REVIEWS

Whatever happened to analytical Marxism?


This is a strange and disappointing book. The jokey and populist title is misleading. In fact the book contains the Gifford Lectures which Cohen gave in 1996, but these lack the substance and coherence one expects from such lectures. Indeed, these lectures are a disparate miscellany, some autobiographical some philosophical, which do not hang together as a whole. They need to be read ‘symptomatically’ as the Althusserians used to say, for what they omit as much as for what they contain.

There is one particularly glaring omission. Whatever happened to analytical Marxism? Not so long ago, Cohen was the leading figure of a movement with that name which promised to bring the self-proclaimed standards of clarity and rigour of analytical philosophy to Marxism. Following the publication of his *Karl Marx’s Theory of History* (1978) – the most important work to emerge from this movement – a group of like-minded thinkers rapidly formed. Apart from Cohen, prominent members included Jon Elster, John Roemer and Erik Olin Wright. They were known as the ‘September group’ because they met annually in that month, alternatively as the ‘non-bullshit Marxism group’. All talk of ‘dialectic’, together with the other mystical trappings of Hegelian metaphysics, was to be banished. Marxism was going to be ‘rationally reconstructed’.

Soon a stream of books, articles and even a small secondary literature started to appear. But just as quickly as it grew that stream seems to have dried up. If this book is anything to go by, even the memory of it has now been suppressed. Like one of those photographs of old Bolsheviks from which a purged figure has been airbrushed out, this book has a great gap at the centre where some account of analytical Marxism ought to be, and, disposed awkwardly around it, are the components which went towards its formation. Even that, however, is enough to make clear what an impossible project analytical Marxism set for itself.

The book comprises two quite disparate and irreconcilable parts. The first begins with an autobiographical account of Cohen’s communist and secular Jewish upbringing in Montreal and goes on to give an account of the ‘traditional’ Marxist philosophy that Cohen absorbed in the process. The second part switches to the analytical philosophy which Cohen imbibed when he went to college, first to McGill in Montreal then to Oxford. But autobiography is left behind here; the second part is devoted to a purely philosophical discussion of Rawls’s theory of justice. There is a tenuous attempt to link these two parts under the heading of equality. Marxism, claims Cohen, foresees the advent of an equal society as the inevitable outcome of the march of history; Rawls sees it as a political task; whereas Cohen himself maintains that it will come about only if individuals are committed to equality in their personal lives and create an egalitarian moral ‘ethos’. However, attention to this theme is uneven. The first part barely focuses on it at all. Rather, it contains an excellent account of ‘traditional’ Marxism stressing the Hegelian, dialectical theory of history which underlies it – precisely the aspect of Marxism rejected by analytical Marxism.

Cohen starts from the way in which Marxism, in Engels’s phrase, regards itself as a ‘scientific’ as opposed to a ‘utopian’ form of socialism. He shows how this distinction is based on a Hegelian dialectical theory of history. For Marxism is first and foremost a historical and economic theory which aims to understand the workings of the present, capitalist world, rather than to lay down how things ought to be in some ideal future. According to this theory, capitalism is only a particular and limited stage of historical development. The full working out of the conflicts within it will lead ultimately to its downfall and give rise to a new historical stage: socialism. Socialism is thus born out of the processes of capitalism. Socialist political activity should not be regarded as a form of social engineering which tries to impose goals on society from the outside; it functions rather like a midwife helping with the birth of the new social order.

Cohen calls this the ‘obstetric motif’ in Marxism – an ugly phrase for what in Marx is a powerful and poetic metaphor. Cohen’s use of language is so awkward that it is not clear whether this ugliness is deliberate. In any case, as Cohen well shows, this motif is rooted deeply in Hegel’s philosophy. It is an
integral part of Hegel’s dialectical method (though Cohen is shy of that term), where it is applied to logical processes of thought as well as to social and historical developments. It also runs right through Marx’s work. It is present even in the canonical ‘Preface’ to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy of 1859, which Cohen claims to be explicating in Karl Marx’s Theory of History, where Marx asserts: ‘no social order ever perishes before all the productive forces for which there is room in it have developed; and new, higher relations of production never appear before the material conditions of their existence have matured in the womb of the old society itself’.

In these chapters Cohen gives an excellent brief summary of these themes in classical Marxism and of their Hegelian origins, making central to Marxism precisely what its analytical offshoot tried to remove. If this is Marxism, then what hope is there for an analytically ‘reconstructed’ version? This would not be so much a non-bullshit Marxism as a non-Marxist Marxism, a self-defeating project if ever there was one. Small wonder that it has not prospered.

One cannot help but feel that Cohen could have written a very good account of the dialectical themes in Hegel and Marx had he so wished, but this is not his purpose here. These themes are described, it seems, only to be rejected. It would be misleading to say that they are criticized; they are simply discarded with only the briefest of dismissive asides.

Thus the Hegelian view that a new social order appears only when the conditions for its emergence are ripe is described as ‘wonderfully convenient’ and ‘incredibly optimistic’. These are superficial and inadequate criticisms. The Hegelian doctrine may perhaps better be regarded as a tautology: the emergence of a new order ipso facto demonstrates that the conditions for it were present. Nor is that necessarily an objection to it. On the contrary, this doctrine can be seen as laying out the conceptual framework for the Hegelian historical approach rather than specifying a substantial theory of historical progress. Or perhaps it should be acknowledged that the Hegelian approach is often ambiguous between these two versions. In any case, if the Hegelian approach is to be taken seriously – and Cohen presumably believes that it should be, since he devotes half a book to it – then it requires a good deal more discussion than it receives here.

Similar remarks apply to the other ways in which Cohen dismisses the historical approach of Marxism. It is politically damaging, he says, because it leads socialists to think that they can avoid ‘hard political choices’. This is an old accusation, but none the more valid for that. A considerable discussion of it already exists, to which Cohen’s asides add nothing. For example, Sartre’s 1948 play Les mains sales (recently revived in London) is all about this issue. Cohen also charges traditional Marxism with ‘criminal inattention’ to ‘the problems of socialist design’, as though it believed that socialism would spring forth fully formed at the appointed hour. Again this is a familiar but questionable charge, reiterated in the briefest and laziest of terms here. There were many things wrong with actually existing socialism but absence of planning was not one of them.

In short, the Hegelian historical approach needs to be discussed and assessed, but Cohen does not do that. On the other hand, he does provide a well-argued critique of the classical Marxist view that the proletariat will emerge as the agent of revolutionary historical change to overthrow capitalism and build socialism. This is one of the best chapters in the book, even if it is reprinted from another source. However, it does not fully address the issues raised by the dialectical theory of history, since the idea of the revolutionary proletariat is only one aspect of this, even if a fundamental one in Marxism. For the rest, however, the theory is simply discarded with barely a comment.

At this point the lecture audience was treated (or should that be ‘subjected’?) to a session of community singing. The reader is let off with a brief explanatory paragraph and can move on to the next chapter. This marks a radical break. The second part of the book is completely different in theme, style and content. According to Rawls, Cohen explains, a just society is governed by two main principles of justice. One of these is the ‘difference principle’, according to which an unequal distribution of goods is just only if it is necessary to benefit the least well off members of the society. Rawls uses this principle to justify unequal incentives. The argument is familiar. The ‘most talented’ members of society will produce more only if they are given incentives and the extra production can be used to benefit the worst off.

Rawls’s theory involves a sharp distinction between the public and private spheres. For he maintains that principles of justice should be applied only to the ‘basic structure’ of society – that is, its legal structure. Issues of justice do not concern how people behave in their private lives. Cohen questions this. Even on Rawls’s own views, he argues, the principles of justice should apply not only to legislative matters but also in private life. A just society requires not only just
rules but also what Cohen calls an ‘ethos’ of justice that governs individual behaviour.

This point is well enough made, though in rather a laboured fashion. Material which forms the basis for a single already published article is stretched out over a couple of chapters. And the scope of Cohen’s argument is exceedingly limited. He makes no attempt to develop or explore the notion of a moral ‘ethos’, nor to consider what social conditions would contribute to its growth or inhibit its development. Marx, of course, had much to say about this. He did not regard the absence of an egalitarian ethos as unconnected with the domination of egoistic interests in the law and the economy. But Cohen makes no attempt to think through what Marxism has to contribute on this issue.

The fact that Cohen made his name as a Marxist, albeit of the ‘analytical’ variety, has vanished from view.

Indeed, Marxism tout court has now disappeared from Cohen’s philosophical repertoire, if this book is any guide, for it figures here only as a part of Cohen’s past, included it seems as an act of filial piety. It would be a pity if this indeed proves to be the trajectory of Cohen’s thought. No matter how problematic it was, the project of ‘rationally reconstructing’ Marxism undoubtedly made a distinctive and original contribution to contemporary philosophy. On the evidence of this book, there a long way to go before the footnotes to Rawls which Cohen is currently writing will result in work of similar importance.

Sean Sayers

Bridges over troubled Walter

Lutz Koepnick, Walter Benjamin and the Aesthetics of Power, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln and London, 1999. 312 pp., £34.00 hb., 0 8032 2744 2.


Now that we have Benjamin, what do we do with him? Do we add him to the roster of intellectual history? Use him as a resource for theoretical plundering? Discover in him the partial prefiguration of contemporary concerns? Or does his life stand as a model of the intellectual? All of these Benjamins have been done and continue to be done. But rarely has Benjamin been approached in a manner which draws upon his work; to engage with a moment of the past as an illumination and critique of the present. Refreshingly, both these books set out to place Benjamin in a critical relationship to the present, although in different ways and with different degrees of success.

Lutz Koepnick’s Walter Benjamin and the Aesthetics of Power, at first sight, sets a reading of Benjamin against areas of contemporary theory. The central aim is to develop a critical model of fascism – particularly Nazism – with which to counter the vision of fascism as part of modernity, even as the apotheosis of its metaphysics, suggested by critics such as Lacoue-Labarthe, on the one hand, and in a different manner by the historists of the Historikerstreit, on the other. In order to identify the ‘synchronic and diachronic uniqueness of fascist terror and fascist modernism’ so as to resist its normalization, Koepnick turns to Benjamin. The three main sections of the book address what Koepnick sees as the three stages of Benjamin’s development of the ‘aestheticization thesis’, based upon readings of The Origin of German Tragic Drama, ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’ and the Arcades Project, respectively. Overall, he asks Benjamin to provide him with a means of distinguishing fascism from modernity per se, arguing that in Benjamin’s view ‘fascism constitutes a historically specific and singular regime of political representation and experience’. Benjamin is cast as arguing that fascism ‘mobilizes technological and economic rationalization against the normative substance of political modernity, against post-Enlightenment values of political justice, equality, freedom and democracy’. The obvious question arises of how far this normative substance was any such thing in twentieth-century Germany before World War II, but, as this passage suggests, it is Koepnick’s aim to enlist Benjamin’s aestheticization thesis for a liberal democratic critique of fascism and, just possibly, of the present. The trouble is that Koepnick is, by and large, too faithful to Benjamin for this enlistment to be easy; it ends up as rather more of a press-ganging, with the struggle still visible.

A clear example can be found in Chapters 5–7. These link Benjamin’s account of phantasmagoria in