionalism, and functional explanation is not necessarily conservative. (1978: 284)

More precisely, functional explanation is taken as consequential explanation in which the consequences are explanatory through their influence on the element to be explained, in Robert Merton's meaning (1957: 90):

When the net balance of the aggregate of consequences of an existing social structure is clearly dysfunctional, there develops a strong and insistent pressure for change

### I.2.2. A biological analogy

Moreover, such a theoretical framework allows thinking of the possibility of an analogy between functional explanation and evolutionary biology<sup>13</sup>. He claims "that historical materialism may be in its Lamarckian state" (1980: 134), that is its pre-Darwinian stage, which means that species wear some kind of useful features "because they were useful" (Idem: 133) and that any organism always tries to adapt to his environment, without the necessity of specifying the mechanism of such an adaptation. This means that the relations of production adapt with the development of productive forces. Jon Elster in particular describes Cohen's view as a primitive view on terms of philosophy of science, some Vienna Circle-type inductivism: "[i]f Marx was Buffon in Marxism, Cohen is Lamarck; let us wait for Darwin" (1981: 754, personal translation). He judges that functional explanation lacks an explanatory mechanism. This question is the object of a special of Theory and Society published in 1982, including contribution by Jon Elster, John Roemer, Philippe Van Parijs, Anthony Giddens, as well as an answer by Cohen himself.

# I.3. The founding document of Analytical Marxism

Cohen renews the mode of interpretation of historical materialism, and then the way of thinking Marxism. His basic breach with Marx's work relies on a rejection of the dialectic method, which keeps him close to Louis Althusser, who "had a strong effect on current interest in historical materialism" (1978: x), in such an extent that Cohen's interpretation might well be understood as an answer to Reading Capital, published in 1965. Althusser put into motion some elements that allowed Cohen to be a precursor. We can perceive three elements on which Cohen relies on Althusser's:

1) Historical materialism is not consistent with the Hegelian dialectics, which is a "philosophical atrocity dedicated to the justification of power" (Althusser, 1004: 31-32, personal translation).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> The reference to evolutionary biology refers to a quest for inter-science comparisons. We can find such an analogy in Marx. Here is a part of Engels's tribute at Marx's funerals: "Just as Darwin discovered the law of development or organic nature, so Marx discovered the law of development of human history" (Engels, 1883: 467).

- 2) The basic concepts in any theoretical structure must be systematically questionaed and clarified.
- 3) there is no specific Marxist methodology. Althusser wonders "what kind of philosophy is best suited with Marx wrote in Capital. Whatever it is, it will not be a 'Marxist philosophy'... it will be a philosophy for Marxism" (Idem: 37-38, translated by us, stress by Althusser). For Cohen, this is analytical philosophy. Nevertheless, he distances himself from Althusser, and talks of "considerable... doctrinal differences" (1978: x). He claims that

although [he] was for a time attracted to Althusserianism, [he] did not end by succumbing to its intoxication, because [he] came to see that its reiterated affirmation of the value of conceptual rigor was not matched by conceptual rigor in its intellectual practice. (2002: 323)

As a matter of fact, Cohen received a huge amount of greetings in the English-speaking academia. Beyond that he proposed an approach to Marxism which corresponds to the standards of analytical philosophy and logical positivism, and in that he attracted some intellectuals that were quite close to Marxism but who, until now, were reluctant to the philosophical assumptions that were traditionally attributed to it, especially its Hegelian legacy. It is commonly accepted then that the birth of Analytical Marxism is attributed to that book (see Roberts, 1996).

Cohen renews the way of thinking about Marxism. In attributing it traditional methods, he opened it the doors of the English-speaking academic world in reducing the reluctance of many radical scholars who had moved away from Marxism because of the lack of rigour traditionally attributed to the Marxist dialectics. In September 1979, in the year following the publication of *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence*, Cohen and Elster organized a meeting in London with a dozen of scholars that were Marxist or close to Marxism – most of them were coming from English-speaking countries and they were specialized in various fields in humanities (economics, sociology, history, philosophy...) – on the issue of exploitation<sup>14</sup>. The experience was renewed a year later in the same place, on the same topic, and it happened that meetings started to be organized every year in September<sup>15</sup>, among scholars sharing a common interest: an attempt to separate the substance of Marxist theory from its mode of exposition. Analytical Marxism as such started in September 1981, the group got named September Group – sometimes Non bullshit Marxism Group<sup>16</sup> –, referring to what they consider as a statement that cannot be clarified<sup>17</sup>.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> The contributors include the Norwegian social scientist Jon Elster, the American economist John Roemer, the American sociologist Erik O. Wright, the American political scientist Adam Przeworski, the American historian Robert Brenner, the Belgian philosopher Philippe Van Parijs. Later, a biologist (Elliot Sober) also took part to the meetings. On Analytical Marxism, see Tarrit, 2006a.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> The meetings occurred every year until 2000, the 2001 meeting was cancelled because of 9/11, and then the decision was taken to move to a every-other-year frequency. See Wright, 2005. The meetings were organized most often in London, but also in Paris (1982), in Chicago (1991), in New York (1996), in Cambridge, Massachussetts (1998), in Oxford (1999à.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> "And when a set of Marxists or semi-Marxists, who, like me, had come to abhor what we considered to be the obscurity that had come to infest Marxism – when we formed, at the end of the 1970s, a Marxist discussion group that meets annually, and to which I am pleased to belong, I was glad that my colleagues were willing to call it the Non-Bullshit Marxism Group" (Cohen 2002: 323)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> See Cohen, 2002. He refers to Harry Frankfurt, for whom bullshit corresponds to a lack of concern with reality.

The term « Analytical Marxism has been first published by the authors in 1986, in a collective book edited by John Roemer – *Analytical Marxism* – even if Jon Elster has used it in seminars since 1980<sup>18</sup>. It led to many debates on the validity of Marx'ss theory, with some major contributions, including Roemer's *A General Theory of Exploitation and Class* (1982), Elster's *Making Sense of Marx* (1985), Wright's *Classes* (1985). According to Erik O. Wright (1994: 40-41), four elements define what is analytical in Analytical Marxism:

- Conventional scientific norms,
- A systematic conceptualization,
- A precise specification of theoretical arguments within and between concepts,
- An importance to the intentional actions of individuals.

The last feature is more normative than methodological, and moreover it is less consensual, in the sense that it is wrong to associate strictly Analytical Marxism with Rational Choice theory. Rational Choice Marxism can be considered as a branch of Analytical Marxism, but not all Analytical Marxists endorse rational choice theory (see Veneziani, 2011).

Marx's work is systematically put under scrutiny and "there is probably not a single tenet of classical Marxism which has not been the object of insistent criticism at these meetings" (Elster, 1985: xiv). These discussions can be based in specific developments in Marxist theory (Cohen, 1978; Roemer, 1982), empirical applications of Marxian concepts (Wright, 1985), reconstructions of Marx's theoretical corpus (Elster, 1985). Theoretically speaking, Analytical Marxism can be summarized as

attempt... to preserve the classical research programme by (a) reconstructing the theory of history along non-Hegelian lines and (b) replacing the classical labour theory of value with contemporary general equilibrium theory. (Carling 1997: 770)

Basically, this corresponds to Cohen's and to Roemer's.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> It is not the first time in the history of thought. A school named "Analytical-Linguistic Marxism" developed in Poland from 1956 (see Skolimowski, 1965). Analytical Marxism has no direct relation with, but both separate positive from normative issues, science from ethics. In the late 1970s, a school of thought named "Analytical Marxism" developed in Japan in the late 1970s (see Takamasu, 1994). Its aim was an algebraic study of issues raised by Marxism, with a strong deal of formalization, continuing the works made by algebraic Marxism by Okiskio (1961) or Morishima (1973).

# II. A reconsideration of historical materialism on the same mode

In the course of the debates within Analytical Marxism, Cohen explicitly distanced from the Marxian theory of history:

I believed the theory to be true before I began to write the book [Karl Marx's Theory of history: A Defence], and that initial conviction more or less survived the strain of writing it... I do not now believe that historical materialism is false, but I am not sure how to tell whether or not it is true. (1988: 132)

In his attempt to specify the elements that constitute respectively the core assumptions and the protective belt of the theory, he reconstructs his own interpretation of historical materialism in a sense that corresponds to a diminution of its explanatory scope. He presented the foundations of his "reconsideration" (*Idem*) during the 1980s, in questioning the logical structure of the theory, and in judging it inconsistent (II.1). During the 1990s, he founded it on empirical elements (II;2).

#### II.1.A theoretical reconstruction

He explicitly presented the foundations of this reinterpretation in interrogating first the logical structure of the theory that he was defending in *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence*. It is based on three points

### II.1.1. A conceptual fragmentation of Marx's work

He presents Marxism as several theories rather than a single theory developing under several aspects, which corresponds to a break with the assumption of homogeneity of Marxism. "Marx produced at least four sets of ideas: a philosophical anthropology, a theory of history, an economics, and a vision of a society of the future" (Cohen, 1988: 136).

- The philosophical anthropology, as the theory of human nature, would correspond to the view that men are creative beings.
- The theory of history would propose an implicit growth of productive power, as a support for social change.
- The economic theory would correspond to the labour theory of value and its extensions (the tendency of the rate of profit to fall, the theory of exploitation...).
- The project for a future society would be communism, as he allows the flourishing of men and of humanity.

Therefore, "Marxism is not one theory, but a set of more or less related theories" (*Idem*: 155) <sup>19</sup>, and this allows the statement that historical materialism and Marxist philosophical anthropology are independent and then that "the apparent dependence of the Marxist theory of history of the Marxist theory of human nature is an illusion" (*Ibid*.: 157). This is a significant development in his own thought, since his initial

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> Not necessarily refuting Cohen, we still can compare with what Marx wrote (1865, stress by the author): "Whatever shortcomings they may have, the advantage of my writings is that they are an artistic whole, and this can only be achieved through my practice of never having things printed until I have them in front of me in their entirety".

defence of historical materialism was based on human nature, *i.e.* on the assumption that human beings are rational and intelligent.

#### II.1.2. Historical Materialism divides in two

Cohen interrogates "the scope of historical materialism" (1983: 195) and he judges that the theory is "too materialist" (1988: 143). It is the reason why he proposes two distinct interpretations of historical materialism, which are specified by a common core and two different protective belts: an inclusive historical materialism and a restricted historical materialism<sup>20</sup>. Inclusive historical materialism states that "history is centrally, inter alia" (Idem: 158, stress by Cohen), the development of the productive forces, in the sense of the Development Thesis that we previously described, which "explain[s] the principal features of spiritual phenomena" (Ibid.: 160). He allows the possibility of explaining spiritual phenomena independently from material phenomena. Cohen charges Marx for "never contemplat[ing] the distinction [and for] commit[ting] himself... regrettably, to the inclusive variant" (Ibid.: 165). Thus, consistently with the epistemological cut taken from Althusser, he claims (Ibid.: 167, stress by Cohen) that

The German Ideology certainly cannot be recovered for restricted historical materialism, but the more precise and circumspect statement of the theory in the Preface of 1859... nearly can  $be^{21}$ .

The condition for saving it concentrates Cohen's distantiation

[T]he document [The Preface] does, I concede, contain one unambiguously inclusivist sentence about consciousness, which says that 'it is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness'. If that sentence is removed, what remains is, I would claim, open to restricted construal. I regard the quoted sentence as a flourish, Marx's own inclusivist comment on the doctrine he is setting out, and not a comment which that doctrine, as otherwise set out, requires. I do not contend that he did not mean what he said when he wrote the quoted sentence, and I accept that this presence colours the rest of the Preface. My claim is that the rest of the Preface may be seen as having a different colour when the quoted sentence is removed. (Ibid.: 167-168)

Restricted historical materialism proposes wears a non materialist feature, namely that spiritual phenomena like religion and nationalism can be explained independently from any material structure. He keeps materialist in the sense that "spiritual phenomena... must neither profoundly disturb nor be ultimately responsible for material progress" (Ibid.: 159). He intends to take these aspects into account and he considers this historical materialism as a reply to "[t]he challenge [of] Max Weber's account of the Protestant Reformation and its aftermath" (Ibid.: 160). Actually, Weber's claim (1905) that a specific feature of the Protestant religion, namely the development of a morality that develops an individualistic behavior, explains the emergence of capitalism in Europe<sup>22</sup> comes at odds with inclusive

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> A similar distinction is proposed by Wright, Levine and Sober (1992) – they are also members of the September Group – between weak historical materialism and strong historical materialism.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> This does not appear in the original version of the paper (in *Irish Philosophical Journal*, 1, 1984).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> This view need to be qualified, notably with H.M. Robertson's approach (1933): On the one hand, the Protestant religion encouraged the business culture in adapting to capitalism. On the other hand,

historical materialism, but is still consistent with restricted historical materialism. Cohen admits his "move [from an inclusive historical materialism] to restricted historical materialism" (Ibid.: 173)<sup>23</sup>, even if he considers that "when [he] wrote [Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence] [he] was already, implicitly or incipiently, a restricted historical materialist" (Ibid.: 174) and he judges necessary "not... to qualify restricted historical materialism as a materialist theory of history"(Ibid., stress by Cohen).

### II.1.3. A rejection of the dialectical method

Cohen's reformulation of historical materialism also rests on his initial rejection of the dialectical method. He denounces as an obstetric conception the statement that the solutions to a given problem can emerge through the full development of this problem, and that the potential social transformation could be described as the process through which the old order gives birth to the new order. This is a critique against Hegel's theory<sup>24</sup>, and more precisely against the Hegelian content in Marx's work, which claims that a solution only exists when a problem is fully developed and is endogenous to that problem<sup>25</sup>:

Perhaps, instead of turning him upside down, or right side up, Marx would have done better, after toppling Hegel, to leave lying there, on a horizontal plane. The really important things that Marx had to say, about the history and liberation of humanity, did not require him to turn the arrow between consciousness and being the other way round. (Ibid., p. 172)

For Cohen, Marx claims that it is necessary to study deeply the social phenomena in order to get a solution, and the role of the socialist theoretician is to make explicit the task of the working class, that is to achieve a social revolution. Here the working class plays the role of the midwife in the obstetric conception, and Cohen claims that "[t]he obstetric conception of political practice is patently false" (1999a: 75)<sup>26</sup> because it "justify a criminal inattention to what one is trying to achieve, to the problem of socialist design" (Idem: 159, stress by Cohen). It is the reason why, against Marx's refusal to "recipes for cook-shops of the future" (Marx, 1867: 21), Cohen judges "that

<sup>26</sup> We notice that Cohen's interpretation of the dialectical method, based on the metaphor of the

distortion of the facts by Herr Dühring when he declares that the negation of the negation has to serve here as the midwife to deliver the future from the womb of the past" (Engels, 1878: 185).

all sections of Protestantism do not have the same relation with capitalism; more generally, the relative propensity of various branches of Christianity to support capitalism relies on material circumstances.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> Cohen attributes an inclusive elaboration to Marx, which would be related to an Hegelian influence: "when he replaced Hegelian idealism by his own materialism, [Marx] retained the inclusivism of the rejected doctrine" (1988: 172).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> "[T]he Dialectical principle constitutes the life and soul of scientific progress, the dynamic which alone gives immanent connection and necessity to the body of science; and, in a word, is seen to constitute the real and true, as opposed to the external, exaltation above the finite" (Hegel, 1830: 213).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> "The formulation of a question is its solution". (Marx, 1843: 218).

midwife, corresponds to Dühring's approach in his critique of *Capital – "The Hegelian negation of the negation, in default of anything better and clearer, has in fact to serve here as the midwife to deliver the future from the womb of the past"* (in Engels, 1878: 178) –, to which Engels answered that: "On the contrary: only after he has proved from history that in fact the process has partially already occurred, and partially must occur in the future, he in addition characterises it as a process which develops in accordance with a definite dialectical law. That is all. It is therefore once again a pure

socialists do need to write recipes" (1999a: 77). This led him to turn his intellectual priorities towards normative political philosophy.

# II.2. An empirical refutation

Cohen develops and justifies his reconstruction on empirical issues, on three points.

### II.2.1. A transformation of class structure

He claims that the modification of the class structure of capitalist societies, at least since the 1980s, to more heterogeneity and less polarization<sup>27</sup>, does not give a social group which has both the capacity for social change, that is being the majority in society and producing what is valuable, and an interest for social change, that being exploited and needy<sup>28</sup>. Such a view echoes the Analytical Marxist Erik O. Wright's view (1985), who proposes a theorization of contradictory class positions, and weakens, if note refutes, the dual character of the structure of class relations<sup>29</sup>. For Cohen, such a modification led the necessity for discussing ethical issues, proposing normative answers

[P]rofound changes in the class structure of Western capitalist societies... raise normative problems which did not exist before. (1999a: 105)

Besides, Cohen assumes that achieving the *Communist Manifesto*'s catchword "Workers of the World, Unite", conceived as an expectation that the national proletariats would transcend their specificities towards international solidarity, has been impossible due to history, including "workers... march[ing] to the trenches of World War I" (Cohen, 1988: 145). More generally he claims that the dispersion of the Western working class within various distinct groups, the agrarian majority in ruled countries, the power of transnational capital, the existence of cultural barriers... prevent the world scale cooperation of workers. In other, he claims that there can be major diverging interests between workers from different countries; for instance, the Indian proletariat can exert a pressure on the English proletariat, as an industrial reserve army. Then the double challenge of both cultural diversity and a differential purchasing power make more difficult the mutual identification of working classes. It is the reason why a moral theory would become necessary for creating a relation of international solidarity.

#### II.2.2. The collapse of the USSR

For Cohen, as for many, the dislocation of Soviet Union amounts to a lack of perspective for a socialist future<sup>30</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup> Less workers (strictly speaking), a new form of petite-bourgeoisie, new structures of qualification, a weaker workers' movement...

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup> Such an interpretation can be referred to the structural definition of classes proposed in *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence* ("A person's class is established by nothing but his objective place in the network of ownership relations", 1978: 73). It comes at odds with the distinction between class in itself and class for itself, as proposed by Edward P. Thompson (1963) for instance.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup> For a presentation of the Analytical Marxist interpretation of social classes, see Tarrit 2006c.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, it appears that for Cohen, the transformation of class structure has a stronger causal influence than the collapse of Soviet Union (and of its satellites) for explaining the retreat of critical thought, and especially of Marxism.

The loss affects both those who (like me) had once believed, and had not abandoned all hope, that the Soviet Union would realize the socialist ideal, and, a fortiori, those who still believed, only yesterday, that it was in fact realizing it. (1995: 252, stress by Cohen)

That the Russian Revolution occurred in 1917 would be contradictory with the central tenets of historical materialism on two issues.

On the one hand.

[n]o social formation ever perishes before all the productive forces for which there is room in it have developed. (Marx, 1859: 21)

For Cohen the productive forces were not sufficiently developed en Russia for leading capitalism to disappear.

On the other hand,

new, higher relations of production never appear before the material conditions of their existence have matured in the womb of the old society itself. (Idem)

For Cohen, claiming that the conditions for socialism existed in Russia at that time would be a mistake. Besides, he distinguishes socialism from Marxism and he thinks that Marxism has been strengthened, since the dislocation of Soviet Union would confirm Cohen's explanation. He claims that the Russian Revolution has never been a socialist country. A succeeding socialism in USSR would then have been a defeat for historical materialism, so that its failure is a success for historical materialism:

If the Soviet Union had succeeded in building an attractive socialism, then that would have been wonderful for socialism and for humanity, but bad for the credibility of historical materialism. (Cohen 1999b: 104)

Yet, we also can imagine the Russian Revolution in 1917 would have been the beginning of the development of the revolution on the world scale, but to a large extent, the debate on the permanent revolution goes beyond the present paper<sup>31</sup>. Still, the development of such a distinction between socialism and Marxism relates to the gradual distantiation of Cohen from Marxism.

#### II.2.3. The emergence of environmental issues

Cohen points a contradiction between the development of productive forces, in the sense proposed by historical materialism according to Cohen's interpretation, and the preservation of environment, and he claims that the limited amount of natural resources leads to an impossibility of growth of productive forces until abundance. The current environmental crisis would be a fetter to the development of the productive forces.

A (supposedly) inevitable future plenty was a reason for predicting equality. Persisting scarcity is now a reason for demanding it. We can no longer sustain Marx's extravagant, pre-Green, materialist optimism. (1999a: 114, stress by Cohen)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>31</sup> One of the few comments Cohen made on that issue is that one: "I do not thereby commit myself to Trotskyism, but perhaps I do commit myself to the view that one must choose between denial of key historical materialist theses and affirmation of some Trotskyist ones" (1999b: 104).

Cohen means that Marx would have been too pessimistic on the social consequences of a less than abundant situation and, for that reason, he been too optimistic on the possibility of occurrence of such abundance. As a matter of fact, such interpretation by Cohen stems both from the Development Thesis – with the development of the productive forces as a condition for historical progress – and from his definition of the productive forces as being reducible to science.

# III. Shifting priorities in favour of normative political philosophy

As soon as the 1970s, Cohen was centrally interested to political philosophy, together with historical materialism and, since he concluded that the explanatory theses on history lost their moral authority. Therefore, he states that it became necessary to concentrate on the research for normative answers and to elaborate a normative defense of socialism since "socialism was to be preferred to capitalism for reasons of normative principles" (1995: 3), and no more on scientific reasons, if we admit the epistemological break between scientific issues and normative issues. This corresponds to a gradual distantiation with Marxism, first in associating it to the concept of self-ownership (III.1), and then in giving it up in favour of an integration in the post-utilitarian debate<sup>32</sup> in normative political philosophy. (III.2)

# III.1. A defense of the concept of self-ownership

# III.1.1. A support to the Marxien theory of exploitation

We do not mean that there is an immediate causal link between Cohen's abandonment of historical materialism and his growing interest for self-ownership, since he claims (1995: 2) that his "Marxism did not control or affect [his] moral and political philosophy in a manner that many Marxists and anti-Marxistswould have thought that it should". In any case, it appears that Cohen's analysis became prioritized towards self-ownership, and they mainly rest upon a critique of Robert Nozick's libertarian theory (1974); they are grouped together in Self-Ownership, Freedom and Equality (1995). He notes that Cohen appropriated the concept of self-ownership in favour of a libertarian defense of capitalism<sup>33</sup>, and he states that this Lockean legacy<sup>34</sup> also can be used to support a critique of capitalism. For Nozick, the thesis of self-ownership leads to the conclusion that the equality of condition requires a violation of the rights to self-ownership, i.e. slavery. Therefore, if one wants to fight against such a justification of inequality, it becomes then necessary to refute either self-ownership, or the inference from self-ownership to the inegalitarian conclusion

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>32</sup> Such a word refers to debates that were initiated by John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice*, which is explicitly presented as a critique that goes beyond utilitarian political philosophy.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>33</sup> All libertarians do not endorse this concept, and Robert Nozick is particularly representative of those who endorse it.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>34</sup> "[E]very Man has a 'property' in his own 'person'. This nobody had any right to but himself. The 'labour' of his body, and the 'work' of his hands, we may say, are properly his. Whatsoever then he removes out of the state that Nature hath provided, and left it in, he hath mixed his labour with it, and joined to it something that is his own, and thereby makes it his Property. It being by him removed from the common state Nature placed it in, it hath by this labour something annexed to it that excludes the common right of other men. For this 'labour' being the unquestionable property of the labourer, no man but he can have a right to what that is once joined to, at least where there is enough, and as good left in common for others" (Locke, 1690: 17).

proposed by Nozick. Cohen chose the second approach<sup>35</sup>, which amounts to a direct confrontation against Nozick's arguments, with some amount of intellectual bravery.

One way of doing good philosophy well is to assemble premises which even opponents will not want to deny, and by dint of skill at inference, to derive results which opponents will indeed want to deny but which, having granted the premises, they will be hard pressed to deny. The trick is to go from widely accepted premises to controversial conclusions. It is, of course, no trick at all to go from premises which are themselves controversial to controversial conclusions. (1995: 112)

Therefore it might be possible to advocate the Marxist notion of exploitation, or at least the notion of appropriation, without nevertheless rejecting the thesis of self-ownership. On the contrary, Cohen judges that the Marxist critique of capitalism, and especially of the associated exploitation, rests on the thesis of self-ownership<sup>36</sup>: since the proletarians do not own the means of production, they are forced to take the jobs that generate exploitation and surplus value; this means that they have the right to leave the proletariat, but they do not have the power to do it:

When I am forced to do something I have no reasonable or acceptable alternative course... and the claim that the worker is forced to sell his labour power is intended in that familiar sense. (1988: 255-256, stress by Cohen).

# III.1.2. A conditional self-ownership

Therefore, if exploitation must be condemned, it is the case because the workers are forced to have their skills on the service of the capitalists, which amounts to the Nozickean logic that the taxpayers are forced to pay for funding welfare programs. We can infer then that the original privatization is a theft of what could be commonly held, which is at odds with what Nozick writes, for whom things come to the world attached to people entitled with rights on them. For Cohen, a private appropriation contradicts what the non-owners wish, so that Nozick cannot pretend to be an advocate of freedom, since private property reduces the freedom of those who are not entitled with it. Therefore; self-ownership would not prevent to achieve the equality of condition, and it van be possible to refute Nozick's inegalitarianism without rejecting the self-ownership thesis. Cohen's view is founded on the attribution of self-ownership to an inegalitarian principle on the external distribution of resources, and the conjunction between self-ownership and the common ownership of resources would erase the tendency of self-ownership to generate inequalities.

Proletarians, who only own their labour force, are unable to have a sufficient control on their life in such an extent that we can talk of autonomy. Therefore, in order for everyone to have a reasonable degree of autonomy, it is necessary to give limitations to self-ownership. Nozick's inequality relies on the attribution to self-ownership of an inegalitarian principle on the external distribution of resources – first arrived, first served – and the conjunction of self-ownership and a common ownership of the world would erase the tendency of self-ownership to generate inequalities. That is a

unthinkingly, on a libertarian premiss" (1995: 17) and the Marxian principle of proportionality – "to each according to his needs" (Marx, 1875) – is a "truncated form of self-ownership" (Cohen: 1995).

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<sup>35 &</sup>quot;The inference from self-ownership to the unavoidability of inequality was my target" (1995: 13).
36 "Those of us who have a Marxist formation... inherit a critique of capitalism which relies, unthinkingly, on a libertarian premiss" (1995: 17) and the Marxian principle of proportionality – "to

private ownership of internal resources and a collective ownership of external resources. In such a way, self-ownership would not prevent the achievement of an equality of condition.

Then Cohen loses interest on the concept of self-ownership, basically on the name of its inconsistency with Kant's philosophy, or, more precisely, between the concept of self-ownership and the Kantian categorical imperative. Cohen then came closer to Kant's philosophy, which seems to be inconsistent with self-ownership, in the same movement that he gets devoted to the Rawlsian and post-Rawlsian<sup>37</sup> political philosophy, which are explicitly based on the Kantian philosophy (see Rawls, 1971).

# III.2. A confrontation with John Rawls's theory of justice

After having spent the first third of his academic career to explore the foundation and the nature of historical materialism, he became interested to philosophical questions that he seemed not to be interested him before. For Cohen, as we noticed, socialist must get normative concerns and they must propose models for future societies, or at least to discuss issues relating to what is a just society. Then, during the 1990s, his publications, including If You're an Egalitarian, How Come You're So Rich? in 1999 take part to the contemporary debate on political philosophy that started with Rawls's publication of A Theory of Justice in 1971. He pretend he proposes a "critique"

#### III.2.1. For a wider basic structure

A central aspect of Cohen's critique to Rawls relies on the identity of the subject to which the principles of justice must apply, namely the basic structure of society. As a matter of fact, a distinction between rights and virtue like the one proposed by Kant does not appear in Rawls. Cohen claims that "the feature of Rawls's view to which [he] strongly object[s] [is] its restriction of justice to the 'basic structure' of society" (1999: 183) and the Rawls's choice of "restrict[ing] his concern to the coercive structure only [is] a purely arbitrary delineation of his subject matter" (Idem: 139). Conversely, Cohen proposes to widen the basic in decomposing it this way: "the coercive structure, other structures<sup>38</sup>, the social ethos<sup>39</sup>, and the choices of individuals" (Ibid: 143). In doing this, i.e. in separating personal choices from the coercive structure, Cohen proposes to be more Kantian than Rawls. The latter indeed resorts to a categorical imperative, but it is only an imperative in terms of law, whereas Cohen also includes an imperative in terms of virtue, in the sense that the individual actions, together with the informal structure of are related, by definition, to no legal framework. Therefore, he proposes that the principles of justice should be applied not only to coercive rules but also to non legally constrained choice of the individuals. As such, in separating personal choices and the legal structure, Cohen is more Kantian than Rawls. Indeed, Kant (1797) draws a distinction between what is legal and what is moral

For Cohen, the choices for which law is indifferent are crucial for social justice. Distributive injustice can reflect individual choices in just coercive structure, which

<sup>37</sup> This word refers to the debates, structured around equality, which intended to overcome Rawls's A Theory of Justice.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>38</sup> They are extra-legal structures, like social norms.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>39</sup> Cohen defines it as "the set of sentiments and attitudes in virtue of which its normal practices, and informal pressures, are what they are" (1999: 145).

raises the issue of the individual responsibility. Precisely his concern is neither limited to the basic structure in which the choices are determined, be it coercive or informal, nor to a set of individual choices, but to the pattern of interactions between structure and choice, which he names "distributive justice" (1999: 134). Individuals must be guided by a culture of justice which everybody would be entitled, and without which inequalities that prevent the situation of the least off to improve – and then incompatible with Rawls's difference principle – would persist. He claims that such a culture is necessary for two reasons related to each other. On the one hand, it is impossible to implement egalitarian rules that can be verified. On the other hand, if the rules should be followed at any rate, this would be an important risk in terms of freedom. Cohen then moves from a political theory of an institutional approach based on the legal structure to an interactional approach founded on behaviours, actions and interactions of individuals and groups of individuals.

# III.2.2. Difference principle and individuals

The difference principle states that inequalities are justified if they contribute in improving the situation of the least off. Precisely, Cohen "ha[s] no quarrel here with the difference principle itself but... there is hardly any serious inequality that satisfies the requirement set by the difference principle (1999: 124). He then develops a critique of the view "commonly thought... that the difference principle licenses an argument for inequality which centers on the device of material incentives" (Idem).

The incentives-based difference principle has a certain number of contradictions, and some ambiguities appear between the difference principle and the notion of solidarity that it is supposed to incorporate. Here is the development of the argument. The minor factual premise claims that when tax is low, then the richest – considered, by definition, as the most talented – are more productive, and the poorest get a better material situation. Therefore, a public policy intended to improve the situation of the poorest should decrease the tax for the richest, and the situation would be better for them than in a more equal society. Therefore, the difference principle can also be used for justifying a lower tax for the richest categories, in the sense that they would be encouraged to improve their productivity. Hence, a greater amount of money would be available for the redistribution, and job opportunities would appear for the poorest. This is a justification of inequality-based incentives, in the sense that they would improve the material condition of the least off. Actually, what seems to be a normative defence of inequality is a factual defence. Rawls does not demonstrate that an inequality that creates is just; he only claims that inequality is unavoidable. A first point in Cohen's critique is an issue of definition: Rawls defines the richest individuals as the most talented. Yet, skill does not correspond to the ability of getting a comparatively high income. The only correct claim states that these people are entitled with a material condition such that they can require a higher income, and that they can move their productivity around such income. Yet, it can be stated that their situation is a result of random circumstances, which is opposed to the Rawlsian assumption that opportunities are the same for all. Cohen concludes that "that the incentives argument for inequality represents a distorted application of the difference principle" (1999: 126).

Besides, the argument relies on the assumption the preferences are selfish and the rich persons – with features allowing the possibility of getting a comparatively high

income – have a strategic behavior. Inequality is necessary only if these people decide to produce less in case of reduction of the inequalities. Yet, in a society entirely<sup>40</sup> based on the difference principle, and then characterized by fraternity and dignity, the talented persons will not need incentives and the expected effect will not happen. The incentives argument is not necessary for the difference principle if the persons accept that principle, since the difference principle relies on a tacit solidarity between the various categories of the population, and since its implementation requires some degree of homogeneity and of social cohesion. Thus the assumption that the persons will have no more advantage except if it benefits to the least off is not consistent with the Rawlsian assumption that the individuals are maximizers;

For Cohen (1992: 314), "justice itself is a compromise or a balance between individual interest and demands for equality". This is how the difference principle requires a culture of justice, an ethos, without which a just society is impossible and without which the conjunction between the defence of individual interests and a proper social justice would be only fortuitous. An egalitarian ethos would be such that it would be useless to have a conscious concern on the least off, since such interest would be internalized. This approach can be seen as a substitute to a mutual indifference which is assumed in the original position. On the one hand, nothing tells that, in their interactions, they would choose such a behavior. On the other hand, mutual indifference is inconsistent with the values of fraternity defended by Rawls. Therefore, the large reading proposed by Cohen is more cautious than Rawls's, but it is not basically based on justice, and it requires just individual behaviours. Then Rawls must give up either the incentives for the talented to exert their skills, or the odeals of fraternity. For Cohen, it is worthwhile to keep the ideals. For that reason, and especially because of their lack in the Rawlsian theoretical framework, that Cohen will be led to give it up in favour of an individual interpretation, instead of a social interpretation. Then he concentrated on convictions, on individual behaviours and the philosophy on which they should be based. Without becoming a Christian philosoher, he refers to the fact that he became

[l]ess contemptuous of another old nostrum [which] says that, for inequality to be overcome, there needs to be a revolution in feeling or motivation, as opposed to (just) in economic structure. (Cohen, 1999: 120, stress by Cohen)

#### Conclusion

Gerald A. Cohen research subject were historical materialism from the early 1970s to the first half of the 1980s, the concept of self-ownership until the mid-1990s, and then the normative political philosophy. Such a move can be illustrated in comparing the epigraph of his first book, *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence* – the Preface of Marx's *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* –, and the last sentence of *If You're an Egalitarian, How Come You're So Rich?*, taken from the Gospel according to Saint-Marc – "For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?" (Mark 8:36). He then finished his intellectual pattern this way, in reaching a result that seems contradictory and irreconcilable with his initial approach.

I would indeed have been shocked to foresee, when I was, say, in my twenties, that I was to come to the point where I now am. For the three forms of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>40</sup> That is on the four elements of the basic structure that were previously discussed.

egalitarian doctrine that I have distinguished can in one dimension be so ordered that my present view falls at the opposite end to the Marxist view with which I began. (1999: 3)

Still, Cohen never chose to stop thinking seriously, and all his work has been marked with a great sense of rigor in the argumentation, and he always tries to take the adequate intellectual tools for radical thought in the great authors (Marx, Locke, Kant). It is still true that, in claiming that he had "in no measure abandoned the values of socialism and equality that are central to Marxist belief" (1999: x), he relies upon a quote from *The Great Gatsby* (Francis Scott Fitzgerald) – "So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past" (reproduced in *Idem*: 1) – for illustrating that since he "was raised as a Marxist... [his] intellectual work has been an attempt to reckon with that inheritance, to throw out what should not be kept and to keep what must not be lost" (Ibid.: 9-10) and that he has "remained attached to the normative teachings of [his] childhood, and, in particular, to a belief in equality... A powerful current bears [him] back to it ceaselessly, no matter where [he] might otherwise try to row" (Ibid.: 1). Then Cohen proposes convincing answers to the thesis that it would be an illusion to overcome the tensions between personal beliefs that are not based on scientific rigour, and a highly rigorous argumentation.

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