

BOOK REVIEW ESSAY/COMPTE RENDU CRITIQUE

Book Review: *G.A. Cohen: Liberty, Justice and Equality*

Christine Sypnowich, Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2024

Matthew McManus, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI 48109, USA.
Email: mattmcm@umich.edu

Oligarchy and inequality are words on many people's lips these days. We are now decades distant from the aegis of social democratic welfare states and the “end of ideology” in the mid-20th century. After generations of neoliberal governance millions are extraordinarily angry at distant elitists running their countries while being indifferent to ordinary people. Though whether this bodes a cure worse than the disease remains an open question.

Unsurprisingly given the times Marxism and socialism have regained some of their former mojo, even winning traction in the United States where Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio Cortez now regularly host rallies in the tens of thousands. Christine Sypnowich, a Professor of Philosophy at Queen's University, will be a key theoretical source during this renaissance. Her classic *The Concept of Socialist Law* remains one of the best English introductions to the topic. She introduced readers to the core themes of socialist legal philosophy, engaging in constructive if critical dialogue with the more developed tradition of liberal jurisprudence. Now, Sypnowich's *G.A. Cohen* for Polity Press presents readers with one of the most interesting (if problematic) socialist thinkers of the 20th century.

G.A. Cohen was a Canadian philosopher best known for his reconstructive *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defense*, which helped found “analytical” or “no bull shit” Marxism. Analytical Marxists were keen to defend the core tenants of Marxism using the conceptual tools of analytical philosophy, game theoretic economics, and contemporary sociology. They were unusually undogmatic in their approach to Marx and socialism, being quite willing to criticize received pieties if they appeared unviable. Many, not least amongst the analytical Marxists themselves, considered the school dead and buried by the 2000s. But it has since been rejuvenated through the contributions of philosophers and political theorists like Tommie Shelby, Lilian Cicerchia, Ben Burgis, Steve Paxton, Michael Kates and others. Cohen himself is a regular topic of discussion in popular outlets like *Jacobin Magazine* and his lectures on YouTube have raked up hundreds of thousands of views.

The time is ripe for a lucid reintroduction of Cohen's work, and Sypnowich doesn't disappoint. *G.A. Cohen* was clearly a passion project for Sypnowich, who recounts meeting “Jerry” in 1985 and finding him a “tough minded” interlocutor, but “also a delightful person, kind, and tremendous fun.” The book opens with a longer than usual biography of its subject: recounting Cohen's early days in a Jewish communist family in Montreal, his move to the UK, the birth of analytical Marxism and his subsequent turn to political philosophy.

One of the challenges in summarizing Cohen's philosophical career is its eclecticism. Cohen published *Karl Marx's Theory of History* in 1979. This was a highly systematic work that defended historical materialism at a high level of rigor, although Cohen was often attacked for reading Marx in a technophilic fashion. A heavily revised edition of *Karl Marx's Theory of History* was released in 2001 that answered critics and accounted for the fall of the Soviet Union. Responding to criticisms that the descent of the Soviet system into authoritarianism and then subsequent collapse refuted Marx's core theses, Cohen sharply rebutted that in fact Marx had tirelessly insisted that socialism could only be built in a society where the means of production had been heavily developed. On the surface Cohen seems to have remained committed to a kind of historical materialism.

This meant many were surprised by an alleged turn in Cohen's work towards normative political philosophy in the 1990s. Cohen himself accounts for this by stressing that the "predictive" character of scientific socialism was simply false, meaning socialists had to offer moral arguments for embracing socialism rather than just relying on the dialectic of history to secure victory. Sypnowich notes that "this change of direction was in some ways not such a surprising step for Cohen" given he had long rejected the "obstetric" view "that communism would inevitably be born from capitalist preconditions." For the remainder of his career Cohen's favorite dance partners were libertarians like Nozick alongside liberal egalitarians like Ronald Dworkin and especially John Rawls. So pronounced was the influence of the latter than in *Rescuing Justice and Equality* Cohen noted he wouldn't object if someone called him a left-wing Rawlsian.

One major frustration about the latter half of Cohen's career is it is very hard to pin it down. Cohen appeals to an array of principles to defend socialism: freedom, community, and above all equality. But it is not always clear how these principles are meant to fit together systematically. The contrast with the ultra-systematic theory of history can feel jarring. Sypnowich acknowledges this in the conclusion to the book, acknowledging the "puzzles or tensions in Cohen's thought that make for surprising juxtapositions, original insights and potentially inconsistent views or claims." I suspect Cohen's very originality and strict analyticity may have contributed to the problem. He'd developed imaginative philosophical arguments of great provocation, but was unwilling or unable to fit them together where it wasn't obvious they could be intellectually harmonized. Despite these all too human limitations Cohen remains a socialist author of startling relevance whose work can be a motor for creative and rigor thinking. We're very lucky to now have Sypnowich's fine volume to remind us of that fact.