

Review Essay

JEAN COHEN ON MARXIAN CRITICAL THEORY

A discussion of Jean L. Cohen, *Class and Civil Society: The Limits of Marxian Critical Theory*, (Amherst: University of Mass. Press, 1982).

MOISHE POSTONE

Jean Cohen's exposition and critique of Marx is a serious attempt to contribute to the creation of a critical social theory that would be adequate to contemporary societies. Her approach is very much informed by the experiences, perceptions, and concerns of the Left in the past two decades. It is marked by an insistence upon political freedom, civil liberties, and human rights as ends in themselves, an uncompromisingly critical stance towards so-called real existing socialist societies, emphasis on new social movements, and a skeptical attitude towards the notion of the proletariat as the revolutionary subject.

A new adequate critical theory should, in Cohen's opinion, retain what is valid in Marx's analysis but must get beyond its weaknesses. A central theme of Cohen's book is her insistence on the importance to any social critique of a theory of political institutions, one that concerns itself with the institutionalization of legality, plurality, and publicity, that is, with what Cohen terms the key features of civil society (p. 225). It is precisely in this area, according to Cohen, that Marx's theory was most deficient. She claims, moreover, that this deficiency was not merely contingent, but necessarily was rooted in the nature of Marx's analysis, in particular, in his class theory.

Cohen argues this position by means of a consideration of Marx's social theory, which she precedes and follows with a discussion of some modern social theorists. She begins her exposition with a critique of what she considers to be variations of Marx's class theory: the theories of Marcuse,

Mallet, Gorz, Poulantzas, E. O. Wright, Gouldner, and Konrad and Szelenyi. Cohen argues that these theories, despite their differences, follow a similar pattern, one which is bound to the fundamental presuppositions of the Marxian synthesis and, hence, is not able to deal adequately with newer historical developments such as the new social movements and the changed relation of state to society (p. 21). She closes her work with an examination of Habermas, Offe, Touraine, and Castoriades, trying to bring together aspects of their approaches in order to suggest a possible direction for a newer critical theory (which Cohen unfortunately terms a “critical stratification theory”).

At the center of this book is an analysis of the development of Marx’s class theory. Cohen begins her examination of the theory from its inception in Marx’s early *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*. She then traces it through the first critique of political economy (the *1844 Manuscripts*), the transhistorical version of the theory, which Cohen terms “historical materialism” (*The German Ideology, Theses on Feuerbach, The Communist Manifesto*), and the historical works. She concludes with a discussion of Marx’s mature critique of political economy, in which the historical specificity of the categories informs the nature of the critique (*Grundrisse, Capital*).

Although it is difficult to summarize adequately an argument as dense as Cohen’s in the space of a review, the main thrust of her critique of Marx can be outlined as follows. Marx’s analysis of capitalism was successful as a “critique of an antagonistic social system that generates illegitimate inequalities through its exclusionary mechanisms” (p. 228). However, except in his earliest critique, Marx committed the fundamental error of assuming that “the institutions of modern civil society and the class relations of the capitalist mode of production are . . . the same” (p. xiii). This implied that the destruction of the capitalist system would entail the destruction of civil society (p. 49). Because Marx failed to conceptualize and realize the significance of a public space between state and economy in his critique of capitalism and representation of socialism, he was not able socially to ground the democratic norms and ideals he personally valued (p. 109). Instead he fell prey to the dangerous anti-political myth that a future society would be conflict-free and homogeneous (p. 209).

At the core of this theoretical approach, according to Cohen, is the Marxian concept of class; the notion of the proletariat provides both the standpoint of Marx’s critique of civil society and his model of a future rational and homogeneous society (pp. 50, 106). Because Marx sought to ground his critique of civil society in relations of class domination, he saw in the working

class the embodiment of the universal that was not truly realized in capitalist civil society (p. 100). Consequently, that class became the model for socialism (p. 106). The notion of a homogeneous universal class as a model for the future, however, implies a homogeneous future order entailing the abolition of politics, a future that would be an extension of the present order (pp. 101, 107). The productivism of capitalism, therefore, became viewed affirmatively; this, in turn, implied a statist, authoritarian, vision of socialism (pp. 183–193).

Cohen's book is a powerful statement against a statist conception of socialism and for a serious consideration of the public sphere of non-state politics. It is, at the same time, an indictment of Marxism for having failed to consider sufficiently the importance of this sphere. Cohen makes a convincing case for the severe limitations of any critical social theory that rests on a notion of class as the standpoint of its critique and that, explicitly or implicitly, posits the self-realization of the working class as the condition of emancipation.

Much of Cohen's argument is applicable to important tendencies within the Marxist tradition. However, her thesis that a necessary connection exists between Marx's critique of capitalism and a non-democratic vision of socialism is based upon a questionable, if widespread, interpretation of that critique. At issue, as Cohen herself indicates, is the nature of an adequate foundation for contemporary critical social theory. In my opinion, the questionable aspects of her interpretation of Marx reappear as problems and weaknesses in the sort of new synthesis she proposes in the last chapter of her book.

At the very center of Cohen's interpretation is a traditional reading of Marx whereby the social relations of capitalism are interpreted essentially as class relations. Within such a reading, relations of domination are treated in terms of class domination. They are considered to be a function of private ownership of the means of production with its attendant inequalities and exclusions. Social domination interpreted as class-domination is *extrinsic* to the process of production itself; the use and ownership of production is considered to be capitalist, but its material form is not. Hence the Marxian contradiction between the forces and the relations of production is generally interpreted as being one between industrial production, on the one hand, and private property and the market, on the other. Such an interpretation posits an affirmation of industrial production that, freed from the "fetters" of the capitalist relations of production, supposedly constitutes the foundation of socialism. By the same token, the class that is intrinsically bound to the industrial process of production, the proletariat, is seen as realizing itself in

socialism. The critique, according to this traditional reading, is one of the particular (the bourgeoisie) from the standpoint of the general (labor, the proletariat).

Cohen's criticism of Marx is based upon such a class-centered reading, which, however, is not adequate, particularly with respect to Marx's mature theory. In Marx's later works the social relations of capitalism are expressed by the categorial forms such as the commodity, value, capital. These categories can neither be adequately understood in narrowly economic terms nor can they be sufficiently grasped by considerations of class. They represent an attempt to analyze the very nature of the fundamental social relations that constitute modern civilization, not only the unequal distribution of wealth and power within that civilization. The differences between the categorial and the class-centered interpretations of social relations entail very different analyses of domination in capitalism and what its overcoming would imply. The two interpretations also view differently the implications of locating historically the institutions of modern civil society with reference to capitalist social relations.

Curiously, in her general introduction to Marx's late works (p. 134ff), Cohen includes some elements of an interpretation that is not class-centered, elements that point to very different conclusions than those of her critique. Yet, those elements, while presented, have little ultimate impact on her own interpretation. She presents the thesis that in the *Grundrisse* and *Capital* Marx analyzed the historical specificity of capitalism and recognized the historical determinateness of his categories, no longer considering notions such as class struggle and the dialectic to possess transhistorical validity (p. 134). According to this interpretation, the value categories of Marx's mature critique grasp the social relations of domination specific to capitalism as well as its historically specific form of wealth. Furthermore, in his mature critique, Marx analyzed the material form of the labor process, its technical dimension, as being itself social and structured by capital (p. 135). Social domination in capitalism is abstract. Cohen quotes Marx's characterization of the specificity of capitalism in terms of a system of "personal independence founded on *objective* (*sachlicher*) dependence . . . in which a system of general social metabolism, of universal relations, of all-rounded needs and universal capacities is formed for the first time" (*Grundrisse*, p. 158).

It should be noted that even these few determinations suggest Marx's critique was very different from the traditional class-centered theory. Marx's analysis of the industrial process of production as *intrinsically* capitalist, because molded by capitalist relations, calls into question the interpretation of those

relations in class terms alone, the affirmative stance towards industrial production and, hence, the notion that the proletariat is to realize itself in socialism. Similarly, Marx's concept of objective dependence, grounded in the value forms, calls into question the notion that domination of the working class by the bourgeoisie is the most fundamental ground of social domination in capitalism and that the critique is one of the particular from the standpoint of the universal. Finally, the passage cited indicates that Marx's critique of capitalism was not merely a condemnation of class domination but entailed a theory of a two-sided process of historical constitution. This critique, in other words, was not based on those positions that, according to Cohen, imply a non-democratic vision of a future society. Cohen seems to take cognizance of this when she writes:

the model of communism presented in the first text to break with evolutionism, the *Grundrisse*, is neither productivist nor statist. Far from generalizing the status of the worker to all of society, or extending the productivist logic of capitalism to the future, the *Grundrisse* model of communism envisages the abolition of the direct labor of the worker and the emancipation of society from the tyranny of labor time" (p. 151).

She maintains, however, that Marx's "model" of communism in the *Grundrisse* was directly contradicted by his later analysis in *Capital*, which is "aggressively technocratic, productivist, and, implicitly . . . statist" (p. 152). But, as I shall indicate, Cohen's reading of *Capital* overlooks the nature of Marx's categorical critique and instead returns to the assumptions of the traditional class-centered interpretation. Cohen does not address the question of the relationship between the categories of the critique of capitalism and the determinations of such a "model" of communism. Yet Marx's notion of communism as the determinate negation of capitalism implies an intrinsic relationship between the negation and what it negates, i.e. the fundamental basis of the capitalist formation. That basis, in Marx's mature works, is supposedly grasped by the historically specific categories of the critique.

The elements of a future society outlined in the *Grundrisse* entail the overcoming of a system of "objective dependence," the abolition of direct labor in a process of production that is intrinsically capitalist, and the emancipation of society from the tyranny of labor time. Hence if the categories of the critique are to point to the possibility of such a future society, they must express a system of objective dependence, the necessity of direct labor in the process of production, the intrinsically capitalist character of that production, and the tyranny of labor time. The unfolding of the categories, moreover, must indicate the emergent possibility of their determinate negation. Marx's categories in *Capital* such as the commodity, value, abstract labor, capital, and valorization process fulfill precisely these determinations. By

means of these categories, Marx analyzed the character of the social fabric of capitalism. What renders that fabric so peculiar, according to Marx, is that it is constituted by labor. The category of abstract labor refers to a historically specific function of labor in capitalism. Labor is not only a productive activity, as in all social formations, but serves as a medium of social relations. Those relations are constituted as impersonal, quasi-objective, compelling structures of “objective dependence” (value, capital). Social domination in capitalism is not simply domination by a social grouping but is the abstract domination exercised by the historically-specific structures of the labor-mediated, and hence alienated, social relations. These abstract structures do not *veil* the “real social relations” of capitalism, they *are* those relations and are themselves veiled. An interpretation of Marx’s mature theory of capitalist relations in terms of concrete relations alone (e.g., classes), misses this essential aspect of his critical theory. It is because of its historically specific, socially constituting role that labor is central to Marx’s analysis of capitalism. It is the *object*, not the standpoint, of the critique. This theory has little in common with conventional theories of the primacy of production.

Cohen, however, appears to misunderstand the character of the Marxian critique. She fails to recognize that Marx intended his basic categories to grasp the deep structure of a historically determinate reality and, instead, she mistakenly assumes that the categories are intended as a “representation of a *heterogeneous reality*, a fetish of the capitalist mode of production” (p. 157). Cohen, therefore, takes Marx’s theory of fetish to be one of a social *illusion*, a theory of forms that disguise what presumably is truly social: class struggle (pp. 163–164, 169). Cohen’s notion of Marx’s critique is that it unveils this truth, that it “seeks to *defetishize* the capital fetish by pointing to relations of class struggle at the heart of the value categories” (p. 164).

By conflating class and value, Cohen equates categories of the distribution of concrete social power in capitalism with Marx’s analysis of the very character of its social fabric. Marx’s analysis of the peculiar nature of social relations in capitalism as expressed by the categories is thus swept aside by Cohen as a veil covering the truth of class struggle. Such an interpretation breaks the intrinsic links between the categories of Marx’s critique and a notion of the future as their determinate negation. It also constitutes class as the necessary standpoint of the critique. Following this interpretive logic, Cohen returns to the traditional interpretation, maintaining that in *Capital* the proletariat does represent the principle to be realized in the future society (pp. 155–156). She identifies Marx’s notion of the forces of production with wage-labor and the relations of production with capital (p. 134), which would imply that industrial production is not intrinsically capitalist and that the status of the

worker will be generalized to all of society in socialism. Cohen thus attributes to Marx a notion of socialism in terms of the continuation of the logic of [capitalist] industrial production, once liberated from the limits of the market and private property (pp. 182–183). These class-centered positions are all imputed to Marx rather than based on a categorial analysis. Moreover, Cohen's reading of the notion of fetish excludes the epistemological aspect of Marx's categories, his social-historical theory of knowledge, and its relation to this theory of social constitution. This allows her to conclude that Marx's theory of social action overlooked the importance of beliefs and world views and was based solely on a utilitarian notion of interest (pp. 112, 113, 196ff).

Cohen's interpretation of the Marxian categories as what veil social reality, rather than as determinations of that reality, leads her to attribute the characteristics of those categorial forms to the class that they supposedly veil. The result, as I shall outline, is a transformation of what Marx criticized into its imputed affirmation.

This transposition emerges very clearly in Cohen's discussion of Marx's analysis of capitalist industrial production in *Capital*, his unfolding of the labor process as a capital-determined process of creating surplus value (p. 158). This process of valorization entails a series of inversions, whereby the worker becomes the object rather than the subject of production (p. 163). With industrialization, the inversions of valorization become materialized. The worker becomes an appendage of capitalist machinery as production begins to depend more on the direct application of science and technology and less on direct human labor (pp. 166–167). Cohen points out that Marx's analysis of production implies the proletariat becomes integrated into the logic of capitalism (pp. 168–169). Because, however, she maintains that in *Capital* the working class represents the socialized productive forces and the model of another future, Cohen concludes that Marx's analysis expresses a future-directed teleology in which the task of the proletariat in socialism would be to further the productivist project of capital (pp. 163, 174, 183).

This conclusion depends on Cohen's presuppositions regarding the proletariat in Marx's critical theory. It is precisely his categorial analysis of production in *Capital*, however, which calls those presuppositions into question. The production process in capitalism is analyzed as capital-determined. Hence both that process and the class engaged in it are to be overcome, not realized, in socialism. The analysis sought to show that the development of capitalist production not only increasingly fragments proletarian labor, but also points to the possibility of its *abolition*. It did so by means of an

examination of the contradictory necessities and anachronisms of value-based production. With industrialization, capital begins to appropriate directly science and technology. Capital, as a structure of alienated social relations not reducible to capitalist private ownership, thereby becomes greater than the sum of its parts; its power cannot be directly related back to its constituting workers. Far from representing the socialized productive forces, the proletariat becomes an increasingly insignificant source of those forces that, as capital, are constituted in alienated form. The worker becomes an appendage of the productive apparatus; the class becomes anachronistic. Nevertheless, according to Marx, the only source of value, i.e., of the form of social wealth in capitalism, is the expenditure of direct labor time. Hence the workers remain necessary to capital as the source of value, although much of their labor has become superfluous in terms of the use-value dimension. They have literally become the objects of valorization. The inversions of valorization are no mere illusions, but are real. They do not disguise the power of the proletariat, but express the growing fragmentation and emptiness of its labor. Valorization, according to Marx, necessitates ever-increasing rates of productivity in addition to the retention of direct labor in production. Rather than affirming productivism, Marx analyzed capitalism as a form of production characterized by runaway productivity, in which proletarian labor remains necessary only as a result of the exigencies of value, while becoming increasingly fragmented, reduced, and anachronistic.

Marx's analysis of capitalist production in *Capital* thus implies a notion of socialism similar to that expressed in the *Grundrisse*. The compulsion to ever-increasing rates of productivity and the continued necessity of proletarian labor were not treated affirmatively, but were grounded in historically specific categorial forms that point to the possibility of their own negation. These compulsions were not ultimately rooted in class domination, but in the "objective" domination of the abstract structures of value and capital that are constituted by labor acting in a peculiar, historically specific fashion as a social mediation. The overcoming of capitalism entails the abolition of that constituting its value foundation: proletarian labor. The democratic form of such abolition would be one of self-abolition. Marx's conception of the self-abolition of the proletariat may be problematic, but it has nothing in common with an affirmation of the working class as the model of the future. It does, moreover, raise the question of the historical constitution of generalized needs for meaningful activity, which arise both within and without the working class. Cohen, however, fails to grasp Marx's analysis of capital in terms of an alienated process of the development and socialization of the productive powers of humanity that become greater than the aggregate direct labor constituting them. According to his analysis, the development of

capitalism eventually renders proletarian labor anachronistic while maintaining its continued necessity. Instead Cohen takes Marx's analysis of the attributes of capital to be an analysis of the attributes of the workers' labor in mystified form (p. 167). The reversal is based on Cohen's assumptions that, for Marx, class struggle is the essential social reality that is veiled by the categorial forms, and that the process of class constitution fundamentally challenges the logic of capital (pp. 163–164). Hence she raises the problem of how a class, whose labor was analyzed by Marx as increasingly fragmented and empty, could have been considered by him as a radical alternative to the logic of capitalism (pp. 155–156). But she does not consider that perhaps Marx's analysis itself contravenes the assumption that the proletariat was his model for the future. This latter assumption is central to Cohen's argument regarding the necessary relation between Marx's critique of capitalism and an apolitical statist vision of socialism. However common that assumption may be, it is alien to Marx.

Even in his early works, Marx viewed class negatively and, as Cohen herself points out, spoke critically of the subsumption of individuals under the class (p. 106). She claims, however, that Marx developed a notion of the proletariat as the universal, rational, homogeneous model of the future in the *German Ideology* (p. 108). There, however, Marx continued his critique of class and stated that the proletarians can only liberate themselves as individuals by abolishing what creates classes, i.e., labor (*German Ideology*, pp. 77–79). This is hardly an affirmation of class as the model of the future.

Cohen also attempts to ground her thesis of the necessary apolitical or statist consequences of Marx's critique of capitalism with an argument based on Baudrillard's reductionist interpretation of the category of use-value. Marx, she claims, considered use-values and needs to be pure calculable economic entities and, therefore, envisioned an apolitical future society in which the satisfaction of needs would either be automatic or would be regulated by the state (pp. 187–189). It seems clear, however, that with categories such as value and abstract labor Marx sought to specify the historically unique character of capitalism precisely in terms of a system of quasi-objective regulation and domination. Marx thereby implied the *negation* of such regulation and of the objective calculability of needs and goods in a future society. Questions of the sorts of goods produced, their distribution, and the sorts of needs to be met, would be decided upon consciously. If one does not impute to Marx's notion of socialism the attributes that he analyzed as characterizing capital, there is nothing in the theory that necessarily points to the notion that such conscious decisions could only be made in a centralized state structure. Indeed where Cohen argues that Marx called for the dissolu-

tion of politics itself, it is with reference to a passage in which he quite clearly was speaking of the dissolution of state-power (p. 107). In other words, the Marxian critique of capitalism can certainly be read to imply a sort of non-statist political institutionalization of socialist society through which the constantly required socio-political decisions could be made democratically.

My discussion of Cohen's criticisms of *Capital* has revealed a fundamental theoretical transformation of critique into imputed affirmation. *All of the properties that Cohen attributes to Marx's notion of the proletariat and of socialism* – abstract homogeneous universality, “objective” calculability, abstract rationality, the affirmation of industrial production for production's sake – *are properties of capital in Marx's mature critique*. This reversal, rooted in a class-centered reading, underlies conventional Marxist affirmations of the proletariat. It would be important to examine the grounds in the workers' movement and in communist parties for this reversal, whereby the vision of the future could indeed be described as one of the domination of capital, freed from private property and the market. But this would entail a social-epistemological history of Marxist theory. Cohen, however, proceeds in the opposite direction. By reading traditional Marxism into Marx, she implicitly presents a history of subsequent social and political developments in terms of Marx's theory, an approach that is adequate neither to those developments nor to the theory. It is because Cohen reads Marx ultimately through the spectacles of “real existing socialism” that she posits a necessary correlation between the critique of political economy and authoritarian, statist politics (pp. 183ff.).

Marx's critique of civil society appears in a different light when his analysis of the fundamental social relations of capitalism is not limited to considerations of class domination. Cohen points out that in his late works, Marx related the characteristics of civil society to the universalization of exchange relations. She notes that his mature critique did not entail reducing civil society to economic processes, but was directed against the concealment of a new form of domination (p. 145). That form of domination, however, is *not*, as Cohen goes on to argue, merely a class relation (p. 146). Marx did not simply criticize civil society because its universalistic forms conceal the particularistic interests of the bourgeoisie. Rather, the critique was of the domination of capital, of a specific form of universalism itself that had been constituted historically with the spread and generalization of the commodity-determined forms of social relations.

Marx sought to analyze the institutions, values, and world-views of modern capitalist civilization in terms of those basic forms of relations. Such an

approach does not necessitate treating those institutions and values as mere shams. It does, however, avoid the sort of position that, lacking epistemological self-reflection, contextualizes the values and institutions of all other cultures, but treats those of bourgeois capitalism as transcendent concepts, hovering above the surface of history, that have not been fully realized in capitalism, but should be so in socialism.

Marx's critical theory of social constitution was two-sided, as is indicated by the passage quoted above in which he characterized capitalism as a system of personal independence and objective dependence. Within that theory, the universal, with all of its positive dimensions, is indeed historically constituted. It is, however, constituted by labor-mediated social relations in an alienated, homogeneous form that exerts a sort of objective domination over the individuals. The dual character of the universal finds expression in the dual character of the values and institutions of bourgeois civil society. It is the recognition of the duality of the alienated universal rather than the mere opposition of universal and particular that informs Marx's mature critique. The institutions of modern civil society are *not* simply collapsed into class relations, but are grounded with reference to the abstract categorial forms. The critique should be understood as a critical theory of social constitution, rather than one that only reveals the sordid truth behind the façade of bourgeois ideology. It points neither to the future realization of the abstract homogeneous universal of the existent formation, nor to the abolition of universality. On this level, there is a conceptual similarity to the mature Marxian analysis of industrial production as intrinsically capitalist. Overcoming capitalism would not entail the abolition of the productive potential developed in the course of the past centuries. The form as well as the goal of production in socialism, however, would be different. In both cases the analysis avoids hypostatizing the existent form and positing it as the *sine qua non* of a future free society while also avoiding the notion that what was constituted in capitalism will be completely abolished in socialism.

The abstract universal analyzed by Marx grounds an objective form of social domination that is not simply one of a social grouping and that is not sufficiently grasped in terms of the "self-regulating" market. It is expressed in the compulsions of capital accumulation with all of its attendant social consequences on a world-wide scale – namely, the massive and constant restructuring of patterns of living, of production, of transportation, of relative power among states, etc. The overcoming of "objective dependence," of the runaway locomotive of capital-determined history, was for Marx a necessary condition for personal and social freedom.

If domination in capitalism were class domination alone, it would be expressed only in the unequal distribution of social power as well as of wealth, which could presumably be rectified politically. If, however, the domination of capital also entails the sorts of quasi-automatic developments analyzed by Marx, then the question of overcoming that domination must be posed differently. The limitations imposed on freedom of political decisions by the necessities of capital cannot be ignored. Neither should they simply be reified as quasi-natural requirements of “the economy” (as French and German social democrats have done in the recent past).

Cohen’s criticisms of affirmative productivist social theory are well taken, yet her identification of such a theory with Marx’s critique creates antinomies in her reading and weakens her notion of a contemporary critical theory. Her transformation of the object of Marx’s critique into its affirmative standpoint leads her to the unfortunate conclusion that the attempts to locate the possibilities of the future in the structure of the present must necessarily lead to the continuation of the logic of the present into the future (pp. 189–190). This position implies a theory whose standpoint is essentially normative, at the expense of an analysis of contemporary society, especially of its dynamic tendencies. In her concluding chapter, Cohen suggests aspects of a new critical social theory. It is not accidental that, given her class-bound interpretation of Marx and her positive reception of his analysis of capitalism only in terms of the critique of social antagonism and inequality (p. 228), she overlooks both his critique of accumulation and his theory of social constitution.

Marx’s critique approached the relation of system and action in terms of a complex theory of social constitution. The underlying social structures of capitalism expressed by the categories of commodity and capital are constituted by labor as a historically specific social mediation. They are thus “objective” in character. Moreover because their constituting principle – in contrast to overt social relations – is abstract and homogeneous, they constitute a “system.” The notion of “system” is not ontologized, but is shown to be historically specific and constituted by social action. Social action, according to Marx, is in turn conditioned by those deep structures, as mediated by their forms of appearance. Marx’s theory of the fetish was not one of mere illusions, but was an attempt to ground a theory of the constitution of both social objectivity and social subjectivity by relating forms of thought, world views, and beliefs to the ways in which social relations present themselves to immediate experience. *Capital* was an attempt to indicate the constitution of historically specific deep social structures by social action that is, in turn, guided by beliefs and motivations grounded in the veiling forms of appear-

ance of such deep structures. The whole, however, is not statically circular and doxic. Its dynamic and contradictory character entails both the generation of needs and perceptions that tend to perpetuate the system and of those that call aspects of the system into question.

Cohen's reading overlooks this immanent dimension of the Marxian critique. In her last chapter, she turns to the question of the relation of system and action, without the benefit of a theory of the social constitution of socially constituting action. On the one hand, she adopts the reified notion of system, as it has been taken over by Habermas and Offe, but criticizes their inability to deal with the creative dimension of social movements (pp. 193–209). On the other hand, she turns to Touraine and Castoriades for the notion that social action is constituting. But the question of social constitution is not only immediate, referring to that which is directly constituted by action. It is also mediate, a question of the historical constitution of social knowledge, norms, and needs that mold social action. For this latter dimension Cohen seems to accept Habermas's evolution theory of history as a learning process implying the development of cognitive and moral competencies (p. 220). This, however, ultimately undermines any dialectic of system and action inasmuch as it blocks the question of the constitution by social action of what constitutes the social actors. Instead frozen and compartmentalized dimensions of social life ("system," "socially creative action") become extrinsically bound through a theory of evolution. The elements of such an approach were already called into question by Cohen herself in the course of her discussion of Marx, in her critique of reified concepts, transhistorical projections, and Enlightenment notions of progress and evolution (p. 87).

Finally, in Cohen's exposition, there is no discussion of accumulation in its manifold social dimensions. Runaway growth, for example, is not merely a "cultural model" of contemporary western society (p. xi). It is rooted in capital as a social form. Overlooking the question of abstract domination impoverishes the theory of an analysis of the dynamic development of the social formation, of a social critique of large-scale ongoing social changes and global developments in terms that break out of the antinomy of objectivism and volitionism. It is certainly important to emphasize, as Cohen does, that continuing attempts to democratize all aspects of social and political life cannot and should not wait for other "conditions" to be realized first. On the other hand, the issue of democratization, of popular self-determination, cannot and should not be confined to spheres of concrete domination and overt inequality. A theory of democratization must also address the question of the abstract domination of capital, which imposes very determinate limits

on the freedom of political decisions so long as value remains the hidden core of the social whole.