

# On Taking Historical Materialism Seriously

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## 1.

In the first chapter of *Karl Marx's Theory of History*, G. A. Cohen contrasts Marx's image of history with Hegel's, contrasts, that is, a powerful form of historical idealism with historical materialism. Historical idealism stresses the "dominion of thought" (*Gedankenherrschaft*); social change, on such an account, is to be explained principally in terms of changes in consciousness, the course of history being determined by fundamental ruling ideas and conceptions. This view is to be contrasted with historical materialism. The central vision of history in Hegel is formulated as follows by Cohen, "*History is the history of the world spirit (and, derivatively of human consciousness) which undergoes growth in self-knowledge, the stimulus and vehicle of which is a culture, which perishes when it has stimulated more growth than it can contain*"<sup>1</sup> (26). Marx's vision, a historical materialist vision, is identical in structure with Hegel's, but endows the structure with a new content. This can be seen from the parallel formulation of it, given by Cohen: "*History is the history of human industry, which undergoes growth in productive power, the stimulus and vehicle of which is an economic structure which perishes when it has stimulated more growth than it can contain*"<sup>2</sup> (26). The italicized words, which are identical in both formulations, show that

- 1 All references to G. A. Cohen's *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978) are given in the text. Other references are in the end-notes.
- 2 This stress, as will become apparent later in this essay, meshes nicely with Yu. I. Semenov's instructive account of the development of socio-economic formations and world-history in his "The Theory of Socio-Economic Formations and World History", in *Soviet and Western Anthropology*, ed. Ernest Gellner (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), 29-58.

the same structures obtain in both conceptions of history. The content, of course, is crucially different and it is this content which justifies the ascriptions "idealism" and "materialism"; the structure justifies the common ascription "historical".

However, Cohen's reconstruction of historical materialism aspires not only to offer us a reading, vision, interpretation or "philosophy of history", as Hegel did, but he attempts to provide the "beginnings of something more rigorous", namely a theory of history which, respecting proper empirical and theoretical constraints, can correctly be construed as a scientific account. Cohen seeks in *Karl Marx's Theory of History* to provide "a reconstruction of parts of historical materialism as a theory or infant science" (27). He seeks, as he puts it in his Foreword, to provide "a less untidy version, and thus a more readily criticizable version, of some of Marx's major thoughts about historical materialism". In doing this he respects two constraints "what Marx wrote" and "those standards of clarity and rigour which distinguish twentieth-century analytical philosophy" (ix). But his reconstruction of historical materialism is not meant to be simply a rational reconstruction of Marx's thought, but, as well, a *defense* of that infant science.

It is also important to note that in contrast with some well-known Contentual reconstructions of historical materialism, the historical materialism that Cohen defends is, as he puts it, "an old fashioned historical materialism", a "traditional conception, in which history is, fundamentally, the growth of human productive power, and forms of society rise and fall according as they enable or impeded that growth" (x).

The theory that Cohen reconstructs and amplifies is essentially built from the famous bald programmatic statement of historical materialism in Marx's 1859 Preface to his *Critique of Political Economy*, though Cohen also marshalls, in an impressive way, texts from *The German Ideology* onwards both as *prima facie* conflicting texts (but *only as prima facie* conflicting texts) and as supporting texts. Whether or not Cohen finally convinces us either that he has got Marx right or of his defense of historical materialism, it plainly is the case that Cohen has, carefully and utterly undogmatically, provided us with an impressive reconstruction of historical materialism that both has a definite rigour and clarity of conception and is responsible to Marx's actual conceptions.

However, while Cohen considers a wide range of texts, it remains the case that for him, as he put it in an article subsequent to *Karl Marx's Theory of History*, the canonical text for "his interpretation of historical materialism is the 1859 Preface".<sup>3</sup> That Preface, he contends, "makes explicit the standpoint on society and history to be found throughout

3 G. A. Cohen, "Functional Explanation, Consequence Explanation and Marxism", *Inquiry* 25/1 (March 1982), 28-33.

Marx's mature writings, on any reasonable view of the date at which he attained theoretical maturity".<sup>4</sup>

## 2.

Let us briefly see what this view of historical materialism comes to. The economy, as everyone knows, is for Marx the centre of class societies. Historical materialism, as well as the labour theory of value, afford us an account of what this comes to. As Cohen reads Marx and reconstructs historical materialism, the productive forces of a society are distinct from its economic structure. The economic structure is the ensemble of its relations of production. "Transformations of economic structures" are, as Cohen puts it, "responses to developments within the productive forces" (292). It is an essential historical materialist claim that "production relations reflect the character of productive forces" and, in turn, in reflecting that character, have a "character which makes a certain type of structure propitious for further development" (292). It is here, of course, where Cohen's reliance on functional explanations is manifest. The underlying claim of historical materialism, as Cohen construes it, is that within the modes of production the productive forces broadly determine the production relations in whole historical epochs. On Cohen's account we have a technological historical materialism: productive forces determine (or at least strongly condition) relations of production ("relations of ownership by persons of productive forces or persons or relations presupposing such relations of ownership") and these in turn determine (or strongly condition) the superstructure, i.e., the set of non-economic institutions such as the State and the legal system whose character is explained by the nature of the economic structure (216). The productive forces, which on this account are the most fundamental dynamic of social change, are a distinctive kind of material substratum below the economic base (the ensemble of the relations of production). It is this material substratum that brings about changes in the economic structure of societies: the motor of social change is what is used in production to make things, the facilities for making material goods and the facilities necessary to meet the physical demands of the productive processes. It is these things which are the material substratum of any society and it is these things (the various productive forces of the various societies) which are the genuinely material foundation of the society whose productive forces they are, while the economic structure (a set of social relations), as distinct from these processes, is taken by Cohen to be equivalent to what has been called "the base" in Marxist literature. But this material substratum is even more fundamental than "the base" (the economic structure), for it is changes in it which bring about structural changes in the base; that is to

4 *Ibid.*, 28.

say, these productive powers (forces) determine (or strongly condition) the direction of change in or of the base. But in turn the base is said to determine (or strongly condition) the superstructure, i.e., those non-economic institutions, such as the State and the legal system, whose character is explained by the nature of the economic structure.

Cohen argues, using his conception of functional explanation, that the production relations are as they are because they enable human productive power (the productive forces) to expand and the superstructures are as they are because they consolidate and protect the economic structures that match them. Superstructures hold foundations (bases) together and production relations control the development of productive forces. Basic changes take place in the economic system in order to facilitate the development of the productive forces and central changes take place in the superstructure (the political and legal institutions) in order to facilitate changes in the base (the economic structure).

Such a formulation is an "old-fashioned" technological historical materialism; eschewing "structural causality", it attempts coherently to account for, on the one hand, the claim that the development of the productive forces is the driving force of history and, on the other hand, the twin claims that bases require (need) superstructures and that relations of production effect productive forces. Cohen attempts to show how a historical materialist can claim this without either adopting a unilinear fundamentalist one-way deterministic conception of historical materialism or adopting a dialectical interactionist model in which there is a zig-zag two way determination, without any primacy claims, between the economic foundation (the modes of production) and the superstructure. The unilinear conception seems plainly false and the dialectical interactionist conception, aside from being opaque, is miles away from any technological orientation. Its adoption would, in effect, eviscerate historical materialism of the content that made it a significant, though possible false, theory of epochal social change.

We have before us, though without its nuance and subtlety, the skeleton of Cohen's account of what has come to be called (though not by Cohen) the technological determinist view of historical materialism. Before we turn to a critical examination of this account, let me close this section by citing Cohen's own succinct summary of his view of historical materialism. It will perspicaciously fix for us the core of the reconstruction of historical materialism we shall examine.

In Marx's theory, as I present it, history is the growth of human productive power, and economic structures (sets of production relations) rise and fall according as they enable or impede that growth. Alongside a society's economic structure there exists a superstructure, of non-production relations, notably legal and political ones. The superstructure typically consolidates and maintains the existing economic structure, and has the character it does because of the functions it fulfills.

Historical materialism's central claims are that

- (1) the level of development of the productive forces in a society explains the nature of its economic structure, and

(2) its economic structure explains the nature of its superstructure. I take (1) and (2) to be *functional* explanations, because I cannot otherwise reconcile them with two further Marxian theses, namely that

- (3) the economic structure of a society is responsible for the development of its productive forces, and
- (4) the superstructure of a society is responsible for the stability of its economic structure.

(3) and (4) entail that the economic structure has the function of developing the productive forces, and the superstructure the function of stabilizing the economic structure. These claims do not by *themselves* entail that economic structures and superstructures are *explained* by the stated functions: *x* may be functional for *y* even though it is false that *x* exists because it is functional for *y*. But (3) and (4), *in conjunction with (1) and (2)* do force us to treat historical materialist explanation as functional. No other treatment preserves consistency between the explanatory primacy of the productive forces over the economic structure and the massive control of the latter over the former, or between the explanatory primacy of the economic structure over the substructure and the latter's regulation of the former.<sup>5</sup>

### 3.

Central to Cohen's reconstruction of historical materialism is what he calls *the primacy thesis* and that thesis in turn presupposes another fundamental thesis, *the development thesis*. Cohen defends both as core beliefs of Marx and as beliefs which are true and important (134-174). *The development thesis* is the claim that "the productive forces tend to develop throughout history" and the *primacy thesis* is the claim that "the nature of the production relations of a society is explained by the level of development of its productive forces" (134).

Cohen acknowledges that class struggle is often the immediate explanation of social transformations, but, he argues, it is not the fundamental explanation of epochal social change (140). "Capitalism develops when and because the bourgeoisie prevails against pre-bourgeois ruling classes, and socialism begins to be built when and because the proletariat defeats the bourgeoisie. But *why* does the successful class succeed? *Marx finds the answer in the character of the productive forces*. ... The class which rules through a period, or emerges triumphant after epochal conflict, is the class best suited, most able and disposed to preside over the development of the productive forces at the given time" (149). What explains, what brings about and sustains class militancy and makes class conflict overt, is the state of the productive forces: "the exhaustion of the productive creativity of the old order, the availability of enough productivity to install the new" (150). The function of revolutionary social change is to unlock productive forces whose development has been impeded.

Why does *the primacy thesis* require *the development thesis*? *The primacy thesis* is a universal thesis applying to all historical epochs and in making this universal claim, it speaks of the levels of development of the productive forces, thereby, in its very formulation, showing that it

5 G. A. Cohen, "Functional Explanation: Reply to Elster", *Political Studies* 28/1 (March 1980), 129-130.

presupposes that they are developing. It is also the case that "a given level of productive power is compatible only with a certain type or certain types of economic structure" (158). If  $X$  is a slave society, then  $X$  cannot be a society of computer technology. But in simply pointing out that certain productive forces make impossible certain production relations, we do not get the asymmetry that *the primacy thesis* requires. All the above considerations show is that the constraint between forces and relations is symmetrical. "If high technology rules out slavery, then slavery rules out high technology. Something must be added to a mutual constraint to establish the primacy of the forces (138).

If *the development thesis* is accepted, and if it is true, we have an argument for a necessary asymmetry. And, given the factors of constraint, we can, from *the development thesis*, argue to *the primacy thesis*. If a given level of the forces is compatible only with certain types of production relations, then, with the development of the forces (the assumption of *the development thesis*), there must come a time, given the plausible assumption of a lag resulting from a resistance to extensive changes in the production relations, when the old relations are no longer compatible with the changed forces. It is their very changing that is the primary cause of their incompatibility and it is this change which triggers the change in the relations of production. What makes the incompatibility is the developed productive force: a relation which suited (matched with) an old productive force no longer suits (matches with) the new productive force. The cause of the dysfunction is explained by the altered, indeed developed, productive force which is no longer compatible with the production relations in the society in question. The reason why we can expect that to continue, alternating with periods of dovetailed mutual suitability, throughout the course of history, is that the productive forces tend to develop throughout history. But that, of course, just is *the development thesis*.

It should now be evident that *the development thesis* is central to such a conception of historical materialism. But why should we accept *the development thesis*? Some of Cohen's critics, including even some of his Marxist critics, think it is false.<sup>6</sup> We will try to sort out what is centrally at issue here.

*The development thesis* asserts a universal tendency for productive forces to develop throughout history, though such a claim does not entail that forces never decline or always develop, but it does assert that "it is of the nature of forces to develop" (135). Marx, as we have seen, sees history as "the development of human power": these forces are such that they must everywhere and at all times *tend* to develop (148).

6 Joshua Cohen, "G. A. Cohen: Marx's Theory of History", *The Journal of Philosophy* 79/5 (May 1982), 253-273; A. Levine and E. O. Wright, "History and the Forces of Production", *New Left Review* 123 (September-October 1980), 47-69; and Milton Fisk, "The Concept of Primacy in Historical Explanation, *Analyse & Kritik*, forthcoming.

Why *must* this be so? Or, so as not to beg any questions, *is* it so? Cohen does not claim to have a conclusive argument for *the development thesis*, but he hopes he has an argument that has some substance (151). The conclusion he wants to get is, of course, “that the productive forces have a systematic tendency to develop” (150). In sketching his argument, he utilizes two premises which appeal to what he calls “two permanent facts of human nature” and another premise which appeals to a “fact about the situation human beings face in history” (150). What are these allegedly permanent facts of human nature? The first is that “men are, in a respect to be specified, somewhat rational” and the *second* is that “men possess intelligence of a kind and degree which enables them to improve their situation” (152). The relevant respect in which men are rational is that human beings (statistically normal human beings?) everywhere, everywhen will, when they “know how to satisfy the compelling wants they have”, be disposed “to seize and employ the means of satisfaction of those wants” (152). There can be no serious doubt, Cohen asserts, that men are “rational to some extent in this respect” (152).

He thinks these two facts about human nature, together with a fact about our historical situation, provide us with a good, though still inconclusive, argument for *the development thesis*. The alleged fact about our historical situation is this: “The historical situation of men is one of scarcity” (152). What he means by our situation “being one of scarcity” is that, given our wants and “the character of external nature”, we still cannot satisfy our wants unless we spend the better part of our time and energy doing something we would rather not do, namely engaging “in labour which is not experienced as an end in itself” (152). It is because of this feature of our situation that Cohen says we live in a condition of scarcity. (This, note, is a rather specialized use of “scarcity”.) Where our situation is a situation of scarcity, unassisted nature does not cater well to our needs. Nonetheless we have enough intelligence to know how to alter our environments sufficiently to satisfy our compelling wants and, being in that respect rational, we are disposed to take the necessary means to satisfy those wants. Moreover, we possess sufficient intelligence to be able to reflect on what we are doing and to “discern superior ways of doing it” (153).

This argument has been much resisted.<sup>7</sup> Cohen notes himself that it has two gaps (153). Human beings have an interest not only in overcoming scarcity and maximizing their material advantage, they also have an interest in certain “cultural and social possessions” which may be so deep that answering to them is worth a considerable sacrifice “in the calculus of human welfare” (153). This being so, it is not so clear that human rationality is such that all rational human beings will in all cultural

7 See the references in the previous footnote.

circumstances tend to opt for the development of productive forces over their other competing interests. What reason requires here may be deeply contested. Moreover, and independent of that last claim, it is "not evident that societies are disposed to bring about what rationality would lead men to choose. There is some shadow between what reason suggests and what society does" (153).

Cohen will argue in arguing for the *primacy thesis* that there is "a rough correspondence of interests between ruling classes and humanity at large", but he is very aware that, to avoid going in a rather small circle, he must not at this  *juncture* in his defense of historical materialism invoke that claim. He needs *the development thesis* to establish *the primacy thesis*, so in establishing *the development thesis* he must not appeal to *the primacy thesis*. But the above claim is a corollary of *the primacy thesis* and to appeal to it here would be tantamount to appealing to *the primacy thesis*. So we are left, on Cohen's own showing, with two gaps in the argument for *the development thesis*.

Cohen believes, however, that the fact that the argument for *the development thesis* is incomplete is importantly mitigated by the actual *record of history*, which, in his judgment, supports *the development thesis*. Surprisingly enough, he says that the fact about the record of history which is crucial here is the fact "that societies rarely replace a given set of productive forces by an inferior one" (153). However, even if the "exceptions to this broad generalization are of no theoretical consequence" and the putative fact is a fact, it will not have the import that Cohen attributes to it. That productive forces rarely move backwards does not at all show or give us reason to believe that they always have a tendency to move forward. What it does at least suggest is that people are sufficiently rational for it to be the case that they usually can recognize it when they have a good thing going for them and that they will tend to try to keep that thing going for them; but that does not show, what Cohen needs to show, namely that always and everywhere people (normal members of different cultures) will, as at least a significant number of them do in capitalist societies, have Faustian drives to greater and better things, e.g., a disposition to *develop* their existing productive forces. (I do not, of course, absurdly say that all people in capitalist societies have that drive in anything like the same degree.)

We do not, in querying Cohen's claim here, need to deny that "productive forces are frequently replaced by better ones" (153). But there is inertia in human society as well and not infrequently the productive forces stand still, as in Asiatic-mode-of-production societies, and sometimes, as we shall see, they even go backwards. Cohen acknowledges that inertia but he still does not give sufficient weight to epochal standstill phenomena: the extensive epochal stagnation of many societies. The fact that a people's extant productive forces are frequently replaced by better productive forces and the fact that there is inertia, does not



show, or even tend to show, that there is a universal tendency for the forces of production to develop.

Cohen himself recognizes that the fact that (s) [the productive forces often move forward] is an entailment of (a)' [the productive forces *have* developed throughout history] does not show that (s) is the same as (a) [the productive forces *tend* to develop throughout history]; but, what Cohen does *not* advert to, is that, though (s) is an entailment of (a)', it is also not the same as (a)', for it could be true, and indeed probably is true, that productive forces frequently move forward in history without it being the case, as it probably is not the case, that they have developed throughout history. That is to say, (s) could be true while (a)' could be false. From the truth of (s) we can get to neither (a)' nor (a). But (a) is *the development thesis*.

What seems to be the case is that Cohen has not shown that the historical record confirms *the development thesis*. However, perhaps the historical record, together with his admittedly inconclusive argument, is sufficient to make a persuasive argument for *the development thesis*? Recall what the core of Cohen's claim is. It is not that "history as a whole" is an "unbroken development of the productive forces ..." (155). That kind of development is something which "is peculiar to capitalist society". What he is predicating throughout history is "a perennial tendency to productive progress arising out of rationality and intelligence in the context of the inclemency of nature" (155).

Some of Cohen's acutest critics have thought him mistaken about this.<sup>8</sup> In trying to assess the case Cohen makes here, we need to recognize that his argument from rationality is central for him. As we have noted, Cohen believes that the falsehood of *the development thesis* would "offend human rationality" (153). I think his argument here fails. We can, and I believe should, accept his two claims about human nature and his proposition about what he calls scarcity. Indeed, but for the fact that some social scientists, including some Marxists, have denied them, I would take these three propositions to be empirical truisms, but not, for all of that, untrue. But, I shall argue, the acceptance of these three premises will not enable us to establish (I mean this even in the weak sense of "establish" that Cohen opts for) *the development thesis*.

Normal human beings in all societies at all times have the ability, to "refashion their environments to suit themselves" and they can and do transmit culture. But they do not always and everywhere, "when knowledge provides the opportunity of expanding productive power", take it. But Cohen, of course, would say that it isn't necessary that they always *take* it but that they always *tend* to take it. But it is not evident that all normal people under normal conditions even tend to take it. The historical record, as I shall seek to show in a moment, goes against

8 See references in footnote 6.

Cohen here. This, some might say, may show that these peoples (whole cultures) who do not take this option are irrational. But we must tread carefully, for it is, to put it mildly, a problematic business to say that most members of a society are irrational or that during a certain epoch most people were irrational.

If we don't say that, the most that we can say is that in conditions of scarcity (an almost invariable condition) people tend to use the knowledge and brains they have to develop their productive powers to better satisfy this compelling need and that this, whether they clearly recognize it or not, is the rational thing to do. But is this really what reason dictates in all circumstances of scarcity? People have many interests, many compelling needs, and people, as members of different classes with quite unequal access to power, not infrequently have different interests, and these interests do not always run in tandem. Sometimes the interests of some people, or perhaps even of whole cultures, are not in the development of the productive forces. Moreover, in making this point, we need not deny that human beings, by and large, have a propensity for rational behaviour: they will, that is, have some understanding of what their compelling needs are and how to satisfy them and they will, *ceteris paribus*, be disposed to employ what they regard as the most efficient means for doing so. But they will in important ways have different conceptions of what their needs are and of what weighting to give to their various needs when they conflict. As Cohen acknowledges, other needs than that of expanding their productive powers and in this way improving their material life may seem more imperative to some peoples in certain cultural situations. Not all rational people, that is not all people with a good sense of their options and a reasonable awareness of what their needs are, will, in certain circumstances, give such pride of place to the development of the productive forces. Labour power can serve many needs and, while there are needs which are panhuman, there is also a considerable historical and cultural variation in needs and, even more evidently, the weight given to various needs varies over cultural and historical space and time and between individuals.

From primitive communism to the socialism and eventually to the communism arising out of the contradictions of capitalism, what, according to Cohen, triggers and sustains the development of human history is the pervasive desire on the part of people for an increase in productivity defined specifically in *material* terms. But he has not shown that that desire is all that pervasive and dominant and he has not shown that people act irrationally or at least with impaired rationality if they do not in all circumstances give such material interests such pride of place.

However, it might be felt, and not without reason, that what rationality does or does not require is a vexed question. (But this, of course, cuts against Cohen too.) However, what, short cutting all that, the

historical record does show is something more definitive. And, when we see what that is, it has been argued, we will see that it does not back up Cohen's claim about *the development thesis*. To see what is involved here consider the following: suppose for a long time, that is, say, for a century or two or more, there is stagnation or regression rather than a development of the productive forces, and suppose further that the situation was not an abnormal one, such as might result from a series of cataclysmic natural catastrophies such as prolonged droughts that killed three quarters of a society's population, then *the development thesis* would be disconfirmed. But it is things like that the historical record shows. It is what happened with the collapse of the Roman Empire, what obtained through the span of the Inca Empire, obtained for the aborigines in Australia, the native peoples of New Guinea, for China of the Ming and Ch'ing dynasties and generally in Eastern Europe from the late Middle Ages to the beginning of the eighteenth century. In both China and Eastern Europe of the above specified periods, there was not only stagnation but there was actual regression after an earlier growth. The Incas, to take another example, in spite of their far flung empire and intricate political control, did little to develop their productive forces from what they were in pre-Inca times. And, though the aboriginal peoples of Australia, through very early contacts with agricultural people, learned about agriculture, they did not adopt it. The aridity of some of Australia made it suboptimal in parts of Australia, but in many places in Australia it would have been to the inhabitant's clear advantage. Still, though they had the know-how, the need and the opportunity, the more developed productive forces were not adopted.

Given such wide spread and extensive stagnation and even occasional regression, it looks at least as if *the development thesis* has been disconfirmed.<sup>9</sup>

Cohen discusses only the case of the decline of the Roman Empire and admits, with his characteristic candour, that this case does count against *the development thesis*, particularly if Rome's decline was not just due to the barbarian invasion but to "internal" causes as well (156-157). But Rome, as we have seen, is not just an isolated case. It is difficult to suppress the suspicion that Cohen is unwittingly ethnocentrically extrapolating a global tendency from a phenomena that is distinctive of capitalist societies: societies where there indeed has been an enormous development in the productive forces and where this development is catered for by both its base and superstructure. But it may be a mistake to attribute this tendency to world history.

#### 4.

Cohen, however, wants to state historical materialism in such a way that it affords us a theory of social evolution and an account, for all of history,

<sup>9</sup> Joshua Cohen details things like that. See Cohen, "G. A. Cohen".

of epochal social change. He needs *the development thesis* to do this but it appears at least as if *the development thesis* has been disconfirmed. It looks like it does not square with the historical record. What seems at least to be the case is that there is no true general law to the effect that rational people tend to opt for the growth of productive forces no matter what the socio-economic formations in which they are placed. What is true of the capitalist era has not been shown to be true throughout history. We—or so the above considerations seem to force us to conclude—appear not to be justified in believing that throughout history there is a staircase pattern of the growth of productive forces which connects all social epochs and all periods into such a staircase of growth.

Yet there does seem to be something like world or global history and it is, as well, crucial to realize that historical materialism is about epochs in world history in which, or so the claim goes, the whole process of world history, the very march of human history, to use another metaphor, is such that while still allowing us to conceive of history as having some kind of unity, it also sanctions our speaking of one epoch of world history ending, say, the ancient oriental epoch with its Asiatic mode of production, and a new historical epoch, the ancient slave owning epoch, with its distinctive mode or production, beginning. (By an “epoch” is meant here a period of history defined by the prevalence of some particular, and indeed characteristic state of things.) We have something called history as a whole with its various successive stages. There is a way of viewing history as a global system or a world system in which we do not see history as simply a heterogenous collection of the acts of different women and men in quite different societies at different times and places, but also see it as a history of humankind and human society, which, along with its diversity, also has the essential unity of a natural-historical process in which there is the development and succession of socio-economic formations.

It might be well to view Marx, and Cohen’s reconstruction of Marx, as an attempt to discover the inner dynamic of that development and succession of socio-economic formations.

Socio-economic formations, I should add, are stages in the development of human society. It is a theory-laden description to talk in terms of such stages or even in terms of human society. Someone might say that in reality there are just different concrete specific societies. Human society is just a reification: the dream of a spirit seer and talk of the essential unity of a natural-historical process is just a bad metaphor. But recall that certain anthropologists have even thought of “tribe” as a reification. “Society”, it is well to point out in this connection, gets used in several different ways. Sometimes it is used to refer to one more or less distinct cultural and/or political unit: “Danish society”, “Quebec society”, “Athenian society”, “American society”, “Nuer society”, “Venetian society” and the like. However, alternatively, sometimes

“society” is used to designate a type of society—one of the socio-economic formations with its distinctive mode of production—as in “slave owning society”, “feudal society”, “capitalist society”, “socialist society” and the like. But “society” is also used in a still different way. And it is that use that I want to fasten on here. What I refer to is this: sometimes “society”, as in “human society”, is used to designate all cultural and political units past, present and (perhaps) even future as well, in a way similar to how “human” ranges over all men, women, children and infants, past, present and future. It is in this sense that we speak of “human society as a whole” and referring now to all existing cultural and political units past and present, we can speak of the history of humankind as a whole.<sup>10</sup>

Historians, who are also historical materialists, do not see global history as a endless flow of events devoid of any kind of order, but see it as a unitary process with a development and succession of socio-economic formations, the distinctive succession and development of which, as the history of humankind as a whole, is an empirical law-like necessity, similar to the way in which a healthy acorn, barring certain external influences, will grow into an oak tree. There is, on such an account, *n* stages of the history of humankind at large (as a whole). Historical materialists will, within limits, disagree about just how many stages there are and what these stages are. Perhaps the most plausible filling in is a six stage epochal development. It is, as are all Marxist accounts, an evolutionary account of the long and often painful development of human society in a progressive manner by a replacement of one type of society by another higher type. In this manner we can speak of the evolution of human society. (This sense of “evolutionary” does not, of course, stand opposed to “revolutionary”. It has nothing to do with “evolutionary socialism” à la Bernstein.) It is not a multilinear development but a conception in which the diverse histories of various societies, and types of society (e.g., feudal society), are seen as a “unitary process of the evolution of human society, subject to one single set of regularities”.<sup>11</sup> The six stages I have in mind, each fixed by a distinctive mode of production, are: (1) primitive pre-class communist societies, (2) ancient Asiatic mode of production societies, (3) ancient slave-owning societies, (4) feudal societies, (5) capitalist societies, and (6) socialist and eventually communist societies. The claim is *not*, as it is often thought to be, that each discrete society, barring externalities, which may destroy it, will sooner or later go through all six stages as a healthy acorn, by stages, will grow into an oak tree. To claim that for all concrete societies is absurd. Many specific societies are stagnated and will never go through all these stages. There is with them at least no

10 I owe these distinctions to Yu. Semenov. Semenov, “Socio-Economic Formations”, 29-31.

11 *Ibid.*, 54.

endogenous development of the productive forces. Some societies, like many in highland New Guinea or in the heart of the Amazon, are, or were, until dragged into the twentieth century by powerful developed societies, still at the first stage of development. They will never have an Asiatic mode of production, be feudal societies or probably even capitalist societies.

Different societies do not all go through identical stages of socio-economic formation. The stages of development (perhaps the favoured one should be the six stages I just mentioned) are stages of development of socio-economic formations. They should be applied to the history of human society taken as a single whole and not, analogously to the acorn-to-oaktree-case, to the development of individual societies (like individual acorns).

The development of the history of humankind as a whole might be likened to a series of runners running a relay with a torch to be carried on to some destination. As the torch is passed on by the runners, so the metaphorical torch of leadership of the most developed productive forces and modes of production is passed on from one stage of society to another in the development of human history as a whole.

How does this apply to *the development thesis*? *The development thesis* asserts a universal tendency for productive forces to develop throughout the history. It is a specification of Marx's reading of the history of humankind as a perennial tendency, seen in global terms, to productive progress through the development of productive power. *The development thesis* is seen by Cohen, and by his critics, as applying, at least in the first instance, to concrete societies as embodiments of types of society. And, as we have seen, so understood, it appears at least to be false. There has been, that is, considerable disconfirming evidence brought against it. The reason I have gone on about the development of the unity of the history of humankind as a whole, and about talk of human society as distinct from talk of concrete societies, is that it seems to me possible, and indeed desirable, to apply *the development thesis* to the history of humankind as a whole and not to all concrete societies. If this is so, then Cohen would be freed from having to claim that everywhere, everywhen the productive forces tend to develop. He could be understood as claiming instead that human society is such that there is a universal tendency throughout the history of human society for the forces of production to develop and that this tendency manifests itself for some, though not for all societies, at particular times and at particular places, in such a manner that they have a tendency to develop their productive forces and that, throughout human history, this tendency has continued to manifest itself. Where this tendency becomes more than a tendency and there is a spectacular distinctively new development in the productive forces, we can correctly speak of the torch of leadership for the course of history passing into that society's hands.

I have no idea whether Cohen would accept such an employment of *the development thesis*. Read in this manner we should take *the development thesis* as applying to the course of human history as a whole and only contingently, in the manner characterized above, to specific societies. In this way we avoid the standard objections to *the development thesis*.

##### 5.

Some will argue we only avoid those objections to fall prey to others. The conceptions "human history" and "the history of human society as a single whole" are, my remarks about reification to the contrary notwithstanding, reifications of a very suspect metaphysical sort, perhaps committing one to some form of Platonic realism with its utterly metaphysical theory of universals.<sup>12</sup> But such a realism about universals is certainly not the sort of thing that ought to be admitted into the ontology of a scientific world perspective (if a scientific world perspective needs an ontology at all) or into a genuinely scientific theory, for such metaphysical constructions do not answer to any genuine social realities.

Such an objection is understandable, but still, I believe, very suspect, for it could as readily be applied to traditional periodicization of history into ancient, medieval and modern, to talk of Nation, State or Tribe, to talk of particular societies such as the Arapesh, the Nuer, the French or the Swedes. All of these, for the same reasons, could be called reifications. Unless we retreat to a logical atomism or methodological individualism, both thoroughly discredited, we must rest content with such "reifications" (if that is what they are) though we should also resist such a characterization or (*pace* Gellner) any claim that such conceptualizations commit us to any metaphysical doctrine about universals or indeed to any philosophical account of universals at all. Historical materialism can, and should, simply remain agnostic here.

A more substantial objection to such a reading of *the development thesis* is a Popperian one. We can be confident that acorns generate oak trees because we have, or can come readily to have, numerous examples, in varied circumstances, of such a development. But "human history as a whole" like "the universe" is not something of which we have a lot of instances. They are not as numerous as blackberries or acorns. Yet, on a classical Marxist account, from primitive pre-class communism to communism, there should be endogenously generated in world history, through the various stages marked by distinctive socio-economic formations, with their distinctive productive forces functioning as the motor of history, an inexorable unfolding of history eventually

<sup>12</sup> Ernest Gellner, "A Russian Marxist Philosophy of History", in *Soviet and Western Anthropology*, ed. Ernest Gellner (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), 60-63.

leading to a communist classless world society rooted in vast social wealth. This generation of world society in the history of humankind is analogous to the way the acorn develops into the oak.

It is certainly natural to think that the Popperian criticism is very much to the point here. If we only possess one instance, as we do with the history of humanity as a whole, how can we possibly be in anything like a well based position to claim that we have a law of development here? We need, it is plausible to believe, many instances to be confident in making any such generalization, but equally plainly, that is just what we do not and cannot have here, dealing, as we are, with this single and unique development.

When *the development thesis* was treated as applying to concrete societies or even to types of societies, we had a basis for such a generalization in a way that is roughly analogous to the acorn case. But here we do not have anything like that. By making *the development thesis* apply to history or a whole we have deprived it of any scientific value and indeed to try to make generalizations about the empirically necessary course of history is to make claims which could not have any warranted assertability. It is, that is, an empirical claim without empirical warrant. The central issue is not whether *the development thesis* could not have the form of a law-like statement but of whether it could possibly be tested for its probable truth or falsity, so that it could be warrantably asserted.<sup>13</sup>

To this, it can be and has been replied, that a developmental law-claim "may entail a number of predictions about the occurrence of events at various stages in the unique process that it purports to explain".<sup>14</sup> Thus, even when *the development thesis* is about how productive forces will tend to develop throughout history, that very thesis could generate predictions about how particular capitalist productive forces or feudal productive forces would develop in determinate types of circumstance and thus, there could be a confirmation or disconfirmation of socio-economic formation relative laws and, indirectly, and always tentatively, that would provide either some confirmation for or disconfirmation of a non-socio-economic formation relative law of development even when applied to a unique process, e.g., the development of world history as a whole. The fact that we are "forever confined to the observation of one unique process does not mean that we are forever confined to one unique observation".<sup>15</sup> Moreover, *the development thesis*, on either reading, is not what Popper calls an "absolute trend". Even when it is applied to history as a whole, it depends on certain conditions obtaining. If the atmosphere radically altered or some horri-

13 Richard Hudelson, "Popper's Critique of Marx", *Philosophical Studies* 37 (1980), 262.

14 *Ibid.*, 264.

15 *Ibid.* See also his "Marx's Empiricism", *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 32 (1982), 241-253.



ble thermo-nuclear war occurred, it could very well be a different ball game altogether, even, in some instances, over the long run.

What we should conclude from this Popperian objection to the reading I am now giving to *the development thesis* is that there very well might be good reasons to doubt whether *the development thesis* is in fact true even though there are no methodological or logical reasons to reject it as inherently unscientific or something that could not reasonably be expected to be true or even, to any reasonable degree, something to be confirmed or disconfirmed.

Some of the crucial empirical issues are brought out in a very interesting exchange between the British social anthropologist Ernest Gellner and a distinguished Russian anthropologist Yu. I. Semenov.<sup>16</sup> There is still a lot more to be clarified and more to be said about what it is reasonable to expect here in the way of confirmation/disconfirmation and what the upshot of this would be on the overall assessment of the likely truth of historical materialism. But, I think, enough has been said to put in doubt the claim that historical materialism must be false because either *the development thesis* has been disconfirmed or is, read in the way I have read it, a metaphysical claim.

## 6.

It is only a necessary condition for the truth of Cohen's account of historical materialism that *the development thesis* be true. His *primacy thesis* must also be true. So let us now assume, for the sake of continuing the argument, and what is not implausible in any event, the truth of *the development thesis*, on which *the primacy thesis* depends, and see what can be said for and against *the primacy thesis* itself.

Cohen's direct argument for *the primacy thesis* is remarkably brief: only a page and a half in a book of well over three hundred pages (138-139). But much indirect argument for it came before in his arguments about "such generalities as human rationality and intelligence, and the facts of scarcity". These considerations, deployed much as he has deployed them in his argument for *the development thesis*, are essential background for his defence of *the primacy thesis* and, if they are accepted, they will, Cohen believes, be crucial elements in establishing the truth of *the primacy thesis*.

*The primacy thesis* maintains that the "nature of the production relations of a society is explained by the level of development of its productive forces" (158). Production relations that come into being and persist for a time do so because they are the relations necessary for the optimal development of the existing productive forces. But, at this juncture, we need to ask the following question: assuming that the

16 Gellner, "A Russian Marxist", 59-82, and Semenov, "Socio-Economic Formations", 29-58. See also Ernest Gellner, "The Soviet and the Savage", *Current Anthropology* 16/1 (December 1975), 595-601.

productive forces are disposed to develop (*the development thesis*) why should we further believe that the level of development of these forces explains the production relations of a society? We might start by remarking that we can observe that changes—changes beyond a certain threshold—in the productive forces will bring about changes in production relations and we can make predictions and retrodictions on the basis of some socio-economic-formation-relative generalizations we make on the basis of these observations. Moreover, it is evident enough that, for any given level you like, a given level of productive power is not compatible with just any kind of economic structure. We cannot say exactly what the threshold will be, but there will always be a threshold. Productive forces, for example, that include computer technology are not compatible with the production relations of a slave owning society. Cohen's reason for claiming they are not compatible is that there would be a successful revolt because of the degree of their education and their general cultural level, something they could not be without because it is needed for them to work the technology. Their awareness rooted in their cultural accomplishments would lead them to revolt and, unlike Spartacus, to revolt successfully against their slave status. And, when we take *the primacy thesis* with *the development thesis*, such non-compatibility does not give us a symmetrical mutual constraint (high technology ruling out slavery and slavery ruling out high technology); it gives us instead an asymmetry rooted in *the development thesis* with the changes in productive forces producing changes in the production relations which in turn produce changes in the superstructure. What establishes the primacy of the productive forces is the incompatibility of the forces and the relations plus the truth of *the development thesis*. Given that productive forces tend to develop and that certain production relations are not compatible with certain levels of productive power, then we can correctly predict that sooner or later (we cannot in general be precise about the threshold) the production relations (economic structures) will have to change so that they will come to suit the changed productive forces. Moreover, since throughout the whole of history such productive changes will always tend to go on somewhere (blockages to productive progress, whatever their longevity, being impermanent), then, where they go on developing, changes in production relations will also occur, when these tendencies, as somewhere they will, are actualized to a sufficient extent. If, *au contraire*, the production relations on some world wide scale permanently block or fetter the productive forces, or force them to regress (to become less developed) over any epoch, then there would plainly be a blocking of the tendency of the productive forces to develop throughout history, but that implies the falsity of *the development thesis*. But, if we have established the truth of *the development thesis*, then, given the sometimes incompatibility of the forces and relations, we have established *the primacy thesis*.

Suppose we ask: why must there be this incompatibility, so that the relations have to change? Or even, given this incompatibility, why must this result in a change in relations? How can we be sure that there always must be a threshold such that any further changes in productive forces have to result in a change in the production relations? Why exactly cannot slaves come to work in factories as skilled workers operating systems of computer technology? Or why cannot proletarians, given certain prior relationships of power, continue to sell their labour power on the market, even after the productive forces are much more socialized than they are now and require for their operation on the part of the workers a far more developed knowledge base? How can we be so sure, as Marx is, and as Cohen is, that when the relations have become fetters shackling the *optimal* development of the forces, that we must then reach a point where these fetters will be broken? Why must there come a point in society where, given its productive power, things will, relative to that productive power, eventually come to operate *optimally*?

Cohen says, consistently with his argument for the *development thesis*, that their fettering foretells their doom “because it is irrational to persist with them given the price of lost opportunity to further inroads against scarcity” (159). “It is”, as Cohen puts it, “because the capitalist system forbids ‘all rational improvement beyond a certain point’ that it is destined to go under” (159-160).

However, for Cohen, in the transition from capitalism to socialism, the transition—the going under of capitalism—occurs not because the productive forces are actually constrained or fettered. Rather the transition occurs because of the fact that the productive forces of a given type of society (a socio-economic formation characteristic of bourgeois society) are not being as rationally deployed as they could be to meet the wants and needs of the great masses of people. (Is that a way of saying they are being fettered?) Given those needs of those people and the technological potential of those productive forces, those productive forces are being used suboptimally and this would not obtain with a socialist organization of society. But why, given (a) the vast ideological resources of advanced capitalist societies (the consciousness industry and all that), and (b) their awesome technological means of supervision, control and oppression, must this irrationality—this suboptimal use of productive power—be perceived as such by the great masses of people who bear the worst brunt of such supervision, control and oppression? And, even if it is so perceived, can we be so confident that the proletariat will risk their necks to achieve a change to an optimal use? And why should we so confidently expect that these fettered productive forces will continue to develop in such a circumstance, such that they will be the central causal mechanism for bringing about social production relations? We can, of course, be confident that sooner or later any produc-

tive force or any set of production relations will change, but Cohen is not just asserting, with his *primacy thesis*, that commonplace. While accepting and indeed requiring two way causation between forces and relations for his functional reading of the dialectic of history, he still wants the principal causal thrust for epochal social change to come from the developing productive forces. It is they, Cohen claims, which decisively make things happen to those production relations which no longer suit them. But that productive forces will change does not entail that they will develop or that they will be the main engines of social change or that they will develop in a determinate upward spiral direction such that because of them certain socio-economic formations will inevitably, for a considerable stretch of a certain epoch, find themselves stably dominant. Cohen sets out to establish that *primacy thesis*. It is indeed central to his account, central to classical historical materialism and Marxism and to its scientific account of society. Cohen has freed it from the various charges of incoherence by such people as H. B. Acton and J. B. Flamenatz. But, achieving coherence or even plausibility is one thing; achieving truth is another. He has achieved the former two things, but his defense of Marx's theory of history has not been sufficiently strong to make the case for historical materialism's approximate truth. Indeed we can reasonably continue to *hope* that something like it is true, for, if it, or some rational reconstruction of it, after all, turns out, as it could, to be an approximately true conception of things, it would provide a rational grounding for a powerful conception of human progress and emancipation. We have learned in our time, and not without reason, to be extremely wary and indeed even cynical about such conceptions. (Contrast Cohen here with his former teacher Isaiah Berlin.) But for someone who cares about the possibility of our having a life together in a truly human society—it is difficult not to hope, be he a Cohen or a Berlin, that human liberation is possible. One might fear, as Berlin does, that what is being held out as “liberation” is not such and one might be very skeptical indeed about the prospects for such a liberation. It is not unreasonable to doubt whether it is possible for more than a few people. But these things are different matters than that of *hoping* for human liberation: the achievement of a truly human society. Though she might be very skeptical indeed about its likelihood, a caring person would hope, or at least wish, for a more general liberation. It is, of course, easy to sneer at such a conception of liberation as being somehow “religious”. But, it is, that notwithstanding, a *hope* that Cohen's careful and sustained analysis and reconstruction of Marx's historical materialism has rendered not unreasonable, though, as I have tried to show, the grounds for skepticism also remain as powerful constraints, making a pessimism of the intellect and an optimism of the will a compelling way of ordering one's being.