

GA “Jerry” Cohen (1941-2009)

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This has been a bad summer for left wing intellectuals. The radical political economists Giovanni Arrighi and Peter Gowan died within a few days of one another in June. And then last week the socialist philosopher GA “Jerry” Cohen died suddenly at the age of 68.

Jerry is best known for his 1978 book Karl Marx’s *Theory of History—a Defence*. This restated and defended the materialist theory of history that Marx developed in *The German Ideology* and succinctly outlined in the 1859 *Preface To A Contribution To The Critique Of Political Economy*. In this view of history, societies rise and fall in as much as they tend to develop the productive forces. Most of the Marxist left from Marx’s time onwards had largely taken this orthodox historical materialism for granted.

Cohen described the book as “homage to the plain Marxism” that he had learned from his parents and the broader Communist community to which they belonged during his childhood in Quebec at the height of the Cold War.

By the 1960s and 1970s, however, this “plain Marxism” was unfashionable. Many of those radicalised by the mass movements of the time dismissed the emphasis on the development of the productive forces in the 1859 *Preface* as “technological determinism” that gave no importance to ideas or to class struggle.

Cohen’s book also cut against the grain of the contemporary left in a second way. The rediscovery of Marxism during the 1960s and 1970s typically favoured one or other philosopher from continental Europe, notably Georg Lukács, Theodor Adorno and Louis Althusser.

By contrast Cohen developed his interpretation of Marx by drawing on the analytical philosophy dominant in US and British universities. This emphasised explicitly defining concepts and spelling out the steps in an argument.

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Jerry carried off this project in such a clever and original way that he helped to shift the balance of argument back to recognising the fundamental role of the development of the productive forces in bringing about historical change.

A less fortunate offspring of the book was the emergence of a school of “Analytical Marxism”. This was a group of talented but ambitious

scholars who sought to make Marxism compatible with mainstream approaches in English-speaking philosophy and social science.

Bizarrely, this particularly involved trying to marry Marx to “rational-choice theory”. This is a very influential academic doctrine that seeks to reduce social life to the actions of self-interested individuals.

Not surprisingly, very little of Marx survived processing by rational-choice theory.

Jerry’s position was more nuanced. Having initially resisted the turn to rational-choice theory, he later capitulated to it. But he never completely abandoned the Marxism he had defended in his first book.

Cohen’s later work was closer to more mainstream political philosophy. He concentrated particularly on developing a theory of social justice in which the ideal of equality played a central role.

One could interpret this shift as an embrace of the academic establishment. Jerry was Chichele Professor of Social and Political Theory at Oxford University until his retirement last year, and sometimes he seemed a little too comfortable with Oxford’s peculiarly privileged life.

But Cohen’s commitment to socialism remained much more than theoretical. He strongly criticised New Labour’s backsliding from the idea of equality. And he retained something of the style of his Communist upbringing.

I can remember debating with Jerry at the Socialist Workers Party’s annual Marxism festival in the 1990s. To illustrate an argument, he sang the old American union song “Solidarity Forever”.

There aren’t many philosophers, at Oxford or elsewhere, who would or could do that. I shall remember Jerry Cohen for his unique mixture of analytical brilliance and gut socialism.

P.S.

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