



Class and Civil Society: The Limits of Marxian Critical Theory by Jean Cohen

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The final element that Ward finds central to Bentley's mature thought is American pragmatism (especially the teachings of Peirce and Dewey and, to a lesser extent, William James) with its own somewhat unwieldy amalgam of idealism and experimentalism. Although Ward's careful and sympathetic account tries to present Bentley's attempt to assimilate these diverse postures in its strongest form (an entirely proper attitude for a biographer in my view), I remain skeptical that the central ideas of form and activity can be conjoined (Bentley might have said "made to lie down together") in some stable epistemological perspectivism, but surely the enterprise was a noble and enlightening one.

What then should and will political scientists make of this book? It clearly is required reading for Bentley scholars, for those interested in the intellectual climate of American philosophy and social science during the first fifty years of our century (especially its European roots), and for anyone interested in the fundamental problems of knowing. Unhappily, one must suspect that within the ranks of contemporary political scientists those categories will be sparsely populated. Our discipline within the past fifteen years, perhaps echoing the general climate of retrenchment of that time, seems to have repaired to many of the themes, "domain assumptions" (in Alvin Gouldner's phrase), and "methodologies," which dominated its agenda in the 1950s, much to the surprise and dismay of post-behavioral critics of the intervening decade. In this respect, we can wish *Language, Form, and Inquiry* the considerable audience it merits, while counseling its author against planning early retirement on anticipated royalties.

— Paul F. Kress
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CLASS AND CIVIL SOCIETY: THE LIMITS OF MARXIAN CRITICAL THEORY by Jean Cohen. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1983. \$22.50.

It has become easy to criticize Marxian theory. Not only the political authoritarianism, the social conformism, and the sterility of official culture in those regimes that justify themselves in the name of

Marxism, but equally significantly, the emergence in late capitalist societies of social movements and protest forms not easily accommodated within the classical Marxian framework have led to a radical rethinking of Marxist theory. Nonetheless, it is rare to encounter works that subject Marx's *oeuvre* to a rigorous and informed critique. It is all the more rare to find works motivated by the commitment to develop a critical social theory of the present, uniting social and philosophical concerns with political engagement.

Jean Cohen's book is such a work. It combines historical scholarship, textual analysis, and rigorous argumentation in an effort to assess the potential of Marxian theory to contribute to our understanding of late capitalist societies.

Cohen has reached the conclusion that Marxism cannot provide a critical theory of the present. "The Marxist assumption that the institutions of modern civil society and the class relations of the capitalist mode of production are one and the same occludes the very aspects of society that must be interrogated and precludes any understanding of what is new about the new social movements" (p. xiii). The main body of the book analyzes this Marxian reduction of the institutions of civil society to class relations in the capitalist mode of production. The introduction criticizes neo-Marxian theories for dealing with the problems of the present by preserving the orthodox search for a single revolutionary class (Marcuse, Gorz, E. O. Wright, N. Poulantzas, A. Gouldner, G. Konrad, and Szeleny). The conclusion addresses the "postneo-Marxist" theories of Offe, Habermas, and Touraine.

"Class" and "civil society" are the fundamental concepts that define both the achievements and the limits of classical Marxian theory. We owe Marx the insight that class is a specifically modern principle of stratification (p. 23). Marx realized that modern civil society was the first social formation in history to divorce the individual's legal-political status from his or her socioeconomic role. Civil society promised equality before the law and enjoyment of legally guaranteed civil and political rights to all, while confining to the "private" sphere socioeconomic differences of income, status, and power. Having seen this particular feature of modern civil society, however, Marx took a fallacious step. "His impressive theory of the organizing principle of the economy—the wage-labor/capital relation—was accomplished at the price of identification of civil society with its most important historical manifestation—capitalism" (p. 24).

Cohen raises both social-theoretical and normative objections to Marx's treatment of class and civil society. After having discovered the specificity of class as a modern principle of stratification, Marx projected this category onto all of human history, thereby reducing all historical development to the model of the development of the forces of production (p. 108). Admittedly, there is a tension between a theory that emphasizes the open-ended dynamic of class struggle and one that asserts the linear-evolutionary primacy of the development of production. Yet even in the *Grundrisse* and *Capital*, in which Marx distinguished between the genesis of capitalist relations and their logic of reproduction (pp. 134ff., 155ff.), a fundamental ambivalence remains with respect to the concept of class. On one hand, Marx sees this principle of modern stratification as a negative category of subsumption and domination. The concept of class typifies the individual by abstracting from his or her concreteness, reducing him or her to a social role or social actor, to a "mask," as Marx put it in *Capital* (pp. 70, 75, 144-45). On the other hand, Marx has a positive evaluation of classes as the only normatively significant collectivities. "Classes and class struggles are to be the source of a radical alternative to this logic, the locus of a new form of individuality, needs, and interaction free from economic fetishes" (pp. 155-56). It is here that Cohen locates the antinomy of Marxian class theory: its critique of the reduction of sociality (*Vergesellschaftung*) to class relations on one hand, and the search, on the other, for a new principle of individuation, solidarity, and association in the class experience. This leads Marx to assume that the category of class, the sociological correlate of production relations, can be the locus of a new model of community and association (p. 155).

The antinomies of the concept of class can be explained in light of the absence in Marx's thought of a normative concept of the political. Developing a little-understood charge first made by Hannah Arendt, Cohen argues that Marx's theory tends to eliminate the sphere of the "political," and that his vision of the future vacillates between romantic utopianism and technocratic statism. Two variants of the romantic utopia are discussed. The first envisages a dedifferentiation of state and civil society and their reunification in some ideal of community (p. 35). This is to be distinguished from the utopia of the *Grundrisse*, which foresees the development of a future society of abundance and leisure time for all. "In the telos of this theory freedom tends to be sacrificed to abundance" (pp. 109-10).

If Marxist utopianism yields political authoritarianism by dedifferentiating civil society and the state, the technocratic-statist ideals of socialism that permeate the *Communist Manifesto* and *Capital* are even more disastrous. “Marx,” summarizes Cohen, “against all his intentions, provides the basis for the anti-democratic single-party state penetrating all of civil society when he argues that civil liberties and democratic forms in bourgeois society are mere reflections of capitalist market relations that communism can well do without” (p. 108).

Let me briefly address three issues raised by Cohen’s rich book. The lack of clarity concerning the concept of “civil society” detracts from the merits of Cohen’s critique. The concept has at least three meanings, all of which are suggested but not adequately distinguished. In the eighteenth century Mandeville and Adam Smith used the term to specify a nonpolitical sphere, one freed from state interference. This sphere primarily meant the market and the “civilizing” system of needs, exchange, and commerce. The second sense in which Cohen uses the term is as equivalent to the formation of a “bourgeois public sphere” in the course of the Enlightenment. It is here that the criteria of legality, plurality, and publicity have their place (p. 225). The third meaning is inspired by Kolakowski’s critique of existing socialism as political formations in which the state dominates and suffocates any initiatives of association, self-organization, and opinion building coming from below. If Cohen sees a fundamental connection between these three meanings, it would have been helpful to point it out.

The ambiguity surrounding the concept of civil society permeates Cohen’s call for a “critical stratification theory.” The main problem is why a critical theory of late capitalism would have to be a critical stratification theory at all (p. 195). The changing configuration between state and the economy, the increasing politicization of relations of production, suggest that socioeconomic status is not the main motive, channel, or even locus of oppositional political activity. One of the more puzzling aspects of new social movements, such as ecology, peace, and the women’s movement, is their focus on cultural questions of the good life rather than on problems of distributive and social justice. It is unclear that this feature can be explained by a critical stratification theory, or can be adequately addressed through an immanent critique of civil society (p. 224).

Any effort to read Marx seriously will have to deal with the kinds of questions with which Cohen begins. Nevertheless, we have to ask

whether the privilege of hindsight does not distort our hermeneutical imagination. Does the intensity of our disappointment at the failure of Marxian promises blind us to the historical and social imaginary of Marx himself? Do we search for the kernel of the misery of the present in the past of theory? If so, are we ourselves not running the same risk of "logicizing" history of which we accuse Marx; instead of having to contend with the ambiguous, contradictory, and open-ended history of political struggles that Marxism informed, and by which it was formed, we tend to seek in the word of theory an explanation for the failure of praxis. Cohen succumbs to this temptation. It is equally undeniable that her provocative work shows why Marxian theory could come to legitimize so much oppression, even if we cannot deduce the history of the movements that acted in its name from the logic of the theory itself.

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ERRATUM

Please note the following correction to "Nineteen Eighty-Four: Should Political Theory Care?" by Judith N. Shklar, which appeared on pages 5-18 of the February 1985 issue of *Political Theory*:

The sentences beginning on the bottom of page 16 and ending on the top of page 17 should read: "In his *Behemoth* in 1941, Franz Neumann, still orthodox, rejected Hilferding and insisted that Nazi Germany was a capitalist state and that its proletariat would yet assert itself. He candidly admitted that otherwise there was no hope, the regime was omnipotent, and inner resistance futile.